

Observations on Cultural Alternative and Environmental Conservation: Populations "Delayed" and Excluded from Health and Public Hygiene Policies in Mexico (1890-1930)

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Abstract : The history of the circulation of hygienic knowledge and the consolidation of public health in Latin American cities towards the end of the 19th century is well known. Among them, Mexico City was inserted in international politics, strengthened institutions, medical knowledge, applied parameters of modernity and built sanitary engineering works. Despite the power that this hygienist system achieved, its scope was relative: it cannot be generalized to all cities. From a comparative and contextual analysis, it will be shown that conclusions derived from modern urban historiography present, from our contemporary observations, fractures. Between 1890 and 1930, the small cities and areas surrounding the Mexican capital adapted in their own way the international and federal public health regulations. This will be shown for neighborhoods located around Mexico City and in a medium city, close to the Mexican capital (about 80 km), called Cuernavaca. While the inhabitants of the neighborhoods kept awaiting the evolutionary process and the forms that public hygiene policies were taking (because they were witnesses and affected in their territories), in Cuernavaca, the dictates came as an echo. While the capital was drained, large roads were opened, roundabouts were erected, residents were expelled, and drains, sewers, drinking water pipes, etc., were built; Cuernavaca was sheltered in other times and practices. What was this due to? Undoubtedly, the time and energy that it took politicians and the group of "scientists" to carry out these enormous works in the Mexican capital took them away from addressing the issue in remote villages. It was not until the 20th century that the federal hygiene policy began to be strengthened. Despite this, there are other factors that emphasize the particularities of each site. I would like to draw attention here to the different receptions that each town prepared on public hygiene. We will see that Cuernavaca responded to its own semi-rural culture, history, orography and functions, prolonging for much longer, for example, the use of its deep ravines as sewers. For their part, the neighborhoods surrounding the capital, although affected and excluded from hygienist policies, chose to move away from them and solve the deficiencies with their own resources (they resorted to the waste that was left from the dried lake of Mexico to continue their lake practices). All of this points to a paradox that shapes our contemporary concerns: on the one hand, the benefits derived from medical knowledge and its technological applications (in this work referring particularly to the urban health system) and, on the other, the alteration it caused in environmental settings. Places like Cuernavaca (classified by the nineteenth-century and hygienists of the first decades of the twentieth century as backward), as well as landscapes such as neighborhoods, affected by advances in sanitary engineering, keep in their memory buried practices that we observe today as possible ways to reestablish environmental balances: alternative uses of water; recycling of organic materials; local uses of fauna; various systems for breaking down excreta, and so on. In sum, what the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries graduated as levels of backwardness or progress, turn out to be key information to rethink the routes of environmental conservation. When we return to the observations of the scientists, politicians and lawyers of that period, we find historically rejected cultural alterity. Populations such as Cuernavaca that, due to their history, orography and/or insufficiency of federal policies, kept different relationships with the environment, today give us clues to reorient basic elements of cities: alternative uses of water, waste of raw materials, organic or consumption of local products, among others. It is, therefore, a matter of unearthing the rejected that cries out to emerge to the surface.

Keywords : sanitary hygiene, Mexico city, cultural alterity, environmental conservation, environmental history

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