

## A CASE OF THE NERVES

I am writing *A Case of the Nerves*, a book on late-nineteenth century “American nervousness.” Many believed in that era that Americans were too tense, suffering from neurasthenia or hysteria, and experiencing “nervous prostration.” Before Freud and his followers informed the American public that all was in the mind, especially in subconscious mental life with its profound link to the emotions and sexuality, American physicians emphasized the important role of the body and physical organs in what is today labeled mental illness. In particular, Americans read, heard, and thought about the controlling force of the nerves. As a cultural historian, I hope to explore the nervous body as those in the late nineteenth century envisioned it. The subject offers a critical intersection where the biological person meets the ideas and practices of the age.

I begin *A Case of the Nerves* with a number of key questions. What did late-19<sup>th</sup>-century Americans mean when they spoke of nerves and of nervousness? How did they understand the connection between mind and body? How did they build upon or reject earlier knowledge? How did the primary physical science of the day, evolutionary biology, guide them? And what of the new fields of sociology and psychology? How did the first generation of nerve specialists—the physicians who called themselves “neurologists”—answer these and related questions? How did *Popular Science Monthly* and other influential periodicals convey these ideas to the broader public?

What makes these questions come alive are the sources that I have to answer them. While a considerable literature exists on the emergence of American psychiatry and psychology during this era and their impact on American intellectual and literary life, none exploit the varied sources as I do. In manuscript collections, such as those of the Baltimore philanthropist Mary Elizabeth Garrett, are letters that detail her decades-long experience of nervous illness, visits to physicians and their diagnoses, and courses of treatment. I am exploring approximately thirty similar collections. Some of the patients, such as William James and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, are familiar figures; others are less known. But even those whose lives have been studied and restudied by scholars bear new attention, for no scholarship treats their anxiety and psychological problems in the context of their own era’s understandings of the relation of body and mind.

My interest in this subject originated first in my examination of the life of M. Carey Thomas (and her close associates, such as Garrett) and more recently in my exploration of sexuality in the nineteenth century. Both projects resulted in books on those subjects. Beginning in 2004-05, my last sabbatical, I returned to the Countway Medical Library of Harvard Medical School to research the nerves in nineteenth-century rare books and medical journals. These works—and the guidance given by important new discoveries and recent literary and historical scholarship—enable me to reinterpret the medical discourse on nervousness of the nineteenth century.

Although my major concern is with the post-Civil War era, I begin with the approaches of the early nineteenth-century. Americans of that period experienced a range of symptoms for mental illness. Many resorted to religious explanations for their distress, even as they sought relief from physicians and other health practitioners. New writings in reform physiology advocated fresh air and exercise and the water cure. Neither sufferers nor those who treated them saw diseases typically as specific entities with specific causes. Rather diseases reflected debility or inflammation, general conditions of the body.

By the late-1860s, regular physicians gained new authority as they told Americans how their bodies worked, why they were ill, and how they might be restored to health. Those dealing with nervous ailments called themselves “neurologists,” and explored new concepts of the mind and its relation to the body. William A. Hammond, S. Weir Mitchell, George Miller Beard, and others were materialists whose secularism rejected any authority, including that of religion, over science. The Civil War gave these physicians new experience in treating the nervous ailments of wounded soldiers. After the war they broadened their practice to civilians, male and female. For both the medical profession and wider audiences, they wrote and spoke about nerve-related ailments.

These male professionals came of age in an era radically different from the antebellum years. The late-nineteenth-century generation rejected earlier non-scientific explanations and enthusiasms. It sought fact, hard fact. To this generation, science, particularly new evolutionary notions, satisfied many of the great questions of the age. That humans evolved from lower animals by natural selection marked only the beginning. Scientific inquiry declared that biological truths were the basis of everything that humans saw, felt and did. All that we call *mind*, from unconscious reflexes to higher thought, was part of the evolution of the species: it was the mechanism by which those highest on the evolutionary scale adjusted their inner to their outer selves. These were the ideas that guided and motivated the earliest American neurologists as they established their specialty in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago in the late 1860s.

Moreover, each disease now had a specific cause. The diagnostician’s goal, indeed purpose, was to find it. But this generated a new problem. Although neurologists believed that mental disorders were physical disorders, with clearly traceable causes, they had no laboratory tools to detect the *specific* causes, to register the lesions of the brain or spinal cord. A horde of paying patients sought their help in seeking relief from pain, but physicians lacked appropriate vehicles or mechanisms to test or measure their newfound theories. Instead, they relied upon the implicit contract between doctor and patient—patients described symptoms, and doctors provided means to relieve or cure them. In the breach, neurologists offered therapeutics that drew on old and new strategies to stimulate or calm the body. Leaders in the field quickly became wealthy and renowned.

The leading sets of symptoms that patients brought to these neurologists were the feeling of debility or exhaustion (often linked to impotence); “vastation” or overwhelming dread; uncontrollable emotional outbursts; and bodily manifestations, such as paralysis of the legs or an inability to tolerate food. The late Roy Porter, in considering hysteria, the leading label put on such symptoms when the patient was female, suggests that it “was a condition chiefly rendered visible by the medical presence.” At a time when the physician became central to “regulating intimate lives,” the patient and the doctor found each other, and, as in an embrace, they responded to each other. The physician defined, the patient communicated, the physician redefined, the patient recomunicated.

It is this embrace that attracts me. What did those suffering from such ailments feel? How did they describe it? What was the relation of their communication and the language that neurologists used? What did patients know about the theories behind the language and the remedial treatments prescribed? For truly understanding how culture matters to an individual and to the society—how we are culturally constructed—this is a critical entry point. Learning how it felt to be a patient with a “case of the nerves” offers a key connection between culture and biology.

Consider the philosopher William James. He wrote often to his wife about what he came to understand as his case of neurasthenia. One of his most revealing statements was unintentional, however, when, in 1883, he asked her to receive the neurologist George Beard hospitably because of his insight into the illness that afflicted James: “he knows,” James wrote, “the secrets of my prison house.” By contrast, in 1880 the philanthropist Mary Garrett experienced the prescription of Britain’s most eminent neurologist as a death sentence. She wrote with mounting anger to M. Carey Thomas that Dr. Hughlings

Jackson told her to “amuse myself in every possible healthy way (indeed it seem to me that healthy or unhealthy may seem equally good to him), *avoid intellectual society, form some friendships with ordinary and commonplace people, drink weak tea & a little after dinner coffee if I liked, use no alcohol, and above all again & again, do no work!*” Such letters open a window into the internal world of the nervous.

But letters are not records of raw experience. Such sources are filtered by culture and relationships to correspondents. Subjects are conscious of both broad and specific understandings and standards. Memoirs and other reflections composed later in life are also shaped by cultural influences. Writers often read back into their earlier experiences their later understandings shaped by new knowledge. Thus awareness of changing conceptions of brain, body, and mind is necessary to the appropriate interpretation of primary sources. At this point in my work I have found the need to reevaluate the scholarly narratives of familiar figures such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and William Dean Howells.

After a prologue on the antebellum period, the book focuses on the years after the Civil War, when important physicians established themselves as neurologists. It concludes with the aftermath of Freud’s visit to the United States in 1909. I see the book as a series of interconnected essays, focused on individual case studies, each one chosen to enable exploration of a facet of the larger issue of American nervousness moving through time. I anticipate that the book will thus move not only biographically but also thematically and chronologically. Currently I plan to present five major case studies, chosen from the approximately 30 individuals researched. Under consideration at present are the experiences of Mary Garrett, William James, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Although all my subjects will likely be middle or upper class, I will be looking as I select the final two for regional, racial, and ethnic diversity. Although especially attentive to these five, I will bring in points of comparison and contrast from the experiences of the broader group as seen in their letters. I am also researching the papers of physicians, such as S. Weir Mitchell.

During the time of the NEH, I hope to complete two chapters that surround two case studies already selected and largely researched, Mary Garrett and William James. This will allow me to confront the gendered nature of diagnosis and attempted therapies. I will also give me practice with combining the individual case study with elements of a narrative thread. I hope to develop each chapter into an article that I will submit to a peer-reviewed journal, such as the *Journal of American History*.

There are excellent materials in the Boston area which I have begun to research. I have visited a number of important archives, including the College of Physicians that holds the S. Weir Mitchell Papers, the University of Southern California, the Huntington, and the Bancroft Library in Berkeley. During the time of this fellowship I will continue to explore archives and rare book rooms accessible in the Boston area, such as the Houghton, the Schlesinger, and the Countway. I plan, in addition, to work at Yale, the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, where there are many collections important to this project. I will return to Philadelphia to continue work on S. Weir Mitchell materials. I also hope to use professional travel farther afield, such as my twice-yearly trips to Indiana University (where I am a member of the board of trustees of the Kinsey), to research important collections.

*A Case of the Nerves* will be written to appeal to both scholars and educated lay readers. Placing American nervousness in deep personal stories of illness, combined with intellectual, cultural, and institutional context, will not only illuminate the time when Americans diagnosed nervous prostration, but it will also and more importantly force readers to reexamine the origins and cultural influences of this mysterious and illusive subject.

**In the Business of Revolution:  
General Abelardo L. Rodríguez and the Making of Modern Mexico, 1920-1967**

**Purpose:** I am seeking an NEH Fellowship to write a book on General Abelardo L. Rodríguez as a case study of the emergence of a new national bourgeoisie during and after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1940). Rodríguez was president from 1932 to 1934 and one of the individuals who most benefited personally from the revolution. Virtually penniless at the outset, he rapidly rose through the ranks in the army. He became a millionaire by seizing the lucrative business in prostitution and gambling that characterized the Mexican border state of Baja California in the 1920s, and then added to his wealth by investing in the growing entertainment industry. Rodríguez epitomized the corrupt revolutionary elite depicted in Carlos Fuentes's novel, *The Death of Artemio Cruz*; a group that had forgotten its earlier zeal for improving the living conditions of workers and peasants in favor of an all-absorbing obsession with personal gain.

My project demonstrates the connections between wealth and political power in twentieth-century Latin America, connections often taken for granted but never studied in detail. Historians have steered away from such analyses, in part because most archives open to the public contain little information on political leaders as entrepreneurs. While many of these leaders destroyed their business records or kept them under lock and key rather than turn them over to government archives, Rodríguez constitutes a fascinating exception. His recently discovered private archive in Mexico City contains abundant and hitherto unknown documentation on his business and political activities. Along with other collections such as the Rodríguez archive housed at the Universidad de Baja California in Tijuana, the new documentation allows the historian to trace the growth of Rodríguez's entertainment empire, and its connection with his growing political influence. My research reveals the new opportunities available in the postrevolutionary political order for the type of corruption characterized by the party that ruled Mexico from 1929 until 2000, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, or Institutional Revolutionary Party). The present popular distrust in the country's newly democratic institutions, distrust that lingers even in an era in which the PRI no longer dominates Mexico, has its roots in the era that allowed Rodríguez to rise to wealth and power. Similar instances of the abuse of military and political power for personal benefit have plagued other Latin American nations, and, indeed, much of the world in general.

**Significance:** Periods of prolonged bloodshed afford great opportunities for ambitious military leaders to carve out spheres of personal power. That was the case in revolutionary Mexico, where a mass-based movement swept away an entrenched dictatorship before disintegrating into several factions that continued to fight with each other until 1920. By then, more than one million had died, and the nation's economy lay in ruins. The fighting had left regional warlords in charge of most state governments, and central authority was weak. At the time, border towns like Tijuana and Mexicali were targets of vice tourism, places of refuge for U.S. visitors who came to escape the strict laws of the Prohibition era. These towns brimmed with brothels, casinos, and nightclubs, protected by warlords such as Baja California governor Esteban Cantú in exchange for a large percentage of their profits. In its quest to expand its authority, the new revolutionary government attempted to eradicate both vice tourism and the rule of warlords on the border. It was thus that General Abelardo Rodríguez came to Tijuana in August 1920 to reassert central government authority over Baja California. Fifteen years later, he had become the prototype of a new class of entrepreneurs who played important political roles and dominated the emerging leisure industry that served the growing middle class in post-revolutionary Mexico.

Rodríguez appears in most scholarship as a minor political figure in the "Sonoran Dynasty," a group of revolutionary leaders from the border state of Sonora who dominated Mexico from 1920 to 1935. In fact, however, he was a key political and economic figure into the 1960s. Born in 1889, Rodríguez was drifting through life when the revolution offered him the chance at a fresh start. As police chief of Nogales, he formed business alliances with eventual presidents and fellow Sonorans Plutarco Elías Calles and Alvaro Obregón. When Obregón sent him to Tijuana to submit Baja California to the new central government, Rodríguez closed down the city's night clubs and casinos, only to inaugurate his

own entertainment empire in alliance with U.S. investors, Calles, and Obregón. In so doing, he promoted the very activities he had been sent to prohibit, epitomizing a regime whose protagonists often said one thing and did quite the opposite. Within two decades, Rodríguez had become a multimillionaire. By the 1950s, he was a partner in more than two hundred privately held companies with a net worth of more than \$100 million. His holdings included movie theaters, hotels, golf courses, breweries, vineyards, and snack producers, among other ventures. In the final decade before his death in 1967, Rodríguez's fortunes gradually waned amidst the emergence of William O. Jenkins's movie empire, but he remained important in national political life as an exponent of anti-Communist policies within the ruling PRI.

Apart from one brief Mexican publication (Gómez Estrada, 2002), my project will be the first serious study of Rodríguez. Following my earlier work, it questions the notion of Calles as jefe máximo (Supreme Chief) who manipulated Rodríguez and other allies from his behind-the-scenes role following the assassination of Obregón in 1928. In public, Rodríguez often took Calles's lead throughout the 1920s and 1930s and appeared to defer to him as a mentor. However, Rodríguez far surpassed Calles in personal wealth and business connections. As a result, his presidency witnessed the gradual decline of Calles's power and paved the way for President Lázaro Cárdenas, a populist leader still renowned for parceling out 49 million acres of land to campesinos and expropriating the foreign-owned oil industry. The Rodríguez presidency therefore marked the beginning of a period of transition to a political landscape without Calles, who was exiled in April 1936. Ironically, Rodríguez, the same leader who helped the Cardenista left to power, emerged as a leader of the Mexican right only twelve years later.

This study will make a contribution to Mexican historiography by demonstrating the significance of entrepreneurial competition in the shaping of the modern state. By the mid-1920s, Mexico featured at least three rival entrepreneurial circles: the Sonoran group under Rodríguez and Calles; the Monterrey elite under the leadership of General Juan Andreu Almazán; and a smaller group from Michoacán that included both Ortiz Rubio and Cárdenas. Other entrepreneurs like Aarón Sáenz of Monterrey and Maximino Avila Camacho of Puebla served as intermediaries among those circles. In the end, Cárdenas crushed the Sonoran group by means of his alliance with mass popular organizations. While the Nuevo León group survived Cardenismo with little damage (Saragoza, 1988), Rodríguez was the only one of the Sonoran leaders to add to his wealth, in large part due to his ability to reconcile his own interests with those of Cárdenas and his allies. My study therefore challenges the existing orthodoxy that describes Callista Mexico as a chaotic, Hobbesian world of unbridled personal ambitions in which presidents, governors, and other political leaders followed each other in rapid succession until Cárdenas put an end to Calles's power in late 1935 (Dulles, 1961). Instead, I will follow the lead of political scientist Roderic Ai Camp in arguing that conflict of revolutionary camarillas tied together by kinship and common business interests helped structure not only the political discourse and practice of the governing elite, but also the building of the post-revolutionary state under the leadership of the official party. The focus on primary research will distinguish my work from Camp's political science models and illustrate the human dimension of elite networks. Indeed, this will be the first study that demonstrates the inner workings of a revolutionary camarilla—the Rodríguez-Calles group—based on primary archival research that looks at the members of this group as both entrepreneurs and politicians.

The project also provides a new explanation of how entrepreneur-politicians confronted popular demands for social change. Throughout Latin America, these demands increased during the 1920s and particularly following the Great Depression, which affected the region almost as much as it did the United States and Europe. Mexico was unique in that the revolutionary Constitution of 1917 provided a series of theoretical guarantees to workers and campesinos—guarantees that the government and (after 1929) the official party promised to fulfill. Yet Rodríguez's career demonstrates that the governing elite of Mexico, like that of many of the other large Latin American nations such as Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, managed not only to co-opt, but also to benefit from the social upheaval of the 1930s. As president, Rodríguez supported social reform, and particularly the renewal of land distributions and a minimum wage. As an entrepreneur, he recognized the implications of labor and agrarian radicalism. Aware that Cardenismo targeted large estates and mining activities as well as the casinos on the border, Rodríguez shifted his investments into the entertainment industry, a new and emerging sector that benefited from the state's

emphasis on consumer-driven economic growth. In particular, he invested in hotels, spas, drink producers, and movie theaters. I hope that my study may invite others to complement the literature on social movements in the 1920s and 1930s with analyses of the business activities of wealthy leaders who professed to champion the causes of the poor yet ended up profiting from the social programs they created.

**Methodology and Plan of Work:** The project is based on Mexican and U.S. primary sources, and particularly Rodríguez's private archive, which recently became available for consultation at the Fideicomiso Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca (FAPEC) in Mexico City. I am the first historian to have consulted this archive. Stashed away for decades in the attic of a private residence, it consists of more than 70,000 documents. Containing correspondence as well as balance sheets and other documents on Rodríguez's various business ventures, this archive allows a surprisingly honest look at how an upstart came to power and wealth in revolutionary Mexico. Among other items, I found an appraisal of the jewelry in the estate of Rodríguez's widow in the amount of more than eight million dollars, a detailed listing of family assets as of 1967, and several testaments and balance sheets. I will finish up the research in this collection in the summer of 2007 and plan several shorter trips until the beginning of the fellowship period in July 2008 to Tijuana and College Park, Md., to do research in local and state archives in Baja California as well as in the U.S. National Archives.

The fellowship would allow me to write the book manuscript during the 2008-2009 academic year. My position as Director of Latin American Studies at UNC Charlotte entails heavy administrative responsibilities, as we are currently adding an M.A. program at our high-growth institution. More than half of my time is currently devoted to administration, including the summer, and I also teach in the Latin American Studies program. Therefore, I have little time for research and writing during the academic year, and I require a fellowship such as this one to get the book manuscript done.

I envision a book of five chapters. Chapter One, "The Opportunistic Revolutionary," traces Rodríguez's emergence as a member of the Sonoran coalition under General Alvaro Obregón. Chapter Two, "Transforming Baja California" studies Rodríguez's rise to wealth and power as governor and chief of military operations in the border state during the 1920s. Tentatively entitled "In the Vortex of the Maximato," Chapter Three examines Rodríguez's role in national politics (1931-1935), and especially the transition from the Maximato to the rule of Cárdenas. With particular emphasis on the movie industry and Garci-Crespo, Chapter Four, "A National Entrepreneur," addresses the expansion of Rodríguez's business ventures beyond Baja California from 1935 to 1950. The final chapter, "The Changing of the Guard," analyzes the decline of Rodríguez's fortunes in the 1950s and 1960s due to the emergence of Jenkins's transnational entertainment empire. It also examines his late political role as the focal point of the Mexican right, and particularly the anti-Communist movement.

During the fellowship year, I plan to devote six weeks to writing each chapter as well as another two weeks for the introduction and conclusion. The goal is to finish a draft manuscript by late February, 2009, followed by approximately four months of revisions. I plan to spend a part of those four months in Mexico to do any necessary follow up work in the archives, followed by submission of the completed manuscript to a publisher in August 2009.

I am well positioned to finish this project. I have read extensively on twentieth-century Mexican history in the course of previous research, which resulted in three monographs (including a prize-winning book on Calles), an edited volume, and eighteen articles and book chapters. Fluent in Spanish, I possess the language skills necessary for the project. I am also at an advanced stage in my research. This summer, I will complete the archival research in FAPEC as well as two other archives in Mexico City: the Archivo General de la Nación, and the archive of the foreign relations secretariat, the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. I will get all research in Tijuana and Washington D.C. accomplished during the academic year 2007-8 and the early summer of 2008.

The prospects for publication of this book are excellent. I have already contacted several publishers about my project, and the \_\_\_\_\_, the \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ have all expressed interest in the manuscript.

Exemption 4

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