

## Butchers Anywhere: Food, Hunger, and the Sudden Liberalization of Markets in Insurgent Mexico

Carniceros en cualquier parte: comida, hambre y la intempestiva liberalización de los mercados en el México insurgente

Carniceiros em qualquer parte: comida, fome e a intempestiva liberalização dos mercados no México insurgente

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### RECEPCIÓN

3 de marzo de 2014

### APROBACIÓN

31 de marzo de 2014

### DOI

10.3232/RHI.2014.  
V7.N1.04

Managing the urban food supply was a crucial function of colonial governance and late-colonial officials in Mexico City relied on two key dynamics to ensure both subsistence and orderliness: private monopolies and state regulation. Authorities did not directly control the production and sale of food, as they did other key sectors of the economy, nor did they abandon them to the “free” market, as some liberal reformers advocated. Rather they entrusted food to private monopolies that, in theory at least, were subject to close supervision by official inspectors. This model undergirded authorities’ sense of *buena policía*, a concept that combined a paternalist concern for the wellbeing of the populace and the containment of disorderly behavior.

The ten-year insurgency transformed the structures of urban provisioning by forcing authorities to substitute “liberty of commerce” for strict monopolist control. The collapse of the absolutist model evened out the playing field of the market and allowed for a wave of small food suppliers to enter the market. With their squealing pigs in tow, small producers rescued the city from famine but upended the urban ideal of orderliness, control, and paternal oversight of the public wellbeing. That disorderliness resulted will not surprise scholars of early-nineteenth-century Mexico, who emphasize the instability and disasters that occurred during and after the war of independence. This article instead highlights how, in the absence of oligarchic monopolies and restrictive regulations that favored them, the urban market became more egalitarian after the late-colonial liberalization of commerce.

Key words: **Mexico City; Food Supply; Market Regulations; Late Colonial Mexico**

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El manejo del suministro de comida fue una función crucial del gobierno colonial y los oficiales del período tardo-colonial en Ciudad de México. Este descansó en dos dinámicas esenciales para asegurar tanto la existencia como el orden en torno a los alimentos: monopolios privados y regulación estatal. Las autoridades no controlaron directamente la producción ni la venta de comida como se hizo con otros sectores de la economía. Tampoco lo abandonaron todo al “libre mercado”, como

querían algunos reformistas. En cambio, confiaron el tema de los alimentos a monopolios privados que, al menos en la teoría, eran supervisados muy de cerca por inspectores oficiales. Este modelo aseguraba el sentido de *buena policía* de las autoridades, un concepto que combinaba tanto la preocupación paternalista por el bienestar del pueblo como la contención de aquellos comportamientos propios del desorden.

Los diez años de insurgencia transformaron las estructuras del aprovisionamiento urbano forzando a las autoridades a sustituir la “libertad de comercio” por un estricto control de los monopolios. El colapso del modelo absolutista emparejó el campo del mercado y permitió a toda una red de pequeños proveedores de alimentos entrar al mercado. Con sus cerdos arrastrados chillando, los pequeños productores rescataron la ciudad del peligro de la hambruna, pero impidieron el establecimiento del ideal del orden, el control y la supervisión paternalista en pos del bienestar público. El desorden resultante no sorprenderá a los especialistas de los inicios del siglo XIX en México, quienes ponen énfasis en la inestabilidad y los desastres del período. Sin embargo, este artículo resalta cómo, ante la ausencia de monopolios oligárquicos y regulaciones restrictivas que los favorecieran, el mercado urbano llegó a ser mucho más equitativo luego de la liberalización comercial de fines del período colonial.

Palabras clave: **Comida; Abastecimiento; Regulación de mercado; Ciudad de México; Insurgencia.**

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Os dez anos de insurgência transformaram as estruturas do aprovisionamento urbano forçando as autoridades a substituir a “liberdade de comércio” por um controle estrito dos monopólios. O colapso do modelo absolutista empatou o campo do mercado e permitiu aos pequenos provedores de alimentos entrar ao mercado. Com seus porcos arrastados gemendo, os pequenos produtores resgataram a cidade do perigo da fome, mas impediram o estabelecimento do ideal da ordem, o controle e a supervisão paternalista em pró do bem-estar público. A desordem resultante não surpreenderá aos especialistas dos inícios do século XIX no México, quem põe ênfase na instabilidade e nos desastres do período. Porém, este artigo ressalta como, ante a ausência de monopólios oligárquicos e regulações restritivas que os favorecesse, o mercado urbano chegou a ser muito mais equitativo depois da liberalização comercial do fim do período colonial.

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## Introduction

*“La democracia está, ¿sabe dónde?, ¡en la venta de zapatos! [...] En la venta de zapatos del sábado, el pueblo llamado tal, el pueblo llano, el tercer estado, el pueblo pillo, trabajador e industrioso, en fin, por si no he dicho nada todavía, aquello que nuestras buenas y decentes gentes llaman canalla, plebe, vulgo, muchedumbre, populacho, chusma, multitud, qué sé yo qué otros tratamientos honrosos, se reúne al frente de aquel portal, que es su conquista, a vender su artefactos, a comprar lo que necesita, a ejercer su industria, su capacidad y su malicia.”*

*D. F. Sarmiento, “La venta de zapatos”*

Mexico City residents felt the 1810 outbreak of insurrection in their stomachs. Rebel gangs fighting to overturn absolutism starved the capital by severing it from the hinterland. They burnt crops, seized cattle, and threatened to kill suppliers who brought food to the city. These tactics disrupted the traditional conduits of urban provisioning, which, in keeping with the logic of Spanish colonial absolutism, were under the strict control of official or unofficial monopolies known. Hence, the siege imperiled not only urban consumption, but also the underlying structures that governed victual markets. The insurgents aimed to provoke generalized despair; yet they attacked, unwittingly perhaps, a pillar of local colonial rule and oligarchic domination. Facing a subsistence crisis that would have added urban rioting to the rural uprising, the viceroy enacted severe measures. He decreed an end to the complex regulations that limited the preparation and sale of food. Subsequently, under the new regime of “absolute liberty of commerce”, anyone could sell, at any time, anywhere. An explosion of commercial activity by peasants, small-time ranchers, and improvising butchers ensued<sup>2</sup>. The insurrection took another decade to overthrow colonialism, but within months of the outbreak, it successfully, though unwittingly, democratized the food market.

Although the market reforms aimed to increase the amount of food that came into the city by lifting restrictions on suppliers, they also hit on anxieties that went beyond the stomachs of the potentially unruly residents. Since the beginning of Spain’s colonial rule in Mexico, authorities regarded the strict regulation of urban markets -and food markets in particular- as a crucial lever with which to create conditions that would ensure an orderly, governable population. They saw a clear connection between the behavior of food markets and the behavior of the public. If the food supply became volatile and unpredictable, social disorder would surely follow. This concern was not limited to scarcity and food riots, though these topped the list of occurrences to avoid, but rather went deeper, into the more ambiguous but prevalent fear of disorderliness that underlay the authoritarian spirit of absolutism. Releasing food markets from their centuries-old restrictions, then, necessarily entailed putting these apprehensions to the test. Could “free” markets coexist with an orderly city or would unregulated markets give free course to people’s innate tendency toward chaos?

This paper discusses the regulation of food markets in late-colonial Mexico City under royal absolutism and how the ten-year insurgency transformed the structures of urban provisioning. The war, which led to Mexico’s independence from Spain in 1821, early on forced authorities to jettison their strict control in favor of what contemporary terms “liberty of commerce”.

The wave of food suppliers that followed, with their squealing pigs in tow, rescued the city from famine but also challenged the urban ideal of orderliness, control, and paternal oversight of the public wellbeing. That authorities tolerated, and even encouraged, such freedoms underscores the vital connections between food and governance. Though ideological shifts in the Spanish empire bolstered reform, the colonial authorities' market reforms, more than a principled embrace of liberalism responded to the urgent imperative of procuring food for urban residents.

This tension between "liberty" and unruliness around consumer-goods market sheds light on the important economic reforms that were enacted between the 1810s, but it also frames a similar, related debate regarding access to political power. Recent scholarship on the wars of independence in Latin America and their aftermath has highlighted the demands of subaltern groups for the full exercise of their rights as citizens<sup>3</sup>. This scholarship has shed important light on political institutions and political culture but it has neglected struggles in the domestic economy. In the local economy, the economic was inextricably related to the political. Indeed, ordinary Mexicans in the nineteenth century conceived of independence from Spain and measured their new rights as citizens in terms of economic liberties. They *became* citizens through advantageous participation in the marketplace, certainly more than they did at the ballot box.

## Food and orderliness in Late Colonial Mexico City

Like all early-modern urban settings, in colonial Mexico City, food was central to authorities' sense of order. Ensuring that the urban population had access to food of reasonable quality and price was essential to maintaining a functioning city and social peace. Severe market fluctuations led to inflation and hunger, which potentially could provoke riots. Therefore, the crown enacted a long list of punctilious laws that aimed to govern virtually every aspect regarding the production and sale of many food items. These laws sought to foster a stable, reliable food supply that would feed the people, keep the city functioning, and conspicuously assert the crown's paternal responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of the Spanish subjects.

The objective of these laws involved more than material concerns related to subsistence. Although scarcity and the fear of food riots were primary among the concerns of colonial authorities, the connection between food and order went beyond dearth. Indeed, subjects could be almost as unruly when they were eating as when they were hungry. Note, for example, the reaction of the viceroy, Manuel Antonio Flores, when in 1789 he saw "many individuals of both sexes" selling and eating food in the street during the Holy Week religious processions. Such behavior turned what were supposed to be the most solemn religious events in the Catholic calendar into "occasions of entertainment, unbridled shame [*destemplanza y desenvoltura*] that offend the Divine Majesty and subvert public piety"<sup>4</sup>.

Other food-related practices caused disturbances not so much because they encouraged improper consumption but rather because of the comportment of the very food they sold. Pigs were particularly disorderly. They ran freely through the streets, foraging in garbage heaps, plazas, even convents and inns. They spread garbage throughout the already filthy city and fed

on the sewage that residents tossed into the street. Pork butchers who sold meat from these beasts threatened to poison unwitting consumers with toxic chorizo<sup>5</sup>.

Another related goal was to prevent producers and merchants from establishing what the colonial government viewed as improper combinations of objects and activities<sup>6</sup>. Each producer or merchant was to remain within his specific niche. Pork butcheries could not sell beef. Millers could not grind wheat of poor quality together with wheat of high quality; likewise, bakers could not mix different flours in their bread. Bakers of sweet breads could not make salted bread, under penalty of permanent banishment from the profession. Other laws decreed that “bakers cannot be storekeepers and storekeepers cannot be candle makers” and bakery owners could not own mills<sup>7</sup>. The underlying logic was that businesses gained unfair advantages over other businesses when they mixed things of different natures and bridged distinct trades because these combinations gave them the control of too many economic levers with which they could speculate with consumers, to the detriment of consumers and the royal treasury.

Although these combinations were illegal, monopolies per se were not a problem for colonial officials. Indeed, authorities encouraged the formation of monopolies as long they remained within their specific niches. Most monopolies were organized into *gremios*, or guilds that grouped together artisans or merchants.

Government officials believed they were the only forces capable of imposing order, the only barrier against unrestrained chaos. These concerns were built into colonial governance early on after the conquest of Mexico and establishment of New Spain. However, they rose to the forefront of the authorities’ attention in the latter half of the 18th century, under the Bourbon dynasty, which worked to pull the Spanish empire from a century-long economic slump. Bourbon officials decided to ratchet up control, passing new laws and demanding more vigilant enforcement of old ones.

To address unruliness during Holy Week, for instance, the viceroy prohibited the sale and consumption of food anywhere near the religious processions. No longer could vendors set up stands to offer chia seeds, candies, cakes, watermelons, mangos and “any other such objects that could make people scandalously break the precept of fasting”. Transgressors faced two months in prison, if they were Spaniards; and two months prison and fifty lashes in the stocks, if they belonged to other castes<sup>8</sup>.

As for squealing, defecating pigs, no one was allowed to bring them into the city, much less butcher them in the street. All pigs had to be sold, alive, at the bridge that crossed the canal behind the Royal Palace at the edge of the city, killed in the official slaughterhouse. Pork was to be sold at fixed prices in the handful licensed butcheries (*tocinerías*) controlled by the pork butchers’ *gremio*.

Controls with the same underlying objective of imposing the orderly treatment of food extended also to steers, goats, sheep, and any other meat animals. Indeed, the handling of meat animals was of special concern for officials, who hoped to apply the latest findings of modern

husbandry in order to improve the quality and supply of food.

To enforce these complicated regulations, the crown created the Tribunal of the Faithful Executors (*Tribunal de la Fiel Ejecutoría*). The tribunal focused its attention, above all other products, on bread and meat. These were, not coincidentally, the foods most prized by Spaniards and which officials encouraged the populace to consume. In contrast to the tortilla and beans that constituted the base of the Indians' diet, officials believed that red meat and wheaten bread strengthened the body and tempered the spirit. Accordingly, regulations strove to keep the prices of bread and meat accessible to the lower classes of the city. Contrary to the view commonly held today, the urban poor during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries regularly ate bread, as well as beef and even mutton.

The regulations involved complicated, onerous bureaucracy. In the case of bread, every four months, bakers had to declare to the Faithful Executors how much wheat they bought, from whom, when, and at what price. Inspectors corroborated these declarations using those given by the wheat growers. Then, based on the price of wheat, plus bakers' other expenses such as milling fees, officials set the official weight of bread, known as the *postura*. The price of bread was permanently fixed at one *medio real* (one-sixteenth of a peso). What varied over time were the ounces. In good times, a bought eighteen ounces of fine white bread (*pan floreado*). In slim times, bread could weigh as little as fourteen ounces. The cheaper *pambazo* (literally "low bread"), made with coarse unsifted flour, usually weighed around forty ounces but could drop to sixteen<sup>9</sup>.

Officials known as faithful re-weighers (*fieles repesadores*) regularly checked the weight and quality of bread and meat. Punishment for noncompliance could be severe. Unbranded bread could cost a panadería owner ten pesos for the first offense, four years' suspension from the trade and two years' banishment for the second, and "definite suspension, public shame, and perpetual banishment" for the third. Selling underweight bread or meat could land a merchant in jail for two years<sup>10</sup>. Bread and meat could only be sold at determined outlets located in shops or plazas in different parts of the city. This spatial arrangement facilitated inspection and ensured a steady supply to each neighborhood<sup>11</sup>. In theory, since all retailers sold at the same price and complied with the same norms, there was no need for shops to compete with each other. Equilibrium and stability, not competition, was the goal for both the economy and the social order.

## Monopolies

As a result of these policies, *gremios* monopolized the production and trade of most common consumer goods. Monopolies worked closely with the colonial officials, who believed that limiting the market to specific groups of identifiable, wealthy businessmen whom inspectors could hold accountable complemented the government's efforts to ensure a steady supply of food. Meat markets were divided between beef, pork, and goat (fowls, especially chickens, were not subject to regulations).

Beef suppliers gained exclusive concessions to supply Mexico City's through competitive bidding. In theory, the bidding was competitive; in practice it was "effectively limited to...those

individuals who had sufficient capital and connections” to local authorities<sup>12</sup>. The winning bidder -known as an “*obligado*”- earned access to publicly owned fields for pasture and had the authority to hire and fire inspectors. The Junta de Abasto, the government body in charge of regulating the meat trade and setting prices, consisted of an ostensibly disinterested group of local notables but in fact was often dominated by ranchers<sup>13</sup>.

While the beef “*obligados*” only served a determined term (usually two years), a more permanent “*gremio*” (guild) controlled the pork market. These “*puerqueros*” were the beneficiaries of the authorities’ concerns around the disorderliness of pigs and they defended their monopoly both in terms of the importance of pork in the population’s diet and the potential dangers of loose pigs<sup>14</sup>. The pork *gremio* members claimed to be modest producers who relied on family labor; however, inspectors’ persecution of lower-class pig raisers, and the frequent criticisms of labor conditions in *tocinerías* (pork butchereries) seem to belie this claim.

Bakery owners, in contrast, were clearly patriarchs of some of the wealthiest families, holders of honorific military and aristocratic titles. They often served on the city’s governing council and were quite close to the very authorities in charge of overseeing them<sup>15</sup>. Membership in the bakers’ *gremio* was restricted to a dozen or so major members who collectively owned the city’s fifty-odd shops as well as the nearby mills. The *gremio* constituted itself as a legal entity around 1742. That year, the Count of Fuenclara became viceroy of New Spain armed with plans to make local government efficient, centralized, and solvent. The dominant *panadería* owners persuaded Fuenclara that an official *gremio* strengthened his broader plan to make commerce more efficient and profitable<sup>16</sup>. The viceroy ratified the *gremio*’s bylaws, which allowed members to elect their first legal representative in 1742<sup>17</sup>.

Although they closely collaborated, the *gremio* and the colonial government had a deeply contradictory relationship. The *gremio* fulfilled the government’s imperative to ensure a steady supply of accessible bread, but the group regularly engaged in illegal combinations. The most powerful members of the *gremio* owned both mills and *panaderías*, which violated the proscription on improper combinations and allowed them to speculate with grain. They bought wheat at low prices while it was still in the ground, thus providing planters with much-needed cash but preventing them from fetching higher prices after harvest. They then grounded the flour for use in their own shops and sold it at inflated prices to others when supplies became scarce.

Local officials in Mexico City tended to support the *gremio* and turned a blind eye to their fraudulent activities. Even through its members violated certain laws, the *gremio* facilitated the overall regulatory structure by providing cohesion to what otherwise would have been a fragmented market of individual actors difficult to govern. In a deeper sense, though, the ideal model of a static, balanced marketplace favored the formation of cartels over modest producers. If the overall objective was not to foster competition but rather dependability, local officials believed that a cartel was best equipped to deliver bread and orderliness.

High authorities, including the Crown and the viceroy, regarded the *gremio* as a threat, a position that sprang from both political and fiscal concerns. When mill and bakery owners speculated with grain, they generated profits that eluded the tax collector. Furthermore, they constituted a force

of political influence that challenged the authority of the crown. When Spanish King Charles IV read of such abuses, he personally ordered his viceroy to revoke the *gremio's* official status<sup>18</sup>.

In practice, the order did little to restrict the *gremio's* ability to profitably manipulate the bread market. The group continued much as it had before. In 1789 the crown appointed as viceroy the Second Count of Revillagigedo, a fervent reformer eager to impose order in the city and undermine the power of entrenched local elites. He took on the battle with the *gremio* with particular vigor. A week after arriving in Mexico City, he reiterated the old laws and enacted new ones that ordered the separation of dealings between wheat haciendas, mills, and bakeries in order to "justly prevent monopolies and usury." Bakery owners were to buy wheat only from planters. Millers were only allowed to grind that wheat, for a fee they charged to the bakers. Millers could grind and sell wheat they cultivated on their own estates, but they could not own or lease bakeries. Bakery owners, likewise, were barred from running their own mills. Revillagigedo promised to banish transgressor ten leagues from the city, and confiscate all the wheat and *panaderías* implicated in illegal transactions<sup>19</sup>.

As revealed by the increasingly exasperated tone of Revillagigedo's subsequent decrees, the *gremio* members continued to run mills and *panaderías* simultaneously, speculate with grain, and cheat consumers. "Despite the official prices, which should allow for but moderate profits", the viceroy wrote angrily, "bakery owners live with ostentation and more than a few have made huge fortunes". Certain that such wealth came from speculation and fraud, he pledged to "make an example of their greed"<sup>20</sup>.

By the end of his term in 1794, though, the viceroy came to question the entire premise of the regulations as well as the ideal of a market based on order instead of competition. He concluded that both of these pillars of the colonial economy tended to strengthen, not weaken, the *gremio*. Regulations alone did not cause the formation of the *gremio* -the transactions between wheat fields, mills, and *panaderías* were at the heart of the group's dominance- but they did stifle competition from smaller producers. Indeed, until now, colonial rulers had not wanted to foment competition but rather a predictable, controllable supply of bread. But Revillagigedo now wanted to overturn this ideal altogether.

He wrote his successor that "as long as bread production is ... linked to certain restrictions that can only be overcome with considerable wealth, this and other types of monopolies will continue". The solution he suggested was to encourage free trade by removing "so many government policies and provisions" and make the bread trade "absolutely free, so that any individual of medium wealth could take it up"<sup>21</sup>. A deregulated free market, the viceroy believed, would open the bread trade to the salutary airs of competition and allow smaller producers -"individuals of medium wealth"- to take the place of elite groups like the *gremio*.

Revillagigedo's suggestion went beyond a mere shift in the model that governed commerce. He envisioned a transformation of the relationships between consumers, producers, and the state. For years, he had stubbornly worked within the paternalist system in which the state assumed the responsibility of protecting the public's wellbeing through strict regulation of structures of production and commerce that were dominated by economic elites. For authorities,



the “public” meant consumers, not producers; the government’s responsibility was to ensure that the public had food, not access to the means of production.

But now the viceroy was embracing the liberal principle that an unregulated market would allow non-elite producers greater access to the market and provide the public with quality goods without government intervention. The proposal was hardly democratic in the political sense: the viceroy hoped that this proposal would consolidate Madrid’s authoritarianism by weakening local government and removing powerful merchant groups who stood between the crown and its vassals. But it did have the potential to make the market into a more even playing field on which small producers and vendors could play. In any case, Revillagigedo came to these conclusions only on his way out, as he looked back on his exasperating stint as viceroy

## Liberalism

Revillagigedo’s suggested free-market proposals reflected the influence of liberalism that was gradually gaining traction within the court in Madrid. Liberal economists and philosophers posited that an unregulated free market encouraged competition and, in turn, lowered prices and improved the quality of consumer goods. The solution to fraud, in this view, was not severe regulation and government control but exactly the contrary, the removal of laws that restricted the individual’s pursuit of economic self-interest<sup>22</sup>.

Desperate for revenues after wars with England had drained the treasury, the Spanish Crown made important reforms to liberalize international trade. Evidence that Spain’s monopolistic approach to international trade had failed was abundant. From the 1740s on, liberal advisers within the court suggested profound reforms. They argued that Spain’s trade policies (especially the expensive fleet system) had hindered the export of its own goods. As the liberal Spanish philosopher wrote in 1740, “Commerce is what maintains the body politics, just as the circulation of the blood maintains the human body, but in America commerce is broadly obstructed”. Campillo suggested eliminating mechanisms that made Spanish goods artificially expensive (tariffs, fleet system) to facilitate and cheapen trade between Spain and America<sup>23</sup>. In 1774, the crown increased the number of ports in which trade ships could arrive (from two to nine), allowed for limited trade with other European powers, and removed restrictions on commerce between American colonies. In 1778, he removed or reduced export and import duties. Finally, in 1789, he broke the transatlantic trade monopoly held by merchants and allowed many small traders to enter the commercial field<sup>24</sup>.

Easing regulations on production and commerce within domestic markets, however, lagged far behind. The crown had agreed to liberalize transatlantic trade in order to generate more revenue for itself. Spain would not have derived the same benefits from liberalized domestic markets of consumer goods in the colonies. Indeed, colonial officials and even Spanish liberal philosophers recommended continued state regulation of food prices out of fear of public unrest. In Mexico, authorities clung to a deep distrust of the free market. In their view, their vigilance and regulations

were the only forces capable of safeguarding order. Without government oversight, disorderliness, which always lay barely beneath the surface, would pounce. If bakers and butchers cheated the public even when inspectors were watching, what would they do without government regulations?.

Colonial officials clearly articulated this philosophy of a paternal state that oversaw a static, regulated market. “Although anyone may do as he lies with his own property”, wrote the Crown attorney in 1747, “in the things necessary for the sustenance of life, sellers should not be at liberty to set and raise prices freely”<sup>25</sup>. Likewise, in 1779, the attorney general (*procurador general*) of the *Fiel Ejecutoría* rejected a proposition to allow the “free market” to set prices. He wrote that if Mexico had not seen the “revolutions over a lack of bread that are so common in the most cultured countries of Europe, where bread production is entirely free”, he insisted that it was because price fixing had “ensured the public’s peace and tranquility”. Indeed, following the release of bread from strict government oversight in London, Paris, and other cities, bakeries raised prices and residents rose in revolt<sup>26</sup>. Modern ideas and inventions were fine, he said, for “physics, chemistry, shipping, and other sciences.” But to trust the “tranquility of the vassals” to anything beyond the “known rules of economics and prudence” was to court disaster<sup>27</sup>.

## Imperial crisis and free-market reforms

Despite the growing influence of liberalism within the Spanish empire, fears of disorderliness continued to prevail over calls for reforms in food markets, which remained subjected to onerous bureaucracy and the monopolist control of the *gremios*. The eruption of even greater calamities, however, forced authorities to rethink the connections between food, order, and markets.

In 1808 Napoleon invaded Spain and sent Ferdinand VII into exile. A government of regents, quickly assembled in the city of Cádiz, instituted wide-ranging changes that limited the power of the crown, made government posts into electoral position, and eased restrictions on commerce. In Mexico, the spirit of these reforms, coupled with a prolonged draught that same year, provoked intense debates about how to improve the provisioning markets.

Some officials urged for radical changes and excoriated the previous centuries of laws that limited free access to markets. “All laws and ordinances that hinder free trade will damage society, industry, commerce, and agriculture”, insisted one colonial official. “They encourage egoism and monopolies. It is only individual interest that which attracts abundance”. Arguing in favor of liberalizing the sale of meat, he suggested disbanding the meat *gremio* and opening the sale of beef to “anyone, wherever he may choose, without officially fixed prices (*postura*)”<sup>28</sup>. This view was gradually gaining supporters but it had not overcome the deep absolutist fears of disorder. The officials in charge of regulating the meat market argued that “the difficulties of supplying a population [with meat] increase in proportion to its size and its distance from the cattle ranches. It would therefore be risky to entrust the feelings of a large population to contingency from which grave dangers could result”. In particular, the officials pointed out that if anyone could sell meat at any time, meat from stolen cattle would appear in butchereries, supply would suffer dangerous seasonal fluctuations, and prices would become exorbitant<sup>29</sup>.

The rapidly changing circumstances that followed Napoleon's invasion of Iberia favored the reformists in Mexico. In 1810, Mexican provincial elites and peasants rose in rebellion against the local colonial government and launched what became the decade-long war of independence. The fighting severed Mexico City from its hinterland. Consumer goods became scarce, prices shot up, and authorities struggled to find ways to bring food to the capital. Now the greatest threat to order in the city was scarcity.

Viceroy Venegas, desperate to find food in order to prevent an outbreak of discontent in the capital, sent out dozens of letters to neighboring provinces, urging them to send wheat to the capital. None of the responses was positive. The intendant in nearby Toluca wrote back that "rebels have taken the surrounding roads ... they've threatened to kill anyone who tries to transport grain to the capital". Planters in Querétaro were too afraid of "insurgent bandits" to venture onto the roads. All the rest wrote that they had no wheat to send to the capital<sup>30</sup>.

Despairing of finding wheat, the viceroy turned to address the scarcity of meat. Lent, a period preceded by increased meat consumption, was approaching yet the cows provided by the approved suppliers of the meat *gremio* were few and skinny<sup>30</sup>. So, Venegas opened up the market to any suppliers and, furthermore, lifted the slaughter tax as well as the fee that cowboys paid upon entering the city with cattle. The move soon produced positive results. The viceroy's advisers reported that there was "more than enough mutton in the butcheries where more than three to four hundred lambs are slaughtered daily. The same can be said for goats and cows". Another report noted that "despite the damage that the fatal insurrection has inflicted on cattle in this beautiful kingdom, there is notable abundance of high quality meat"<sup>32</sup>.

This increase of meat, though, was temporary. Rebels continued to intercept food on route to the capital. In January of 1812, officials write the viceroy that "the scarcity of meat in the Capital has reached the extreme. If effective and extraordinary measures are not taken there will remain not an ounce of meat to offer to the public"<sup>33</sup>. They urged further reforms. "Your Excellency should remove all obstacles and limits on the meat trade and declare absolute liberty for all and any people, without consideration of status, who would bring lamb and castrated goats in the sites and places that best suit them". The viceroy quickly decreed "absolute liberty" in beef<sup>34</sup>.

Now anyone could bring cows to the city, slaughter them, and sell at any price. The success in beef convinced him to apply the same freedoms to the sale of mutton and goat meat. Instead of setting the *postura*, the viceroy declared that now the "arbitration between buyers and sellers" would determine prices.

Free trade quickly transformed from a controversial, risky, and "modern" notion into an urgent imperative whose superior ability to attract abundance and lower prices suddenly appeared self-evident. "Everyone now knows", wrote the attorney for fiscal affairs, citing the Spanish philosopher Jovellanos, "that it is in vain to expect abundance to emerge from any principle other than the free sale of goods"<sup>35</sup>.

As successful as these policies were, authorities resisted applying them to the animal that they most associated with poverty and disorder, pigs. Again, *the síndico de lo común* argued in favor of opening the market. He insisted that allowing anyone to bring pigs and sell pork would be a boon to poor people, both producers and consumers<sup>36</sup>. However, other members of the city council insisted on

the dangers to society represented by unregulated swine. Soon pigs would once again run all through the city, eat garbage, and transmit disease. "The poor will feed them on waste, filth, and other sources of nastiness which will probable lead to a veritable epidemic". If this liberty extended to poor people, the Faithful Executors would be unable to "contain such disorderliness". Moreover, if poor people were allowed to raise and sell pigs, the price of soap would increase, for the poor could not afford to buy molds with which to make soap<sup>37</sup>.

Not surprisingly, the leader of the pork guild also expressed his opposition to free trade. Pigs presented problems that were unique among meat animals and required more careful treatment. The "horrible squealing and nastiness" were reason enough to limit the market to the *gremio*, not to mention the fleas that proliferated on pigs and the risks of water pollution. Making soap from lard was likewise a potentially dangerous "art" that required careful training in order to prevent fires and "impregnated and putrid airs". If the viceroy were to declare "absolute liberty", practically everyone would raise pigs in stalls, stores, and "everywhere else". The result, he insisted, would be disastrous<sup>38</sup>.

Nonetheless, the continued scarcity of pork convinced the viceroy to open up the trade beyond the *gremio*. In February 1813, he announced that anyone could raise and slaughter pigs, and sell pork, as long as their animals did not run loose. Around the same time, the viceroy declared "absolute liberty" in bread, maize, vegetable, and other basic consumer goods such as candles and charcoal<sup>39</sup>.

These measures successfully confirmed the liberals' view that "the lowering of prices depends of abundance and it is in vain to expect such abundance from any principle other than the free commerce of goods: that only the hope of interest can encourage the producer to multiply his fruits and bring them to market"<sup>40</sup>. However, certain negative consequences of the market reforms also confirmed the fears of conservatives that unrestricted markets would lead to dangerous disorderliness.

Makeshift butcheries proliferated throughout the city and, as conservatives had warned, a host of dangers appeared: the overwhelmed faithful re-weighers found that butchers did not sell at the rates they advertised, meat from stolen cattle appeared on the city's chopping blocks, customers unwittingly ate "unusual" meat from mules and dogs, and fetid smells rose from bloody alleys where neighing, squealing, and mooing animals met their death.

Such disorders gave ammunition to conservative opponents to free trade. Like the liberals, they understood that, at bottom, markets were manifestations of human behavior. Both regarded market regulations as mechanisms that restrained human behavior. For liberals, removing them yielded more efficient and dynamic markets. Conservatives, in contrast, believed that removing regulations would unleash people's inherent tendency toward disorderliness. They were especially concerned about the chaos of the poor urban masses who could well undermine elite privileges by bursting into the previously closed markets. But they also feared the greed of established merchants, whose fraudulent actions could anger the poor and provoke further discontent. Eliminating regulations moreover removed one of the colonial state's most visible functions, that of ensuring the wellbeing of the population. Without them, how would be state manifest its paternal protection?.

This tension between the hopeful liberal discourse of abundance and the conservative fears of disorder grew as the changes played out in the real life of the city. As disorder increased, the viceroy adjusted the “absoluteness” of absolute liberty. After a run-away steer trampled an Indian water seller to death, the viceroy decreed, among other provisions, that cowboys could bring bulls to the city only at dawn and that butchers had bring live animals into the city before slaughtering (to ensure that the meat came from healthy and “usual” animals)<sup>41</sup>. The decrees asserted that the colonial government had not relinquished its authority over the market nor neglected its responsibility to protect consumers<sup>42</sup>. But could the government fulfill its role in the absence of regulations? Was deregulation inviting abundance or chaos?.

A meat merchant’s tempting proposal to return to the old “*obligado*” system of meat monopolies put the question to test. Manuel de Amaya pledged to the city government that he could ensure both order and abundance. “The multitude of chopping blocks that claim to be butcheries has shown itself to be both injurious and damaging to our admirable public”, Amaya wrote to the city council. Therefore he proposed a monopoly, controlled by him. He requested the government allow him to establish six downtown butcheries that, in addition to the official slaughterhouse, would supply the entire city. He would pay the salaries of “good men” named by the viceroy who would oversee sales and operations in order to confirm the fair treatment of consumers. He would also pay employees to patrol the city and close down any illegal butcheries. He offered to pay twenty thousand pesos a year, divided in monthly payments, regardless of the price or availability to meat<sup>43</sup>.

Liberals on the council, most notably the *síndico de lo común*, expressed angry opposition and insisted that the problems did not arise from the free market itself, but rather from the momentary dislocations caused by the insurgency. The long-term result would be a more efficient and democratic marketplace. He further criticized Amaya’s “good men” who would oversee his butcheries. In a free market, these men would be irrelevant. The proposal “is not in the interest of the Royal Treasury nor of that of the public”, and only merely intended to “disguise with the cape of zealotry the intention to monopolize”. “In the name of the good people of whom Your Excellency calls yourself father ... dismantle the malignant fraud that the monopoly is weaving against it”<sup>44</sup>.

But reestablishing a meat monopoly was certainly tempting. A city under siege, a quickly dwindling treasury, and an increasingly restive population could well have disposed the council to accede, even to welcome, the proposal. The viceroy’s attorney general, a strong supporter of Amaya, detailed the disorderliness and the fraud that rose with the proliferation of chopping blocks. Like the *síndico*, he also appealed to the viceroy’s sense of paternal responsibility. “Will Your Excellency allow vendors to profit from the ignorance of the miserable public that has no defense other than that which Your Excellency can offer? Will you listen with indifference their laments? Will you let them perish? No, sir. You may not authorize deceit and wait with serenity the fatal consequences”<sup>45</sup>.

The city council, however, soundly defeated Amaya’s proposal to monopolize the meat market and the messy array of small ranchers, butchers, and vendors continued to operate

in relatively level playing field<sup>46</sup>. The council's vote shows the degree to which liberalism had influenced the colonial government in a very short time. The overall certitude that a static, steady market for consumer goods -supported by the monopolist system of *gremios*- best suited both governors and governed had been integral to the colonial state's entire function in Mexico. Yet it quickly succumbed to the political and subsistence crises that shook colonial society.

Or perhaps the change was not as sudden as it seems. From the 1790s, high colonial authorities, especially the viceroy Revillagigedo, had struggled to dislodge entrenched local elites. Their stronghold on victual markets, however, frustrated his attempt to make the bread trade, for example, available to what he called "any individual of medium wealth". Two decades later, Mexicans of medium wealth (together with those of no wealth at all), rose up against the Bourbon authorities whose market regulations had curtailed their economic process. The liberal officials who were in the city council when the insurrection broke out struggled to address a subsistence crisis. The practical imperative of procuring more food seems to have pushed them much more than broad visions of equality. But by dismantling the monopolist *gremios*, and then resisting the temptation to form new monopolies, authorities overcame the old absolutist apprehensions of the disorderly masses. Exactly why and how they were able to disregard centuries of law and custom is not entirely clear.

## Markets and Political Aperture

Although the insurgents' efforts to cut supplies from Mexico City ushered in these economic reforms, the liberalization of markets coincided with the political reforms that emanated from the Constitution of Cádiz. Promulgated by the Cádiz Regency in 1812, the constitution "enfranchised most of the adult population and established elected bodies at various levels from the imperial parliament to all towns of at least 1,000 inhabitants"<sup>47</sup>. Shortly after, in June of 1813, the Regency decreed "*absoluta libertad en el movimiento y transacción de víveres y fijan como única tasa para frutos, ganados, etc., la que acomode a sus dueños, salvo que se lesione la salud pública*" (35). In Spain, markets and political participation both opened and closed in tandem with the struggles between Fernando VII and liberal politicians. A year after the free-trade decree, the King returned to Spain and undid the political and economic reforms enacted by the Cortes. In 1820, the liberal rebellion forced the King to "*afirmar la primacía de los intereses privados que concurran en las relaciones entre vendedores y consumidores en la Real Resolución de 10 de marzo*". In 1823, the King once again attempted to impose commercial restrictions and monopolies, which, by then, enjoyed little support in Spain<sup>48</sup>.

While the wrangling between the King and liberals had repercussions in Spain, the correlation between political and economic reforms in Mexico is rather more uneven. When Ferdinand VII returned to the throne, rejected the Constitution, and reasserted his authority as the absolutist monarch, economic reforms in Mexico continued at an even greater pace as clashes between insurgents and the newly assertive crown intensified. The political closure intensified the war for independence, which, in turn, created more need to open food markets to an increasingly broad array of suppliers. Perhaps if political participation and market aperture had occurred in tandem, the war of independence would not have been so long and destructive. In any case, access to both political and economic resources became a central demand among the

lower classes who fought and suffered during the wars of independence. Both became signs of citizenship in new republic.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, "La venta de zapatos", in Manuel Rojas and Mary Canizzo (eds.), *Los costumbristas chilenos*, Santiago, Zig-Zag, 1957, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup>Citing similar instances of economic participation by previously marginalized actors, Voss calls this trend "gente baja initiative". Such lower-class producers and vendors, he argues, "were very much active players in the post-independence economy -mostly out of necessity but with some vision of improvement and even mobility". Stuart F. Voss, *Latin America in the Middle Period, 1750–1929*, Wilmington, DE, Scholarly Resources, 2002, p. 137.

<sup>3</sup>See summary of recent research in Sarah C. Chambers, "New Nations and New Citizens: Political Culture in Mexico, Peru, and Argentina", in Thomas Holloway (ed.), *A Companion to Latin American History*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2008, pp. 215-229.

<sup>4</sup>Manuel Antonio Flores, "Decreto que prohíbe venta de comestibles, bebidas y juguetes", March 27, 1789. Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de México (henceforth cited as AHCM), Bandos, Caja 92, Exp. 6.

<sup>5</sup>Viceroy Revillagigedo, "Decreto sobre tocinerías", Feb. 17, 1792. Archivo General de la Nación (henceforth cited as AGN), Insituciones Coloniales, Ayuntamiento, Abasto y Panaderías, Vol. 8, Exp. 15.

<sup>6</sup>"Real cédula sobre que no se mezclen varios negocios y una sola representación", Aug. 21, 1748, in Manuel Dublán and José María Lozano (eds.), *Legislación mexicana ó colección completa de las disposiciones legislativas expedidas desde la Independencia de la República*, Vol. 1, Ciudad de México, Imprenta del Comercio, 1876, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup>"Ordenanzas de la Fiel Executoria, de la mui noble y muy leal ciudad de México," May 24, 1724, in *Colección de ordenanzas de la mui noble ynsigne y mui leal e ymperial ciudad de Mexico*, ed. Francisco del Barrio Lorenzot, AHCM, Ayuntamiento, Ordenanzas, tomo 3, vol. 433a.

<sup>8</sup>Manuel Antonio Flores, "Se prohíbe vender comestibles, bebidas y juguetes", March 27, 1789, AHCM Bandos, Caja 92, Exp. 6.

<sup>9</sup>For prices from the eighteenth century to 1812, see AHCM, Real Audiencia, Fiel Ejecutoria-Panadería, Vols. 3824-30.

<sup>10</sup>Guemez Pacheco de Padilla Horcasitas y Aguayo, Conde de Revillagigedo, *Instrucción reservada que el conde de Revilla Gigedo dio á su sucesor en el mando, Marqués de Branciforte, sobre el gobierno en este continente en el tiempo que fué su virey*, 79; García Acosta, *Las panaderías, sus dueños y trabajadores*, 41. See sample of these brands in Barros and Buenrostro, *Panaderías de Tlaxcala, ayer y hoy*; Barrio Lorenzot, *El trabajo en México durante la época colonial*, 236; AHCM, Ayuntamiento, Real Audiencia, Fiel Ejecutoria, Condenaciones, Vol. 3791, Exp. 4.

<sup>11</sup>"Ordenanzas de la Fiel Executoria, de la mui noble y muy leal ciudad de México," May 24, 1724, in *Colección de ordenanzas de la mui noble ynsigne y mui leal e ymperial ciudad de Mexico*, ed. Francisco del Barrio Lorenzot, AHCM, Ayuntamiento, Ordenanzas, tomo 3, vol. 433a.

<sup>12</sup>Eric Van Young, *Hacienda and Market in Eighteenth-Century Mexico: The Rural Economy of the Guadalajara Region, 1675-1820*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, University of California Press, 1981, p. 49; Enriqueta Quiroz Muñoz, *Entre el lujo y la subsistencia. Mercado, abastecimiento y precios de la carne en la ciudad de México, 1750–1812*, México, D.F., El Colegio de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora, 2000.

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<sup>14</sup>AHCM, Policía. Salubridad. Zahúrdas, Vol. 3687, Leg. 1, 1756. Bando del ayuntamiento de 22 de diciembre de 1756, 1 f.

<sup>15</sup>John E. Kizca, "The Great Families of Mexico: Elite Maintenance and Business Practices in Late Colonial Mexico City", *Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 62, 1982, pp. 429-457.

<sup>16</sup>Esteban Sánchez de Tagle, "El inicio de la reforma borbónica en la ciudad de México", *Relaciones*, N° 73, 1998, pp. 273-280; Esteban Sánchez de Tagle, "Las reformas del siglo XVIII al gobierno: la ciudad, su hacienda, su policía, su ejército", in Clara García Ayuardo, *Las reformas borbónicas, 1750-1808*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2010.

<sup>17</sup>AHCM, Real Audiencia, Fiel Ejecutoria-Panadería, Vol. 3842, Exp. 14.

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<sup>21</sup>Revillagigedo, *Instrucción reservada que el conde de Revilla Gigedo dio á su sucesor*, 79-80.

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- <sup>31</sup>Francisco Xavier Venegas, "Virrey decreta venta libre de carne", Jan. 5, 1811. Bandos, Caja 92, Exp. 237.
- <sup>32</sup>Junta de Abasto, Aug. 2, 1811. AGN, Insituciones Coloniales, Abasto y Panaderias, Vol. 8, Exp. 11.
- <sup>33</sup>"Junta pide derogacion de pensiones para evitar la escasez," Jan., 2, 1812; AGN, Insituciones Coloniales, Abasto y Panaderias, Vol. 8, Exp. 12.
- <sup>34</sup>Francisco Xavier Venegas, "Providencias para evitar la escasez de carnes en esta ciudad", Feb., 5 1812, AGN, Insituciones Coloniales, Ayuntamiento, Mercados, Vol. 6, Exp. 6.
- <sup>35</sup>Fiscal de Hacienda to Félix María Calleja, Mexico City, Mar. 20, 1814, AGN, Insituciones Coloniales, Ayuntamiento, Mercados, Vol. 6, Exp. 8.
- <sup>36</sup>Dec. 29, 1812. AGN, Insituciones Coloniales, Ayuntamiento, Abasto y Panaderias, Vol. 8, Exp. 15.
- <sup>37</sup>Dec. 31, 1812. AGN, Insituciones Coloniales, Ayuntamiento, Abasto y Panaderias, Vol. 8, Exp. 15.
- <sup>38</sup>Jan. 11, 1813. AGN, Insituciones Coloniales, Ayuntamiento, Abasto y Panaderias, Vol. 8, Exp. 15.
- <sup>39</sup>Francisco Xavier Venegas, "Reglas para el libre comercio de tocinería", Feb. 6, 1813. AHCM, Bandos, Caja 92, Exp. 281; "Se declara extinto el gremio de veleros; libertad en la fabricacion y comercio de velas de cebo", Feb. 9, 1813. AHCM, Bandos, Caja 92, Exp. 28.
- <sup>40</sup>Reglas para el libre comercio de carne: carneros, toros, novillos y machos cabrios", March 1, 1813, AHCM, Bandos, Caja 92, Exp. 281.
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- <sup>47</sup>Sarah C. Chambers, *op. cit.*, p. 217; Peter F. Guardino, *The Time of Liberty: Popular Political Culture in Oaxaca, 1750-1850*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2005.
- <sup>48</sup>Antonio Fernández García, *El abastecimiento de Madrid en el reinado de Isabel II, Madrid*, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas-Instituto de Estudios Madrileños, 1971, pp. 35-36