

disease and the Maori that builds an unexpected (to an outside reader) finding that race was less significant than class in stereotyping or deforming public-health responses.

Military venereal disease is a major focus of the book, in particular the lessons learned from the First World War for the more sensitive management in the Second. Civilian infections and the fears over 'amateur' and professional prostitution in wartime are investigated separately. (The long distances from the fronts enabled home populations to be protected from infected soldiers more effectively.) The study is enriched by the attention paid to the patient's perspective and his or her agency in seeking better treatment.

Post-war, this is largely a story of a medical profession gradually learning to 'think socially' rather than 'morally': to start to understand how to identify 'at-risk groups'; to reduce the stigma and fear which might deter the seeking of treatment; to trial more effective sexual education and public health campaigns. As Kampf concludes, by the 1980s, after travelling a 'rocky and winding' road, a new generation of sexual health physicians had arrived at a place where their patients were clients, their tools were biomedical and psycho-social and they worked in multi-disciplinary teams. The next phase of the story will be New Zealand's response to the challenge of HIV/AIDS. This is a book of interest to historians and to sexual health practitioners.

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**Gabriela Soto Laveaga,** *Jungle Laboratories: Mexican Peasants, National Projects, and the Making of the Pill* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), pp. xiv + 331, £17.99/\$23.95, paperback, ISBN: 978-0-8223-4605-0.

Heralded as one of the world's key transforming medicines, the oral contraceptive pill has prompted many different histories since its first arrival half a century ago. Some have considered the motivations and difficulties of those who helped finance, synthesise and test the original pill. Others have looked at the impact the medicine has had for women and society as a whole. Few of these histories, however, have examined in detail its history from the perspective of the Mexican peasants who helped gather and process the Mexican wild yam (*barbasco*) necessary for its emergence. Soto Laveaga's *Jungle Laboratories* provides a vivid account of these Mexican peasants, tracing their involvement back to the rise of the global synthetic steroid hormone industry from the 1940s that helped pave the way to the pill in the 1950s.

Based on archival sources and more than fifty interviews with former *barbasco* pickers, processing plant owners and state officials, *Jungle Laboratories* yields fascinating insights into the social, political and economic consequences of the global search for medicinal plants at a local level within the rural regions of southeast and southwest Mexico. The book particularly highlights the interrelationship between local allegiances and power structures in the development of *barbasco*. These were not static and shifted over time as the plant was converted from a local weed to a highly lucrative international medical commodity, firstly as cortisone, and then as a contraceptive pill.

Soto Laveaga argues that the scientific exploitation of *barbasco* was heavily dependent on the skills of rural Mexicans and their knowledge of soil conditions, growth cycles and ability to distinguish between different yam species. It was a Mexican peasant who helped Russell Marker, the first American chemist to synthesise steroids from *barbasco*, to track down the first plant for his research in 1942. When the *barbasco* plant proved difficult to transplant elsewhere, steroid production continued to rely on the expertise of Mexican peasants. Within eight

years of Marker's first work on the plant, rural workers were removing several dozen tons of it from the jungle every week, delivering it by boat, horse or on their backs to processing plants. By 1975 more than 100,000 *barbasco*-picking families were involved in the trade. This included men, women and children.

In focusing on the impact of *barbasco* production on rural Mexicans, Soto Laveaga shows that these people were not simply a unified or universally exploited group in the process. While payment for extraction of the plant remained very low and conditions for picking and delivery were highly strenuous and hazardous, a lucky picker could rise socially, becoming in his or her turn an employer of other pickers, buyer or processor. For some rural Mexicans, *barbasco* gave them a new sense of identity as they moved from the position of uninformed root gatherers to that of skilled experts upon whom the wider pharmaceutical industry greatly relied. Within a short space of time they became well versed in the conditions necessary for tracking and extracting high-yielding plants, the science behind the drying and purification of the root, and developed highly tuned skills for negotiating agreements with commercial companies.

Armed with this new power, some of these rural Mexicans, as Soto Laveaga points out, later became articulate political agitators for economic reform of the countryside. From 1974 they were supported in this effort by a populist Mexican government seizing *barbasco* as a national symbol to promote rural modernisation and Mexican pharmaceutical independence. Setting up a Mexican state-run company, Proquivemex, to oversee the *barbasco* trade and improve the lot of those helping to gather and process the root, this government effort, however, ultimately failed. In part this reflected the fact that by the 1970s the international steroid industry had already begun successfully to exploit alternative raw materials for steroidal production. Soto Laveaga's book is a powerful reminder of the complex local and

international relationships involved in the production of medicinal drugs and the intricate social, economic and political impact this can have on individuals' lives.

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**Peter Atkins, *Liquid Materialities: A History of Milk, Science and the Law*, Critical Food Studies (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. xxii + 334, £65.00, hardback, ISBN: 978-0-7546-7921-9.**

What can milk be other than the whitish, opaque and sweet liquid produced by women and female animals as the primary source of nutrition for their offspring? Certainly, we know that the exact components of this liquid vary by species, farming methods, age or nutrition, and that there exist vegetable liquids from soy, rice or almond called milk. One can observe that milk has the tendency to change over time, while for the purposes of consumption these material changes can be put into operation in numerous forms. We are also aware that the highly sensitive substance is not easy to store and transport, and therefore are used to the many hygienic treatments of milk, e.g. pasteurisation, as a preventive measure in the fight against pathogenic microorganisms. Yet, despite all restrictions and well-known technical operations, we tend to identify milk as one of the most natural foodstuffs on our table. Among the plethora of processed food products, milk and dairy products seem to have saved much of their naturalness.

However, there is nothing self-evident in the very nature of milk. Neither the material of milk nor its qualities are timeless, stable and unalterable. Our meanings of milk are instead the result of history; especially the question, why a particular food should be for whatever reason a healthy and desirable one, can be answered in very different ways. Today, the notion of nature fits better with our ideals of a