

Understanding *Palanca*: Is it Possible to Survive Invisibility to Power?

Karen Merritt, PhD MPH | Dept. of Arts & Sciences | Maine Maritime Academy, Castine, ME, USA
(karen.merritt@mma.edu)

Technology (n): the application of scientific knowledge to the change and manipulation of the human environment

Power (n): the ability to act or produce an effect in the human environment or to control people or events

To be compensated, you must be valued. Developed in the 1890s and jointly patented in the United States and Austria, the Castner-Kellner chlor-alkali cell utilized elemental mercury in the electrochemical conversion of brine into chlorine gas and caustic soda. Over the span of the 20th century, approximately 300 mercury cell chlor-alkali facilities were built globally, generating Cl₂ for the production of bleach (drinking water treatment as well as for pulp and paper), PVC, and organochlorine pesticides, as well as NaOH for the catalytic cracking of petroleum and creation of synthetic fibers and fabrics. Across the Americas, mercury cell facilities were built in Canada (n = 15); the United States (n = 31); and in ten countries across Latin American (n = 24).

This paper summarizes the geographical distribution and eras of reliance on this technology across the Americas, including identification of national regulations and international agreements that have closed or are in the process of eliminating the use of mercury in the chlor-alkali process. With specific focus on facilities that operated in Canada (Dryden, ON), the United States (McIntosh, AL) Nicaragua (Managua), and Venezuela (Maracaibo), this paper also examines the aftermath of facility closures and the struggle of former workers and downstream communities to exact financial redress for the operational carelessness and resultant health impacts that were a not uncommon feature of this industrial process.

With respect to technologies of care, this paper argues that power is a technology of care in the role it plays in creating leverage. Specifically, without leverage, it is difficult to be seen. Without being seen it is difficult to be valued. Without being valued, it is difficult to demand and to receive either monetary compensation or personal or community care following acts of corporate industrial negligence.