

Reproducing Cruelty

IMPERIALIST IRONY

In 2017, a US journalist released a podcast titled *A Craving for Nutritional Knowledge*, which described the nutritional landscape of Guatemala as “ironic”: “The main crop here was irony. The same valleys that produced a cornucopia of vegetables of enormous size . . . also produced the highest rates of stunting in the Western hemisphere” (Thurow 2017).

Roger Thurow, a hunger policy consultant who worked for three decades as a foreign correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*, had traveled to a rural health clinic outside of Xela to conduct research for his book, *The First 1,000 Days: A Crucial Time for Mothers and Children—And the World* (2016). At the clinic, he attended a nutrition rehabilitation class for new mothers and mothers-to-be. His podcast tells a story about how a K’iche’ clinician quizzed the dozen women in the room about where calcium and iron came from and how the women answered with “Milk, meat, green vegetables, spinach, beans.”

Their correct responses to the clinician’s questions offered evidence of the uncomfortable truth that nutrition education often does little to alleviate hunger in Guatemala’s highlands, where, as Thurow reports, “childhood malnutrition and stunting rates were about the highest you will find anywhere in the world.” He mentions that a civil war ravaged Guatemala’s countryside, and he highlights the inequalities of the export trade, which makes vegetables costly for the people who grow them. Thurow is struck by the tragedy of the situation: women who produce food for the world do not, themselves, have enough to eat. The podcast concludes with an emphasis on irony: “[The women] left the classroom

empowered and burdened at the same time and walked home, past the fields of the valley, ripe with irony.”

This chapter critiques Thurow’s framing of Guatemalan malnutrition as “ironic,” suggesting that what he labels as irony is in fact a dangerous rhetorical trick that elides the historical brutality of US-Guatemala relations. In making this argument, I take inspiration from Renato Rosaldo’s discussion of imperialist nostalgia. Rosaldo (1989) coined the term “imperialist nostalgia” to characterize the mourning for a past that one has been complicit in destroying. He gives the example of colonial officers and missionaries who deplete environmental resources and then worship nature, kill and then deify their victim, or alter life immeasurably and then lament that life is not how it was before they arrived. “Imperialist nostalgia,” writes Rosaldo, “uses a pose of ‘innocent yearning’ both to capture people’s imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination” (108).

“Imperialist irony” similarly deploys a technique of feigned surprise to conceal clear exploitation and deeply patterned cruelty. Irony, like nostalgia, comes from the Greek word *eirōneia*, meaning “simulated ignorance.” *Eirōneia* served as a performative device in Greek tragedy, where the audience was a knowing observer of conditions about which characters living through these conditions were unaware. As with imperialist nostalgia, imperialist irony functions as a power play: those standing apart see something that they mark as surprising or unexpected, implying that insiders do not see this themselves. And as with imperialist nostalgia, imperialist irony allows an observer to convey a longing for things to be different while they elide their own culpability for the way things have become.

Thurow is correct in his assessment that knowledge of nutrients will do little to improve the lives of the women in the vitamin education group he visited, but there is no irony in this fact. The conditions that Thurow documents are not an ironic surprise. For years, people with political and economic power in Guatemala, with the aid of US politicians and the complicity of many US-based newspapers and journalists, have run an intentional and well-orchestrated campaign of Indigenous genocide, targeting women as a means of destabilizing communities. There is nothing ironic about how women are today marginalized in a land of plenty or about how their children suffer. Great effort has gone into foreclosing their life possibilities, and Guatemalan women are well aware of the systemic cruelty that shapes their communities.

The literary theorist Jean Franco (2013, 1) notes that cruelty generally connotes the deliberate, conscious attempt on the part of individuals to hurt or damage. I write instead of *systemic cruelty* to shift the focus away from any singular individual’s decision and toward socially patterned forces that produce iniquity. For example, systems of cruelty are at work when politicians exploit fear of immigrants in order to gain attention to get themselves elected to platforms where they can spread more fear. Systemic cruelty is likewise at work when an education



FIGURE 5. A woman waiting at a San Juan health clinic has wrapped her baby in a US flag. Photo by author, 2008.

system teaches us that women's ignorance is a primary reason they are sick, suggesting the remedy is more education, which reinforces the idea of women's ignorance. When it comes to the claim of irony, we can see how the claim of innocence obfuscates the sources of harm, causing the audience—not the actor—to look in the wrong place for the remedy. In each of these cases (politicians mobilizing fear to create more fear, educators promoting education that obscures knowledge, journalists promoting innocence rather than responsibility), cruelty is systemically reproduced. The focus on systemic cruelty does not discount that individuals can and will act in cruel and abusive ways. Clearly we could point to cruel politicians as drivers of malnutrition in Guatemala. Yet naming cruelty as *systemic* shifts our focus away from individual actors toward broader sociopolitical structures that normalize, reward, enable, and amplify harm.

Thurow is concerned with the lost potential that results from nutrient deficiencies in the weak bodies of mothers and their vulnerable children's subsequent cognitive decline. His job as a narrator is to move his audience to feel sorry for forgotten or abandoned women and children, to then react heroically to alleviate their suffering. Yet his narrative frame of irony allows us to overlook how nutrition policies are not *failing* women and children, but they are *succeeding* in buttressing and reproducing the systems in which they operate, creating an underclass of poor

and Indigenous people whose lives are treated as expendable and whose violent deaths are leveraged as a way for those in power to maintain control.

THE POWER OF HISTORIA

Since the release of his book, Thurow has become a spokesperson for maternal health programs. He is frequently invited by philanthropic foundations to speak about the far-reaching consequences of malnutrition and he has created several podcasts and interactive web stories on the topic of hunger in the early life period of the first thousand days (Thurow 2020). Reviews of his book have appeared on National Public Radio (Aubrey 2016) and the websites of numerous humanitarian organizations. The World Food Bank's CEO, Richard Lackey (2018), writes that Thurow's work reminds him of something Tony Hall, a former Ohio congressman who served as the US ambassador to the Food and Agriculture Organization between 2002 and 2006, once said: "The capacity to end hunger exists today. The only thing lacking is the will to make it happen". Lackey (2018) continues, "Thurow makes the case for focusing on more complete nutrition during the first 1,000 days as a mechanism for not only reducing morbidity and mortality and the obesity and stunting caused by malnutrition, but also for improving the capacity of children to complete higher levels of education and to take on better paying jobs with lessened risk for chronic illness and less stress on the family unit."

As an experienced journalist, Thurow uses the narrative power of storytelling to raise awareness about the urgency of improving maternal nutrition. At a roundtable focused on the theme "the first 1,000 days of life" hosted by the Chicago Council for Global Affairs, he reflected on his experience visiting mothers and their children who had survived famine. He spoke of a boy named Hagirso in Ethiopia, who was five years old at the height of the famine and weighed just twenty-seven pounds. Thurow described listening as a doctor told the boy's family that he did not know if the boy would survive. Ten years later, Thurow met the boy again. This time, at the age of fifteen, the boy was in a first-grade classroom and only just learning to spell. Five years later, at another visit, the boy was now in a fourth-grade classroom where half of the students were eighteen or older.

This classroom, Thurow says, exemplifies the "long-term generational aspect of early childhood stunting." Thurow asks his listeners to imagine an entire cohort of "babies" (his word, not mine) in the wombs of mothers who are not receiving proper nutrition, who then transfer their own malnourishment to their children later in life.

The first 1000 days of life—from the time a mother first becomes pregnant to the second birthday of her child—is when good nutrition is most important. It's when the brain is growing most rapidly and expansively, when the foundation for physical and cognitive development is laid, and when the immune system is strengthened to ward off future disease. It's the most important time for individual

human development, setting the stage for what is to come. For years. For decades. For generations. (2021)

Thurow calls the classroom a “harbinger of the future,” adding that “we carry the burden of failed promise” in which the dreams and aspirations of an entire generation “become stunted along with the bodies and along with the cognitive mind.” The website profiling Thurow’s work shows the face of a boy, presumably Hagirso, next to a caption that reads: “A Lost Chance at Greatness” (2021). He cautions his audience that it is almost impossible to measure “this loss of human potential and this life sentence of underachievement and underperformance.” He concludes, “Just think of the lost opportunity and potential for all of us—what might those children have accomplished not only for their families, but for their country and the whole of Africa—for the whole of the world, for all of us, were they not malnourished and stunted as children.”

Thurow and I have much in common. We have both received funding from grant agencies interested in research that explores the “first thousand days of life” (the Pulitzer center funded his research; the Dutch Science Foundation, the European Research Council, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation funded mine). Both of us have spent time with pregnant and nursing women in Guatemala, meeting with families over the course of nearly two decades. We both hold US passports. And both of us are interested in how the narrative power of the stories we tell shapes our worlds. Yet despite these similarities, our stories are built on significantly different premises, leading us to make different observations and emphasize different pathways for change. Precisely because Thurow and I are so similar on the surface, I take the time in this chapter to address how our stories diverge.

Thurow’s writing about Guatemala first caught my eye not only because of his interest in the window of a thousand days, but because I have visited the Guatemalan clinic he describes in his book and podcasts several times and know many people from the US who have spent months volunteering there. The facilities are a quick commute from downtown Xela, a short ride on a public bus or a brisk walk through fresh air and scenic vistas that can be made in under an hour when the weather is nice. The clinic’s volunteers typically live in Xela, where they have hot showers and access to French or sushi restaurants. The uninformed listener would be forgiven for thinking that the journalist is far off the beaten path, since he never troubles this impression. He describes the clinic as “decrepit,” and he speaks of the long-standing neglect that has exacerbated malnutrition in the region.

In fact, the clinic is a well-networked, living laboratory of nonprofit and non-governmental aid. Cofounded by a US citizen, it has a polished English-language webpage, draws its volunteer pool from prestigious US universities, and its board has had several US Americans, including at least one anthropologist. This absence belies other absences in the story he tells. Not once in Thurow’s discussion of Guatemalan poverty does he mention his own government, which has spent

decades crushing grassroots attempts to give Guatemalan farmers control of the land where they grow food. He uses the term “civil war” to describe the armed conflict in Guatemala, a phrase that connotes a country divided in two, minimizing the widely accepted finding that almost all of the atrocities were committed by military and paramilitary forces.

Thurrow is not unusual in depicting Guatemalan hunger as a problem whose origins lie in Guatemalan violence. Many journalistic accounts of malnutrition published for US audiences omit the role of the US in creating the conditions in which Guatemalan communities cannot secure enough to eat (e.g., Rodriguez 2021; Sieff 2021; Strohlic 2021). Journalists commonly frame Guatemalan hunger as an unfortunate medical condition that humanitarian organizations are struggling—and typically failing—to mitigate, saying nothing about how US politicians have historically relied on Guatemalan suffering to boost their own economic profits and political power.

Thurrow’s reporting on food insecurity in the first thousand days highlights ignorance and the toll that lost cognitive potential takes on Guatemalans and, by extension, “all of us.” A more precise *historia* of hunger would focus on the systemic cruelty of military intervention. This *historia* would not only address the role of the US government; it would also reflect on how US journalists have contributed to the violence by repeating false narratives about Guatemala’s history.

“EXPOSITION OF PROPAGANDA”

The well-documented backstory of Guatemala’s armed conflict, which directly challenges Thurrow’s description of malnutrition as “ironic,” is that in 1952 a powerful banana corporation known as the United Fruit Company (today Chiquita Brands International) hired Edward Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud and the so-called father of the field of public relations, to run a massive disinformation campaign in Guatemala. As the documentary filmmaker Adam Curtis (2002) explains this history, the Soviet Union had just detonated its first hydrogen bomb and the US government wanted to quell mounting fear of communism by reassuring people that everything was okay. Bernays foresaw a different tactic for his clients, who included President Dwight D. Eisenhower and shareholders of United Fruit such as the US secretary of state and the director of the CIA, the brothers John and Allen Dulles. Curtis (2002) describes how Bernays, strongly influenced by his uncle’s theories of the human psyche, wanted his clients to mobilize subconscious psychological drivers of fear to manipulate the masses: “Bernays argued that instead of trying to reduce people’s fear of communism they should encourage and manipulate the fear, but in such a way as it became a weapon in the cold war.”

In twentieth-century Guatemala, the idiom of national development belonged to United Fruit. In the early part of the century, it was United Fruit more than Guatemala’s own national government that built railroads, ports, and transportation

systems, as well as schools and basic health care services for people who lived and worked on company land. By the mid-twentieth century, United Fruit held exclusive rights to the railroad, telegraph systems, and ports in Guatemala and owned 555,000 acres—equivalent to controlling roughly one-tenth of Guatemala's economy (Simon 1988). "Development" had served to facilitate its supply chain, keep its labor force alive, and boost its profits. As I explain further in chapter 6 when I discuss the banana company's reliance on agrichemicals and monoculture, progress, privatization, and capital accumulation went hand in hand.

Jacobo Árbenz ran his presidential campaign on a platform of agrarian reform. In 1952, shortly after he was elected to office—and the same time United Fruit began to work with Bernays—Árbenz signed Decree 900 into law. The decree authorized the redistribution of uncultivated and idle lands held by large private estates to the country's rural poor. The historian Piero Gleijeses (1989, 461) describes the decree as a "moderate law cast in a capitalist mould." But though Árbenz's popular policy affected just 1,710 of the 341,191 registered private holdings, landownership in Guatemala was so unjust that this covered more than half of the total private acreage. In addition, since landowners had historically, and without consequence, grossly undervalued their property on their tax returns, they would not be compensated for what they now declared their land was worth (462, 464). Árbenz's popular agrarian reforms, which had redistributed property to roughly 500,000 Guatemalans by 1953, were particularly a problem for United Fruit.

Curtis (2002) explains that Bernays recognized that he had a "narrative problem" on his hands: "Instead of position Árbenz as a popularly elected government that was doing good for the people, he needed to portray him as a threat to American democracy, close to the American shore." Bernays focused his disinformation campaign first on US journalists. He flew several prominent reporters who knew little about Guatemala to the country, arranging that preselected politicians both entertain them and pass along the message that Árbenz was a "communist controlled by Moscow" (Curtis 2002). During the trip, a violent anti-American demonstration broke out in the capital, which many people working for United Fruit later suspected had been organized by Bernays himself. Bernays also created the Middle American Information Bureau, a fake news organization that bombarded the US media with press releases implying that Moscow was using Guatemala as a communist base.

The end goal was not only to discredit Árbenz, but to legitimize a coup d'état. United Fruit and the CIA were training a rebel army that would eventually topple Árbenz's presidency, crush the labor unions that had begun to flourish, and restore land to the corporation. Bernays's campaign of propaganda went hand in glove with the US military's campaign of violence, creating the conditions for the coup's acceptance and eventual success. He ensured that the US media would portray the US as a freedom fighter for democracy against the threat of

communism. During the days surrounding the overthrow of Árbenz, the front page of the *New York Times* reported, “Árbenz is deposed by an anti-communist junta. . . . US is asked to help end the bloodshed as the regime shifts” (Kennedy 1954). A front-page headline declared, “Reds Jailed and Captives Freed.” The article quotes the then-ambassador to El Salvador, Hector David Castro, who argued that a period of oversight would be necessary “to determine whether international Communist penetration in Guatemala still constitutes a danger to the hemisphere” (Lawrence 1954).

Shortly after Árbenz was replaced by Carlos Castillo Armas, an ally of Eisenhower, Vice President Richard Nixon made a visit to Guatemala, where he was filmed touring the “Exposition of Propaganda.” A master class on disinformation, the exposition detailed the Russian takeover of Guatemala by featuring evidence of Russian propaganda such as motion pictures sent from Moscow, Stalinist stories for schoolchildren translated into Spanish, and piles of Marxist literature apparently collected from Árbenz’s now-vacated presidential palace.

During his visit, Nixon participated in a televised event staged by United Fruit’s public relations department, where he and Castillo Armas stood together in front of a poster with a sword spearing and breaking a Russian sickle, to proclaim the “triumph of freedom” (Castillo Armas and Nixon 1955). Castillo Armas read from a prepared English script. Looking frequently at Nixon for approval, he said:

I speak not as the chief of state but as a soldier in the war against the communists. Before the revolution, which I directed, and which overthrew the Árbenz government in June, Guatemala was dominated by the communists. That government did not have the support of the Guatemalan people. That government has a destructive influence in this hemisphere, threatening the friendly solidarity of all the American nations. The government of Colonel Árbenz was under the direction of a foreign power which had an ideology alien to my people. That is why the liberation movement, which I have been honored to help, began and that is why the movement organized by a small group of patriots succeeded so quickly. With all the strength of their being, the Guatemalan people wanted the anti-communist revolution to succeed. They were sick of communism and tortured by its system of slavery. . . . I hope you will tell the many people you will meet on your tours about all the things you have seen in Guatemala. (Castillo Armas and Nixon 1955)

Nixon explained to the cameras that the Russian propaganda they had gathered clearly demonstrated that the Russian-backed communist regime of Guatemala had been “attempting to change the minds of the people and to warp them over to supporting international communism.” He praised Castillo Armas for upholding the principles of freedom and liberty, a message that he delivered “on behalf of people from the United States and free peoples everywhere and of people who want to be free behind the iron curtain.” The exposition offered irrefutable proof, he asserted, that the “Árbenz regime was not a Guatemalan government: it was a

foreign government, controlled by foreigners. . . . It's a good lesson for all of us to be on guard against what the communists try to do." Nixon concluded:

This is the first time in the history of the world that a communist government has been overthrown by the people, and for that we congratulate you and the people of Guatemala for the support they have given and we are sure that under your leadership, supported by the people whom I have met by the hundreds on my visit to Guatemala, that Guatemala is going to enter a new era in which there will be prosperity for the people together with liberty for the people. (Castillo Armas and Nixon 1955)

In hindsight, it is clear that the US government was implementing a strategy of disinformation that would shape its approach to foreign policy in the years to come. Future US presidents seized upon Bernays's tactical use of fear to gain political and economic control in Guatemala, eventually contributing to a campaign of war so brutal that the 1950s, when the coup against Árbenz took place, was considered a time of peace (officially the war started in 1960). In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan offered military intelligence, training, and arms to Guatemalan dictator, Ríos Montt, and his military general, Otto Pérez Molina, who together led a death campaign, frequently called a "killing field" (Kinzer 2018), that ravaged the Guatemalan countryside. They waged a "systematic campaign of highland deforestation" to remove protective natural resources in order to depopulate areas where communities of Maya farmers were living (Costello 1997, 14). The aim was for people to starve.

Between 1981 and 1983 alone, the military killed or disappeared an estimated one hundred thousand civilians (Costello 1997, 14). The UN-backed Truth Commission investigating the violence learned of hundreds of cases in which army officers led by Ríos Montt held civilians at gunpoint, forcing them to "rape women, torture, mutilate corpses and kill" (CEH 1999, 27). It found that the state had explicitly tried to destroy Indigenous communities, whose strong collaborative social structures posed an economic and cultural challenge to the political oligarchy. The military used rape and sexual violence to damage kinship and community networks, targeting women because of the work they undertook to hold their families and communities together.

Children were also among the direct victims of arbitrary execution, forced disappearance, torture, and rape. According to the Truth Commission, "The armed confrontation left a large number of children orphaned and abandoned, especially among the Mayan population, who saw their families destroyed and the possibility of living a normal childhood within the norms of their culture, lost" (CEH 1999, 23). To explain the brutality of military operations the report points to the state's racist "doctrine of superiority" (24). "This extreme cruelty was used by the state to cause social disintegration," the Truth Commission recounts (27). Meanwhile, in 1982, Reagan stood in front of the press and declared, "I know that President Ríos Montt is a man of great personal integrity and commitment. I know he wants to

improve the quality of life for all Guatemalans and to promote social justice. My administration will do all it can to support his progressive efforts” (Reagan 1982).

Today the “Exposition of Propaganda” appears as a truly Orwellian occasion of doublespeak: Bernays, the father of public relations, directed the future US president and the current puppet dictator of Guatemala—who had just worked together to overthrow a democratically elected president—to publicly assert that communist propaganda was undermining democracy. By the time Thurow published his popular book about the first thousand days, it was widely known that the US government had actively encouraged the conditions of hunger still haunting Guatemala today.

While the *New York Times* never formally apologized for its inaccurate and misleading news coverage, it changed the tenor of its reporting, as demonstrated by a 2011 article that narrated the presence of the US in Guatemala in the 1950s in a much different light than it had at the time of the events: “The Eisenhower Administration painted the coup as an uprising that rid the hemisphere of a Communist government backed by Moscow. But Mr. Árbenz’s real offense was to confiscate unused land owned by the United Fruit Company to redistribute under a land reform plan and to pay compensation for the vastly understated value the company had claimed for its tax payments” (Malkin 2011).

This story of deception might itself be further nuanced to clarify that Guatemalans were not mere pawns in the US war machine. The “Exposition of Propaganda” was a well-crafted public relations stunt—Árbenz was never a lackey for Moscow—but many Guatemalans were skeptical of capitalism, and Árbenz was influenced by political confidants who belonged to the Communist Party. As the anthropologist Carlota McAllister describes in her book *The Good Road* (forthcoming), Guatemalans had multifaceted relationships with communism and socialism that included critical intellectual engagement with Marxism and trenchant objections to imperialism. The brilliance of Bernays’s propaganda campaign was not only that it deployed propaganda while seeming to critique propaganda; it linked a critique of capitalism to pro-Russia sentiment, refuting the narrative by declaring that Guatemalans were pro-US, which would further serve to reinforce US corporate interests.

Thurow, however, mentions none of this complexity, focusing instead on the “baby” in the mother’s womb. When he details Pérez Molina’s Window of 1,000 Days campaign he mentions that Pérez Molina was a high-ranking general in the military, but he says nothing about how he was an alumnus of the US School of the Americas, where he developed expertise in tactics of torture that he put into practice under Ríos Montt at the height of the genocide. Thurow (2016, 54) describes how following Pérez Molina’s election in 2012, the new president dispatched officers and members of the business community to spend a night with people living in poverty, undertaking what Thurow calls “an anthropological study of malnutrition in the western highlands.” He describes the businessmen trying to

get comfortable while sleeping on thin mattresses. “It was my most difficult night,” one businessman told him, adding a description of his host family that Thurow included uncritically in his book: “They had big eyes, you could see they were malnourished” (54). Thurow writes, “Between home visits and the study, the ruling class discovered the realities of their own country: the heavily corn-based diets; the fact that women often ate last (and usually least); the tiny houses; the sleeping on floors; the lack of sanitation” (54).

He characterizes Pérez Molina’s Zero Hunger Pact as an awakening among the upper classes, which saw Guatemala’s competitive edge in international markets flagging in the big, hungry eyes of starving people. Their firsthand encounters with poverty spurred them to action, as they realized that Guatemala’s economic future would be “stunted” along with the country’s rural poor. Thurow does reflect on the possibilities of *Guatemalan* corruption as he writes of paging through glossy pamphlets that show Pérez Molina and Baldetti hugging rural children (they had not yet been arrested when his book was published), but he mentions nothing about US political corruption. When the mothers at the health clinic tell him, without equivocation, that nothing will change, he does not take them at their word. He insists that it is an open question whether politicians’ investments in nutrition will “trickle down” to help rural women (2016, 55).

I have already given away the ending of Pérez Molina and Baldetti’s Window of 1,000 Days agenda: they were complicit in massive theft, both politicians finishing their tenure in jail. They used the charade of “good nutrition” to steal from the country, a conclusion that surprised none of the women I spoke with in my fieldwork. Poverty in Guatemala, after all, is not a product of neglect or indifference. It is not “irony” that those championing democracy are overthrowing democracy and those critiquing propaganda are deploying it. These are carefully studied strategies that American politicians in both the US and Guatemala have deliberately executed and that the structures surrounding them support. This is systemic cruelty at work.

NUTRITION IN THE SHADOW OF GENOCIDE

Before turning to the chapter’s conclusion, I would like to consider another seemingly “ironic” contradiction that is not ironic at all: the exclusion of reproductive rights from the agenda of maternal nutrition.

Studying nutrition in the shadow of genocide, with the murder and disappearance of young women a daily story in the news, I often reflected on what I would never be able to study or write about. For example, I did not think I could listen to people share lived experiences of abortion, given that abortion is legal in Guatemala only if the pregnant person’s life is in danger—and even then the procedure must be approved by multiple doctors. The Guatemalan constitution (title II, chap. 1, art. 3) guarantees full protections for human life from conception

on (its language). People who seek or perform abortions without state-sanctioned permission face one to three years in prison, even if the reasons given for the pregnancy are rape or incest and even if there are concerns about fetal impairment or the pregnant person's physical or mental health. I worried that sharing any knowledge about the topic with me might compromise people's safety, and *not knowing* about abortion seemed to be my most ethical course of action.

Although I did not discuss abortion with people, when I asked midwives and other health professionals what political actions might make the biggest impact on hunger, several pointed to the need to give women more autonomy in family planning. "Gaining control of birth spacing" was a way of referring to reproductive rights that didn't challenge religious conventions too much. That women might not want children or to be wives at all was, I believe, an idea too scandalous for most health workers to speak, but in the background of all of our discussions about family planning was the patriarchal power of the church and the need to challenge this power to genuinely better the lives of all Guatemalans.

I did not need to talk with people about abortion to know that abortions are common everywhere that contraception is not widely available. One group of researchers working in Guatemala estimated that 65,000 abortions are performed in women of reproductive age in the country each year—a rate of 24 in every 1,000 women (Kestler and Mora 2018). They report that 82 percent of rural Indigenous people seeking an abortion are not seen by qualified professionals. They describe abortion-induced maternal morbidity and mortality as a "very significant and preventable public health problem in Guatemala" (531). In describing the problem as "preventable," they are, of course, thinking in theoretical terms—imagining how easy it would be to save lives if people in political power wanted to prevent these deaths.

The oft-spoken cliché about the failure to address hunger is that "political will is lacking." That was Ohio congressman Tony Hall's statement, cited by the World Food Bank's CEO at the start of this chapter. Yet thinking in terms of systemic cruelty, we would notice *how much* political will goes into the design of policies that do women harm (Sanford, Stefatos, and Salvi 2016; Valdez and Deomampo 2019). In other words, will is not *lacking*: political systems are meticulously arranged to ensure that women cannot control their bodies, families, and homes. (Consider that Tony Hall, who led US international diplomacy on hunger for years, was himself staunchly antiabortion.)

When midwives linked hunger to contraception their concern was not about "overpopulation." The idea that Indigenous women having too many babies causes global food insecurity, though still pervasive, has racist origins and has been overwhelmingly debunked (Hartman 1997; Sen 1997; Roberts 1998). Their concern was, rather, for how frequently Guatemalan women became mothers without choosing this path for themselves. The anthropologist Alejandra Colom (2015) describes how Pérez Molina and Baldetti's Window of 1,000 Days intervention not

only ignored reproductive rights, but erased them by subsuming the human rights of women and girls under the rights of the “unborn child.” Several of the girls and women she interviewed who were part of the intervention became pregnant after rape. Colom develops the idea of “forced motherhood” to describe how the intervention forced girls and women into a life they did not want to have.

Forced motherhood is a commonly reported reason for leaving Guatemala, although migration is no clear escape from rape and pregnancy. Some reports suggest that men have raped upwards of 80 percent of women who arrive at migrant shelters in the US (Siegal McIntyre and Bonello 2014). One midwife told me that before women leave Guatemala for the US, they will look for injectable contraception, knowing this is an invisible and long-lasting form of birth control. Women frequently cannot find it, assuming yet another risk on their journey north.

In 2017, several pregnant people apprehended at the US-Mexico border tried to secure abortions—which should have been within their legal rights at the time (the *Dobbs* decision to eliminate the constitutional right to abortion did not happen until 2022). Instead, the Office of Refugee Resettlement blocked their requests, forced the women to have sonograms and antiabortion counseling, and denied them medical care (see Cromer 2019). The director of the Trump administration’s resettlement program, E. Scott Lloyd, was an avid antiabortion activist. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, he regularly coerced young women into carrying pregnancies to term, forcing them to go to crisis pregnancy centers with religious affiliations (ACLU of DC 2017).

Not long after these cases wound their way through the US courts, a young woman from San Juan Ostuncalco and her husband set off for the US (Paredes 2019). A midwife from San Juan told me Victoria Mendez Carreto had just learned that she was pregnant before leaving. She was early enough in her pregnancy that reporters did not include this information in the stories about her death, from dehydration, in the Arizona desert. As I mentioned at the start of the book, the week Victoria died, the trial of a US citizen who left water for migrants ended in deadlock: four US jurors were willing to convict the defendant of a felony crime for trying to save the lives of people in desperate need (Prendergast 2019).

Less than a year later, another young woman from the department of Quetzaltenango who was crossing with her partner fell eighteen feet from Trump’s border wall. Classified as a criminal before she could be classified as a patient, Miriam Estefany Girón Luna was eight months’ pregnant when she died of internal injuries from the fall. Meanwhile, people commenting about her death online complained that US hospitals, and ultimately US taxpayers, would have to pay the medical bills of Guatemalans who injured themselves on the border wall (Dedaj 2018)—which the Trump administration had spent \$15 billion in taxpayer money to build (Anderson 2020).

The anthropologist Risa Cromer (2019) raises the question of how politicians are able to maintain the seemingly contradictory positions of being pro-life while

enacting border policies that directly lead women to suffer and die. Her answer is that this is not actually a contradiction, given that White Christian America deploys both positions—being antiabortion and anti-immigration—to control the bodies of migrant women. What is termed pro-life is not actually undertaken in the service of “life” but is a strategy of domination (see also Cromer and Bjork-James 2020).

When Thurow visited the rural clinic in Quetzaltenango to discuss health during “the first thousand days of life,” he followed the lead of policy makers everywhere by engaging women in discussions of nutrients—not reproductive autonomy. Thurow’s book likewise mentions nothing about contraception in Guatemala, focusing instead on women’s knowledge about vitamins, iron, or fiber. As I illustrate in the following chapter, the framing of malnutrition as a problem of biological deficiency sets up remedies focused on technological innovation. We can also see this in Thurow’s podcasts, which tell a story of a mother whose first child died in infancy and who then received nutrition education and support from Harvest Plus, a biofortification organization that provided her with iron-enriched sweet potatoes and beans. Thurow (2020) recounts that during her second pregnancy she ate the biofortified crops with positive results: “When her son Aron was born, relatives and neighbors admired his robust and sturdy size. Aron had thrived on his mother’s nutrient-rich breast milk and eventually, those same sweet potatoes and beans are an example of what good nutrition and support systems can do to change a life, a family, and entire communities.”

Framing nutrient deficiencies as the root cause of malnutrition allows policy makers and scientists to celebrate iron fortification. Time and again hunger policy makers I spoke with shrugged off contraception and abortion as irrelevant to their work, insisting that they were working in the field of nutritional development and not in reproductive politics. Meanwhile, midwives who work closely with pregnant women point to reproductive autonomy as one of the most effective ways to address the structural foundations of maternal hunger.

We must consider that this efficacy is precisely why reproductive politics are so frequently cleaved from the agenda set by hunger policy makers: constraining reproductive rights serves to uphold existing structures of power, and those with power do not want to give up their power. To push the argument further: we can understand the separation of abortion politics from hunger if we consider that “first thousand days of life” programs may not function to make lives better for the women they claim to help. A reason that an intervention to better women’s health ignores an obvious avenue for doing so—strengthening women’s reproductive autonomy—is that bettering women’s lives is not, after all, the end goal of the intervention. This is not a space of irony, in which a knowing audience can decipher what women cannot see for themselves. The assumption that underpins Thurow’s discussion of rural poverty is that governments are “failing,” but women plainly see that their governments are succeeding in keeping them poor.

When policy makers describe malnutrition as a problem of deficiency (lack of nutrients, lack of education, or lack of political will) the treatment, in turn, is supplemental: more iron, more fiber, more nutrition classes, more politicians doing what they do. But if malnutrition were instead understood as orchestrated and coordinated, rooted in the cruelty of systems that gain and retain power by producing suffering, a different set of responses would be necessary. The focus would shift away from nutrient deficiencies in women's bodies to structural deficiencies in the science and politics of maternal health.

WHEN CRUELTY IS THE POINT

One of the major stories in the Guatemala news while I was carrying out fieldwork in 2016 and 2017 recounted the details of the Sepur Zarco case being tried in the Guatemalan court system. The Q'eqchi' community Sepur Zarco, in the east of the country, had been a site of horrific violence. In the 1980s, community leaders had decided to fight for legal titles to the land they had lived and worked on for years (Beaudoin 2015). Plantation owners called in the Guatemalan army, which declared the area a communist base. The army disappeared at least fifteen of the community's men and forced their wives into sexual and domestic slavery for the next six years.

In 2011, fifteen survivors of this sexual violence met with women's and human rights organizations to receive training in how to translate the haunting memories into a viable legal case. Words and concepts such as "rape" or "sexual slavery" did not have obvious corollaries in the Q'eqchi' language. A woman who was gang raped by the military for years might say, "We were forced to take turns" (UN Women 2018). To make this intelligible to the justice system, she would need to learn to articulate her suffering as "victimization" and "violence against women." As the sociologist Alison Crosby and the justice theorist M. Brinton Lykes (2019, 130) explain the process, Maya women tended to think of violence in collective terms and as distributed across time and place, but to be victorious in a court of law they needed to be able to narrate an "individuated, spectacularized, singular, sexualized event" (see also Posocco 2021).

Joining forces with legal experts and three Maya Q'eqchi' men, the fifteen survivors launched a landmark legal case against Esteelmer Reyes Girón and Heriberto Valdez Asij, who had served in relatively low-level military positions in Sepur Zarco. The women testified to the brutality they had experienced, recounting graphic details of rape and torture. It was the first trial to bring charges of sexual slavery during war to the court system of the country where the crimes had occurred (Eulich 2016). In 2016, Guatemala's national court handed down prison sentences of 120 and 240 years to Reyes Girón and Valdez Asij, respectively. Nearly three decades after the Truth Commission had documented widespread and willful brutality against women, the national court recognized that the Guatemalan state had deployed sexual violence as a weapon of war.

The clinic where Thurow visited with women during their nutrition class is on the other side of the country from Sepur Zarco, but the women he spoke to surely followed the arc of the case. Women throughout Guatemala, especially Maya women, cared deeply about the outcome, pushing for the case to be tried in court and when it was, marching together in hopeful solidarity. “Nuestra Mirada Está en la Justicia: Sepur Zarco” (We Look to Justice in Sepur Zarco) became a nationally recognized slogan (Lakhani 2016).¹

When Thurow speaks about the urgency of malnutrition in Guatemala, he presents a story about ironic ignorance among Guatemala’s business classes who are oblivious to how bad things are for the country’s rural poor. He does not mention that Pérez Molina was trained and supported by the US government to use the brutality and suffering of women as a tactic to further US military power. That the businessmen are “surprised” by the scale of poverty fits his narrative of irony. They didn’t know—for surely if they had known they would have cared. The impression we are left with as readers is that if only we can awaken people’s consciousness, they will be moved to action.

In contrast, the political scientist Cristina Beltrán (2020) shows how US politicians are routinely elected on racist platforms, where narratives meant to increase fear of migrants and showcase migrant suffering help to “sustain White Democracy.” Conventional liberal and humanitarian responses to racism frequently focus on educating a White public about how health policies produce health disparities. Yet this strategy does not take seriously that many who occupy White public space *want* health disparities to exist because these disparities help maintain their social power (see also Metzl 2019). Beltrán’s argument is that drawing attention to the plight of Guatemalan migrants for a White Euro-American audience would not be an effective way to transform politics: the political system was designed to keep poor, Indigenous Guatemalans marginalized.

Consider that as Thurow was raising awareness about malnutrition through his podcasts and public narratives, the bodies of Salvadorian migrants Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his baby daughter, Valeria, were photographed at the Rio Grande border, where they had drowned in each other’s arms trying to cross the river. As the image circulated, so did the warnings: “Stop showing this picture,” many from the Latinx community urged, including the the National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ) (2019), which called the photo exploitative and condemned its use. Those objecting to the image’s dissemination pointed out that its circulation did not do antiracist work of bearing witness to evil but would instead embolden a White, racist public that benefits from migrant suffering. Illustrating the existence of suffering as a means to end it ignores that people already know. This sought-after awakening of consciousness overlooks the history of US imperialism in the Americas in which cruelty is, and has long been, the point.

Of course, there may be individual businessmen unaware of the scale and scope of poverty who are genuinely surprised when faced with hunger and who

carry out their “anthropological study” of participant observation with good intentions (Thurow 2016, 54). The anthropologist Emma Kowal (2015) has argued that a focus on an individual can obfuscate global politics that produce systemic injustice (see also Parvin and Pollock 2020). There is, Kowal points out, a tremendous gap between antiracist desires and antiracist consequences, and any individual’s intentions should be evaluated as secondary to their action’s effects. Accordingly, it is not especially relevant whether Guatemalan businessmen are personally kind or cruel: it is the system and its reproduction, not an individual’s will, that we should keep our eye on. For example, when it comes to narratives about hunger we should be asking about the structures in place that allow Thurow’s narrative of women’s vulnerability to circulate widely and gain social currency and popularity—especially among key aid organizations such as the World Food Programme—whereas narratives tightly linking nutrition to reproductive autonomy, land sovereignty, or US-sponsored genocide are all but erased.

It might seem to be the height of irony to critique Thurow for omitting the role of US journalists in his discussion of maternal malnutrition while ignoring the role that White US anthropologists like me have played in contributing to the conditions of dispossession that we later critique. Yet my argument in this chapter has been that we should see this as an example of systemic cruelty, not irony. That a system of knowledge production would allow me to overlook my field’s culpability would be an example of structural hubris if not outright maleficence. This omission would be a way of reproducing structures of power as they are.

This reproduction is also something I can act against by acknowledging and addressing how often US anthropology has been complicit in the very problems it claims to work against. When Eisenhower was training Guatemalan dictators, Richard Adams, who would eventually serve as president of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and who helped establish the field of applied anthropology, was hired by the CIA to interview pro-Árbenz prisoners and report on their political activities.² The agency had realized that anthropological knowledge of community life would be especially valuable for counterinsurgency. Soon afterward, Adams leveraged his anthropological skills to improve the palatability and flavor of a powerful nutrient supplement, helping make it the widely popular and immensely lucrative product that it is today (see chapter 3). Though this was not Bernays-level propaganda, it is certainly not work to address and transform the political cruelty that underlies so much Guatemalan hunger.

Less explicit but also dangerous is the frequent repetition on the part of anthropologists and medical professionals of the trope of vulnerable, hungry women also used in Thurow’s writing about the irony of hunger in Guatemala. Irony positions the narrator and anthropologist in the role of a hero who can see what the vulnerable insider cannot. Irony, or simulated ignorance, becomes an especially convenient device for policy makers when they discuss what or why or how people eat. The anthropologist Emilia Sanabria (2016) makes this point clear when

she demonstrates how nutrition policy makers routinely, and willfully, produce certain kinds of people and communities as ignorant so as to justify intervening in their bodies and behaviors while leaving untouched the political and economic systems in which they live. Likewise, when someone claims irony, they put themselves in the role of the knower, casting the people in the scene they are viewing as ignorant. The maneuver of making the viewer the expert redirects attention from the expertise of the people in the scene when it comes to the question of what to do next. Logically, it makes sense that when a US narrator tells the story of vulnerable women saved by US interventions, US institutions would repeat the narrative. Since institutions such as USAID are predicated on intervention, the narrative holds in place the conditions that allow them to exist.

CONCLUSION: CHANGING THE HISTORIA

In 2021, protests erupted across Guatemala. The attorney general, María Consuelo Porras, had just fired Juan Francisco Sandoval, the prosecutor who was investigating high-level corruption and human rights violations and who was thought to be very good at his job. Cases of COVID-19 were higher than at any previous time during the pandemic, and Guatemalans were not willing to wait patiently for things to turn themselves around. Protesters, organized largely by Indigenous community leaders, mobilized a national strike on July 29, 2021 (Cuffe 2020). Across the country people took to the streets, demanding the resignation of Porras and President Alejandro Giammattei.

Many of the images of the strike were reminiscent of a classic protest image taken near the end of the armed conflict that shows unarmed women and children facing a line of militarized police (@soydelfuego 2021). “No one is backing down or even showing fear,” Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj (2013, 170) writes about the historic image from the armed conflict, which she describes as a “highly condensed image of gender, race, agrarian struggle, resistance, and potential violence.”

One photograph showed women in pink huipiles who had erected a stone barrier in the road on a rainy highway, a direct action to interrupt political life (see @NeryPeriodista 2021). A line of oil tankers and semis looms behind them, as the women occupy the road. One woman nurses a baby. Two women directly in front of a big rig are engaged in conversation. Other women fill in the spaces between them to create a line. The women look completely in control of the situation—not scared, or weak, or vulnerable. These are not women who need heroes.

As the photograph circulated on social media, so did the comments. One, posted by the mayor of Huitan, a majority-Mam municipality near San Juan Ostuncalco that has the highest level of malnutrition in the state, disparaged the women involved. “Huevona deplano no tiene marido esta suelra una mujer de casa haciendo el almuerzo estuviera,” wrote Mayor César Calderón in a barely intelligible post that called the women lazy, suggesting that they didn’t have husbands and

should be at home making lunch (El Chapin Chispudo 2021). Guatemalan women on social media were quick to respond, pointing out the systemic misogyny that Guatemalan women face (@AdaValenzuelaVN 2021). Several posted the Guatemalan constitution's law against femicide and other forms of violence against women on the municipality's Facebook page (Sor 2021).

Their point, which has been my point in this chapter too, is that the framing of Indigenous women as lacking—in vitamins, education, or knowledge of political operations—has the narrative backward. The problem instead lies with a state that is maintained and reproduced by leaders who openly refuse to treat women, particularly Indigenous women, with dignity and bodily autonomy. Policy makers, journalists, and even anthropologists might describe the problem of hunger in a land of abundant food as ironic, but the frame of “irony” is wrong,

It is cruelty, not irony, that Indigenous women from a land of rich agriculture do not have enough to eat.

It is cruelty, not irony, that politicians tasked with food security do not want to talk about reproductive choice.

It is cruelty, not irony, that a maternal health campaign mobilizes around a message that starts life at conception, undermining reproductive rights.

It is cruelty, not irony, that so-called pro-life politicians spend their time and resources building border walls that will kill children.

And it is cruelty, not irony, that so many public health officials talk about harmful foods that women are eating instead of what politicians are doing to uphold the conditions of poverty that cause them harm.

Talk of irony, in fact, keeps the audience ignorant. As I explore in the chapters that follow, women do not need saviors who see what they cannot see and will come and save them. They need networks of solidarity composed of people who will join them in resisting and refusing the terms of imperialism. The fight to change the historia is ongoing.