

'Hungry for Health': Protein Deficiency and Bio-Political Citizenship in Guatemala, 1949-1977

Over the course of my studies, I have developed a particular interest in the interaction between U.S.-led healthcare initiatives across Central America and shifting ideals of bio-political citizenship. Throughout the twentieth century, American-led health-care missions strategically deployed scientific knowledge so as to invest Central American bodies with specific properties making them amenable to control. The dissemination of a western biomedical ideal was intended to liberate Central American populations from enduring underdevelopment by offering natives the possibility of becoming 'modern' citizens of a universal community of rational health. My research will examine how the outline of such a community was repeatedly redefined by various American and Central American actors after 1949, as international health bodies shaped by U.S. values and interests increasingly replaced philanthropic organisations in the domain of international health worldwide.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Rockefeller Foundation's Central American single-disease services endeavoured to link native possession of a 'well-nourished, modern body' with the acquisition of national citizenship. My research will question the extent to which this philanthropic correlation between well-nourished bodies and citizenship was reframed by international health organizations in their initiatives to tackle protein deficiency in Cold-War era Central America. I plan to approach this question by examining the Central American Institute for Nutrition's (INCAP) efforts to eliminate chronic kwashiorkor and marasmus in Guatemala from 1949 to 1977. My study will observe how the Rockefeller-supported organisation associated defective embodiment with mental deficiency, thus locating undernourished natives outside the parameters of a newly-defined progressive national citizenship. I aim to demonstrate how such an association was ideologically constructed in the midst of the Guatemalan Civil War and thus functioned to exacerbate existing socio-economic inequalities across the nation.

I intend to focus particularly on INCAP's development of low-cost foods such as INCAPARINA to combat infant protein deficiency in the 1950s and 1960s. My research will illustrate how the native consumption of such foods was framed by both Americans and Guatemalans in terms of adherence to ideals of national citizenship. Until very recently, historians of tropical medicine largely overlooked the extent to which international health was validated as an important tool of U.S. foreign and economic policy in the context of the Cold War. My study will explore how INCAPARINA, as a technical intervention, constituted a potent safeguard against communist propaganda stemming from left-wing guerrilla forces in civil-war Guatemala. I hope to follow Marcos Cueto and Randall Packard in analyzing how the symbiosis between international health and global politics during the Cold War has left an indelible mark on Central American notions and systems of public health.

My research will conclude with an examination of INCAP's longitudinal community-based studies of protein-deficient infant growth in south-western Guatemala. I will detail how malnutrition treatments are often deployed as effective instruments for regulating society and legitimising ideological and cultural systems centred on the attainment of modernity. A focus on interventions such as the Oriente study from 1969 to 1977 will also enable my work to be situated within current debates concerning the relative effectiveness of 'vertical' and 'horizontal' approaches in malnutrition treatment programs, opening possibilities for speaking to policy. I will question the extent to which community-based outpatient care methods promote individualist notions of citizenship, which undermine the diffusion of western biomedical knowledge by encouraging Latin Americans to actively renegotiate imported definitions of 'rational' eating and cooking habits.

My MA research on the interplay between yaws disease and hygienic citizenship in colonial and post-colonial Jamaica has entailed the use of several archives that I will require for this research. I will need to travel to Washington D.C. to visit PAHO's archives where records of INCAP's programmes are located. I will also go to New York to visit the archives of the Rockefeller Foundation, so as to access records pertaining to its involvement with INCAP. My research on Guatemala will also be supplemented by an examination of the work of British colonial nutrition units in neighbouring Jamaica, so that I can explore the extent to which INCAP mined the language of colonialism to construct a model of universalist rationality. Consequently I will also use the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine's nutrition archive to gain access to documents related to colonial nutrition endeavours.