FORUM: RESPONSE

Popular Culture, Violence, and Religion in Gloria’s Story

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One of the most vexing challenges accompanying any attempt to reconstruct the legal history of the family is deciding how much interpretive weight to assign to social factors as opposed to legal factors. “Gloria’s Story” is loaded with social history, in part because it focuses on a small group of decidedly non-elite characters. It discusses non-legal matters as big as the impact of wealth concentration on the Guatemalan family and as small as the social significance of home births, as opposed to hospital births, in Quetzaltenango during the 1960s. Nonetheless, the most important factors driving the analysis are legal, not social. The article’s central argument—that “modernizing” legal reforms adopted in Guatemala since the mid-nineteenth century have fortified, not weakened, adulterous concubinage—emphasizes the effects of legal change.

Katherine Bliss, Pablo Piccato, and M. C. Mirow all appear to accept the broad contours of this legal-historical argument. All three, however, urge greater attention to non-legal factors. Their comments are intelligent and constructive. I thank them and offer this brief reply.

Bliss asks how Guatemalan society, as opposed to Guatemalan law, responded to relationships such as Gloria and Julio’s. It may have been legal for a thirty-six-year-old married man to take up with a fourteen-year-old single woman, but was it socially acceptable? Did social thinkers in Guatemala, as elsewhere, view “adolescence” as a special life stage and urge teens to stay in school and avoid pregnancy? Did opinion leaders seek to reform “wayward” juveniles?

Although I have no solid answers to these good questions, I can specu-
late. Did social scientists in mid-twentieth-century Guatemala view “adolescence” as a special life stage? It seems so.1 Were teens urged to remain sexually inactive and avoid pregnancy? It seems not, or at least not much. Just recently in Quetzaltenango, Sully Samayoa Elizondo, my solicitous sister-in-law, was kind enough to interview, at my bidding, thirty-five approximate contemporaries of my article’s Gloria—women, that is, born in or around the 1940s. Sully and an equally solicitous friend asked these women if, as far as they recalled, anyone advised them to remain sexually inactive and avoid pregnancy during adolescence. “Their answers were consistent,” Sully reported. “In the past, unlike the present, these women said, there was neither advice nor discussion of this sort on the part of parents, teachers, the church, or anyone else.”2 Take these findings for what they are: an intriguing albeit unscientific set of distant recollections.

Even if, contrary to Sully’s findings, authority figures did advise teens to stay in school and avoid pregnancy, that advice appears to have had little impact. According to Guatemala’s 1964 census, only 36.1 percent of females between the ages of ten and fourteen—and 10.6 percent between the ages of fifteen and nineteen—remained in school.3 (Gloria was fourteen when she took up with Julio.) According to the same census, Gloria’s teen-age pregnancy (she was sixteen when her first child was born)4 was not particularly unusual. About one in five Guatemalan females between the ages of fifteen and nineteen had children.5

As for the treatment of “wayward” juveniles, one wonders by what mea-


2. One highly educated woman recalled learning about sexual reproduction in a biology class, but “even in that context, there was no discussion of pregnancy avoidance and no recommendation regarding the proper age to commence sexual activity.” Sully Samayoa Elizondo to John Wertheimer, 9 Sept. 2005, e-mail communication. Translation by John Wertheimer. My deepest thanks go to Sully, her helper, and her interview subjects.

3. VII Censo de Población, 1964 (Guatemala: Dirección General de Estadística, 1971), tomo II, 121, Cuadro XLI, “Porcentaje de asistencia escolar de la población de 7 años y más por sexo según grupos de edad en la república.”


sure Gloria would have been considered “wayward.” She was a teenage mother—but so were twenty percent of her peers. She was unwed—but so were about two-thirds of all Guatemalan mothers. The key point is that Gloria, though unmarried, was not “single.” She was “united,” which was far and away the most common category for teenage mothers. Officially, at least, Gloria lived with the father of her children. That man, Julio, had “recognized” his paternity of Gloria’s children. If any Guatemalan women were considered “wayward,” my guess is that they were not similarly situated. They were the young single mothers whose children, unlike Gloria’s, had neither official fathers nor paternal surnames.

Bliss also asks about popular culture. If adulterous concubinage was as widespread as “Gloria’s Story” suggests, she reasons, it should be represented in popular literature, songs, plays, films, and radio and television programs. When presented with Bliss’s query, some experts in Latin American culture reported that an informal code of silence shrouded the topic. One professor, a Latin American native, characterized adulterous concubinage as something that everybody in his home country knew about but scarcely anyone mentioned. Another professor suggested a couple of works for me to explore, then commented: “It’s funny that more works don’t spring to mind. Perhaps [this is] because the casa chica is one of those well-known, but at the same time well-kept secrets.”

If a code of silence surrounded adulterous concubinage in Latin America, however, it was frequently breached. By the end of the twentieth century, indeed, the casa chica had become, as the New York Times reported, “a familiar backdrop” in Latin American literary and artistic creations. In One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967), Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez presents adulterous concubinage as an organic life force. He describes a farmer who finds refuge from his sexually cold wife in the arms of a hot-blooded concubine. Each time the farmer and his concubine sleep together, the fertility of the farmer’s livestock magically increases.

7. Among teenage mothers, “uniteds” outnumbered “marrieds” by almost two-to-one and outnumbered “singles” by almost five-to-one. Ibid.
8. Jacqueline Bixler to John Wertheimer, 4 Oct. 2005, e-mail message. My Davidson College colleague Alberto Hernández Chiroldes agrees with Bixler that at least a mild taboo has suppressed discussion of adulterous concubinage in Latin American popular culture. My thanks to both professors for their generous help.
The rise of Latin American feminism led some Latin American novelists to treat adulterous concubinage more critically. In Los años falsos [The False Years] (1982), Mexican writer Josefina Vicens describes an imaginary conversation between a resentful “legitimate” son and his deceased father. Son criticizes father for, among other things, having maintained a concubine.\footnote{In the end, nevertheless, the son winds up taking his deceased father’s concubine as his own. Josefina Vicens, Los años falsos (1982; México: Coordinación de Difusión Cultural Dirección de Literatura, UNAM: 1987). For a prime illustration of the recent trend toward critical, feminist portrayals of the casa chica, see Mexican playwright Sabina Berman’s El suplicio del placer (1978). One of the playlets included in this play is called “La casa chica.” El suplicio del placer appears in Sabina Berman, The Theatre of Sabina Berman: The Agony of Ecstasy and Other Plays, trans. Adam Versényi (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002). I thank Adam Versényi and Jacqueline Bixler for calling Berman’s work to my attention.}

My one reference to popular culture in “Gloria’s Story” involved music. In a footnote, I mentioned “El abandonado,” a melodious, mid-twentieth-century ranchera song made famous by Mexican film and singing idol Jorge Negrete. In this song, the flawed but sympathetic male narrator laments: “You abandoned me, woman . . . because [among other things] . . . I suffer the misfortune of being married.” (Negrete and his music, like most elements of Mexican popular culture, were extremely popular in Guatemala.) A more recent ranchera celebrates adulterous concubinage even more explicitly. In “La casa chica” [The Little House], Mexican singer Vicente Fernandez, Jr., praises his concubine for possessing virtues absent in his wife: “She [the concubine] cares only about loving me. / She’s with me for love, not contract. / The casa chica is the home that I never had. / It’s my preferred, albeit sporadic, refuge.”\footnote{“La casa chica,” from Vicente Fernández, Jr., El mayor de los potrillos (Sony International, 2001).}

In a similar vein, many twentieth-century Latin American plays portrayed the casa chica as, in the 1952 words of Mexican dramatist Rodolfo Usigli, an “institution almost as firmly established as marriage.” In Paterfamilias (Paraguay, 1941), the adult children of a “casa chica” relationship urge their parents to marry, after the death of their father’s legal wife. Similar plots characterize Los hijos de la otra [The Other Woman’s Children] (Mexico, 1930), Papá es un gran muchacho [Dad Is a Great Guy] (Argentina, 1944), and many other plays. So common were such dramas that a theater critic from the United States warned an Ecuadorian audience in a 1946 speech that casa chica-based plot twists, though a reliable source of amusement in the Latin American theater, would not please U.S. audiences. “I am afraid,” the critic explained, that “most North Americans
consider in bad taste many of the plays of this sort written south of the Río Grande."\textsuperscript{13}

Neither is adulterous concubinage a stranger to the Latin American screen, big or small. It is represented in such films as \textit{La casa chica}, a 1949 Mexican movie whose title became synonymous with the institution generally, and \textit{Rosa de dos aromas} [Rose of Two Scents] (Mexico, 1989), a comedy about a wife and a concubine who simultaneously seek to bail their shared man out of jail.\textsuperscript{14}

Adulterous concubinage is a stock feature of \textit{telenovelas}, the prime-time soap operas that dominate weeknight television viewing throughout Latin America. \textit{Casas chicas} have figured prominently in \textit{telenovelas} since their emergence from Cuban radio dramas around the middle of the twentieth century. \textit{Senda prohibida} [Forbidden Path], the pioneering 1958 melodrama that is widely considered to be Mexico's first modern \textit{telenovela}, featured a \textit{casa chica}-based plotline.\textsuperscript{15} Adulterous concubinage has remained a prominent \textit{telenovela} theme ever since. When asked whether any \textit{telenovelas} portrayed the \textit{casa chica}, one specialist responded that anyone who could ask such a question “has obviously never watched Latino soap operas!”\textsuperscript{16} Bliss is right: this sort of research would have strengthened the article.

One final response to Bliss: She twice asserts that Gloria’s relationship with Julio was “not really [or ‘not officially’] supposed to exist.” I disagree. The relationship was open, widely known, and entirely legal. Persons both within and beyond the legal system reinforced it. By what measure was this relationship “not really supposed to exist”?

Pablo Piccato complains that “Gloria’s Story” does not pay sufficient attention to the impact of violence. He starts by asking about the \textit{political} violence in Guatemala that surrounded the 1954 military coup and the civil war and brutal repression that followed. Piccato’s concern is understandable. The 1954 coup and the subsequent civil war are arguably the defining events of modern Guatemalan history. How, Piccato wonders, could an

\textsuperscript{13} Rodolfo Usigli, \textit{Jano es una muchacha; pieza en tres actos} (Mexico, 1952), 22. My thanks to Francine A’ness for alerting me to Usigli’s discussion of the \textit{casa chica} in the prologue to this play. The remaining information in this paragraph, including the Jones quotation, comes from May Summer Farnsworth to John Wertheimer, 4 October 2005, e-mail message.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{La casa chica} (Mexico, directed by Roberto Gavaldón, 1949); \textit{Rosa de dos aromas} (film 1989, based on Emilio Carballido’s 1986 play).

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Senda prohibida} (1958 Televisa \textit{telenovela}, written by Fernanda Villegui, a.k.a. María Ofelia Villanueva Garza de Fuentes-Berain).

\textsuperscript{16} Jacqueline Bixler to John Wertheimer, 3 October 2005, e-mail message. My thanks to Jacqueline Bixler for her willingness to share some of her cultural expertise with me.
article set in Guatemala in the second half of the twentieth century not give greater prominence to these events?

I did not highlight these events because I found no evidence that they affected the principals in "Gloria’s Story." It is possible that the perpetrators of "state terrorism" did affect the principals but covered their tracks very well. But I believe that the modest, apolitical characters in "Gloria’s Story" were unlikely "state terrorism" targets.

Although Guatemala’s civil war began in 1962, the very year in which Gloria and Julio got together, the conflict remained a low-intensity affair for years thereafter. Not until the late 1970s, over a decade after Gloria’s trial ended, did the conflict become the horribly bloody affair that the world remembers.17

Moreover, Quetzaltenango, the western city where Gloria and company lived, witnessed blessedly little political violence. During the years of "Gloria’s Story," political violence concentrated along Guatemala’s south coast, in the east, and in Guatemala City. At no time was Quetzaltenango a battleground of any significance. Of the 669 major massacres that the Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarification has identified, only five (less than 1 percent) occurred in the Department (state) of Quetzaltenango. When one moves beyond full-blown massacres to explore the broader category of "all human rights violations and acts of violence" during the war years, the Department of Quetzaltenango still accounts for less than 2 percent of the national total. And again, most of these incidents took place long after "Gloria’s Story" ended.18

Nor did Gloria and company occupy the social ranks most likely to have been affected. Most victims were rural; Gloria and company were urban. Most victims were indigenous; Gloria and company were "ladinos." The victims were "mainly peasants, rural organizations, university and secondary school teachers and students[,] and guerrilla sympathizers." Gloria and company fit none of these categories.19

I do not mean to minimize the "armed confrontation." It was horrible. It caused the disappearance and presumed deaths of two members of my wife’s extended family. Hundreds of thousands of other families were similarly affected. But because I found neither direct nor circumstantial evidence that these events affected my story, I did not emphasize them.

18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
Piccato also asks about *domestic* violence. He wonders, for instance, whether the enhanced tendency of women to sue for “denial of family support,” beginning in the mid-1960s, provoked men to unleash a backlash of domestic and sexual violence. Piccato predicts: “A look at not obviously family-related criminal cases in Quetzaltenango will yield interesting correlations between spousal or children battery and homicide, on the one hand, and denial of support or other family-related prosecutions, on the other.”

My quantitative research in the docket books of a Quetzaltenango criminal court provides no substantiation for Piccato’s prediction. In roughly ten-year intervals between 1929 and 1989, I measured (among other things) the proportion of violent crimes to total crimes. (My “violent crime” category included both non-sexual crimes—e.g., homicide—and sexual crimes—e.g., rape.) In 1929, 1939, and 1949, violent crimes reliably accounted for between 50 percent and 55 percent of total crimes. In 1959 and 1969, violent crimes increased to just over 60 percent of total crimes. Thereafter, however, and seemingly contrary to Piccato’s prediction, the trend reversed. In the 1970s, the proportion of violent crimes returned to about 50 percent; in the 1980s, as “family support” cases rose to unprecedented heights, the proportion of violent crimes plunged to 28 percent. If increases in “family support” cases spurred an increase in domestic and sexual violence, as Piccato suspects, Quetzaltenango’s criminal docket books do not reflect it.20

I plead guilty to M.C. Mirow’s charge that “Gloria’s Story” neglects religion. At first glance, this neglect seems glaring. Religion, after all, provides one of the readiest explanations for the prevalence of adulterous concubinage in twentieth-century Latin America. “In a Roman Catholic society in which divorce was discouraged,” reads a typical version of this explanation, “the *casa chica* was a standard fixture of the social landscape.”21 Applied to Guatemala, this logic seems compelling: although divorce was perfectly legal, the Catholic Church’s unwillingness to countenance it caused many failed marriages to persist on paper long after they had ended in fact. Adulterous concubinage was the almost inevitable result.

There is truth in this analysis. Three caveats, however, complicate it. *First, casas chicas* and marriages existed concurrently, not sequentially. Julio, after all, did not *leave* Cristina for Gloria. He lived with both women

20. Selected docket books (*Registros de Procesos Penales*), compiled between 1929 and 1989 by the following criminal court: Juzgado Primero de Primera Instancia, Palacio de Justicia, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala.
simultaneously. Catholicism may help to explain why Julio and Cristina remained formally married, but it fails, I think, to explain why they continued to live together and procreate, even after Julio and Gloria had established their casa chica.

Second, although Catholicism has declined dramatically in Guatemala in recent decades, divorce rates have not increased correspondingly. Between 1964 and 1980, the supposed negative correlation between Catholicism and divorce appeared to hold sway. The proportion of Guatemalans who were Catholic decreased from 91.5 percent in 1964 to about 78 percent in 1980. Meanwhile, the ratio of divorced people to married people increased from about 2.2 divorced people per hundred married people to about 6.6 divorced people per hundred married people. Thereafter, however, although Catholicism’s decline continued, divorce’s rise halted and even reversed somewhat. Between 1980 and 2002, the proportion of Guatemalans who were Catholic shrank from about 78 percent to about 63 percent, while the ratio of divorced Guatemalans to married Guatemalans fell from 6.6 per hundred to 5 per hundred. If Catholicism were as crucial to divorce rates as some analysts (not Mirow) assume, a much tighter correlation would be expected.22

Third, Guatemalan Protestantism and concubinage were not necessarily antithetical. When Gloria left Julio in 1968, as Mirow himself perceptively notes, an evangelical pastor attempted (unsuccessfully) to reunite the adulterous couple.

Professors Bliss, Piccato, and Mirow have all examined my scholarship in productive ways. If readers leave this Forum with an enhanced appreciation for the relevance to legal history of popular culture, violence, and religion, they, as I, will owe Bliss, Piccato, and Mirow a debt of gratitude.