

Health and medicine in twentieth-century Latin America: historical perspectives on the Cold War

*Salud y medicina en la América Latina del siglo XX:
perspectivas históricas sobre la Guerra Fría*

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BIRN, Anne-Emanuelle;
NECOCHEA LÓPEZ, Raúl.
*Peripheral nerve: health
and medicine in Cold War
Latin America*. Durham:
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Scholars of Latin America are familiar with the narrative of the Cold War in the region. The stories we tell about the second half of the twentieth century often rely on narrative scaffolding provided by the Cold War; after all, the global influence of the ideological, political, economic, and military battles between the United States and Soviet Union permeated all aspects of people's lives to various degrees. In these stories, the Latin American Third World is presented as influenced, persuaded, and pressured by the two global superpowers while politicians and policymakers made decisions about the path nations would take towards development and globalization (see, e.g., Smith, 2007). In *Peripheral nerve: health and medicine in Cold War Latin America*, Anne-Emanuelle Birn and Raúl Necochea López present a different way to look at the Cold War era in Latin America, with a more nuanced view of how different people in different places experienced, reacted to, and acted during the Cold War. This is not an alternative approach meant to decenter

the Cold War: on the contrary, the authors and editors illustrate the complexity of the Cold War on the ground, on the so-called peripheries of development. This book demonstrates that people in Latin America had the “nerve” to face international pressures and make choices that, while under the veil of the Cold War dichotomy, had more to do with the individual local realities than the larger battle between First and Second Worlds. To learn how Latin Americans dealt with the Cold War on a local and international level this book is essential.

Against the larger backdrop of the Cold War, this volume concentrates thematically on the history of health and medicine. This entry point is valuable because policies that govern public health and knowledge that shapes medical fields are linked to political ideologies. But more importantly, health and medicine are inextricably tied to the life of each and

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every person: medicine is social. By looking at how different people engage with medicine, health care, and the bettering of life we can see much of the complex negotiations of daily life during the Cold War. For this reason, this book is a major contribution to not only our understanding of this era beyond the two “superpowers,” but also the larger historiography of health and medicine in Latin America, adding an in-depth look at the second half of the twentieth century.

The book is organized into three semi-chronological sections with each chapter following a similar pattern that brings together the various authors’ distinct perspectives on the story. The chapters are consistent, each providing a clear statement of unique arguments and how they relate to the book’s greater purpose from the start, along with a conclusion that clearly ties their individual arguments to the overarching theme of the volume.

The contributors to this book are thoughtful in how they use the Cold War lens to explore the stories they are familiar with and well-known for, a fresh nuanced way of understanding local histories and international interactions. In the first section, contributions by Katherine E. Bliss, Nicole L. Pacino, and Gabriela Soto Laveaga consider (and complicate) how people in Latin America were suspected of being communists because of leftist inclinations in their approaches to health. In the second section, Raúl Necochea López, Gilberto Hochman and Carlos Henrique Assunção Paiva, and Jennifer Lynn Lambe look at population science, parasitology, and psychiatry as locations for contesting Cold War ideologies and state formation. In the final section of the book, Jadwiga Pieper Mooney, Marco Ramos, and Cheasty Anderson focus more closely on the local nuances of health interactions that did not always follow the patterns of Cold War politics described by previous scholars.

The contributions in this volume accompany the more recent trend of decentering the Cold War in the histories of Third World countries (for example: Joseph, Spenser, 2008; Pieper Mooney, Lanza, 2013; Fink, 2017). In the introduction and epilogue, Birn and Necochea López (2020) carefully tease out how each of these chapters are part of this important effort. They also remind us of the common themes that are woven through the chapters, including the importance of local pressures for health policies that may appear to have been influenced by Cold War politics but rather were responses to local needs, the often-contradictory focus and politics of the Rockefeller Foundation, the weaving path of medical professionalization, and the multidirectional networks of international knowledge that medicine and health science comprise. This book does not oppose the framework of the Cold War, but instead allows us to see beyond the binary categories that dominate its narrative. It also shows how ideas and tendencies attributed to Cold War politics actually originated before this era, allowing us to shift the chronology, de-emphasize the time markers established by US-Soviet history, and see the larger contributing story in Latin America. By reframing the Cold War outside this dichotomy, we can then see the people in Latin America engaging in complex interactions, creating and contributing to international knowledge, and participating in a global world.

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