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## Imperialist Irony

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Not long ago, a US journalist released a podcast titled *A Craving for Nutritional Knowledge*,<sup>1</sup> 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.”

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 K’iche’ health clinic where he attended a nutrition rehabilitation class for new moms and moms-to-be. He 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 back with great enthusiasm: “Milk, meat, green vegetables, spinach, beans.”

Their correct answers offer evidence for the uncomfortable truth that knowledge 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 Guatemala’s civil war ravaged the countryside, and he highlights the inequalities of the export trade, which keeps the cost of healthy vegetables high. Thurow is struck by the tragedy of the situation: women who produce food for the world do not, themselves, have enough to eat.

I have visited the clinic he describes several times and know many people from the United States who have spent months volunteering there. The clinic is a close commute to Xela, Guatemala’s second-largest city. Volunteers typically live in the city, where they have hot showers and access to the French or sushi restaurants that nuance Thurow’s story of Guatemalan poverty. The uninformed listener would be forgiven for thinking that the journalist is far off the beaten path, since he implies that he is. 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 nongovernmental aid. It has a polished English-language webpage and several US Americans

sit on its board, including at least one anthropologist. These omissions belie other absences in Thurow's story of chronic hunger. Not once in his discussion of Guatemala's entrenched poverty does he mention his own government, which has spent decades squashing any grassroots-led attempts to alleviate poverty in Guatemala (Glejises 1989). Nor does he mention the role that US journalists have played in upending what had been a peaceful land reform by repeating false narratives about the growing threat of communism (Curtis 2002; Grandin 2015). As I have written about elsewhere, "civil war," though widely used to describe the violence in Guatemala, is a deceptive misnomer for what was actually a multi-state-sponsored genocide (Yates-Doerr 2019).

Thirty years ago, Renato 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).

Alyshia Gálvez (2018) documents how imperialist nostalgia underlies discussions of the changing food landscape of post-NAFTA Mexico, where policymakers celebrate the intangible heritage of Mexican cuisine on the international stage, all the while refusing to make tangible policy changes to protect small farmers' way of life. Guatemala's political landscape is also rife with this form of imperialist food nostalgia, as is Thurow's podcast, which mourns Guatemalan poverty while sidestepping his role in its production (Alonso-Fradejas 2012).

In this Vital Topics contribution, I suggest that we might add *imperialist irony* to the concept of imperialist nostalgia. Irony, like nostalgia, is a Greek word, with origins in *eirōneia*, meaning simulated ignorance. Historically, *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, which insiders do not see themselves. And as with imperialist nostalgia, imperialist irony allows an observer to convey a longing for things to be otherwise while they elide their own culpability for the way things have become.

Irony, or simulated ignorance, becomes an especially convenient device for policymakers when they discuss what or why or how people eat. Emilia Sanabria (2016) makes this point clear when she demonstrates how nutrition policymakers routinely, and willfully, produce certain kinds of people and communities as ignorant so as to justify interven-

ing upon their 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. This maneuver of making the viewer the expert redirects attention away from expertise of the people in the scene when it comes to the question of what to do next.

Thurow concludes his podcast about nutrition in Guatemala with the message: "[The women] left the classroom empowered and burdened at the same time and walked home, past the fields of the valley, ripe with irony."

Except this is wrong. Thurow is correct in his assessment that knowledge of nutrients will do little to improve the women's lives, but there is not irony in this fact. The conditions that Thurow documents are neither surprising nor a product of neglect. For years, people in political power in Guatemala, with the aid of US politicians and the complicity of many US-based newspapers (Malkin 2013), have run an intentional and well-orchestrated campaign of Indigenous genocide, targeting women in particular. 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, of which they are well aware.

#### NOTE

1. <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/blog/outrage-and-inspire/outrage-and-inspire-roger-thurow-craving-nutrition-knowledge>.

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