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Creating Mexican Consumer Culture in the Age of Porfirio Díaz by Steven B. Bunker

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Bunker, Steven B. *Creating Mexican Consumer Culture in the Age of Porfirio Díaz*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012. xiii + 333 pages. Cloth, \$50.00.

The historian Steven Bunker offers a notable and often fun history of the modern consumer culture that bourgeoned in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Mexico City. Porfirio Díaz was the Mexican president who ruled from 1867 to 1910. After decades of tumultuous upheaval following Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821, Díaz's reign brought relative political stability. Foreign investment and government funds turned Mexico City into a showcase of the latest high fashion, thrilling amusements, and technological wonders. In *Creating Mexican Consumer Culture in the Age of Porfirio Díaz*, Bunker demonstrates how Mexico's political and economic elites looked to new consumer products to foster national development. More than simply an elite project, the new consumer culture allowed a broad section of Mexico City's population to take part in a modernization effort.

What marked the consumer culture that emerged in the late nineteenth century as modern was mass marketing and mass consumption. Bunker begins by telling the story of the El Buen Tono cigarette company and its pioneering of new types of advertising. Aiming to showcase the modern factory in which machines rolled over 3.5 billion cigarettes a year, the company's general director, Ernesto Pugibet, invited a famous French opera singer to take a tour with the city's press in tow. The company's in-house advertisement department—one of the few in Mexico at the time—used new technologies to reach a wider public that it hoped would associate its product with modernity. For example, Mexico City residents saw the El Buen Tono logo printed in the sky on the side of a dirigible and in the streets on a roaming “Electric Man” illuminated with light bulbs. Other companies began their own publicity campaigns in response. Before long, advertising became a lucrative business and a new professional field. Bunker gives an account of many patents sought by Mexican inventors who hoped to pioneer other illuminated and mobile advertising methods, such as a walking mechanical dog that roamed the streets with advertisements on its back.

New buildings provided a modern setting in which to purchase the mass-produced goods advertised throughout Mexico City, where German and French families built some of the world's earliest department stores. Bunker describes how Mexicans from all social classes could enjoy a new kind of “sensual experience” offered by displays of color and material abundance (p. 150). Bunker's discussion of department stores best supports his overall argument that Mexico's political and economic elites considered a broad based consumer culture essential to furthering national development and modernization. Bunker demonstrates how the elites believed that “department stores and the modern consumption and fashion that they promoted could homogenize, whiten, and modernize the citizenry of the republic so that it could take its proper place among the fraternal order of civilized nations” (p. 106). Shopping thus became a form of “improvement for the individual, the family, the nation, and humankind in general” (p. 110). Unfortunately, Bunker has little evidence to demonstrate if non-elite consumers shared this idea about shopping's transformative power or if it simply provided them with pleasure.

Whether or not mass consumption was an amusement or an effort to advance national development, shoppers were not to upend social hierarchies. Mexican elites became anxious when individuals attempted to cross class boundaries through overconsumption or stealing. Evidence is scant, but Bunker offers one of the first considerations of the history of shoplifting in Mexico. Certainly, Mexican elites interpreted shoplifting by females as transgressing class boundaries to fulfill desires for unaffordable goods. Studies of the late nineteenth century in

many areas of the world demonstrate the tension inherent in the elite wish to civilize and modernize populations while maintaining old hierarchies. In Mexico City, the elites believed a new shopping public could improve the nation while adhering to the prevailing social order.

The La Profesa Jewelry Store robbery of 1891, described in the book's final chapter, offers little support for Bunker's main argument. Bunker asserts that the heist was the first modern robbery in Mexico but provides scant support for his claim other than to say that it marked a "new level of illicit finesse" (p. 228). Such an assertion requires much more background than Bunker presents on the history of robbery in Mexico. Bunker argues that the crime was "packaged and sold" in newly burgeoning mass-circulation press (p. 228). Yet the reader is offered neither historical context nor sources on the evolution of the Mexican press.

As a whole, Bunker's study offers new insight into the advent of early modern mass consumption and marketing in Mexico. His work will be of interest to scholars and students who work on these themes in Latin America and elsewhere. The chapters stand largely alone and could be used effectively in undergraduate classrooms to enhance student understanding of modernity in the late nineteenth-century and the role of consumer culture in national development as well as in the formation of collective and individual identities.

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