

CONSTRUCTIONS OF FEMININITY AND THE ‘AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE’ IN LATIN AMERICA IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY: THE CASE OF CHILE

Stefan Rinke[1]



At the beginning of the 20th century, the image of women slowly began to change due to the advance of new feminism and its impact upon the public sphere. Women in many countries fought for political rights and entered new professional fields. This was especially true for Europe and the United States, but also for some Latin American countries.[2] Chile was one of the more developed Latin American countries where this worldwide trend was quite obvious: Women fought for civil rights and joined new professions, and internationally renowned women like the educator

Amanda Labarca or Latin America's first Nobel laureate (1945), the poetess Gabriela Mistral, were the visible vanguard of a larger social movement.[3]

Early Chilean feminism covered a broad spectrum and included the Conservative Party and church activists as well as left-wing radicals and anarchists. However, the movement was dominated by young liberal feminists who belonged to the middle class. Although their political opinions differed widely, Chilean feminists – as well as those in many other Latin American countries – agreed on one point: to strive for a peculiar form of female identity different from foreign models.

In the following, I will explore how this “sane feminism”[4] related to the ‘American Way of Life,’ which at that point had strong repercussions in all fields of socio-cultural development in Chile.

I

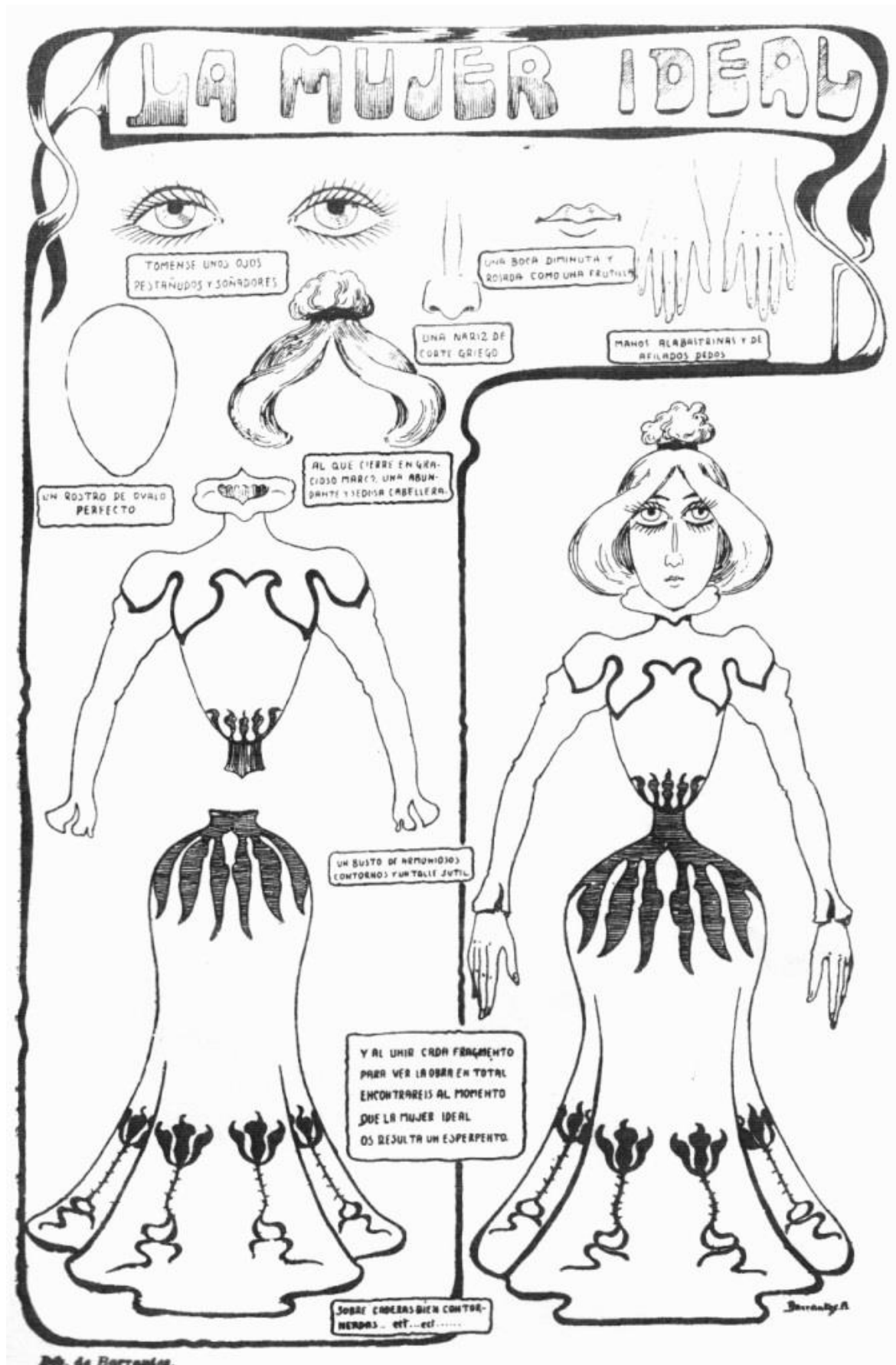
The election of Arturo Alessandri to the presidency in 1920 was one of many factors that reflected the rise of a new middle class in the decade after the First World War.[5] Major social and economic reforms encountered the stubborn resistance of a traditionalist oligarchy. While still characterized by hacienda agriculture, Chile suffered from the demise of an export economy based to a large degree on nitrate. Nevertheless, the processes of urbanization and industrialization progressed in a time that was also marked by a high degree of social unrest.[6]

In addition to social and economic change, a growing number of Chileans were exposed to a variety of new images. Newspapers and magazines introduced new techniques to reproduce photographs and cartoons. Modern mass media like radio and cinema had their roots in the 1920s. Many of these innovations were imported directly from the United States.[7]

In this society in upheaval, women remained subordinate. However, a moderate reform discussion had begun during the First World War. The traditional gender roles were simply not in accord anymore with the growing number of women in the workforce. The question of protecting working women and children tied in with the debates on education, public health, and eugenics in the first decades of the 20th century

tying in with the larger debate about reforming the nation.[8] Due to the reevaluation of reproduction and of the health of mothers and babies as a national concern, the social ‘function’ of women was enhanced. Another important issue was the strife for women’s civil rights that culminated in the reform of the Civil Code in 1925. However, discussions about a divorce law did not lead to any legislative reforms. Finally, the 1920s saw a rising call for female suffrage in Chile.

The women and men who contributed to these discussions made sure, however, not to shake the foundation of traditional society and provoke male sensitivities. Even a younger generation of liberal middle-class feminists emphasized a female ideal of gentleness and selflessness. For most Chilean feminists, traditional gender roles were not to be transgressed. Their aims were moderate reforms in welfare, health, education, and legislation, and ultimately the right to vote. Reinforced by a strong Roman Catholic tradition, a woman’s role in Latin America in the early decades of the 20th century remained that of wife and mother in a patriarchal family. This was reflected in images of the “ideal woman” which circulated in the new illustrated media at the time. The following illustration shows an example from one of the leading Latin American illustrated magazines of the time, *Caras y Caretas* of Buenos Aires. The “ideal woman” which is presented here is a conservative vision that follows European standards of the time. Yet things were to change quickly.



Ill. 1: “*La mujer ideal*”, *Caras y Caretas* 4 (no. 165/1901)

II

Beauty ideals changed in the early 20th century. In Latin American countries with a high proportion of indigenous population like Mexico, even indigenous beauty was discovered.[9] However, the inclusion of the indigenous remained an exception. More important was the discovery of modern beauty as epitomized in U.S. American women. How, then, did Chilean readers perceive the new generation of women in the United States – the ‘new woman’ who supposedly was the spearhead of modernity? This article will show, that the image of this ‘new woman’ was multifaceted.

In 1928 the Santiago magazine *Hollywood* wrote: “A whole continent was preoccupied with the hair of Mary Pickford. The fall of her classic curls has exasperated many of her admirers.”[10] Indeed, young U.S. women reflected a slowly emerging new ideal of female beauty. Chilean men were presented with plenty of young beauties from the United States, and the stories and photos of actresses now caught widespread attention. Most important was the influence of Hollywood movies, as the Chilean audience increasingly read the latest gossip about the stars.

In the 1920s, Chileans were looking more and more to the United States in terms of fashion, too. While Paris did not lose its hegemony, how U.S. women dressed was very interesting to Chilean women and men alike. And this interest was not exclusively benevolent: A type of fashion that left ever more parts of the body uncovered seemed shameless. Apart from causing serious health problems in the cold Chilean winter, this new vanguard seemed to constitute a real danger for a traditional society. The Chilean concept of fashion, to be sure, was still much more modest, as the illustration shows.



Ill. 2: “*La moralidad en la moda femenina*,” *La Nación* (14. Nov. 1920), p. 7.

Nevertheless, in this discussion about morality and female dress developments in the United States were important points of discussion.

In the long run, there seemed to be no solution to this problem because, as one voice pointed out, fashion simply followed a new lifestyle that was characterized by sports and passion for the cinema. This new lifestyle, the same source claimed, was epitomized in the symbol of the ‘flapper’ – a term used in the second half of the 1920s for the new image of young women in the United States. The flappers were presented as sportive, libertine, and modern. They were flying airplanes, driving automobiles, smoking, and showing their uncovered knees in public freely and in a self-confident

manner. This new woman was personified in movie star Clara Bow, and characterized as free and independent – or, more critically speaking, as “noisy, indifferent, seductive.”[11]



Ill. 3: “¿Qué es una Flapper?” *Hollywood*, no. 10 (Jul. 1928), p. 19.

The image of the flapper reflected a change in the perception of U.S. women in Chile. Indeed, with the curls of Mary Pickford, a “symbol of virtue and innocence” had fallen.[12] What is more, according to some journalists, young women in Chile admired and imitated ‘Flapperismo’:[13] They frequented the movies and danced black bottom. Overall, modesty appeared to be threatened by the “feminine danger.”[14] In a very near future, threatening scenes from nightlife in New York – presented to Chileans in an endless flow of images in the media – might repeat themselves in Santiago.

The alleged nakedness and sexual connotations of the flapper were probably the most disturbing aspect for a society that claimed an ideal of chastity. Again, the

influence of Hollywood movies proved decisive, and campaigns against the pernicious example of flappers in U.S. cinema were welcomed. But for many a commentator, these reactions came too late or were doomed to fail.

The idea of a ‘feminine danger’ became palpable with respect to the new roles of women as employees and workers. According to press reports and images, women in the United States were independently searching their own place in society. In public administration and in the male domain of the military, U.S. women now played an important part: They could earn a lot of money or run for president, and women in the United States even competed in sports.[15]

On the one hand, these success stories excited admiration on the part of Chileans. On the other hand, according to contemporary commentators, the success of a woman in the working line depended either on her beauty or on her female intuition. Chances for a female president were almost zero and too much sport would destroy the figure of a woman by making her look masculine. Chilean commentators were not in principle opposed to working and sportive women, but most agreed that “the days in which woman dedicated herself to the kitchen had been better.”[16]

If American women were shaping a new ideal of feminine beauty and were also active in the working world, all of this was only part of the story. In addition, they became an increasingly important mass of consumers. In Chilean media, the Yankee females were represented as consuming (especially modern) goods. They ‘taylorized’ their kitchens, equipped them with advanced machinery, and excessively used the telephone, albeit mostly for romantic endeavors. Readers could gain the impression that women were even more progressive than men – a virtual vanguard of modernity.

Yet this modern consumerism also carried dangers. Indeed, the front pages of newspapers repeatedly featured sensationalist reports about car accidents that destroyed beautiful bodies and female careers or about beautiful women causing disaster in modern traffic. More troubling were news about the loss of moral values due to the modern way of life: white slaves or young women who fled their homes and got lost in the monstrous megalopolis. Modern life was unhealthy – this at least was the message of the many reports about suicides and mental illnesses of women in the United States.

Another disturbing aspect of the new U.S. woman was her changing role in gender relations. Women had not only learned how to defend themselves against obnoxious men but were now also “sustaining, guiding and controlling the world.”[17] Columnist César Cascabel wrote in 1927: “In the United States, man is the weak sex. Never in my life have I seen husbands as degraded as those who are subjected to the big stick of an American wife.”[18] The positive aspects of this emancipation were rarely mentioned. Rather, commentators again talked gloomily about a feminine danger, a feminine rule over the world.

Marriage – the core of the family – was singled out as a key problem area. Many Chilean observers concluded that there was a connection between the rise of Hollywood dreams and the superficiality of modern life. The crisis of matrimony was seen as a direct result of an age in which women enjoyed more and more freedom. Critics left no doubt that women were to blame since they neglected their children and husbands. They claimed that the reason why men had not yet revolted against this condition was their internalization of the role as servants to women, first as brothers and later as husbands.[19]

Yet the most important issue concerning gender relations as portrayed in the media was the so-called ‘explosion of divorce rates’ in the United States. Given the extensive newspaper coverage, the Chilean reading public had to take notice of the fact that a wave of lawsuits around romantic relationships had developed in the United States. Corresponding to the stereotypical assumption that money dominated all spheres of Yankee life, commentators concluded that even in love affairs and marriage, the dollar ruled. Women were accused of calculating the profit to be reaped from both marriage and divorce. To critics, it seemed that sinful U.S. women only married in order to file for divorce and live off the alimony. Marriage seemed to become a luxury issue considering the immense sums of alimony that were part of daily life in the United States. Shamelessly, so the commentators stated, Yankee women first seduced poor youngsters and, after catching them in matrimony, they exploited them to the fullest before getting rid off them. The judicial system clearly favored women, of which they took advantage. For men, this implied that each marriage involved the risk of financial ruin, or so the observers described the situation. According to these voice it was no surprise, that Yankee men shied away from the altar. In general, it seemed that the age

of materialism first introduced by males had become part of gender relations that favored women, not men.[20]

In a society like Chile in which divorce was still impossible, the images of gender relations in the United States were hardly comprehensible. There were numerous sensationalist reports in the dailies and magazines about new records in marital separations. Divorce seemed to be a veritable mass movement or a popular sport in the United States. Indeed, Chilean visitors to that country noted that spouses decided to have a divorce for the most ephemeral reasons and that the lives of Hollywood stars like Rudolf Valentino or Gladys Walton were representative of North American marriages.[21] The philosopher Enrique Molina reported that the number of cases had risen from 25,000 in 1886 to 124,000 in 1916, with a tendency to increase further. He and other supporters of divorce claimed that this was more a reflection of social change than of immorality. From Molina's point of view, divorce presented a way out of an insoluble dilemma.[22]

The majority of Molina's compatriots did not concur. For them, it was clear that the duration of marriage in the United States simply obeyed market laws. According to literary critic Omer Emeth, who reviewed Molina's book, the trends in the United States indicated a movement back towards "pure and simple animalism." [23] The stereotypical Puritan moralism of the Yankees contrasted starkly with this moral abyss. For the critics of the United States, this was yet another sign of the notorious Yankee hypocrisy. Emeth and other conservatives were convinced that Latin American (and especially Chilean) women would never behave like their U.S. contemporaries.[24] Many Chilean readers could not understand why, nor could they accept the fact that what had been presented to them as the fantastic dream marriages from fairyland was profanely ending in divorce. However, they obviously loved to read about it.

The immense interest of Chileans in the divorce question in the U.S. was related to the ongoing discussions about the legalization of divorce in their own country. Since the turn of the century, that discussion had gained relevance as several divorce bills were introduced in the National Congress of Chile in the 1920s and 1930s.[25] Yet these attempts failed due to conservative resistance. An important argument against a divorce law was the negative example of the United States. The strength of this argument was reflected in the fact that the advocates of divorce constantly had to refute

it. They tried to do so by emphasizing the positive and exemplary aspects of the liberal divorce legislation in the United States.[26] Yet they were fighting a losing battle because the sensationalist reports about divorce records and about immoral seductresses who were destroying marriages continued to titillate Chilean audiences. Thus, negative images of moral decay in the United States had a direct impact upon a crucial reform debate in Chile.

The United States was a bad example in this regard. There, the new liberty of women led to bizarre lawsuits. Even more serious was the diminishing birth rate – a direct product of the new ideal of a marriage based on comradeship. For many a Chilean, these signs of decay in the USA were a product of an aggressive feminism. This was a movement they feared to rise in Chile as well. Conditions in the United States were the writing on the wall – the U.S. was a mirror of what would become of Chile if it gave up its traditions and followed the call of modernization blindly.

III

The significance of the images of the new U.S. American woman in Chile can only be understood in their function as symbols. These symbols became a powerful part of the debate about gender roles and modernity in Chile in the course of the 1920s and early 1930s. The extensive press coverage shows that Chileans were very interested in the new woman from the north. The youthful and adventurous Yankee girl stood as much for female liberation and emancipation as she stood for changes in society and culture at large. She caused much admiration and fear and was thus a mirror for the ambivalent attitude Chileans held about the United States and modernity.

Values and attitudes of an allegedly ‘American way of life’ were more often than not understood to undermine not only morality as such but cherished traditions in particular. To a certain degree, these fears on the part of many Chilean males were not totally unfounded. There were indeed changes due to women joining the workforce and fighting for suffrage or for the legalization of divorce. On the other hand, even the more progressive Chilean women rejected flapperismo. From their perspective, the U.S. American flappers simply went too far.

The study of many Chilean sources from this period revealed that perhaps the most puzzling aspect of the U.S. American and/or modern woman was the fact that she had not given up her femininity. On the contrary, the Yankee Girl appeared emancipated but also sexually seducing and thus subverted the stereotype of the solterona – the old spinster that was part and parcel of the stereotypical image of a feminist. According to Chilean observers, in promoting the image of the new woman, the U.S. exerted just another subversive influence that would ultimately lead to decadence and decline.

Certainly, the sources discussed here reflect only a small part of the Chilean population at the time. The mass of poor and marginalized women of the less privileged strata of society appeared in public discourse only as objects of paternalistic or maternalistic reform plans. Nevertheless, the debates sketched in this article were important as they paved the way for broader reforms that finally gained ground after the end of World War II.

With the foundation of the Movimiento de Emancipación de las Mujeres Chilenas in the 1930s, Chilean women managed to press their demands more effectively. In 1949 they finally gained complete suffrage. In the following years, however, their movement disintegrated as women started to vote for traditional parties that adopted female issues more or less willingly. At that point and later on in the context of the women's liberation movement, the 'American way of life' was no longer needed as a bone of contention to stimulate discussions about the role of women in Chilean society. And yet, the idea of a special 'Latin' femininity and, thus, of a special form of 'feminism' that defined itself in relation to the 'other' US and European model did survive, albeit with new connotations of anti-imperialism.

Notas

[1] Stefan Rinke is Professor of Latin American History at the Institute for Latin American Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin.

[2] Gisela Bock, *Frauen in der europäischen Geschichte: Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (München: Beck, 2005), S. 177-238. Joan W. Scott (ed.), *Feminism and*

History (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 5th ed. 2004). William L. O'Neill, *Feminism in America: A History* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publ. 2nd ed. 1994). For Latin America: Asunción Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, 1890-1940* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1995). Francesca Miller, *Latin American Women and the Search for Social Justice* (Hanover: UP of New England, 1991).

[3] For the Chilean case see: Paz Covarrubias O., *Movimiento Feminista Chileno, 1915-1949* (Santiago: Pontificia Univ. Católica, Instituto de Sociología, Documento de Trabajo No. 22, 1974). Edda Gaviola et al., *Queremos votar en las próximas elecciones: Historia del movimiento femenino chileno 1913-1952* (Santiago: Coedición, 1986). Julieta Kirkwood, "Feminismo y participación política," in: María Angélica Meza (ed.), *La otra mitad de Chile* (Santiago: Instituto para el Nuevo Chile, 1986). Corinne A. Pernet, "Chilean Feminists, the International Women's Movement, and Suffrage, 1915-1950", *Pacific Historical Review* 69 (2000), S. 663-688.

[4] "Hacia un sano feminismo," *La Unión* (4 Dec. 1920), p. 1.

[5] For the significance of Alessandri's election see: Stefan Rinke, *Kleine Geschichte Chiles* (Munich: Beck 2007), S. 77-78.

[6] Cf. Luis Ortega, "El proceso de industrialización en Chile, 1850-1930," in: *Historia* (Santiago) 26 (1991), pp. 213-245. Patricio Meller, *Un siglo de economía política chilena, 1890-1990* (Santiago: Andrés Bello, 1998), pp. 11-54. For the middle class: Jaime García Covarrubias, *El Partido Radical y la clase media: La relación de intereses entre 1888 y 1938* (Santiago: Andrés Bello, 1990). Gabriel Salazar and Julio Pinto, *Historia contemporánea de Chile, vol. 2: Actores, identidad y movimiento* (Santiago: Lom, 1999), pp. 65-92. Patrick Barr-Melej, *Reforming Chile: Cultural Politics, Nationalism, and the Rise of the Middle Class* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2001), pp. 103-169.

[7] Stefan Rinke, *Begegnungen mit dem Yankee: Nordamerikanisierung und soziokultureller Wandel in Chile, 1898-1990* (Cologne-Vienna: Böhlau, 2004), S. 74-84.

- [8] Elizabeth Q. Hutchison, *Labors Appropriate to Their Sex: Gender, Labor, and Politics in Urban Chile, 1900-1930*(Durham: Duke UP, 2001).
- [9] Rick A. Lopez, "The India Bonita Contest of 1921 and the Ethnicization of Mexican National Culture", in: *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82 (2002), S. 291-328.
- [10] "Comentarios del Doctor Pullman," *Hollywood*, no. 12 (Sept. 1928), p. 31.
- [11] "¿Qué es una Flapper?" *Hollywood*, no. 10 (Jul. 1928), p. 18-19.
- [12] "Comentarios del Doctor Pullman," *Hollywood*, no. 12 (Sept. 1928), p. 31.
- [13] This term was coined by María Eugenia, "Mr. Hicks y la flapper," *El Industrial* (14. Mar. 1928), p. 1.
- [14] César Calzada, "El peligro femenino," *El Sur* (10. Apr. 1921), p. 3.
- [15] "Dos mil sirenas yanquis en el servicio de salvamentos," *La Nación* (3. July 1919), p. 3.
- [16] "Eran mejores los tiempos en que la mujer se dedicaba a la cocina," *El Diario Ilustrado* (31. Jul. 1932), p. 3. See also "El trabajo de la mujer," *ibid.* (27. Feb. 1929), p. 3.
- [17] "La mujer sostiene, guía y controla el mundo," *Hollywood*, no. 12 (Sept. 1928), p. 6.
- [18] César Cascabel, "Los derechos del hombre," *Hollywood*, no. 5 (Mar. 1927), p. 31.
- [19] Ernesto Montenegro, "La edad de oro de la solterona," in: *La Nación* (23 Oct. 1927), p. 19.
- [20] The sensationalist coverage of divorce in the United States was voluminous in the 1920s. A few examples: "El amor no tiene precio," in: *Las Ultimas Noticias* (19 June 1922), p. 3. "Las ventajas de la mujer en Estados Unidos," in: *La Nación* (3 Oct. 1920), p. 3. "Una luna de miel que cuesta dos millones," in: *ibid.* (25 Aug. 1922), p. 1. "Compañía agradable por 10 dollars," in: *Las Ultimas Noticias* (5 Apr. 1923), p. 3. (25 Jan. 1923). Domingo Melfi, "Algunos aspectos humanos del divorcio," in: *Atenea* 7 (Sept. 1928), pp. 134-137.

- [21] Tancredo Pinochet, *El diálogo de las dos Américas* (Havana: Todamérica, 1918), vol. 3, p. 26. "Una familia que bate el record de los divorcios," in: *La Nación* (21 Nov. 1920), p. 7. "¿Viva el divorcio?" in: *Sucesos* (23 July 1924). "Hollywood bate el record de los divorcios," in: *Las Ultimas Noticias* (24 Sept. 1927), p. 3. "En el país de las estrellas, los contratos y los divorcios," in: *Zig-Zag* (7 Mar. 1931).
- [22] Enrique Molina, *Por las dos Américas: Notas y reflexiones* (Santiago 1920), p. 185.
- [23] Omer Emeth, "El movimiento literario," in: *El Mercurio* (8 Nov. 1920), p. 4.
- [24] "Lo que no hacen las mujeres de nuestra raza," in: *Las Ultimas Noticias* (23 Dec. 1929), p. 11.
- [25] Lavrin, *Women, Feminism, and Social Change*, pp. 227-228 and 232-236.
- [26] See e.g. a series of articles in the journal *Atenea*: "Atenea y el divorcio," in: *Atenea* 5 (Aug. 1928), pp. 3-4. Raúl Silva Castro, "Precisiones sobre el divorcio," in: *ibd.* (Feb. 1928), pp. 379-383.