
Reviewed by Daniela Sclavo (University of Cambridge)

Published on H-Environment (July, 2023)

Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Thomas Rath’s *The Dread Plague and the Cow Killers* is a must-read for anyone with an interest in twentieth-century history about Mexico, agriculture, US-Latin American politics, livestock, and the disease/pathogen movement. As broad as the movement seems, Rath’s astonishing book pulls off a wide-encompassing yet detailed work about the development of the US-Mexico Commission for the Eradication of Foot-and-Mouth Disease (Comisión México-Americana para la Erradicación de la Fiebre Aftosa, or CMAEFA) that took place in Mexican territory from 1947 until 1954.

Rath’s method of zooming in and out allows the reader to situate the aftosa disease in a global perspective where Cold War politics, anxieties over biological warfare, capitalist incentives for modernization, and the intrinsic “mild” characteristics of the pathogen made it difficult to trace and, quite literally, attack. The author also frames aftosa within the landscape of postrevolutionary Mexico, where the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was growing the roots of what would become a seventy-year “soft authoritarian” rule (p. 156). Therefore, this oeuvre offers an account of “Mexico in the world” that integrates the general and the local through the story of a campaign that “represented a compromise between older US models of animal-disease control, new virological knowledge and technology, the Mexican state’s approach to development and security, and the interests and attitudes of rural Mexicans,” as he states in the introduction (p. 6).

Beyond a classic story about US paternalism and interventionism, this story underlines how the Mexican faction of the campaign against aftosa, both officials and their opposition, used its agency in defiance of being the less powerful side of the commission. That is, this faction advanced an agenda against slaughter (the United States preferred strategy against the virus) and toward vaccination: one that was eventually adopted despite a plurality of political, economic, and ecological entanglements.

The book is divided into six chapters, with each taking a different angle to analyze the aftosa
campaign. The first chapter steps back in time and gives the reader a wide perspective of Mexico’s state formation and the place of domestic animals or livestock from the colonial period until the postrevolutionary era. It discusses colonial authorities condemning the indigenous relationship to animals in rituals or worship, the gradual livestock market that developed in the nineteenth century between northern Mexico and the US, the renewed modernizing ideals of postrevolutionary Mexico in the 1920s, the land reform of the 1930s, and the global anxieties around trade and disease control. Thus, this chapter serves as preliminary background to understand the picture in which the aftosa outbreak and the campaign against it took place in the 1940s.

Subsequently, Rath zooms into the core of the US-Mexico aftosa campaign in chapters 2 to 5, in which he develops different sides of the story. Chapter 2 delineates the political construction of the campaign through a supposed shared sovereignty between the two nations, which was not a smooth journey of horizontal agreements, at least not for the first stages of the campaign. The CMAEFA went through three main periods. First, in March-November 1947, the US exercised more political power and established slaughter as the main strategy for fighting aftosa. Second, by November 1947, the Mexican side managed to halt slaughter through official obstruction and public opposition, which resulted in a twelve-month reorientation of the project and a shift toward vaccination. Finally, with this new organization, the campaign ran in steadier terrain from 1948 until its completion. Here, Rath unveils the complex relational dynamics between the parties, especially how the capital elites of both sides pushed for livestock modernization. Being the “weaker state,” Mexico developed an “unspoken strategy,” as the author defines it, to push for vaccination (p. 37). This was done through bureaucratic obstructionism and alternative international ties to neutralize the influence of the US Department of Agriculture. Thus, this chapter describes the campaign’s bureaucratic complications but also sheds light into the instances of clash and cooperation on both sides of the border.

Beyond the internal bureaucracy of the CMAEFA, its opposition greatly shaped its trajectory. Past histories have related the campaign’s opposition as led by peasants or campesinos who provoked violent clashes, such as the Senguio Massacre. Yet Rath’s extended archival work proves that a wide set of actors consolidated a diverse countermovement, sometimes violent but not always. Other strategies, like obstruction, noncompliance, hiding animals, written criticisms, and more, were adopted by ranchers, newspapers, journals, politicians, and many rural farmers and producers, who are all sometimes grouped in the category of campesino. In this sense, this book challenges the common dichotomy of elites versus peasantry in Mexican historiography by considering a plurality of actors that had a stake in the development of the project. This offers a more integral, albeit complex, understanding of how people mobilized against the “sanitary rifle” and pushed toward vaccination—something that resonated in many parts of the world, not only in the Mexican opposition (p. 80).

Controlling the opposition was not easy. CMAEFA’s officials on both sides came up with an equally diverse set of approaches for the campaign to prosper, and it did. Chapter 4 digs into the low-level or below-the-surface strategies that the officials followed to deal with rebellion and to transition from slaughter to vaccination. The campaign went from using military force and violence to gathering and mapping local information, such as situated cultural and political processes. It imposed, negotiated, and persuaded people to cooperate. Even when the use of the army and terror were common in the commission, other tactics were increasingly implemented during the campaign, like indemnities, propaganda, and information gathering, as well as choosing carefully who spoke to communities and how. Therefore, violent
suppression gradually decreased as vaccination became installed and gave way to a more coerced discourse of national progress and binational horizontality—at least in appearance.

Rath zooms out in the last two chapters to analyze how the campaign's traces tell a story of Mexican state-building and international policy, research, and trade. Amid a weak and fragmented state infrastructure, the aftosa campaign propelled the modernization and regulation of the livestock industry in Mexico. For one, it boosted the institutionalization and prestige of veterinary education and opened new avenues for transnational research. This was particularly evident with the “sparkling new animal science laboratory in Palo Alto” where both American and Mexican scientists continued to collaborate (p. 163). In Rath's words, the aftosa crisis then “was also a crucial event in its own right, reshaping when and how the state sought to regulate, sanitize, and rationalize the countryside” in “PRI's developmentalist state” (pp. 190-91).

More so, this binational sanitary effort influenced the course of future international research and trade networks. In the last chapter, Rath underlines Mexico's role in the configuration of international disease control. It was not only the events that took place on Mexican territory that shaped future approaches to the virus but also Mexican expertise and knowledge that traveled to other places in the world. The US-Mexico campaign modeled future battles against aftosa in Latin America and Europe, and it even “helped to lay the foundation of the USDA's knowledge on disease control” (p. 195).

In sum, this book provides a brilliant lens to engage with Mexico's livestock history with a critical eye. For those of us interested in agricultural history, it is especially enlightening as it touches on Mexican rural modernization efforts in the 1940s and the state's relationship with the Rockefeller Foundation beyond the Green Revolution and the Mexican Agricultural Program. By exploring the struggles between veterinarians and agricultural scientists to control animal husbandry, this book highlights the importance of animals, and not only crops, in imaginaries of development and progress.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58616

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.