

Transatlantic retailing

The Franco-Mexican business model of
fin-de-siècle department stores in Mexico City



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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the origins and the business model of department stores in Mexico between 1891 and 1910.

Design/methodology/approach – Primary and secondary source material support an historical and comparative study of retailing and marketing evolution in a market on the global periphery.

Findings – This paper finds that Mexico's vanguard position in establishing the first purpose-built department stores in Latin America is closely linked to the strong presence of an immigrant entrepreneurial class from the Barcelonnette region of France in the retailing and textile manufacturing sectors. Mexican department stores followed Parisian models, policies, and innovations closely, yet accommodated local customs and conditions. The stores served as showcases for the success of the national government's economic and cultural modernization program and as cultural primers for Mexican consumers.

Originality/value – Scholarly work on department stores, consumerism, and the influential French community in Mexico is extremely limited, especially so in English. This is the first work that brings these together and analyzes them within – and in relation to – the context of Mexico's rapid modernization during the era of President Porfirio Díaz from 1876 to 1911. It also undermines the notion that the USA is the first and most influential foreign influence on modern Mexican consumer culture.

Keywords Department stores, Mexico, Retailing, France, Influence, Business history

Paper type Research paper

The department store stands as the representative institution of the dominant bourgeois culture of the nineteenth century and a potent symbol of *fin-de-siècle* modernity. For decades, historians have flocked to study this phenomenon. Early studies focused on often-hagiographical biographies of retailing entrepreneurs and the modernization of retailing methods and technologies (Pound, 1960). By the 1980s, however, scholars inspired by Michael Miller's work on the Bon Marché increasingly examined the institution within a larger cultural, economic, social, and political context (Miller, 1981). The department store had become less an object of analysis and more of a site to which historians from a variety of fields turned their gaze to study a broader history of consumption and modernity (Crossick and Jaumain, 1999, pp. 1-2). Modernization and modernity served as the common themes of this literature, exploring the ascent and consequences of capitalism as both an economic and cultural system within the societies of the North Atlantic.

Outside of North Atlantic societies, however, research into department stores remains embryonic at best[1]. Clearly, a global process requires an equally expansive scope of investigation (Stearns, 1997, 2006; Crossick and Jaumain, 1999, p. 3). Studying department stores beyond the North Atlantic region will provide a comparative basis to better differentiate between the universal and the particular characteristics of institutions and thereby sharpen future studies. Post-independence Mexico and



Latin America is an obvious choice for this. After achieving independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century, Latin American elites sought to emulate the cultural and economic models of modernity provided by the nations of Western Europe and the USA as a way to modernize their economies and their populations (French, 1996; Shumway, 1991; Buffington and French, 2000; Bauer, 2001; Beezley, 2004). In no postcolonial region in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries did the “allure of the foreign” reach such a fervor as in Latin America (Orlove, 1997). The appeal of imported manufactured goods lay not so much in their use and curiosity value but rather in their utility in addressing “specific questions of identity in a postcolonial context” (Orlove, 1997, p. 18). Not surprisingly, then, the first department stores established beyond the North Atlantic rim appeared in Mexico during the last decade of the nineteenth century.

This overview study is the first analysis in English of the first department stores in Mexico and part of a growing literature of the history of consumption in Latin America. From a distinctly peripheral and comparative perspective, it will seek to incorporate the emphases of both historiographical generations mentioned above, examining both the department store’s modernization of retailing and its role in the construction and negotiation of modernity in Mexico. Foreign ownership of the stores – French, specifically – also makes their study notable. An immigrant class from the Barcelonnette region constructed a business model that required the vertical integration of the textile and apparel sectors. Its position in the textile industry allowed it not only to control costs and ensure supplies but also to reach a much broader market in its retail sector by manufacturing lower-cost reproductions of foreign products and styles that Mexico’s middling and upper classes craved. In highlighting French immigration, entrepreneurs, retail systems, and patterns of consumption, this paper seeks to temper and add nuance to the historiography attributing the origins and definition of modern Mexican consumer culture to North American companies and entrepreneurs (Moreno, 2003; Schell, 2001). Perhaps, most importantly, French entrepreneurs could not simply apply unmodified Parisian business models to the Mexican market. Their decades of experience in the new nation’s textile retailing and manufacturing sectors prior to the launch of the first department store had made them savvy in their adaptation and accommodation of foreign business models and strategies to the local and national market, customs, and politics. This interplay between foreign models and domestic factors powerfully influenced the nature Mexico’s retailing systems, department stores, and broader consumer culture.

The evolution of Mexican retailing

Born in 1891, the first purpose-built Mexican department store (*gran almacén*) signaled an expanding consumer market capable of supporting no less than 11 such stores in the capital by the Revolution in 1910[2]. Department stores arose midway through the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (called the Porfiriato, 1876-1911) that had imposed political stability after two-thirds of a century of civil war and foreign invasion. The regime encouraged rapid economic growth primarily through foreign investment and the export of raw materials. For the Porfirian regime and Mexico’s social leadership, national development required modernizing the economy and also the Mexican people. In their eyes, modernity was an import. Domestic and foreign observers agreed that the emulation of the material culture and manners of North Atlantic societies, most notably patterns of consumption, served as tangible evidence of Mexico’s general

march towards progress. Urban department stores, especially those in the capital, were not the only spaces and purveyors of this modernizing consumer culture, but they were the most iconic.

Mexican department stores did not develop in the retailing equivalent of virgin soil. They arose in an urban retailing environment first shaped in the pre-colonial and then colonial period by indigenous and Spanish traditions and innovations. After independence in 1821, British, German, French, and North American merchants introduced novel retailing and marketing practices with increasing success as the century came to a close. Although this paper deals with a predominately imported retailing model, no discussion of Mexico City's retailing and exchange system can overlook the pre-Colombian tradition of the market and its enduring legacy as a parallel system of exchange and consumption. The enormous and well-stocked markets of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco (the two cities that shared the island that became Mexico City) that had astonished Hernán Cortés continued as the dominant retailing venue for most residents of Mexico City during the colonial period and beyond. Permanent and temporary *mercados* and *tianguis* of varying sizes in the capital's plazas and streets served as one of the most conspicuous features of the urban landscape both then and today (Gortari Rabiela and Hernández Franyuti, 1988; Díaz, 1967, pp. 216-19).

The introduction of European retailing architecture and practices developed in the buildings of the urban center constructed by the Spanish in the aftermath of the razing of Tenochtitlan. With shops on the ground floor and residences above, these buildings allowed the Spanish and Spanish-descent residents to develop in the new world an alternative model of retail and consumption, one in which they could find imported goods or European-style goods manufactured by local artisans and thereby culturally differentiate themselves from the indigenous and mestizo majority. One of the most important types of retail outlets was the *cajón de ropa*, selling fabrics, clothes, and accessories, and named for the enormous wooden chest (the *cajón*) in which the owner stored his inventory every evening and on which shop assistants would sleep (Gortari Rabiela and Hernández Franyuti, 1988).

In the decades following national independence, the *cajones de ropa* lost their cachet as two consecutive retailing innovations from France transformed the shopping experience of Mexico City's comfortable and aspirational consumers. By mid-century the predecessor of the department store appeared: the *almacen de novedades*, patterned on the *magasin de nouveautés* that originated in Paris in the 1830s (Coleman, 2006, p. 32; Miller, 1981, pp. 25-8). According to an 1867 Mexican business directory, at least 28 of these stores operated in the capital at the end of the French intervention (Maillefert, 1992, pp. 295-6). In the Mexican market, they stocked imported and domestic fabrics, dresses, millinery, and a variety of accessories, much as the *cajones de ropa* did, but their owners also introduced a number of important innovations. Adopting the first plate glass windows and rudimentary window displays, store owners also began pulling merchandise out of the *cajones* to make it visible to customers before bargaining began. The merchandise still remained guarded from the customer, however, stored in large shelving called the *tarima* located behind long wooden counters (*mostradores*) across which employees and customers now interacted. Attempts to establish the French and American innovation of fixed prices failed miserably. More than a dozen of these *almacenes de novedades* clustered along the main shopping thoroughfare of Plateros and San Francisco – which connected the central plaza (known as the *Zócalo*)

and the grand Alameda Park – as well as the south side of the Zócalo. A total of 25 percent of the nation’s commercial transactions took place in this central district of the capital (Johns, 1997, p. 58).

The second major innovation from France was the purpose-built department store, and by 1910 nearly every urban area in the Republic featured at least one. The original, called the *Palacio de Hierro* (Iron Palace), was also the first in Latin America. Indeed, Mexico City had five such stores by the time Brazil established its first at the turn of the century. Chile and Argentina, the other two economic marvels of the era, waited until 1910 for Gath and Chaves to open in their capital cities (Bauer, 2001, p. 156; Scobie, 1974, p. 34). Modeled on the first Parisian *gran magasin de nouveautés*, the *Bon Marché* constructed by Aristide Boucicaut in 1869, the Palacio implemented the modern business model of high volume and low margins we know so well today. It closely followed the French department store business model with its new policies, new technologies, labor relations, and especially its architecture. Not only creating a new store atmosphere and a new kind of social space, but these also monumental edifices prominently announced the understudied and significant contribution of private investment to the urban transformation project. Accelerated under the Porfirian Government but pursued since mid century by the nation’s leadership and urban planners, this project aimed to modernize and commercialize the capital (Tenenbaum, 1994). Embodying the Porfirian goal of economic and cultural modernization, the downtown department store would remain the non-plus ultra of shopping experiences in Mexico until 1960s when suburbanization and the ascent of the mall began to lure Mexican consumers to a more “modern” way of consuming (Moreno, 2003).

The French connection

Mexico’s advanced status in global department store retailing owes a great deal to the French ownership of these stores. French immigration to Mexico in the nineteenth century was inextricably linked to this evolution of clothes, textiles, and fashion retailing from the cajón de ropa to the *almacen de novedades* and finally the department store. Such thoroughly French names such as Tron, Ebrard, Proal, Ollivier, Reynaud, Signoret, Donnadieu, and Robert instantly brought the cultural cachet of France to the stores in Mexico. This prestige carried great weight in global retailing at the end of the nineteenth century: Paris stood uncontested as the consumer capital of the world, and French culture was synonymous with modernity, globalization, and good taste (Schwartz, 1998; Walton, 1996).

All of these owners and eventually most of their French employees came from a single region in southeastern France – the Barcelonnette – and by the Porfiriato this community controlled the national garment and fashion trade. As *Modern Mexico* magazine admitted in 1901, “the dry goods trade of this country is almost exclusively in the hands of the French merchants” (*Modern Mexico*, 1901, p. 10). Barcelonnettes established ten of the 11 Porfirian department stores and owned all of them after Sebastian Robert bought out the shareholders of the Centro Mercantil in 1901 (Bunker, 2011, Chapter 3). They also became major investors in the banking, textile, beer, cigarette, paper, and dynamite-manufacturing sectors of the economy, but their first and greatest public profile remained in retail (Pérez Siller, 2004). So associated were the French with the textile retailing that the stock Mexican stereotype of the Frenchman was “Vende mucha manta y hace buena cocina [He sells a lot of cloth and cooks well]”

(Antiq-Auvaro, 1992, p. 34). The Mexican nickname for the French was “calicot” for the low-priced printed cotton cloth of which the Barcelonnette-owned garment stores sold so much (D’Olwer *et al.*, 1965, p. 785).

Geography and the long history of the Barcelonnnettes in French textile production and distribution are among the factors offering an explanation as to why this seemingly isolated region could become the source for such a powerful entrepreneurial class in Mexico. Located in the present-day department of the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence and abutting the Italian border, Barcelonnette is both the name of the subprefecture and the main town that comprise the Ubaye Valley. The valley is covered with snow seven months of the year, historically making winter travel through its mountain passes (all above 7,000 feet) nearly impossible. So isolated is the valley that even today it enjoys no train service. The soil is rocky and infertile, best suited for the nearly 60,000 sheep and rams raised in the valley. Population density was and is low, approximately 13 inhabitants per square kilometer in 1891, with a total valley population of 15,000. Residents produced rough woolen cloth and also some silk. In 1388, the valley was politically detached from Provence and became part of the Italian Duchy of Savoy until the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 when it returned to France (Arnaud *et al.*, 1994; Proal and Charpenel, 1986). In the economic orbit of the financial and commercial center of Turin, residents parlayed ties of marriage to gain access to credit. Turin financiers, for example, provided the investment and technology to establish silk production in the valley. Although beneficial, the attachment to Savoy restricted residents’ access to the markets of France. According to Arnaud, 1898, p. 3, by 1689 valley production had exceeded internal demand and the need to find external markets began the Barcelonnette tradition of *colportage* (peddling and itinerant sales) and influenced the political decision in 1713.

The Barcelonnette economy relied heavily on the practice of *colportage* after 1689, an activity that came to define the valley identity and its commercial strategy in Mexico. Approximately, three quarters of household-head males (1,500-2,000) would leave the valley in the autumn before the snow blocked the passes (Arnaud, 1898, p. 3). These traveling salesmen sold their textile products in regional markets such as Aix, Lyon, and in Italy, but by the end of the eighteenth century they were traveling to Paris as well as to Belgium, Luxembourg, and Holland (Arnaud *et al.*, 1994, p. 17). They essentially sold on credit, collecting debts from customers on their way home to the valley in the late spring. Decades later, the Barcelonnette expertise in this commercial practice would continue in Mexico where their scouring of the provincial markets became legendary: for example, in 1896, one Barcelonnnette department store in Guadalajara claimed to employ over 500 traveling salesmen (Limantour, 1896). In nineteenth century, France, however, the valley’s artisanal commerce and trade network began to decline as the industrialization of the textile sector increasingly undercut the Barcelonnnettes. A final blow came in mid-century when consumers embraced light-weight and cheaper cotton. Valley production plummeted to one-tenth of its peak decades earlier (Arnaud *et al.*, 1994, p. 18). As their local economy withered from the effects of the modernization of textile production, the immigration of three brothers to Mexico set in motion a transatlantic migration that allowed Barcelonnette entrepreneurs to enter, amplify, and eventually dominate a new market. To succeed, they would draw upon three strengths: first, a strong group identity; second, a long history of producing, distributing,

and retailing textiles; and third, turning the lessons and processes of modernization that had crippled them in France to their advantage in the new world.

The Barcelonnette saga in Mexico began in 1821 when the three famous Arnaud brothers, Jacques, Dominique, and Marc-Antoine arrived by way of Louisiana and opened the *cajón de ropa Las Siete Puertas* in the capital (Arnaud *et al.*, 1994, pp. 100-17). Jacques, living in a predominately Barcelonnette agricultural community in southwestern Louisiana (today called Arnaudville), visited Mexico in 1818 and must have convinced his brothers to emigrate now that their family silk business in Jausiers had closed (Arnaud *et al.*, 1994, pp. 20, 109-11). The support of fellow Frenchmen in Mexico could not have been a factor as only a tiny community existed due to tight Spanish colonial immigration controls (Arnaud *et al.*, 1994, p. 19). Even after Jacques was brutally murdered, disemboweled, and robbed of \$35,000 *en route* to Veracruz in 1828 the remaining brothers hung on, prospered, and eventually sent home for help (Arnaud *et al.*, 1994, p. 110). Three former employees from Jausiers arrived who would later set up their own store, *El Gran Oriental*, in 1838 in Mexico City's main plaza. The pace of immigration quickened after two of the Gran Oriental owners returned home two years later with 200,000 francs each (Arnaud *et al.*, 1994, pp. 8, 20-21).

Immigration from the valley swelled due to both push and pull factors: pushed by the declining economic situation at home that reached a nadir in 1860 and pulled by the growing success of their labor-hungry compatriots in Mexico. By the time of the Revolution in 1910, the Barcelonnettes comprised 80 percent of the 6,000 member French community in Mexico, with 80 percent of them working in the garment industry, the vast majority single males. They had constructed an astonishing retailing network of 214 commercial houses in 31 cities and 23 states, a network of entrepreneurs linked by business and social ties of kinship and regional identity (Arnaud *et al.*, 1994, p. 81; Pérez Siller, 2004, p. 91).

So, how should we characterize and categorize the Barcelonnettes sociologically? Two useful categories exist. Historian Jürgen Buchenau uses "trade conquistadors" to describe the group of immigrants, mostly bourgeois, from France, Germany, Great Britain, and Spain who came armed with investment capital to further the economic interests of their families and who wielded an influence disproportionate to their relatively small numbers (Buchenau, 2004, p. 16). Unlike the peasant farmers and industrial workers who dominated most of the immigration statistics elsewhere in the Americas, this group sought to make their fortune and return home, marry, construct a fabulous villa (if they were Barcelonnette), and parlay their overseas capital into a comfortable bourgeois life (Homps-Brousse, 2002). Alternatively, economist Castañeda, 2004, pp. 2-3 applies the term "network-entrepreneurs" to the Barcelonnettes. As opposed to "individual-entrepreneurs," network-entrepreneurs are common in societies with weaker government structures incapable of credibly enforcing property and other legal rights necessary to provide an environment of general trust wherein individuals may prosper. Solid financial institutions and credit systems are also lacking. Although network-entrepreneurs possess necessary personal attributes (Castañeda, 2004, p. 3):

[...] more importantly they should have the proper connections and social backing to develop productive businesses and to exploit market niches. This capability evolves from shared values and social networks embedded in specific societies. A businessman is supported by the community's socio-cultural structure, when social sanctions do not discourage the pursuit

of individual success, and when parochialism does not inhibit the possibility of specialization and cooperation beyond a close circle of associates. Under this social setting it is likely that a relatively large [number] of network-entrepreneurs will emerge in the community.

Castañeda (2004), p. 3 also identifies the Barcelonnette network as a “system of spin-offs,” a system that seems to apply to many past and present ethnic communities around the globe:

Through this system, a group of immigrants is attracted to a specific country with the help of friends and family members who have previously achieved [...] success as businessmen in the host country. After experiencing a period of hardship, hard work, and low wages, some of these newcomers begin to develop their own business, either due to having received a family inheritance or the financial backing of the community. This support being the result of a promise made while the immigrant was recruited in exchange for a long and loyal behavior toward the firm. In these societies, patrons have the moral and social obligation to fulfill the promises made to their families and talented employees. This commitment is credible due to the existence of social pressures and a value system that encourages familial or communitarian lineage.

This definition fits descriptions of the Barcelonnette immigration model (Gouy, 1980; Proal and Charpenel, 1986; Antiq-Auvaro, 1992; Gamboa Ojeda, 2004; D’Anglade, 2006) and helps to explain how the Barcelonnette commercial network spread so rapidly, so extensively, and so successfully. Although this system began to break down in the era of the department stores and the greater complexity of Barcelonnette investments and business operations, it still managed to provide considerable ethnic solidarity through the World War I. How these trade conquistadors or network-entrepreneurs achieved such a durable business model requires understanding how they carefully integrated and modernized textile and apparel manufacturing with retailing in Mexico, two sectors that under the Barcelonnettes came to fit like hand in glove.

Product sourcing and clientele

One of the greatest misconceptions of Porfirian department stores is that they stocked only imported goods and catered only to an elite clientele. On one hand, this characterization (or caricature) contains an element of truth: the stores did indeed sell imported goods and to a wealthy clientele. On the other hand, it overlooks the fundamental economic reality that the department store business model of high volume and lower profit margins could not possibly survive these restrictions in a Mexican market of five million consumers, of whom 8 percent could be classified as middle class (three quarters of these being urban) and 1 percent upper class (Haber, 1989, p. 27; Iturriaga, 1951, pp. 34-89). In fact, the Barcelonnettes relied heavily upon domestic products produced by low-wage Mexican workers in their inventories, many of which came from Barcelonnette-owned or controlled textile factories[3]. These cheaper goods included not only “national products” but also reproductions of French and other foreign designs. Affordable reproductions appealed to aspirational consumers as both social markers of status as well as cultural markers of an individual’s modernity and participation in national progress. A closer look at the Barcelonnette role in textile manufacturing and their store inventories reveals the lessons they learned from France, the integration strategy of these network-entrepreneurs, and a compelling argument for reassessing the clientele of these stores.

In Mexico as elsewhere, the modernization of retailing went hand-in-hand with that of production. The same modernization of factories and mills in Europe that devastated the Barcelonnette artisanal production would occur in Mexico by the 1870s. In a reversal of roles, Barcelonnette entrepreneurs spearheaded this change rather than played the victim. Although Barcelonnettes mechanized or introduced the domestic manufacture of many consumer goods in Mexico (beer, cigarettes, paper, dynamite, canned foods, etc.) they were most dominant in the textile and apparel sectors. Barcelonnette-owned textile factories lowered the costs of many high-volume items, ensured steady supplies, and allowed the entrepreneurs greater flexibility and control than if they relied on independent manufacturers. The Barcelonnette vertical integration of textile production and retailing marked a distinct break from the Parisian retail model. There, stores such as the Bon Marché limited their direct involvement in production to the in-house manufacture of certain items of high demand. Boucicaut and other Parisian department store magnates do not appear to have directly controlled the production of the goods they sold (Miller, 1981, pp. 57-8).

The Barcelonnettes followed the classic network-entrepreneur strategy of pooling resources and vertically integrating in order to ensure stable supplies and costs in an emergent market. Modest success and steady integration with the community's retail outlets characterized the three decades that followed the opening the first Barcelonnette-owned mill in Puebla in 1831 (Arnaud *et al.*, 1994, p. 20). The 1860s proved a transformative decade for the industry, as the American Civil War and the French intervention proved a windfall for the community. Manufacturers made hefty profits by filling the demand for troop uniforms by the Confederates, the French, and eventually the Mexican Liberals. They reinvested their profits and modernized their factories by mechanizing production. In doing so, they transformed an industry whose longstanding importance in the Mexican economy was matched by its dreadful inefficiencies. The Pax Porfiriana set the stage for the next round of Barcelonnette expansion, and in the 1880s they established new textile factories and purchased existing ones. The most notable was the formation of La Compañía Industrial de Orizaba, S.A. (CIDOSA), which established and incorporated a number of textile factories including Río Blanco, the largest and most modern facility in Latin America. By 1910, the group generated 13.5 percent of national textile production (Pérez Siller, 2004, pp. 100-02). The second largest company, La Compañía Industrial Veracruzana, S.A. (CIVSA), formed in 1896 and employed 2,000 workers once it began operations at its flagship Santa Rosa factory in 1898 (Proal and Charpenel, 1998, pp. 28–34). By 1910, CIDOSA and CIVSA along with two smaller Barcelonnette concerns produced 35 percent of the nation's textile output (García Díaz, 2004, p. 64). These industrial groups used their economic position and social clout to push for favorable tariff policies such as dropping the tax on raw cotton, their primary imported material. (*L'Echo du Mexique* (1897), January 15, p. 1). Summing up their achievements in 1900, Mexican Finance Minister José Yves Limantour wrote to Swiss-French financier Eduard Noetzelin that (Limantour, 1900):

[...] the brilliant success achieved by the cotton textile factories established or developed in the years between 1895 and 1898 is undoubtedly owed to the skill of the owners of the retail clothing stores who understood very well the advantages that could come from the union, under the same hands, of the manufacturing sites with the establishments that have achieved a *de facto* monopoly on retail sales.

The remarkable output achieved by mechanizing and rationalizing the textile industry required an equivalent modernization in retailing to develop markets capable of absorbing these goods. Not surprisingly, the owners of four of the five department stores built before 1900 happened to be founding members of CIDOSA (Arnaud *et al.*, 1994, p. 44; Proal and Charpenel, 1998, pp. 28-9). Another group of influential Barcelonnette retailers shut out of this investment fronted the money for the subsequent CIVSA (Proal and Charpenel, 1998, pp. 33-4; Meyer, 1974, pp. 62-4). Making the connection between Barcelonnette production and retail operations explicit, many department stores advertised on their exterior façade the names of domestic factories which supplied them. Sebastian Robert's La Valenciana announced in large letters above its second floor "Productos de las Fábricas de Santa Rosa y La Hormiga" (Products of the Santa Rosa and La Hormiga Factories) (Robert, 1901). The Centro Mercantil likewise ran banners on its façade advertising its imports as well as "wools and cottons from the principal factories of the country" (Proal and Charpenel, 1998, p. 39). Francia Maritima acted as an outlet for the woolens produced by Santa Teresa and the cottons of La Magdalena (*Le Mexique*, 1907, June 20, p. 151).

Their broad range of products reinforces the contention that the Barcelonnettes aimed for a diverse market of consumers. From the beginning, they had produced coarse woolen and cotton cloth for an indigenous and lower class market. By the 1880s, however, Barcelonnette factories were producing bleached and printed cloth such as the durable percale (the unofficial uniform of the Porfirian industrial working class, especially factory workers), muslin, flannel, organdy, drill, and cretonne (Keremetsis, 1973, pp. 123-4; Gómez-Galvarriato, 1999, p. 78). The Palacio de Hierro's own workshop on the outskirts of Mexico City produced dress shirts, umbrellas, gloves, other western-styled clothing, and even furniture, employing 600 seamstresses alone.

What we see here are the four levels of the Barcelonnette business model for textile production and retailing. At the top resided the sale of authentic imported goods from a variety of nations to the most affluent consumers. Imported goods were an important element of a store environment designed to reproduce for shoppers an oasis of French culture that in the *fin-de-siècle* world had become synonymous with modernity and globalization, an environment in which participation and the act of purchase shaped consumer identity as much as the provenance of the product itself. At the bottom was the fabrication of "national products" such as the coarse cotton and woolen textiles for the largest market sectors. Their sale took place primarily in outlets other than department stores. Between these two extremes, the model identified two social tiers capable of and interested in absorbing domestic reproductions of foreign styles. The rapidly expanding industrial working class was the lower of these two tiers, absorbing the production of durable western-styled percale uniforms that marked them as members of a global industrial proletariat (Lear, 2001, pp. 49-86). Above it but below the elite market were the middling classes. Comprising over 20 percent of Mexico City's population of nearly half a million and who readily associated with the material culture of North Atlantic centers of modernity, this fast-growing and status-conscious segment of society avidly purchased affordable domestic reproductions of European and North American bourgeois products and styles (Iturriaga, 1951, pp. 34-89).

Although not unique to Mexico, an acute if not unique need to produce cheaper versions of luxury goods to achieve successful mass (or at least broader) consumption characterized the Mexican market. Indeed, manufacturing cheaper versions of luxury

goods characterized the construction and dissemination of bourgeois taste in France (Walton, 1996; Fairchilds, 1993). Yet, the nature of peripheral consumerism is that products manufactured in higher-wage countries such as France may enjoy great appeal but find a limited market in nations with a low-wage structure. Furthermore, the already-diminished purchasing power of Mexican consumers and their ability to buy imports suffered further shocks from the devaluation of silver (especially after 1905), and the application of often-steep tariffs on manufactured goods (Beatty, 2001). In short, to reach the broadest middling market, retailers in Mexico had to reproduce with low-wage local labor the copies of French copies of French luxury goods.

Palacio de Hierro account books and a careful reading of department store advertising confirm that the Barcelonnette business model tightly integrated production and retail operations in order to tap the broadest market possible and survive a challenging yet potentially lucrative environment. These sources exhibit inventories of imported and domestic goods designed to attract a much broader clientele than typically imagined (Bunker, 2011, Chapter 3). Store catalogs reveal an abundance of goods sold at a variety of price points. Their contents corroborate frequent store advertisements for the sale of “Luxury and common goods,” and “Fine, half-luxury, and common goods” (*Catálogo de los Grandes Almacenes de “El Palacio de Hierro” para el año, 1906*; Proal and Charpenel, 1986, p. 39). A Palacio de Hierro advertisement encapsulates best the Barcelonnette retail business model’s inclusive marketing strategy (Domenech, 1899, p. 261):

So it is in this store that one can find articles ranging from the most modest and indispensable to our working class to the most exquisite and the most tasteful goods that can appeal to the middle and aristocratic classes of this refined capital.

Modernisation and modernity: Parisian models, local accommodations

Mexico City department stores shared many of the universal modernizing characteristics that scholars agree define this retailing form. These included increased levels of capitalization, diversified merchandise, changed sales practices, expanded advertising and distribution to a regional and even national market, and incorporation of new technologies. For example, when the Palacio de Hierro incorporated in 1891 it quadrupled its capital to 4,000,000 pesos (Pérez Siller, 2004, p. 95). This allowed it to construct its new building as well as diversify and enlarge its inventory to fill the new space now specialized into departments which by the early 1900s numbered 74. Its innovative sales practices promoted a new kind of store atmosphere and shopping experience. Free entry with no obligation to buy, fixed pricing to end bargaining, and hassle-free product returns rationalized the transaction process and made shopping as agreeable as possible. Facilitated by a government-funded urban modernization initiative that paved roads and installed an electricity and telephone system, stores offered shopping by phone, and home delivery service as a further incentive to buy. Reaching consumers outside the capital, stores installed mail order departments to handle catalog sales made possible by a modernized postal service and a railroad network that expanded from barely over 400 miles in 1876 to over 15,000 by the Revolution. An army of department store traveling salesmen rode these rails in perpetuation of a Barcelonnette tried-and-true commercial strategy. Advertising also reached a national scope in some cases. In 1892, one year after it opened, the Palacio de Hierro had signed newspaper advertising contracts in six provincial cities

including Monterrey and Chihuahua in the far north (Bunker, 2011, Chapter 2). Department stores advertised heavily in mass-circulation newspapers such as *El Imparcial* (a 1907 circulation of 100,000) as well as a wide variety of other mediums such as ad boards in bullrings.

Stores prided themselves on adopting the most modern building, equipment, and sales technologies, showcasing the technological prowess and material achievements of modern society and industry. Customers encountered dazzling technologies such as pneumatic tube systems, elevators, electric lights, and indoor plumbing. The adoption of glass displays that had begun in the *almacenes de novedades* now reached its zenith. Imported exterior plate glass windows measuring 10 × 12 feet – over triple the size of those two decades earlier – allowed for much greater natural light inside the store and spurred the new urban Porfirian leisure craze of window shopping. Inside, glass display cases (and mannequins!) now appeared, although Mexican department stores took much longer to replace the traditional wooden *tarima* and wooden counters over which clerks and customers still conducted the majority of sales.

Palacio de Hierro account books show that shoppers embraced this new retail experience. Net profits of \$520,000 pesos in 1896 climbed to \$751,000 in 1901 and \$1,200,000 in 1907 – the first year of a brutal depression and the last year of information available in surviving company records (Bunker, 2011, Chapter 3). These numbers question the blanket statements on the unprofitability and overcapacity of Porfirian businesses and the scarce purchasing power of consumers. The willingness of Barcelonnette entrepreneurs to invest in the construction of enormous stores adds to their weight. Nevertheless, further research into hard-to-access Mexican company records will be needed to answer definitively the question of whether or not the Palacio was exceptional (Haber, 1989, 1997).

Although sharing universal characteristics that scholars agree define the department store, the Barcelonnettes imported to Mexico a distinctly Parisian version of this commercial phenomenon. This should come as no surprise. Familiarity with the capital and its commercial culture stretches back to the eighteenth century when valley *colporteurs* visited Paris as part of their trade routes and undoubtedly gathered valuable information from their exposure (Arnaud *et al.*, 1994, p. 17). From the 1870s onward, the most successful Barcelonnette entrepreneurs such as the Tron, Reynaud, and Ollivier families began to establish residences and wholesale operations for the Mexican trade out of the French capital (Homps-Brousse, 2002, p. 8; D'Anglade, 2006, pp. 71-123). Barcelonnette businessman looked only to Paris and their purpose-built department stores when envisioning the expansion of their *almacenes de novedades*. In 1888, three years before beginning construction on the Palacio de Hierro, company partner Henri Tron met with engineer Gustave Eiffel (of Eiffel Tower and Bon Marché fame) in Paris in 1888 to discuss his revolutionary engineering designs. Eiffel's use of steel framing and its dramatic improvement in load-bearing capacity allowed architects to dispense with the need for interior load-bearing walls. This allowed spacious and airy interiors, large exterior windows, and permitted stores to build to new heights. Tron hired French architect Georges Debie to design his five-storey building. Blending French and Mexican materials, he imported the steel from the Paris foundry at Moisan and the granite façade stones from the Chiluca quarry (Homps-Brousse, 2002, p. 11; Bunker, 2011, Chapter 3). Subsequent stores in Mexico City followed this

pattern, hiring Parisian architects to work with top Mexican engineers such as Miguel Angel de Quevedo to execute the construction (Pérez Siller, 2004, p. 96).

What marks these buildings as part of a distinctively Parisian department store model is not just their design but even more fundamentally that they are purpose-built establishments. We often consider the building the defining essence of the department store. With their imposing size and elaborate internal design, purpose-built establishments “became the icon, an embodiment of newness and modernity, which has come to define our sense of what constituted a real department store” (Crossick and Jaumain, 1999, p. 22). Yet in much of Europe, the grand edifice came long after adopting the other commonly accepted characteristics of a department store. Much more common was growth by accretion. Through piecemeal acquisition of shops within a particular vicinity – and not always adjacent – a department store was born, waiting for a fire or the possibility and permission for demolition to construct the edifice we know so well (Crossick and Jaumain, 1999, pp. 22-3). Barker’s in London exemplifies this, beginning in 1870 as a general draper in a single store but ballooning to an enterprise with 28 shops, 42 departments and 1,000 employees by 1893 (Peel and Bolitho, 1960, pp. 35-43). The first purpose-built department store appeared in Germany in the 1890s and not until 1909 in England, 40 years after Aristide Boucicault opened his new building in Paris (Benson and Shaw, 1992, p. 141; Breckman, 1991). Research in Mexico suggests that department store owners transferred their *almacenes de novedades* to new buildings with little or no intermediary property accretion. Rethinking our defining characteristics of a department store ties together France’s and Mexico’s retail evolution even more tightly.

This Franco-Mexican transatlantic parallel may have owed as much to similar cultural and political developments, particularly urban transformation projects, as with the common nationality of the owners. In Europe, Paris exceptionalism may have originated in the role purpose-built department stores played in the grand planned urban development of the French capital initiated by Haussman in 1852. Across the Atlantic, Mexican rulers and urban planners from the 1850s to the Revolution specifically looked to these Parisian developments for guidance in transforming their own capital city from an ecclesiastical capital into a secular and commercial one (Tenenbaum, 1994). Monumental purpose-built department stores, then, fit perfectly within a larger Mexican urban and national development project.

The Mexican milieu did not, however, accommodate an unalloyed Parisian retail model on Mexican soil. Barcelonnette adaptations were sometimes voluntary strategic decisions on how to negotiate cultural, political, and market differences (such as the integration of production and distribution in their business model) while at other times forced. Cash-only sales, an important policy in the stores of Western Europe (including France) and the USA, never caught on in Mexico (Miller, 1981, p. 54). The extension of credit was the norm. It is true that as *colporteurs* the Barcelonnettes had extended credit to customers in the sense that they provided the goods outbound on their route and collected on their return. Far more determinative, however, were Mexican cultural and economic factors. From the colonial period onward, Mexican households of nearly all social strata had relied on credit to run their households. Pawning was the most common credit mechanism, and a two-tiered system of public and private pawnbrokers provided not only emergency subsistence for the poor but also facilitated consumption by the middling and even upper classes (Francois, 2007). As the Barcelonnettes found

from their arrival in the new nation, Mexicans expected lenient repayment terms in this “culture of everyday credit” and they received it. Deeply discounted sales events were the only time the department stores adopted a cash-only policy, a policy clearly stated in store advertisements (Bunker, 2011, Chapter 3).

The fixed price was another “modern” sales policy that received a rocky reception in Mexico. Attempts to introduce fixed prices appeared decades before the department stores and had failed miserably (Maillefert, 1992). The Palacio’s owners renewed the effort in 1891 and were soon followed by other Barcelonnette merchants. Fixed prices meant the abolition of bargaining, a practice loathed by Mexico’s business press and modernizing merchants seeking to speed up and rationalize the transaction process, not to mention make shopping a more leisurely pursuit. The newspaper *La Semana en el Hogar* and the business weekly *La Semana Mercantil* pointed out that the time and labor wasted on earning a few centavos more on a sale could have been used to conclude several more sales that would have earned higher profits in the end. Although the department stores stuck with the innovation, screeds in *La Semana Mercantil* and other journals as late as 1909 against the extremely limited adoption of fixed pricing indicate that the imported practice did not catch on outside of the institution (Bunker, 2011, Chapter 4).

Mexican stores also diverged from their foreign counterparts in their store hours, display of goods, and their staffing. Mexican stores opened at seven or eight o’clock in the morning, closed between one and three o’clock for lunch, then reopened until eight at night. In 1896, for the sake of progress, the *Semana Mercantil* urged stores to adopt American hours of business from ten to five o’clock for the betterment of employees and consumers. Miller and others do not mention a midday closing in Paris stores although they did have similar hours (Miller, 1981, p. 147; Bunker, 2011, Chapter 3). Mexican stores broke sharply with their French and American counterparts over the display of goods. For the most part, *La Semana en el Hogar* goods remained displayed in glass cases or behind counters and not on open shelves, tables, and racks for customers to touch and feel unaided by staff (Abelson, 1989). In this respect, they followed the British model (Lancaster, 1995, p. 28). Sales were an exception to this rule and tables were set out for crowds to battle over merchandise (Bunker, 2011, Chapter 3).

When it came to employee relations, the Barcelonnettes and their Paris counterparts shared the same paternalist approach. This included the same rules and regulations monitoring everything from morality to productivity. Their building designs reflected their practices, constructing employee dining areas and living quarters on the top floor (Gouy, 1980, pp. 60-3).

French and Mexican stores differed, however, in the gender, ethnicity, and nationality of their staff. Unlike the Paris stores which relied far more heavily on female shop assistants – depending on the study, at least 30 percent if not much higher – Mexican relied on a male sales staff (McBride, 1978; Lesselier, 1978). Women made up less than 10 percent of the staff, although positions such as the *modistes* who oversaw women’s fashions, hats, and lingerie were always female and always filled by an import from Paris (Bunker, 2011, Chapter 3). As Carson (1909, p. 56) wrote in 1909, “the custom of employing female clerks is only beginning to be adopted in Mexico’s capital”. Males always dominated the staff of the *cajones de ropa*, and the arrival and subsequent domination of the Barcelonnettes merely reinforced this bias. Barcelonnette migration, characterized by the trade conquistador or network-entrepreneur, rarely

included women. With the establishment of the department stores, however, the owners' need for labor outpaced the supply of available Barcelonnettes. The Palacio de Hierro alone employed over 1,000 workers in its main building (Lear, 2001, p. 74). Owners hired a few other foreigners but mostly relied upon Mexican labor to fill the need, offering positions in local delivery, shipping and receiving, clerical, and mail order departments among others. French clerks carried a higher degree of prestige with a Mexican clientele and remained the public face of the store as much as possible, but lists of employees include surnames such as Anda, Manuel, and del Mazo (Bunker, 2011, Chapter 3). One unintended consequence of the larger stores was the greater inflexibility of Barcelonnette social mobility within the ranks which, when combined with new ideological influences and ethnic diversity among the labor force, resulted in a growing working class identity that began to trump the binding Barcelonnette identity that had served the community (or at least the owners) so well. Employer refusal in 1909 to grant All Saints' Day and the Day of the Dead as employee holidays led to French, Spanish, and Mexican store employees marching in the streets of Mexico City singing the *Internationale* in French (González Navarro, 1957, p. 288).

Finally, department store owners sought to embed their stores and the patterns of consumption they promoted into the fabric of private and public everyday life. On an intimate family level, consider the introduction of the 400-pages long Palacio's Agenda for 1900. It noted that "this volume can constitute for families an album of memories, for the housewife a compendium of notes and appointments, and for the forgetful a powerful mnemonic aid." It continued, pointing out the lined page at the end of each month to note "the birth of a child, the day of his baptism, the date of his first communion, and his first triumphs at school [...]" It mobilized a discourse centered on the home, Porfirian sentimentality, and on practicality – all cultural notions readily understood and embraced by its target audience (*Grandes Almacenes de "El Palacio de Hierro" Obsequio a nuestros favorecedores. Agenda para el año, 1900*, p. 1; Bunker, 2011, Chapter 4).

In the public sphere, stores inserted themselves into the capital's social, religious, and political ritual calendar which, coincidentally, also happened to be moments in time of increased consumption expenditures. Stores advertised heavily during holidays such as Christmas, Day of the Dead, New Year's, and Holy Week. By the twentieth century, the Palacio was already depicting Santa Claus as the icon of Christmas for children. In one memorable ad, Saint Nick is riding a burro carrying a *cañasta* basket full of toys while flanked and followed by throngs of neatly dressed children. Stores also announced promotions and fashions for the social calendar of the capital. Events included horse races at Peralvillo, balls at the Casino Español, and a number of functions coinciding with expatriate holidays such as the American July 4, and the French Bastille Day, among others. Religious observances were also social events and stores advertised heavily for All Saints' Day and Day of the Dead in addition to their permanent department selling religious articles and *modistes* tailoring the latest tastes for high-society Sunday Mass at the Cathedral. Department stores and other Barcelonnette businesses were also among the biggest public supporters of President Díaz. For civic celebrations, such as Independence Day (September 16) or specific holidays of adulation for Díaz (such as the quadrennial *fiesta Presidenciales* commemorating his inevitable reelection), department stores spent lavish sums decorating and illuminating the exteriors of their buildings along the parade routes and joined other businesses in their

empire in the elaborate float parades which always accompanied civic events (Bunker, 2011, Chapter 4).

Department stores were far more than economic institutions. Their organization, events, policies, and displays were cultural primers for Porfirian society. They offer a window on how business and non-state institutions disseminated the idea of modernity and development to a broad swath of Mexican society. More than just mere reflections of Mexican bourgeois values, department stores were centers of bourgeois cultural production. They made the bourgeois worldview material.

Which leaves us with the question of how durable was that worldview and the French entrepreneurial class that helped make it. What happened to the Barcelonnette empire after the start of the decade-long Mexican Revolution in 1910 and the exile of Díaz the following year? The combined hit of the revolution and World War I proved disastrous. Most of the stores survived the conflict but the colony sent 1,238 young men back to France to fight, many of whom died or did not return to Mexico (Gouy, 1980, pp. 94-6; Pérez Siller, 2005). After the conflicts, the waves of immigration did not resume and the community lost its cohesiveness. Some individuals continued as successful businessmen but the Barcelonnettes were network-entrepreneurs no longer. The textile business increasingly relied on Mexicans and Spaniards for entrepreneurial and administrative talent. One of these individuals, the Spaniard Jerónimo Arango, would eventually buy CIDOSA with two partners in the late 1950s and then resell it to Mexican interests in the 1970s (Herrero, 1999). Family feuds also forced the sale of Barcelonnette businesses after the 1950s. The brewery *Cervecería Moctezuma* (now part of Grupo Modelo) and the Palacio de Hierro were among the casualties (Gouy, 1980, pp. 106-7). What does remain are thousands of Barcelonnette descendants including Mexico City's mayor Marcelo Ebrard, scion of the family which founded the only remaining Barcelonnette family-run department store business, the *Puerto de Liverpool*. So, too, remain the magnificent structures of 11 downtown Porfirian department stores and the distinctly French flavor of Mexican urban fashion, both reminders of the foundational influences of modern Mexico's consumer culture.

Conclusion

Mexico City was one of the largest urban consumer markets in Latin America by the early twentieth century, and one of the most advanced and innovative in terms of retailing practices. It provided a home for the first purpose-built department store in the region in 1891 and served as a base for the rapid diffusion of the institution throughout the Republic over the next 20 years on a scale unparalleled in Latin America. Department stores served as cultural primers for Mexican consumers, introducing them not only the latest fashions and material culture of Western European and North American societies, but also teaching them through displays, advertisements, and other marketing strategies the proper social deployment of these goods and how to integrate them into their lives. This cultural primer for emulative and aspirational consumerism found its greatest audience among the middling and upper classes who embraced the Porfirian government's program of national economic and cultural modernization.

One cannot properly analyze this phenomenon or the evolution of nineteenth century retailing in Mexico without recognizing the contribution of the French immigrant colony, particularly its members from the Barcelonnette valley region who made up

80 percent of its population in 1910. The tightly knit Barcelonnette community applied in Mexico the experience it accumulated over centuries in textile production and sales in France. Most importantly, the lessons its members learned as victims of modernization in the French textile sector allowed it to take a leading role in implementing this same process in Mexico. As an immigrant community, they exhibited the characteristics of “trade conquistadors” or “network-entrepreneurs,” pooling resources and relying on the labor and trust of fellow members to eventually construct a network of over 214 commercial enterprises that covered the entire Republic. Although investing heavily in banking and other consumer goods industries, the Barcelonnettes dominated the textile and retailing sectors with their vertically integrated business model. They modernized Mexican retailing systems with their construction of grand, monumental stores whose architecture, organization, and procedures were patterned on Parisian models. Modern, mechanized factories supplied their stores with a wide variety of goods, particularly a wide range of reproductions of foreign products and styles whose manufacture by low-wage labor made them affordable to Mexican consumers. This finding contradicts the common misconception of department stores as exclusive purveyors of imported goods and suggests a much broader clientele for these stores than previously believed.

Furthermore, this paper’s emphasis on European retailing and marketing models serves to temper and add nuance to recent studies that attribute the origins and definition of modern Mexican consumer culture to North American companies and entrepreneurs (Moreno, 2003; Schell, 2001). The general paucity of historical research on consumerism, retailing, and marketing in Mexico and Latin America has only recently begun to enjoy a corrective (Bauer, 2001; Moreno, 2003; Buchenau, 2004; Francois, 2007) but still has far to go.

Despite the apparent success of their importation of a Parisian retail model, French entrepreneurs did have to adapt to the Mexican market and its local customs. Their decision to vertically integrate textile production and retail did not come from France but rather from a pragmatic calculation of surviving in a challenging yet potentially lucrative Mexican market. A standard policy for most US and French department stores like cash-only sales gave way to the Mexican consumers’ expectation of – and need for – generous credit terms. Staffing, display techniques, store hours and other store components assumed distinctly Mexican characteristics. Department store marketers sought to embed their stores and the patterns of consumption they promoted into the fabric of everyday private and public life and its rituals. Importantly, both department store profits and a non-stop store construction boom in the capital suggest this hybridized retail system worked, at least until the Mexican Revolution and the World War I presented new challenges to the Mexican market and the Barcelonnette community. The straddling of the local and foreign by these stores represented both the “allure of the foreign” and a distinct sense of *mexicanidad* forming in national retailing and consumer culture. Capturing Mexico’s conflicted engagement with modernity during this crucial era, the department stores’ confluence and negotiation of the foreign and the national still characterizes the field of marketing in Mexico today.

Notes

1. On Mexican stores, Buchenau’s, 2004 study of the German hardware department store Casa Boker remains an English-language exception in a historiographical field dominated by

- French scholars who focus more with the immigrant experience and less with the retailing, marketing, and larger cultural significance of the stores (Gouy, 1980; Proal and Charpenel, 1986; Arnaud *et al.*, 1994). My forthcoming book will provide a more in-depth treatment of this subject (Bunker, 2011).
2. The population of Mexico City was 330,000 in 1892 compared to 1.5 million in France. Rapid urban growth throughout the Republic raised the capital's population to nearly half a million in 1910 (González Navarro, 1956, p. 7; Miller, 1981, p. 35). By "purpose built," I mean that the building was constructed expressly to accommodate the latest display technologies, organizational principles, and retailing innovations of this commercial phenomenon. The 11 stores were: El Palacio de Hierro; El Puerto de Liverpool; Las Fábricas Universales; Al Puerto de Veracruz; El Centro Mercantil; La Ciudad de Londres; La Francia Maritima; La Reforma de Comercio; Al Progreso; El Importador; and La Sorpresa y Primavera Unidas.
 3. A growing literature on the Barcelonnette role in the textile industry explicitly identifies the department stores as a major outlet for its production but does not provide department store records (Gómez-Galvarriato, 1999; García Díaz, 2004) Nevertheless, the perception of department stores as primarily outlets for imported goods remains. Perhaps, the publication of scholarly studies on these stores will correct this distortion.

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