

contexts such as Arquitecto Tucci a thorough reform of the system itself is necessary. Furthermore, they argue that such change can come only from a concerted effort involving the grassroots and working across party lines. In other words, following the authors' argument, an inquiry of this nature uncovers precisely the state's contradictions as it exists at present and, therefore, the limitations of its decision-making structures. Finally, future studies could analyse the historical genealogies of all the tensions that are at stake here. Illegitimate police violence, collusion, corruption and impunity at different levels are not entirely new phenomena in Argentina. As the lingering effects of the country's dictatorial past, they are inextricably linked to the training of the Argentine police and military during the Cold War effected as part of anti-Communist campaigns (for example, through Operation Condor); to a long-ingrained understanding of low-income neighbourhoods as territories of exception when it comes to law enforcement; and to the state terrorism perpetrated by the last dictatorship. Overall, by looking at collusion from the vantage point of fine-grained material, *The Ambivalent State* offers an impressive contribution to understanding the ambiguous illicit practices of the state in marginalised urban space in the eyes of its most vulnerable actors in Argentina.

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## **Susana Sosenski, *Robachicos: Historia del secuestro infantil en México (1900–1960)***

**(Mexico City: Grano de Sal/UNAM, 2021), pp. 277, 330 pesos, pb.**

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Forced disappearances are a distressingly regular news item in Mexico, with the registered tally close to 100,000 people. According to a United Nations report (Committee on Enforced Disappearances, 12 April 2022), the problem has worsened over the past five years and increasingly involves children, with criminal organisations the main culprits. Intending to offer a historical perspective on the current crisis of child safety, Mexican historian Susana Sosenski has produced an absorbing and sophisticated study in *Robachicos*, a term that means 'child-snatchers' and evokes both actual abductors and their mythical or fictional counterparts. Indeed, the book is both an examination of a real phenomenon and an analysis of a popular bogey, mindful of the hazy line between the two.

It is also a well-wrought exercise in interdisciplinary history. As Sosenski writes in her introduction, she broaches 'cultural history and social history, the history of crime and of fear, the application of justice and the role of the media, infancy and the city' (p. 13). She takes cues from scholars of communications and anthropology. Her interweaving of all these strands is one of the monograph's strengths,

as is a periodisation that stretches from 1900 to the 1960s (both of which assets make the book a strong candidate for classroom adoption; one hopes that an English-language translation will follow). Another strength is the combination of deeply-researched chapters on the origins of Mexico's *robachicos* phenomenon, the varied motives of the abductors, and their depiction in film, television, and *historietas* (adult comic books) with two chapters that show how a range of actors – perpetrators, parents, police and newspapers – played key roles in the development and perception of cases in which abducted children were recovered.

Sosenski dates press usage of '*robachicos*' – and hence urban awareness of a growing threat – to the earliest years of the twentieth century. A major factor was a trafficking network, headed by one Joaquín Romay Riveroll, a respected member of the Porfirian elite, which abducted hundreds (possibly thousands) of poor boys and dispatched them to haciendas in Oaxaca and Yucatán, whose owners paid him 120 pesos a head. John Kenneth Turner famously described this kind of practice in his 1910 work *Barbarous Mexico*, but the Mexican press had begun to expose it in 1902. That year Romay went to trial. However, in tune with the social Darwinism of the era, some in the press defended him for doing both the boys and the economy a favour: putting them to useful work in key sectors. And again in tune with the zeitgeist, the de facto slaver Romay was freed on bail.

While the Romay case foreshadows the contemporary trend of private organisations (the so-called cartels) snatching the vulnerable with the complicity of the state (regional politicians and police), Sosenski's survey of subsequent abductions finds little corporate practice. Especially in the 1940s and 50s, when associated waves of media-driven moral panic peaked, *robachicos* were typically single actors: ruffians putting children to work as beggars, sexual predators, extortionists, and women unable to bear children but desperate to be mothers. The latter category, which is also the heart of the matter in the first case-study chapter, offers fascinating insights into gender roles that were rigidly shepherded by the press and popular culture – and which continued to be promoted by highly popular telenovelas (short-form soap operas) in the decades beyond Sosenski's purview. This chapter rivetingly relates the 1945 kidnapping of the fair-haired toddler Fernando Bohigas, a six-month drama detailed by the press. Once the child was recovered, a remarkable degree of public sympathy for the kidnapper ensued. It helped that she was middle-class and devoted to the child. As the author puts it: 'The social requirement of being a mother could justify, for many people, criminal acts' (p. 150).

The second study, on the brief abduction in 1950 of the daughter of a film industry impresario, Samuel Granat, lacks the narrative panache of the first and exemplifies similarly classist media coverage. The key difference is that the motive was either holding-for-ransom, which hypothesis the police pursued, or a bizarre case of business-sector bullying. The latter notion was advanced four years later by the soon-to-be-famous columnist Manuel Buendía, who claimed the underlying cause was the desire of cinema mogul William Jenkins to press Granat into selling him his movie theatres. Sosenski takes Buendía at face value, but his account is strewn with errors. The likelier mastermind was Gabriel Alarcón, a partner of Jenkins with a record of using gunmen to bump off union organisers.

The survey of fictional depictions that closes the book, while a little prolix, shows how Mexico's cultural industries 'insisted that public spaces were not for boys and girls ... especially of the middle and upper classes' (p. 190). That is, they used stories of kidnappings to encourage the well-to-do to keep their children within walls; some discussion of mid-to-late-century architecture and urban planning might have bolstered this point, which is nonetheless persuasive. Another key contribution of fictionalisers was to often insist that blame for abductions lay with the mothers, for taking their eyes off their children. Here again Sosenski illustrates the weight of hegemonic culture in defining restrictive gender roles.

Sosenski rarely treads beyond Mexico City. Except for a slightly misleading subtitle ('in Mexico'), this is hardly a weakness, but it does suggest room for a separate study on *robachicos* in the provinces. Unmentioned here, for example, is the trend of lynchings and near-lynchings of those outsiders suspected, almost always wrongly, of coming to steal small-town children (to use their body fat to power their automobiles or aeroplanes, per a rural trope of the 1920s and 30s), a topic briefly developed in Gema Kloppe-Santamaria's *In the Vortex of Violence* (University of California Press, 2020). Further study, perhaps using federal secret service archives, might take the analysis beyond the 1960s, doing more to explain the horrific rates of child abduction and impunity for perpetrators today. But Sosenski largely achieves what she sets out to do: showing how *robachicos* were both a very real phenomenon, of multiple causes, and a device used by journalists, jurists, filmmakers, and others to reinforce patriarchy, accentuate class divisions, and exalt the fair-skinned minority.

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## **Andrea Martínez Baracs (trans. Hank Heifetz), *An Irish Rebel in New Spain: The Tumultuous Life and Tragic Death of William Lamport***

**(University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), pp. 180, \$22.95, pb.**

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This lively volume is a welcome addition to the growing Latin American Originals series from Penn State University Press. The series offers brief collections of primary documents, edited and translated, accompanied by explanatory/contextual introductions. This volume about William Lamport is no. 17 in the series.

Andrea Martínez Baracs and the translator Hank Heifetz offer readers a broad range of material penned by Lamport, previously unavailable in English. Martínez Baracs provides a helpful introduction to the life and context of Lamport, though