

Reseña / Review

Bunker, Steven B. *Creating Mexican Consumer Culture in the Age of Porfirio Díaz*.
Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012.

Modernization from Above and Below during the Porfiriato

John J. Dwyer
Duquesne University

Steven Bunker has written a very well researched, original, and fascinating account of consumer culture in Mexico City during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bunker researched widely for this important book, which includes sources from thirteen archives in seven different cities. He also employs nearly fifty periodicals, most of which were published in Mexico City. As the author rightly points out, too often the literature on Mexican economic development during the lengthy dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911) focuses overwhelmingly on the state and gives short-shrift to the role played by average Mexicans in sparking and sustaining consumerism. In addition to being out of balance, the state-centric approach wrongly posits that modernization was imposed from above on a resistant and disenfranchised citizenry. In his much-needed corrective, Bunker convincingly shows that modernization, industrialization, and Mexico's growing consumer culture

during the Porfiriato were complex processes shaped from above and below by a cross-section of the population.

Bunker's study allies with the New Institutional Economics (NIE) School of thought which challenges the structural and economic determinist approach of dependency and world system theories. NIE proponents often analyze economic development from both domestic and international perspectives through social, economic, and cultural lenses. Employing a multi-vocal approach from the top-down and bottom-up allows Bunker to re-conceptualize Mexican modernization in refreshingly novel ways. Although modernization clearly had elite and foreign components to it, Bunker's study of consumer habits in Mexico City illustrates the popular and participatory nature of economic development in the late 1800s. Unlike earlier interpretations, Bunker argues urban workers "embraced the notion of progress and material culture," which explains how Porfirian modernization "outlived the political periodization of the Porfiriato" (232-235).

Bunker's book adds to the small yet growing body of literature that uses consumption as its central organizing principle. Said approach allows the author to examine the subject at varying levels, from the local, national, and international, to the elite and subaltern. To prove his argument, Bunker studies everyday consumption in Mexico City, including the state's promotion of it, the institutions and individuals engaged in it, the spectacles that surrounded it, and the discourse regarding it. Along the way, readers get a nuanced description of how individuals and groups alike understood and used goods, as well as the physical spaces where items were bought and sold. Industrialization, along with improvements in communication, transportation, and the distribution of specific goods, such as cigarettes, beer and textiles, drove down prices and fostered popular consumption of everyday products. Meanwhile, the growth of cheap, mass-circulation newspapers and advertising, which coincided with increasing rates of literacy, fostered a materialist ethos that increased rates of consumption among the general public, especially urban workers.

Even though the allure of foreign goods grew around the turn of the century, according to Bunker, "the portrayal of Porfirian slavish imitation of foreign models is inaccurate." Rather, the author provides a nuanced understanding of the era by demonstrating how Mexicans "refashioned their hybrid identities and patterns of consumption" through selectively incorporating elements of foreign material culture with their own. Mexicans did not want to become French, British, German or American, but instead sought to be modern as were many of the citizens of those

advanced industrialized nations. Although Bunker does not ignore the importance of foreign goods, businesses, and actors, he none-the-less states that the growth of Mexico's consumer economy was "directed by domestic rather than imperial imperatives" (8-9). From Bunker's perspective, the nation's business community played a critical role "in transmitting and negotiating the meaning of modernity and progress" (234). When foreign interests played a role, according to the author, it appears the French played a greater part than did the Americans in shaping Mexico's consumption patterns and tastes prior to 1914.

Since it would be impossible to detail consumption patterns of the nation as a whole, Bunker limits his study to a few "snapshots" of Porfirian consumer culture in Mexico City. His book focuses specifically on the cigarette industry, advertising, department stores, and property crime. Whether this limited approach enables us to generalize consumption for the entire nation remains to be seen. In any case, Bunker's study of consumption from different vistas makes for an informative and enjoyable read.

The one commodity the book details are the manufacture, marketing, and purchase of machine-rolled cigarettes. Bunker justifies the study of cigarettes because, during this era, they "symbolized Mexico's economic and cultural progress more than any other mass-produced consumer commodity." Since smoking was seen as quintessentially modern, cigarettes gained an "iconic status" derived from the marketing strategies of tobacco producers as well as the demand and the changing tastes of consumers (13). According to Bunker, city residents found that cigarettes better fit the "faster pace and social etiquette of the urban social world than the messier, leisurely smoked cigars and pipes." Likewise, factory rolled cigarettes "captured the Porfirian spirit of progress in a way that hand-rolled cigarettes or cigars did not" (16). While there is logic to Bunker's argument pertaining to consumer tastes and demand, assigning motive to the purchasing decisions of tens-of-thousands of individuals is risky. Did Mexico City residents smoke because they wanted, in Bunker's words, "to express affordably their participation in, and contribution to, national progress"? Or did they simply derive pleasure from smoking? The fact that cigarettes contain the addictive drug nicotine may raise additional questions about why people continued to smoke that has little to do with the "rationale actor" model Bunker continually employs.

Tobacco advertisers, meanwhile, marketed their products extensively throughout the federal district in affluent and poor neighborhoods alike. No matter

the targeted class, the message was the same: smoking symbolized modernity and individuality. In this regard, working class Mexicans, especially recent migrants from the countryside, embraced Western cultural trends that celebrated the individual modern man. Meanwhile, Bunker shows that a countervailing trend appeared in print advertising and spectacles promoting a common national identity, that of the modern consumer. Hence, the consumption of cigarettes, along with other everyday products, were marketed as a way for the populace to distinguish themselves while embracing a new, unifying identity of consumers. Thus, we see the promotion of an oxymoronic advertising concept, namely universal individuality.

The literature on Mexican advertising at the turn of the century focuses primarily on the commercial press, which targeted a more educated and affluent audience. According to Bunker, such limited analysis gives the wrong impression that working-class Mexicans were not consumers nor the target of advertisers. Through a detailed examination of the advertising patent applications submitted to the Ministry of Development, along with advertisements that appeared in mass-circulation newspapers after 1896, Bunker concludes that a study of both elite and popular advertising in Mexico City indicates that all the city's main socioeconomic groups embraced modernization; the only real debate was over its pace and strategy. The author shows that advertisements appeared almost everywhere, including building walls, rooftops, tramcars, public kiosks, player pianos, and theater curtains, among other spots. The rise of a working-class penny-press at the end of the nineteenth century that sensationalized everyday city life, especially crimes, disasters, and other titillating stories, attracted a mass readership and became a favored domain for advertisers selling cheap products like cigarettes, candles, tortillas, textiles, beer, and *pulque*, as well as affordable entertainment like the circus, bullfights, cinema, and cantinas.

Like the advertisements seen around the city, the capitol's department stores fostered the democratization of consumption and luxury. Although it has not been adequately researched, no study of Mexico City consumerism would be complete without an examination of the all-important Porfirian department store. According to Bunker, the rise of department stores in the 1890s "signaled a maturing and deepening consumer market" in the nation's capitol. The city's nine department stores functioned as a "cultural primer," educating its middle and upper class customers—from semiskilled laborers to business leaders—on "how to look, behave, think and *be* modern" (99). While disparate classes bought what they could afford, all

classes, including the store's working-class employees, regardless of race or gender, became schooled in modernization.

The author uses the Centro Mercantil and Palacio de Hierro (with its seventy-four different departments) as case studies to consider the ownership, organization, product sourcing, financing, employees, clientele, and marketing techniques of department stores. Stores sold a wide range of goods. Expensive imports reinforced the elite's social prestige, while cheap imports and domestic products provided middling classes with a sense of propriety and modernity. Bunker's study of the department store confirms that the "*gente decente*" were more a cultural than economic category. Mexico's department stores reflected the values of a modernizing culture; they also shaped that culture by representing the material tastes of the *gente decente* through store displays found in store windows and in holiday parades. Similar to the bourgeoisie in Europe and the United States, Mexican conspicuous consumption favored products used at home, such as appliances and parlor games, which the country's affluent class purchased to demonstrate their high social station.

Bunker believes Mexico City's department stores reflected what William Beezley termed the "Porfirian Persuasion" (i.e., the widespread faith in progress and social betterment that derives from technological and productive advances which improve the individual and nation). Even the capitol's criminal element supported these socioeconomic mores. Two of the book's most original and anthropologically-informed chapters provide a detailed study of shoplifting and the La Profesa Jewelry Store robbery of 1891. Bunker elucidates how shoplifters operated, how store management responded to them, how the press reported their crimes, and how they compared to similar property criminals in other contemporary societies. Meanwhile, the La Profesa murder and robbery sparked "public discussions on the changing perceptions of crime in a modern society" (228). The fact that criminals—who generally operate outside of society's accepted norms of social order—adopted modern materialistic values and preyed on the symbols of Mexican progress, indicates the degree to which modernization, commodification, and consumption had taken hold. Likewise, the public fascination with the jewelry store heist, murder, and trial themselves became commodities that were sold daily by the Mexico City press to the capitol's residents. In Bunker's account, the Porfirian Persuasion appears monolithic and unstoppable.

While Bunker provides new insights into Porfirian modernization, at times it appears that the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction. All the

protagonists who propagate Bunker's fine book appear to be quite materialistic and eager consumers. Hard to hear are the voices of the city dwellers, and those in the countryside (where most of Mexico's still illiterate masses resided), who may have questioned the new, urban consumer ethos and decried the loss of traditional values. Moreover, as Bunker himself points out, it was in the cities that rural migrants became integrated into larger national and global economic processes which led them to adopt modern attitudes toward consumption. Surely those transformations were not immediate nor always forward moving. Rather, cultural transformations are often slow and disjointed, with starts, stops, and reversals. Unfortunately, Bunker gives little sense of Mexico's disjointed and asymmetrical move toward modernization.

Likewise, Bunker needlessly adopts the cliché of "as Mexico City goes, so goes the nation." Just as Bunker rightly critiques the disproportionate attention given by scholars to the elite, so too should we be wary of focusing solely on one city, albeit a critical one. The very rich regional studies of Mexico over the last generation challenges this centrist interpretation of the nation's varied and complex history. Studies of consumption patterns in northern and southern Mexico, whether urban or rural, at the turn of the century may produce findings that are distinct from that of the nation's capitol. Scholars should take up this challenge and keep Bunker's fine study handy as they do so. Only then will we have a full understanding of the true complexity of Mexican consumer culture in the age of Díaz. Despite these minor shortcomings, scholars and graduate students who study modern Mexican history, as well as those interested in material culture, consumerism, advertising, and modernization, will benefit greatly from Bunker's book.