

*Oligarquía en América Latina: Redes familiares dominantes en el siglo XIX e inicios del XX.*

By PETER WALDMANN. Translated by VIRGINIA MAZA. Revised by TACIANA FISAC and PETER WALDMANN. *Tiempo Emulado: Historia de América y España*. Madrid: Iberoamericana; Frankfurt: Vervuert, 2023. Bibliography. 233 pp. Paper, €40.00.

After analyzing the noticeable status of Latin America as a region of “developing countries in perpetuity” (p. 13), primarily due to its constant social, structural, and political problems, Peter Waldmann, driven by a strong interest in exploring through historical and sociological study the upper-class families of Latin America, wrote his most recent work, *Oligarquía en América Latina: Redes familiares dominantes en el siglo XIX e inicios del XX*.

Throughout this work, Waldmann faces significant challenges that historians often encounter, such as lack of sources, gaps in information in their case studies, ongoing debates, and nuances within the information obtained in the theoretical and methodological realm, among others. Despite the aforementioned limitations, the author manages to support his writing with sufficient sources and maintains consistency in his arguments and methodology throughout the text.

The author also employs specific terminology and concepts to rigorously argue the main points of this work. For example, he avoids using concepts like “ruling class” to explain the oligarchy’s dominance over the rest of society, arguing that such usage of the concept would be incorrect; instead, he opts for more flexible concepts such as “domination” or “exercise of power.” Similarly, Waldmann acknowledges the conceptual complexity surrounding the topics he addresses, with the most evident being the substantial differences between the concepts of “family” and “family network.”

In this work, the author seeks to carry out a comparative study of several nations of Latin America focused on the belle époque, which covers the years between the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. The body of the work is divided into chronological sections, although Waldmann does not strictly adhere to a chronological approach, as his methodology transcends the spatial and temporal boundaries typically employed in historical research.

Although the book is focused on the period from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth, it begins with historical background on the colonial period. Here, the author shows how complex and challenging it is to reconstruct high-class family networks, due to a lack of sufficient sources. However, he mentions that it is possible to observe that many of the practices and customs followed by these networks were less about innovations and more about traditions, which he describes as “patrimonial tendencies” (pp. 21–24). These tendencies were based on these families’ commitment to increasing their patrimonial assets, with a particular focus on landownership, and

consequently their social status and reputation. It is important to note that, despite the relative brevity of the work, the author acknowledges that the practices and customs employed by his study's subjects did not develop uniformly in all the territories that he examines but rather depended on multiple geographic, social, and cultural factors.

Following the chapter on historical background, Waldmann delves into the study of oligarchic family networks in the Latin American nation-states that emerged during the first half of the nineteenth century. In chapters 2 and 3, the author focuses on issues such as the consolidation of the family as an economic enterprise and the capitalization of power and influence by these family networks in the peripheral territories of the nascent nation-states—which were weak and unstable during this historical period—in order to gain economic benefits or political and social status; in the course of this discussion, Waldmann highlights the persistence of patrimonial attitudes.

Chapters 4 and 5 study the belle époque era, beginning with an examination of the seizure and instrumentalization of various state apparatuses and institutions by family networks, which facilitated the basic conditions for the oligarchic regime in Latin America. The author also frames the distinctive aspects of each case studied. For instance, he takes into account the transformation of different geographic spaces due to the elites' interest in adopting forms from the more developed metropolises of the world at that time such as Paris and London, as the elites saw in Europe a reference for the *modus vivendi* they wished to follow. In examining this modernizing vision, the author also exposes significant changes in family structures within the elite, highlighting the different roles and expectations for family members depending on their gender.

In the final chapter, the author presents the primary causes for the upper-class families losing a significant portion of their political control. He emphasizes their inability to adapt to the political, social, and cultural changes that were prevalent in the early twentieth century. Here the author explains the internal and external factors that ended up limiting the influence and political power of high-income families in some of the countries studied; in other countries, although the high-income families lost much of their power, they managed to prevail within the theater of national politics.

I would note in concluding that this work is a successful study that broadly addresses family networks within the elites. While the work could be more extensive and delve deeper into the analysis of some of the case studies, it makes significant contributions to sociology and historiography. Additionally, it maintains consistent arguments throughout the entire book.

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