

2012

Book Review of Heather McCrea, *Diseased Relations: Epidemic, Public Health, and State-Building in Yucatán, Mexico, 1847-1924*

Autumn L. Quezada-Grant Dr
Roger Williams University, aquezada-grant@rwu.edu

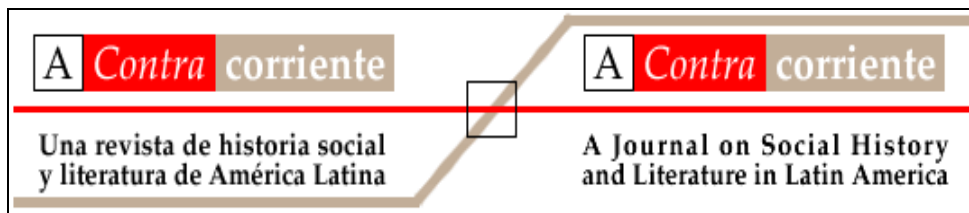
Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.rwu.edu/fcas_fp

 Part of the [Health Policy Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Quezada-Grant, A. (2012). Death, Disease and Disregard. A Review of Heather McCrea's *Diseased Relations: Epidemics, Public Health, and State-Building in Yucatán, Mexico, 1847-1924* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2010). *A Contracorriente*, 9(3), 457-463.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Feinstein College of Arts and Sciences at DOCS@RWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Feinstein College of Arts & Sciences Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DOCS@RWU. For more information, please contact mwu@rwu.edu.



Vol. 9, No. 3, Spring 2012, 457-463
www.ncsu.acontracorriente

Review / Reseña

Heather McCrea. *Diseased Relations: Epidemics, Public Health, and State-Building in Yucatán, Mexico, 1847-1924*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010.

Death, Disease and Disregard:

A study of modernizing medicine campaigns in the Yucatán

Autumn Quezada-Grant

Roger Williams University

Diseased Relations is an impressive work succinct in its focus on the topic of public health history in the Mexican state of Yucatán. Adding to a growing body of scholarship on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this book offers a new lens through which to consider the mechanics of state formation. In this turn to the study of disease and public health, McCrea pulls in the unfolding story of science's understanding of the origin and spread of diseases and reflects upon the dialogue between national officials and state or local officials in the Yucatán. By choosing to focus on specific disease campaigns, McCrea extends the common discussion of state formation and casts it into a light of intimacy and

personal level as she explores the ways in which disease prevention touched and changed the lives of individuals. Instead of viewing 'nation-building' through abstractions, she adroitly pursues the palpable and deadly topic of disease and efforts to combat epidemics as a clear implementation of the long-arm of the state into the private lives of individuals.

Long considered a backwater state in Mexico, the region of Yucatán garnered economic importance during the *Porfirato* with the rise of henequen plantations powered through the enslavement of indigenous populations. Yucatán, with its rural Maya population and small creole elite proves a rich micro-study with its "emergent health initiatives, shifts in public health policy and disease prevention campaigns" which in turn reveal "a buried narrative of state-building, citizenship and insurrection" (2). Policy-making elite within Yucatán sought to make a healthy state in the body politic in order to present an attractive front to draw further economic interest. Yet, this presentation of a healthy state free of disease, comfortable for 'white people' was not portrayed in the typical black and white racial binary of nineteenth-century lingo; the war on disease in the Yucatán was a fight for civilization against barbarism.

The battle to modernize the Mexican nation was a cultural war between what McCrea calls creole elite, in other places termed *ladinos*, against the indigenous population on the local, state and national levels. Civilization became equated not only with hygiene, but also a willingness to submit to vaccines and medical doctors. As the late nineteenth century turned towards the new century, the Spanish-speaking public viewed indigenous peoples, and their perceived resistance to modernizing changes, such as modern medicine, as an obstacle to modernization in all its forms. Public health, in particular, became a loci for discourse on nineteenth-century citizenship between elites and indigenous within the state of the Yucatán. The development of public health initiatives and intervention, McCrea explains, changed the dynamics among indigenous Maya peasantry, mestizos, creole elites, statesmen, foreigners, medical practitioners and devised arguments for progressive governance. Despite the charge that the Yucatán with its "geography of disease" (2) had more in common with Mexico's tropical trading partners in the Caribbean such as

Cuba, Jamaica, Belize, and New Orleans, the Yucatán proves an excellent example through which to understand the complexities of the period tied to the fight to civilize its countryside, a shared experience throughout Mexico.

McCrea in this work connects public policies to eradicate and prevent disease with the effort of state formation. While she focuses in on waves of prevention campaigns, the author connects virulent outbreaks with waves of infamous violence through the long running Caste War in the Yucatán state. An understanding of health campaigns in this micro-study brings to light previously misunderstood causes behind socio-political violence. This idea of “containing contagions” was directly tied to the states wish to “control human populations.” (5) In the modernizing movement, McCrea clearly illustrates a number of intersections of tension—church and state, creole elite and Maya peasant—and internal division and violence. She explores in each chapter the effort against particular diseases and attempts by the state to change the behaviors of its citizenry towards to the goal of a healthy modern society, and explores through these chapters the meaning of citizenship to the Maya through healthcare links. Utilizing James Scott’s notion of “negotiated subordination” (6) the author asserts that for the Maya to accept state policy they had to accept major changes to their individual lives, in particular the practice of *curanderismo*.

In chapter two, McCrea explores the smallpox campaigns between 1846 and 1852 as an entry point to understand localized state formation within the chaos of the national narrative embroiled in wars and the struggle for ideological control between the liberals and conservatives in Mexico City. Just as the Mexican nation was embroiled in moments of intense violence, so too was the Yucatán. Internal power struggles between elites in the cities of Mérida and Campeche over political control of the large region spilled into the countryside and the Maya bore the brunt of the anger and angst. Arguments over power—who retained power and who wielded power—manifested in political and ideological battles over the Indian populations. The ‘Indian’ became the touchstone for many issues plaguing nineteenth-century political life and in that argument sat an uncomfortable realization, one that at its core seemed contradictory. Elites, as much as they disdained the Mayan peasant population, dismissing them

as backwards and uncivilized, understood that they were essential to the economic success of the state. Access to indigenous labor remained an issue in the forefront and the recent outbreak of the so-called Caste War, a war between the races, in 1847 demonstrated the immediacy of needing to civilize the masses.

Smallpox, as we know, was a past, present and future menace. Prevention campaigns for smallpox, however, proved difficult to implement in the state due to two important and recurrent factors: the Caste War violence depleted state funding for inoculation campaigns, on top of which the pervasive political divisions made progress nearly impossible. The people who mattered, though, in the prevention campaign were community members. In telling a story about state formation, it is easy to lose sight of individuals. Yet, McCrea takes into account indigenous ways of thinking and indigenous knowledge of treatment for smallpox. Sub-inoculators found the campaign to fight smallpox just as much about needing to change the Mayan way of thinking about vaccines as it was about eradicating the disease. Medical students who went out into the villages served as intermediaries between the Maya communities and the local and state government in educating the public about disease prevention. McCrea argues that the Maya did not overtly resist inoculation directly, but rather were in the end disinterested in the vaccinators, often hiding sick and deceased individuals in order to avoid outsiders. Such behavior underscored elite perceptions of the Maya as barbaric and superstitious (57). The heroic age of the vaccine became the bureaucratic age of the vaccine as the state attempted to modify knowledge and behavior. Much to the frustration of officials, it was difficult to decide who was winning as even local leaders found it difficult to convince community members to submit to vaccines.

In chapter three, McCrea builds on the fascinating work of scholars like Pamela Voekel and others with a discussion of attempts by the state to change burial practices. The subject of burial practices in this chapter pitted state health officials against the church. By focusing on disease moments of cholera epidemics, McCrea explores Catholic/Maya burial practices, specifically the delays in burial, with the implementation of state

laws, which dictated immediate burial. The fight over burial practices struck to the very heart of the mid-century liberal project of separating the indigenous populations from the grasp of the Church. Liberalism, in essence, freed the Maya from the fiscal control the Catholic Church and local priest requesting fees and tithes, but lost in the midst of this larger argument was the Maya themselves, who in the end could no longer assert control over their rituals of healing, caring for the deceased, and rituals. The effort to secularize the Maya robbed them of ritual autonomy. As could be expected, the Maya resisted this break with the sacred. The Catholic Church, while never formally condoning indigenous practices, looked the other way. This study of graveyard and burials rites as it coincided with the outbreak of cholera in the midst of the Caste War and acute political instability, the author argues, transformed the relationship between citizens and the state and ultimately redefined the boundary lines between civilization and barbarism. McCrea repeatedly ties the practices associated with the Church and burial to the triumph of liberals. It is at this pivotal moment, following the liberal and conservative wars in nation formation that cemeteries and maintenance practices and burial procedures developed in Mexico. In the end, the state won in the battle for authority over the “intimate domain of death” (94).

In chapter four, McCrea tracks the nineteenth-century understanding of cholera in Yucatán through its public discussion when a particularly violent state of the Caste War between 1847 and 1852 coincided with the beginnings of the second cholera pandemic in the 1850s. The state glorified the recent ‘finds’ of John L. Stephens and simultaneously celebrated the ancient Maya civilization and condemned their descendants, rhetoric echoed on the national level. Maya peasants were justly suspicious of any creole elite attempts of any kind. Elites manipulated peasants to fight local battles between liberals and conservatives with promises of land. Elite efforts to “sanitize and civilize the body politic” only pushed Maya resentment and resistance. Yet the cholera outbreaks had chaotic effects upon society.

Just as medical science was learning more about the spread of cholera through the advancements of Dr. John Snow in London, war

mobilized the disease on epic levels through the state. The Yucatán press blamed the Maya for not only the violence, but also the spread of pestilence calling them vengeful and barbaric. The war solidified preexisting prejudices among white elites that the Maya were dangerous obstacles to economic prosperity and modernization. The war, though, depleted state funds and a shortage of medicine and trained officials only compounded existing problems associated with poverty, famine and homelessness. There was a general breakdown in bureaucratic order from the top down. In this time of cholera, even elites feared hospitals and many reverted, ironically, to indigenous remedies. Illness within the Caste War only accentuated the complicated and contradictory nature of the attitudes of creole elites in society to the large population of Maya peasantry and in the end it would take until the 1880s for there to be a general sense of confidence in the government to combat cholera.

In chapter five, McCrea argues that the gravity of disease as a component of war galvanized elites to push for a civilizing agenda against the Mayan peasantry, and with this anti-Indian sentiments tinged with racism in the years surrounding the Caste War changed for the worse. Violence coupled with virulent outbreaks influenced the official state rhetoric and prompted a move to change the countryside. Liberal agendas used disease to shape public behavior, but it was the shock and scale of disease in the protracted Caste War that pushed the need to change private and public practices to stem the spread of infection. In this discussion, McCrea uncovers peasant voices that invoke their rights as *vecinos* (citizens) to state protection. Ultimately though, the Caste War demonstrated a rupture between the desire by state officials to implement health campaigns to care for the citizenry and the actual ability to carry out such plans. Yucatán officials dictated change from the top down but failed to live up to helping provide for change, for instance trash pickup and inconsistent vaccine programs. McCrea connects this failure on the state level as a reflection of poor management at the national level. The inability of Yucatán officials to carry out their own projects reflected badly not only on the state government, but also on the national government. Similarly, Diaz's administration demanded much, but offer very little.

In the end, it would be the arrival of the Mexican Revolution to the Yucatán that prompted state officials to address systemic issues related to health and disease, ironically through subscribing to elite power structures and foreign intervention. In chapter six, McCrea explores the arrival of the Rockefeller 'Campaign for Humanity' and its efforts to eradicate yellow fever and malaria. Again a disease moment offers a portal to understand the push of modernization, and the state and local responses. As McCrea sees it, yellow fever and malaria drew together very unlikely partners, foreign philanthropy (United States capitalism) and Mexican revolutionaries and in the end it was this unlikely partnership that finally pulled the Yucatán from its diseased backwardness.

Heather McCrea offers this focused study of disease moments in the Yucatán's history to challenge the assertion that Mexico's backwardness could not be reduced to a racial binary of black and white. Rather, it was this focused argument of civilization versus barbarism by elites that drove the modernizing project and despite its own inherent contradictions led to a healthier landscape. This work is a valuable contribution to our growing knowledge on the nineteenth-century, however it could have benefited from more emphasis on indigenous participation and voice to fulfill her argument of negotiated contestation. This work is, in essence, is about the fact that the existing 'diseased relations' between elite creoles and indigenous Maya complicated and hindered modernization in the Yucatán. Yet despite this issue, scholars will find this an engaging story of public health history.