
RESEÑAS DE LIBROS / BOOK REVIEWS

A. KIM CLARK. *Conjuring the State. Public Health Encounters in Highland Ecuador, 1908-1945*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023.

Conjuring the State is a historical ethnography of the first public health service in Ecuador, the Servicio de Sanidad. Grounded primarily in the analysis of documents contained in uncatalogued archives, this study covers the creation and development of the idea of public health from 1908 to 1945. Founded after the bubonic plague reached the country in 1908, the Sanidad was in charge not only of controlling the outbreak but also of handling issues such as water sanitation, the regulation of pharmacies, and the registration of physicians. Kim Clark situates the story of the Sanidad at the junction between political anthropology and historical ethnography, as an entry point for the analysis of the state and of public ideas regarding its role in the containment and handling of disease and, in a more general sense, of the population.

The *encounters* that Clark presents take us to fascinating exchanges between socially situated actors whose paths meet during the processes of building and implementing public health policies. The main actors in this narrative are the public health officials who produced the documents contained in the archives, at a time when they were creating a new administrative division under trying conditions. Their work was premised on perceptions and ideas about disease propagation, public health, and hygiene and pressured by the potentially deadly spread of the bubonic plague and other infectious diseases. These officials, who considered themselves politically neutral, develop a project through which the state's highly regulatory role becomes apparent, from the most private of practices of toilet use in the capital city of Quito to the semi-detached world of the hacienda where they implement disease-control measures.

The word “encounters” shapes the theoretical and methodological facets of this study, as the archive is approached not as a source of factual information but as a cultural site to be ethnographically explored. Reading the archive ethnographically requires one to have a “feel” for the characters, and the historical positioning of the anthropologist in the time of the events. This requires wresting attention from the outcomes of the routes of disease transmission and control and other sociopolitical events. Clark incorporates further dimensions in the analysis of the characters, including their past experiences and their views

of the future, gleaned from some of the more personal correspondence of the state officials and exercising a degree of creativity, an unusual and compelling combination in the anthropological study of state formation.

This ethnographic approach can help unmask the people behind the correspondence and the production of official documents, presenting them in their complexity as citizens, scientists, and state officials with their own motivations and pursuits. However, likely due to the limitations posed by archival sources available, the focus is on documents produced by medium- to high-level mestizo officials of the Sanidad, and their views and interpretations of health-related behaviour are what dominates the narrative. The relative lack of other voices, including the accounts of Indigenous peasants and other recipients of Sanidad policies, is one of the drawbacks of a research based on archival material produced by highly educated male urban mestizos.

Although there is a certain limitation in the variety of voices we hear in the book, it does cover geographical spaces which have often been marginalized in studies of state formation in Ecuador. From Guayaquil, following the routes of the plague, Clark explores the implementation of Sanidad measures in the highlands, including small towns, Indigenous communities, and larger commercial hubs like the city of Ambato. The central Andean provinces, despite having historically been a place of encounter and playing an important role in the exchange of goods, have often been overlooked both in the political science and social science literature on Ecuador. In this sense, their incorporation into this study contributes to a better understanding of geospatial and social relations in the Ecuadorian highlands.

An extraordinary finding is the lack of explicit discrimination exhibited by Sanidad officials when discussing particular conditions of intervention in Indigenous communities. The usual language of hygiene that has been highlighted as a mode of racial discrimination in Ecuador in the past and present does not seem to have expressed itself through the Sanidad's documents and procedures. Furthermore, the Sanidad's policies included measures intended to change the habits of the upper classes. Clark suggests that this is, at least in part, due to the legitimacy that the Sanidad needed to achieve in the provinces with respect to hacienda owners and local authorities, placing itself above local hierarchical systems. Although the author recognizes that the public health encounters took place in highly racialized contexts, the dynamics of the exchange between members of the communities and public officials are not interpreted within the systems of racial and economic inequality. Interactions between Indigenous day laborers and Sanidad authorities, as that pictured on the book cover, could reveal other facets of this complex set of relations. Taking the question further, one asks about the potentially opposing views of those who were subject to the

measures of disease control, including the response of Indigenous peasants and urban dwellers who were subject to vaccination campaigns and other measures of plague control.

One of the book's central arguments is that, through the study of the dealings between Sanidad state officials and other groups, one can unveil processes of state formation and their consequences. In Ecuador, the climate of political and economic instability contributed to the difficulty of carrying out "technical" interventions in health and other areas pertaining to welfare. The expansion of hygienic control to the provinces also illustrates the tensions between central, municipal, and provincial levels of governance and the relative freedom with which each of these instances acted. The archive explores several dimensions of these tense relationships between different agencies and even within them. On the other hand, it reveals a degree of care and incorporation of some of the necessities of the Ecuadorian population. All these levels of analysis lay the basis to understand the scope, distribution, and limitations of public services in Ecuador, in the past and today.

Finally, it is understood that the projects of governance portrayed here generally act in favor of certain groups. The confabulation of trade, commerce, international relations, and the negative impact that the propagation of plague would have in Ecuador shaped the measures and the interest of the central government in the creation of the Sanidad. The ethnographic approach used in this book takes us back and forth between the localized, face-to-face interactions on the ground and the construction of the state's ideas and systems, reflecting on how several pairs of opposites like containment and care, rural and urban, coast and highlands contribute to explain the shape of the state's hegemonic projects which were built through everyday interactions.

Lucía Rojas Rodríguez

University of Cambridge

JACOB BLANC. *The Prestes Column: An Interior History of Modern Brazil*. DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2024.

Between 1924 and 1927, a ragtag army of rebel soldiers ranged across much of Brazil's national territory, skirmishing with regular troops and other pro-government forces, before a final retreat into Bolivia. Subsequently called the Prestes Column—after one of its young commanders, the army captain Luiz Carlos Prestes—, it became the starting point for several important political careers (not least that of its namesake, the longtime head of his country's Moscow-aligned Communist Party) and a powerful element in Brazilian national mythology.