This work is an excellent contribution to both the fields of Mexican history and, more broadly, studies of nationalism. McEnroe paints a detailed, vivid picture of the early-modern, colonial imagined community as an antecedent of, and a foundation to, the modern nation.


Sophie A. Greenway*

Interdisciplinarity in academia can be fraught, often richer in claim than substance. Having recently reviewed work by historians on communicating with public health practitioners, I was interested to note the extent to which history has been deployed by two social scientists in setting out their understanding of ecological public health. This award winning volume raises important questions for historians on the nature of interdisciplinary exchange and the extent of involvement in policy.¹ This review will concentrate on Rayner and Lang’s handling of history. Their treatment of current political issues and alternative ecological systems of public health are the subject of reviews of a related essay by the same authors in the B.M.J.²

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¹ BMA Medical Book and Patient Information Awards 2013, Highly Commended in Public Health Category.

The standard model of history as background to public health practice can be seen in Christopher Hamlin’s initial chapter in the *Oxford Textbook of Public Health*. Virginia Berridge has worked to improve links between history and public health, founding the Centre for History in Public Health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in 2003, publishing in medical journals on benefits and problems of communication between historians and public health practitioners and with Martin Gorsky and Alex Mold, *Public Health in History*. Presented as a textbook, this latter volume gives an accessible introduction for practitioners to historical methods such as interpretation and use of sources, and proposes that the methodological gulf between historians and public health practitioners can be traversed through clear presentation by historians. In an article written for historians, Berridge is rather dismissive of social scientists: ‘Historical facts are thrown into analyses as “context” or background’. In this article, Berridge discusses social policy researchers as ‘outside’ the ‘historical field’ and speaks of the need for historians to remain in control of historical interpretation. In my opinion, Rayner and Lang have shown in *Ecological Public Health* that social scientists can possess and utilise a thorough understanding of history.

Rayner and Lang include interdisciplinarity as an ideal for public health, in contrast to multidisciplinarity, which they see as allowing old medical hierarchies to persist. ‘Ecological Public Health’ is not presented as a textbook, but more an argument for a new public health that, by definition, involves everyone. The publisher’s classifications are ‘health and nutrition, ecology, sociology/ geography and politics’. History is not mentioned despite its being fundamental to the argument of the book. The use of history within ‘Ecological Public Health’ could be described as integrative, in that it crops up in virtually all their explanations of public health definitions and systems. Further, the use of history is fundamental to their argument.

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that public health needs to be viewed in the long term, in terms of ‘sustainable solutions’ rather than ‘quick fixes’. In this sense, history is deployed as a political tool, the argument being that an understanding of the long term past of public health will foster an appreciation of the need to secure a sustainable future.

There are moments of weakness in the handling of historical argument, where Rayner and Lang demonstrate a misapprehension of the role of the historian. They explain Hamlin’s point that Chadwick’s ‘Sanitary-Environmental model’ had attended to the ‘remedial conditions of the environment’ but ignored the ‘crumbling constitutions of poor persons’. Rayner and Lang claim Hamlin implies that a ‘more individually oriented, medically based approach might have provided a better solution’. I couldn’t follow up Hamlin’s exact quotation, as Rayner and Lang’s page reference appears to be incorrect, however, given their awareness of the McKeown thesis shown elsewhere in the volume, I was surprised by their suggestion that the only solution was medical rather than economic, or indeed that Hamlin was suggesting any solution at all.

Apart from isolated exceptions, Rayner and Lang have used history very effectively, but for a specific purpose. Their early chapters deal with images, definitions and models of public health, all building towards the proposal of their vision of ecological public health. The authors’ historical understanding contributes to their case, such as their awareness of historians’ possible over-caution at ‘heroisation’ of public health achievements and of George Rosen’s omission of the accommodation of the US public health system to racial oppression in ‘A History of Public Health’. The persistent message is of the complexity of history and therefore of life. Does the fact that this use of history is contributing to a political argument make it a wrong use of history?

As an historian, I am pleased to see a social science book using history in such a multi-layered and thoughtful way, but I find the switches into the present rather jarring, such as the discussion of the 1920’s definition of public health by Edward Winslow (1877-1957): ‘Compared to these modern attempts to define public health,

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8 Ibid., pp.89-90.
Winslow’s 1920’s definition appears the more satisfying. It has content, it draws upon his own working situation and knowledge’.9 This is a difficult issue for historians, seen in Franklin Ginn’s objection to the ‘partial and selective’ use of the history of the Dig for Victory campaign of World War Two by both environmentalists and the Conservative Party.10 Does the discussion of the present jar simply because no historian would overtly attempt it without qualifications and the urging of caution? If we accept that all historical writing is subjective, is there anything wrong with using historical examples as a basis for action? Perhaps the evidence of this book supports greater involvement by historians in policy, as they are best placed to secure the past against misinterpretation. I would like to suggest that we celebrate Rayner and Lang’s work which proves that other disciplines are engaging with history, and that, if historians in turn engage with them, there are fruitful debates to be had on the nature both of history and of progress.

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9 Ibid., p.47.