



Disappearance of the Dowry: Women, Families, and Social Change in São Paulo, Brazil, 1600-1900

Muriel Nazzari

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Why did a practice that had been considered a duty stop being a duty, or, conversely, why did daughters lose the right they had previously enjoyed of receiving from their parents the wherewithal to contribute to the support of their marriage? Despite the many historical and anthropological studies about dowry, to the best of my knowledge this is the first analysis of its disappearance. My hypothesis at a general level is that the institution of dowry was among the many fetters to the development of capitalism, such as entail, monopolies, and the privileges of the nobility, of churchmen, and of army officers, that disappeared as the influence of industrial capital spread worldwide. Yet entail, monopolies, and privileges were abolished legally, whereas the dowry was not abolished legally, it disappeared in practice. Thus the question remains: what led individual families to change their customs regarding dowry? And they changed remarkably. I found that, in the seventeenth century, practically all propertied families in São Paulo endowed every one of their daughters, favoring them by giving dowries far exceeding the value of what their brothers would inherit later on. By the early nineteenth century, in contrast, long before the custom of dowry had disappeared, less than a third of the propertied families in São Paulo were endowing their daughters, and those who did gave comparatively smaller dowries, with a very different content, while some families endowed only one or two of several daughters. How to explain this transformation in customs? I will argue throughout this book that the practice of dowry altered because of changes in society, the family, and marriage. Since dowry is a transfer of property between family members, changes in the concept of property, in the way property is acquired and held, or in business practices are relevant to an understanding of change in the institution of dowry, as are changes in the function of the family in society, the way it is integrated into production, and how it supports its members.

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