

Introduction:

Science and Medicine in Latin America

Julia Rodriguez and Ann Zulawski

This special issue originated in a panel put together by Ann Zulawski (Smith College) and Ann S. Blum (University of Massachusetts, Boston) at the 2007 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association. Recognizing Nancy Leys Stepan's pioneering and wide-ranging historical research on Latin American eugenics, scientific inquiry, public health, and tropical nature, the organizers invited members of the panel to present papers that explored the impact of Stepan's studies on current research on the history of Latin American science and medicine. The session (for which Nancy Stepan was the commentator) fortuitously coincided with her recent retirement from Columbia University and her new research on Rockefeller Foundation science in Brazil. Originally trained in the history of science, Stepan pioneered influential historical studies of science and medicine in Latin America, a research area that has matured in the last 20 years and is now bursting with new findings. All the papers presented at the original LASA panel appear in this special issue of *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, and Stepan herself has contributed an article based on new research. Taken together, these essays showcase some of the remarkable achievements in current scholarship on the history of science, medicine, and public health in Latin America.

Stepan's studies of science and society in specific Latin American milieus brought together questions and methods from a number of fields. To scholars of the history of science, she brought to awareness new ways of thinking about national science and transatlantic science, in terms of both the internal dynamics of idea creation and transformation and the interaction between those ideas and the surrounding society. Her work not only led historians of science to consider the relatively unknown area of Latin America but also contributed to a growing awareness of the transnational circulation of knowledge. Stepan's work roughly coincided with a new interest in the history of medicine and science in colonial Africa and South Asia. Her dialogue with this work contributed to the recognition of the differences and similarities between scientific research and

Hispanic American Historical Review 91:3

DOI 10.1215/00182168-1300119

Copyright 2011 by Duke University Press

the reception of ideas in undeveloped but independent countries of Latin America and in actual colonies. She also made important contributions to feminist studies of science and the history of science, race, and gender around the globe. Her work is widely cited by scholars of European, United States, and African history and in works of theory by feminist and postcolonial scholars.

Like many historians of science, Stepan practiced putting science in context, clarifying the social, political, and cultural significance of scientific and medical ideas. This led many historians of North Atlantic science in particular to recognize the unique and significant histories of science in unaccustomed settings like Latin America. And as her socially, culturally, and politically embedded studies of science crossed geographic boundaries, they crossed conceptual ones as well. Her work has held a remarkable range of insights, from the uncovering of autonomous scientific achievement in Latin America; challenges to the center-periphery paradigm; early exploration of transatlantic and multi-locational sites of scientific production; and groundbreaking studies of public health, eugenics, and racial science in Latin America.

Reflecting on the work of Nancy Leys Stepan leads us to some of the biggest themes in Latin American history: the consolidation of state power, the construction of national ideologies, the hardening and softening of racial schemes and gender expectations. Traveling these significant paths, we are drawn in by her incisive approach and her characteristic ability to uncover the ideological and social underpinnings of phenomena presented as natural or normal and normative. Her work has informed a wide range of inquiries in Latin American history (see Rodriguez's essay in this issue for a discussion of these trends). Beginning with her book on Brazilian biomedicine, *The Beginnings of Brazilian Science* (1976), and later in publications such as *The Hour of Eugenics* (1991) and *Picturing Tropical Nature* (2001), Stepan called attention to the rich and varied stories of science in the region. Given the North Atlantic focus of most work in the history of science, simply turning to Latin American science forced historians to study previously ignored topics and themes as well as larger international and multidirectional connections. Stepan's rethinking of the center-periphery model of scientific production also raised new questions in Latin American history by exposing the role of science and medicine in modern nation-state development and cultural formations. By examining the connections between science/medicine and national political projects, scholars uncovered the specific ways in which social factors shaped the significance and role of science in particular contexts. In this sense, Stepan's work can be seen as part of a trend toward creative interdisciplinary research that calls for the study of science deeply embedded in social, political, and cultural layers.

This special issue contains a set of complementary essays that combine historiographical and methodological analysis and original research. The first two articles reflect on the disciplinary and methodological impact of Stepan's major works. Simone Kropf and Gilberto Hochman examine how Stepan's book *Beginnings of Brazilian Science*, published in 1976, was received in the Brazilian debate about science and the nation's history. They show how issues raised by the book were directly linked to the establishment of what was considered the emergence of a new historiography of science in Brazil. This process was associated, in turn, with a broad political debate in Brazil and Latin America about the characteristics and prospects for science in "developing countries." Next, Julia Rodriguez describes the progression and impact of Stepan's pioneering works in broader disciplinary context. A bird's-eye view reveals how immensely useful Stepan's weaving of science, race, gender, and nation have been to big questions in the field.

The next three articles showcase new research on science in its Latin American context. Alexandra Minna Stern's article explores the convergence of eugenics, public health, and postrevolutionary socialist politics in 1930s Mexico. Building on Stepan's insights into preventative eugenics in Mexico, Stern analyzes the only eugenic sterilization measures passed in Latin America, enacted in Veracruz, Mexico, in 1932. Steven Palmer focuses on Cuba's Instituto Histo-Bacteriologico (founded in 1887), an institution that transformed previous models of research in Cuba by introducing an unprecedented collaborative research agenda. Palmer applies and updates Stepan's model of successful scientific take-off on the periphery, in particular by supplementing her definitions of scientific originality and sustainability with an appreciation for the political and cultural role of medicine and science in distinct locales. An essay by Nancy Leys Stepan revisits the encounter of US and European models of public health and medicine with local needs and priorities in Brazil. Finally, the issue closes with reflections on the state of the field by Anne-Emanuelle Birn and Raúl Necochea López.

Here we share with readers of the *HAHR* the riches of past and emerging scholarship on the history of science and medicine in Latin America. These studies and their innovative methodologies have already made their mark; future developments are certainly in store.

