

TRUCKERS AND LA VIDA LOCA

(LATIN MASCULINITY: MYTHS AND REALITIES)

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Several people played a key role key in providing the information for this book. Johnny Madrigal's study on long-distance truckers, *Al Vaivén de un cabezal (Riding in a cab) A Study on truckers in Central America and their relation to Aids*, (San Jose, Editorial ILPES, 1998), financed by the Dutch Embassy in Costa Rica and ILPES, served as a first draft and basic proposition for this book. On the basis of this research, various colleagues at ILPES chose to participate in this effort in different ways.

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Although this book is the result of teamwork, the final responsibility for what is written here is mine. To protect the protagonists' privacy, all names have been changed and some stories have been altered to prevent their identification, both by the interviewees and the researchers. As an institution committed to fighting for the rights of sexual minorities, we are aware that it is essential to cover our tracks in these small and sometimes intolerant counties. We have also noted that a simple change of name is not always sufficient to prevent people's identification.

Therefore, readers should not assume that some of the relationships described here, even though they are true, might be associated with anyone from the team, including the author. Even less so with the interviewees.

Jacobo Schifter Sikora

INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on a sexual culture particular to Central American truck drivers. As Latin males, truckers are associated with a “macho” culture. We wish to discover the characteristics of this culture and how it functions in practice. We are also interested in finding out how this culture is influenced by social changes and how it reacts to these.

We hope that this analysis of a specific sexual culture, notorious for being “machista”, will contribute to the current debate. The question is whether “macho” culture is positive or negative (this being understood as sexist or non-sexist), or whether it is something inherent or built into Latin culture.

We seek to make a contribution on two fronts. On the one hand, we wish to demonstrate that “machismo” is a discourse, not a sexual culture that treats women as inferior and dependent beings, but one that does not manage to impose itself without resistance. This discourse fosters a double sexual standard in the region, differentiating and categorizing things that are permissible for men and women. However, material reality, competition from other discourses and the contradictions and resistances these generate, neutralize its imposition. The culture that emerges is a hybrid of different discourses and of characters that change according to the situation. It is what we term a “compartmentalized sexual culture”.

At the same time, we suggest that “machismo” is an historical construct that changes in space and time. “Machismo” is modified not only when variations occur in the material, social or political situation, but also during particular periods. In other words, it appears and disappears with great ease in the heads of those who practice it. We therefore attempt to analyze how and why truck drivers “take vacations” from the “machista” discourse and “travel” to other sexual cultures. In offering this new interpretation, we challenge the more traditional notions that tell us that “machos” are always sexist and homophobic. We hope to prove how their relationships with prostitutes and homosexuals reflect something more than exploitation and contempt.

In our view, the confusion that exists with respect to this phenomenon arises from the fact that a sexual culture is not the product of a single discourse, but rather that it interacts with other discourses and with the material reality in which it occurs. At the same time, we believe that Latin sexual culture is characterized by a greater “compartmentalization” between theory and practice and that individuals learn to express different viewpoints according to the place, person and the different environments they are in. This explains why men may express the precepts of one discourse at certain times, and totally opposite ideas at others. Truckers, as “macho” Latin males, construct a culture in which different sexual values prevail and in which each sphere or “compartment” is disconnected from the others. This is responsible for much of the confusion that is evident in the current literature.

This book is also a study of the relation between the sexual culture of truck drivers and the risk of HIV infection. Given that these truckers travel throughout Central America and Mexico, and that 12% reach the United States, the region will be vulnerable to an increase in HIV infection, unless prevention is incorporated into this culture. As we attempt to prove in this book, the prevalence of unsafe sex among truckers and the large number of sexual partners they have, make them a high risk group for contagion and the spread of the disease.

Studies conducted in other parts of the world also help us to understand the need to find out more about the phenomenon. A study published by Bwayo and collaborators on 970 long-distance truck drivers and their assistants who travel the route between Mombasa and Nairobi, in Kenya, found that 27% (257) had HIV antibodies. This study shows, among other things, that HIV carriers make less frequent visits to their wives and more to sex workers.¹ Mutere and his associates report that in a study conducted with truckers (Machakos) in Kenya, 38% of Rwandans, 36% of Ugandans and 22% of Kenyans were found to be HIV positive.²

Bwayo and his team also document the prevalence of HIV infection among long-distance truck drivers in East and Central Africa. The study results indicate that 18% of the participants tested HIV positive. Moreover, 4.6% tested positive for syphilis.³ In a study carried out in India, Singh and Malaviya found that 78% of truckers admitted having sexual relations with several partners, including professional sex workers, and 5% admitted having regular homosexual encounters. The study emphasized that condom use and knowledge about HIV-Aids were poor.⁴ Wilson and other researchers report that condom use in Africa is also very limited. According to their study, condoms were available to truck drivers at several of the transport companies visited, but their use was not effectively promoted. Participants in this study spontaneously said that working conditions should be improved to enable them to spend more time with their families, as a way of avoiding HIV-Aids infection, but few mentioned condom use as the main form of prevention.⁵

Finally, we hope to find out how to conduct research and prevention efforts in a sexual culture such as that of long-distance truck drivers. It is unlikely that they will respond with total frankness to questions posed by health “professionals” or academics, and likely that they will be influenced by the expectations of researchers and educators. One of the

¹ Bwayo, J., Plummer, F., Omari, M., Mutere, A., Moses, S., Ndinya-Achola, J., Velentgas, P. and Kreiss, J. (1994). Human immunodeficiency virus infection in long-distance truck drivers in East Africa. **Archives of Internal Medicine**. (154) 12: 1391-6.

² Mutere, A.N., Bwayo, J., and Ngugi, E. N. (1991). Controlling HIV in Africa: Effectiveness and cost of an intervention in a high risk-frequency STD transmitter core group. **AIDS**. **5**, 407-411.

³ Bwayo, J., Omari, A.M., Mutere, A.N., Jaoko, W., Sekkade-Kigundu, E., Kreiss, J. and Plummer, F. (1991). Long-distance truck drivers: Prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). **East African Medical Journal**. 68(6), 425-29.

⁴ Singh, U.N. and Malaviya, A.N. (1994). Long-distance truck drivers and their possible role in disseminating HIV into rural areas. **International Journal of STS/AIDS**. 5 (2):137-8.

⁵ Wilson, D., Lamson, N., Nyathi, B., Sibanda, A. and Sibanda, T. “Ethnographic and quantitative research to design an intervention for truckers in Africa”. **International Conference on AIDS**, June 1991. (1621);7 (11): 49.

errors in current literature on Latin masculinity is precisely that it accepts answers to sexual questions without probing the context. The same happens with traditional prevention programs, which rely on health professionals to impart information on HIV infection and prevention.

I. THEORY ON “MACHISMO”

There is a debate in academia concerning two very different ways of looking at the modality of Latin masculinity known as “machismo”. One view, expressed in the work of Mirandé⁶ and Gutman⁷, considers “machismo” to be something “positive”. However, others such as Lewis⁸, Paternosto⁹, Carrier¹⁰, Lancaster¹¹ and Díaz¹² perceive it as a “negative” institution. The positive vision tells us that machismo is a phenomenon of Latin American culture that reveres courage, the defense of the family, a sense of communal responsibility and honor: “ethical, modest and concerned with the honor and protection of the family”¹³. The negative view considers machismo as an accentuated form of masculinity that despises the feminine and emphasizes the masculine, and is associated with physical strength, aggression, sexual infidelity and violence against women and sexual minorities. To be macho is to be “violent, irrational and a dominator of women”¹⁴.

Lewis, Paz¹⁵, Aramoni¹⁶ and Goldwert¹⁷ belong to the “essentialist” current, and believe that the macho phenomenon is generalized among Latin men and that it has been part of their culture since a very early period. Others, such as Mirandé, Gutman and Lancaster, regard it as a historical construct that varies in time and space, one that has an origin and will possibly have an end. For the constructionists, there is no category that is common to the whole region. There is no constant in time either. Their studies are aimed at pinpointing the historical changes in different Latin societies with respect to gender, particularly masculinity.

These visions appear to be so opposed to one another that it would seem we are not looking at the same “animal”. The non-academic public observing the debate “from the sidelines” would not understand the reason for all the brouhaha over such a familiar beast. However, university intellectuals tend to create these categories to ensure that they

⁶ Alfredo Mirandé, **Hombres y Machos. Masculinity and Latino Culture**. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997.

⁷ Matthew C. Gutman, **The Meanings of Macho. Being a Man in Mexico City**. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

⁸ Oscar Lewis, **Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty**. New York: Basic Books, 1959.

⁹ Silvana Paternosto, **In the Land of God and Man. Confronting our Sexual Culture**. A Dutton Book, 1998.

¹⁰ Joseph Carrier, **De Los Otros. Intimacy and Homosexuality Among Mexican Men**. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

¹¹ Roger N. Lancaster, **Life is Hard. Machismo, Danger and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua**. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

¹² Rafael M. Díaz, **Latino Gay Men and HIV. Culture, Sexuality and Risk Behavior**. New York, London: Routledge, 1998.

¹³ Alfredo Mirandé, p.67.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Octavio Paz, **El Laberinto de la Soledad**. Mexico City: Fondo de la Cultura Económica, 1950.

¹⁶ Aniceto Aramoni, **Psicoanálisis de la dinámica de un pueblo**. Mexico, D. F. B. Costa Amic, 1965.

¹⁷ Marvin Goldwert, **History as Neurosis: Paternalism and Machismo in Spanish America**. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983.

remain entertaining and productive to magazines and publishers. It is hardly surprising that these discussions go unnoticed by people whose feet are firmly on the ground.

Honorable machos

The first “school”, to give it a name, believes that machismo is Latin cultural baggage characterized by an accentuated masculinity. In his study on Latin men living in the United States, Mirandé concludes that being “macho” has a different connotation from the one usually associated with it:

The findings point to a distinctive Mexican cultural attitude towards humanity, masculinity and the role of the father, an attitude that is particularly strong among men from the lower and working classes. This attitude dictates that a man’s success as a father is measured not only by external qualities such as wealth, education or power, but also by internal ones such as being honest, responsible and hardworking, sacrificing himself for his children and, above all, by not being selfish¹⁸.

It also questions the rural origins of machismo and the notion that it springs from more primitive stages of development, since the poor are those who least define themselves as “machos”¹⁹.

The minority that does define itself as “machista”, and that tends to be from the middle and professional classes, does not do so from a perspective of contempt and domination of the feminine, which has been the traditional view of the term. Those who describe themselves as such, interpret the term as a “code of ethics, honor and decency”²⁰. In other words, for those studied by Mirandé, to be “macho” is to be honest, honorable men who are responsible for taking care of their families. According to him, the fact that being “macho” is equated with being brave and honorable, does not exclude women who may also be regarded as “machas”.

Gutman agrees that the perceptions created by anthropologists about Mexican working men are “erroneous and harmful”. They have lost sight of the fact that not all Mexican men are “hard-drinking philanderers”, and of “the activities of fatherhood in the lives of millions of Mexican men”²¹. In other words, they have forgotten that Mexican men also perform “feminine” activities such as being good parents. In fact “fatherhood” is so important that the author searched all over Mexico City for the model who appeared in a photo of a man holding a baby in his arms, in order to use it as the cover of his book and to show us that Mexican machos can also be nurturers (this despite the fact that in real life the man in the photo is not the baby’s father. The model turned out to be a vendor who was asked by a woman to take care of the baby for a few moments).

¹⁸ Alfredo Mirandé, **Hombres y Machos**, p.145.

¹⁹ **Ibid.**

²⁰ Alfredo Mirandé, **Hombres y Machos**, p.143.

²¹ Matthew Gutman, **The Meanings of Macho**, p.2.

Gutman believes that the male inhabitants of Santo Domingo, a shantytown in Mexico City, no longer consider themselves as “machos” and those who do, the older men, share Mirandé’s definition that has to do with being a “man of honor”²². The young men do not regard themselves as machos or “mandilones” (effeminate or homosexual men) and consider that being macho is something negative. In other words, in Santo Domingo there is no culture that defends traditional machismo.

The author is aware that there is a tradition of subordinating women and upholding the masculine values as superior. However, for him identities are “processes that change historically” and live on “relationships with each other”²³. If economic conditions, for instance, change and women obtain greater opportunities, gender relations will be modified in their favor: “There is an awareness inherited from the past that is accepted without discussion and an implicit one that arises from circumstances and that unites them to transform the world”²⁴.

Gutman considers that the integration of women into the job market, feminist ideas and an erosion in labor divisions are some of the circumstances that have changed the world of Santo Domingo, and therefore of traditional machismo. This creates a “contradictory consciousness”, a kind of discrepancy between what people have learnt about the meaning of being macho and what it means today. Since men can no longer dominate women as they did before, the definition of masculinity has changed. Machismo as accentuated masculinity is no longer possible in a more integrated, democratic world that respects women’s rights. It is therefore replaced by a concept of courage that does not necessarily exclude women.

Thus, the men of Santo Domingo are no longer machos in the traditional sense of the word. They have had to adapt to new circumstances in which women have gained a greater freedom through their insertion into the workplace, their awareness of gender discrimination and their political struggles to obtain land and housing. The machos of old have been forced to watch their territories being invaded by women (bars, sports, the workplace, clothes, etc. are now mixed), their prerogatives slowly eliminated (now they are expected to help with domestic chores and child-rearing), and also their monopoly of public life (women have managed to occupy elected posts).

This new reality has led men to define themselves not so much by what differentiates them from women, who appear more and more like them, but in relation to “mandilones”, who represent homosexuality and the effeminate. It is ironic that the definition of being a man in a Mexican slum is increasingly based upon the way that men who are not “men” supposedly are. If we take Gutman’s theories to their logical conclusions, being a man nowadays in Mexico is the first duality to become independent from its binary opposite.

Sexist machos

²² **Ibid**, p.221.

²³ **Ibid**, p.18.

²⁴ **Ibid**, p.15.

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