UC SANTA BARBARA

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UCSB Historian Examines the Role of Mexican Peasants in the Development of Oral Contraceptives

When chemists in Mexico in the 1940's began studying barbasco, a wild yam indigenous to the region, they made a startling discovery: The tuber contains chemical components that actually mimic human steroids and could be used to mass-produce synthetic hormones for new drugs, such as cortisone and the first viable oral contraceptive.

Although that discovery positioned Mexico as a major player in the global pharmaceutical industry, the country's role in advancing this important area of modern medicine has remained largely unknown. In a new book titled "Jungle Laboratories: Mexican Peasants, National Projects, and the Making of the Pill" (Duke University Press, 2009), Gabriela Soto Laveaga, associate professor of history at UC Santa Barbara, reconstructs the story of how rural yam pickers, international pharmaceutical companies, and the Mexican state collaborated and collided over a barbasco industry that continued through the mid-1990's.

"I wanted to expand what we know about the development of patented medications, such as the pill, and to look at it in terms of where we obtained the raw material to produce pharmaceuticals that transformed our lives and, in the case of oral contraceptives, gave us power over our biology," said Soto Laveaga.

Soto Laveaga traces the political, economic, and scientific development of the global barbasco industry, focusing primarily on the rural southern region of Tuxtepec, Oaxaca, where scientists relied on local, indigenous knowledge to cultivate and harvest the plant. She explores how the yams made their way from the jungles of Mexico to domestic and foreign laboratories, and on to the medicine cabinets of millions of women around the world.

She also sought to give recognition to the Mexican peasants –– men, women, and children –– who for almost 30 years labored to collect barbasco, but had no sense of its value in the marketplace or of the importance of their contribution. "That knowledge –– or lack thereof –– is something I cover in the book, to explain who used steroid knowledge to obtain social and economic power in rural places," she said.

Soto Laveaga explains how some rural Mexicans, at first unaware of the pharmaceutical and financial value of barbasco, later acquired and deployed scientific language that gave them power to negotiate with pharmaceutical companies, to lobby the Mexican government, and to transform how they were perceived by urban Mexicans.

"The history of barbasco is partly that of a project of modernization imposed by the government that in the 1970's attempted to redefine the Mexican nation while grappling to retain political power in the countryside," Soto Laveaga writes. "Those the government chose to include as part of this modern project are what make this story so compelling. Arguably, root pickers –– indigenous, poor, and uneducated –– were in many respects the antithesis of modernity, but in their capacity as gatherers of the root they became the essential link to finally bring a modern project to Mexico: domestic patented medications."

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