Bakers and Basques: Immigration, Monopolies, and Provisioning in Mexico City, 1875-1939

Robert Weis, Graduate Student, Department of History, UC Davis


Mexico City bakeries, from the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, were owned overwhelmingly by Basques from Navarra who formed part of a thin but steady stream of Spaniards who immigrated to Mexico between 1877 and 1939. Like immigrant entrepreneurs in other times and places, the Basque bakery owners established and maintained their position through networks of familial and ethnic solidarity that cemented partnerships and incorporated newcomers as cheap labor. Bakeries were not the only sector Basques and other Spaniards occupied during this period, but they proved to be the most favorable for the development of these networks. In addition to presenting low entrance barriers for immigrants without much capital, bakeries could easily multiply to meet the constantly growing demand for bread and, simultaneously, provide immigrants with an entrance into commerce and proprietorship.

---

1 This paper is based on research for my dissertation, “Pan y Palo: Class, Ethnicity, and Bread in Mexico City, 1875-1939.”
Bakeries, however, differed from typical immigrant endeavors in ways that highlight the contrasts between the Basques in Mexico and other immigrant groups. Bonacich, Light, Waldinger, and others have shown that immigrant entrepreneurs who lack access to capital and political leverage stake out endeavors in sectors that are unattractive to the local elite and inaccessible to the local populace. The Mexican upper class indeed regarded commercial ventures such as bakeries with disdain, but local middling sorts who understood the mysteries of leaven could build rudimentary brick-and-adobe ovens in their patios and sell bread to their neighbors; on occasion, they could even compete with the dominant Basque owners. Indeed, in this case, it was the native producer who occupied a marginal position and relied on self-and family exploitation, much like, say, the Japanese farmers in Central California studied by Bonacich. The Basques, in contrast, occupied the dominant position in an industry that was central to the city’s subsistence. With this domination came political leverage they could bring to bear upon their native competitors.

---


3 Bonacich, "Theory of Middlemen Minorities."

4 Maize tortillas are the foundation of the Mexican diet; however, I argue that the Hispanization of Mexican cities—especially the capital—associated wheat bread with urban residents in contrast with the tortilla-eaters in the countryside. This, like the division of Spaniard/Indian in the colonial period, was fluid and full of nuance; both dichotomies, however, influenced identities.
Their relationship with the local workforce further distinguishes Basque bakery owners from other cases of immigrant entrepreneurs in which ethnic solidarity tends to diffuse class conflict. Although fellow immigrants worked in the *despachos* (retail showrooms) as clerks and managers, Mexicans carried out the manual labor in the *amasijos* (workrooms). To critics, this ethnic division appeared to replicate the colonial exploitation of natives by greedy, despotic *gachupines*, the Mexican pejorative term for Spaniards. Hence, when Basque owners asserted greater control over production in the 1890s, workers began a struggle that many understood as anti-colonial. When the Revolution (1910-1920) elevated nationalist and anti-capitalist discourses to the center of political debate, the Spanish victual merchant appeared to embody the injustices of the old regime. Hungry mobs sacked their shops and sectors of the revolutionary elite viewed them as “fuerzas de la reacción.” During the Revolution, bakers organized into a socialist-anarchist union launched a series of strikes against the Spanish owners that lasted till the late 1930s.

Nonetheless, the more Mexican workers and their Basque employers clashed, the more they formed an alliance against the independent Mexican baker. Indeed, the class conflict and the ensuing government intervention fortified the Spaniards’ position. This presents a broader quandary into how class conflict shaped dynamics of post-revolutionary state formation.

**Basques as Immigrant Entrepreneurs**
When Spanish immigrants arrived, they found a bakery industry that had known better days. Before independence in 1821, bakeries were profitable endeavors often held by aristocratic, landowning families who combined wheat cultivation, milling, and baking.\(^5\) Around the 1850s, there remained only a handful of the many bakeries that dotted the colonial city, a consequence perhaps of the expulsion of many Spaniards who had owned and patronized them, combined with the decades of civil war and foreign invasions that politically destabilized the country and disrupted commercial circuits. The family of famed writer and statesmen Guillermo Prieto was among the few that maintained their position after 1821.\(^6\) Indeed, toward the end of the century, Prieto lamented that Mexican children of well-to-do families only aspired to be “senators, generals, lawyers, doctors, or at the very least engineers,” and had left bakeries, grocery stores, and lending houses to Spaniards.\(^7\)

Not all the Navarrese went into bakeries, and all bakeries were not owned by them. However, of the approximately 1600 who immigrated from Navarra to Mexico between 1877 and 1939, 263 (16\%) concentrated in bakeries—more than

---


in any other single occupation. Roughly half of the Navarrese involved in bakeries came from villages and towns in the rural Baztán Valley in the north of the province. These numbers, however, do not indicate how many immigrants owned or worked in bakeries at any one time. A 1896 municipal tax records list 40 bakeries, 21 of which were owned by Navarrese, nine by Spaniards from other regions, seven by people with apparently French surnames, and three by Mexicans. These figures understate the concentration in the bread business since they list only individual owners and not the partnerships between relatives and countrymen that characterized proprietorship. A more accurate impression comes from an 1895 list of 126 Spanish bakery owners who donated money to the war effort in Cuba; almost half were Basques. Owners from the Baztán Valley were particularly prominent as representatives of the industry vis-à-vis the government. For instance, in 1914, officials summoned 36 owners to a meeting to discuss a conflict with peddlers: 25 were from the Baztán Valley, two were Spaniards from other regions (Vizcaya and León), and nine were Mexicans.

Considering that most of the Navarrese owned more than one bakery (one man,
Braulio Iriarte, directly owned at least ten), while the Mexicans tended to own single shops, their dominance was considerable.

However, in the 1860s, there was only one Basque, Pedro Albaíterro, among the fifteen or so major bakery owners. But when Spanish immigration began in earnest in the following decade, Albaíterro became a pillar of the industry around which the immigrant community coalesced. Born in 1833 in Almandoz, in the Baután Valley in northern Navarra, he arrived to Mexico in the 1850s. I have not found information on his early years in Mexico, but a decade after his arrival he was highly regarded enough that a travelling callus and wart-removing surgeon included testimony by Albaíterro in an advertisement as proof of his method’s efficacy. Before dying in 1900, he had developed the foundation of the modern bread industry in Mexico and the center of gravity for the Basque immigrant community in general.

Albaíterro and fellow Navarrese Basque José Arrache constructed La Florida, the first flour mill located within the city, in 1887. The steam-powered motors, imported from Budapest, liberated the mill from streams that ran into the southern and western edges of the Valley of Mexico. Most mills were located on wheat haciendas where planting and grinding formed part of the same productive unit. Merchants and middlemen transported flour from the hacienda mills to the city bakeries. Albaíterro and Arrache, however, were able to integrate flour and bread production within the urban commercial circuits and thus
supply their own and other bakeries more efficiently. This became clear the next year, when they established Mexico’s first highly mechanized bakery, Los Gallos, in a luxurious downtown building where the Porfirian elite came to enjoy fine chocolate and bizcochos (sweet bread and pastries). By 1896, the partners owned at least 11 major bakeries in the city, which in turn supplied several retail outlets.

Albaitero and Arrache were also concurados, that is, their wives were sisters. Albaitero married Luisa García Rejón y Piñón in 1859; Arrache married María de la Luz fifteen years later at La Candelaria, a church near Albaitero’s home in Tacubaya, just west of Mexico City. Albaitero was undoubtedly a godfather in the wedding, and the joining of families strengthened the links between himself and his younger partner. In this way, the partners formed links of fictive kin, in keeping with the familial nature of bakery ownership. Such links commonly cemented partnerships between immigrants already in Mexico.

Family links, on the other hand, were central to the dynamic of immigration and assimilation. Immigration records reveal a chain immigration based primarily on relations between siblings and uncles and nephews. Bakeries constituted the

---

12 La Sociedad 2/12/1864.
13 El Tiempo 6/21/1887.
14 El Municipio Libre 7/17/1896.
vehicle to introduce immigrants into the economic life of the city. Most arrived to Mexico as single men in their late teens and early twenties, and waited a decade or so to form families. In the mean time, they relied on members of the extended family for support as they consolidated their patrimonies. In the absence of these relatives, partnerships based on regional identity sufficed. Albaitero, for instance, was 41 when his first son was born, in Mexico City. Two relatives, probably nephews, did not arrive until 1917 and 1925, long after his death. Thus he associated with Arrache, but before his death he passed his businesses on to his son and his son-in-law.

Albaitero’s son, also Pedro, took over some bakeries after his death, his son-in-law succeeded him more fully in the wheat-flour-bread complex. Juan Irigoyen Echartea, from Erratzu (Navarra), married Albaitero’s eldest daughter Mercedes in 1885. In 1900, when Juan took over La Florida, he already owned wheat haciendas in the Bajío, Mexico’s bread basket, and Mexico State. His brothers also had wheat and sugar haciendas and owned the Molino del Carmen flour mill in Celaya, Guanajuato. By around 1910, Juan’s brother Pedro Irigoyen was the city’s major wheat merchant, moving grain from the Bajío to Mexico City.

---

19 Alday Garay, "Presencia baztanesa en las regiones de México, siglos XIX y XX."
and importing it from Europe and South America. As such, he was close to the political elite, especially to General Alvaro Obregón, with whom he exchanged chummy letters discussing Argentine wheat and barbecues on the general’s ranch.\(^{20}\) When Pedro Irigoyen died in 1925, Obregón, then president, personally arranged for the transportation of his remains.\(^{21}\)

The rising star of the wheat-flour-bread complex after Albaitero, however, was Braulio Iriarte Goyeneche. Iriarte arrived to Mexico from Elizondo, Navarra, in 1877, when he was 17. He began working in one of Albaitero’s bakeries before taking a job in a flour mill in an outlying town.\(^ {22}\) By 1890, he owned some of the city’s most important bakeries,\(^ {23}\) which helped him become one of Mexico’s most important industrialists. In addition to numerous bakeries and extensive real estate, his enterprises included El Eúskaro flour mill (1903); Leviatán y Flor (1912), Mexico’s first industrial yeast producer; the Modelo Beer Company (1925); and a greatly enlarged El Eúskaro flour mill (1929), which milled the lion’s share of flour for the country.\(^ {24}\)

---

\(^{20}\) Pedro Irigoyen to Alvaro Obregón, México, D.F., 7/18/1918, Fideicomiso Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca Fondo FAO, serie 020500, exp. "223"/206, inv. 494, legajo 1, fs. 5.

\(^{21}\) Alvaro Obregón to Fernando Torreblanca, Cajeme, Sonora, 2/13/1925, AGN Presidentes, O-C, caja 319, exp. 814–I–1.


Iriarte consolidated a strong group of Navarrese bakery owners. He also relied heavily on his many nephews, who managed then owned bakeries and mills. Agustín Jáuregui Iriarte, for instance, immigrated to Mexico in 1909 and ran one of his uncle’s most important bakeries before becoming a manager at El Eúskaro. Jáuregui he married his daughter Esperanza to his nephew. After Iriarte’s death in 1933, Jáuregui bought the El Carmen flour mill from the Irigoyens, most likely aided by a hefty inheritance. Other nephews dominated the milling industry in the agricultural and industrial Toluca Valley, just west of the capital, and another of Iriarte’s sons-in-law (from Garralda, Navarra) took over at least two of Iriarte’s bakeries.

These links of family, regional identity, and enterprise also infused Basque and Spanish institutions. Families frequented churches erected in honor of their provinces’ patron saints. They went to the Sanatorio Español for medical care and were buried in the Panteón Español when they did not have the fortune of expiring in the towns of their birth. At the Centro Vasco, established in 1907 in the luxurious Palacio de Azulejos in the city center, they organized dances, charity dinners and holiday events, and otherwise socialized and conducted business. Juan Irigoyen was among the original founders of the Centro Vasco, and bakery owners from the Baztán Valley consistently headed up the board of directors until 1937 when the Spanish Civil War split the community between the conservative Navarrese and anti-Franco, nationalist groups from other Basque

25 Alday Garay, "Presencia baztanesa en las regiones de México, siglos XIX y XX."
provinces. Tellingly, it was a Navarrese bakery owner, Gabriel Arrechea Perurena, who founded the Círculo Vasco-Español, which distanced itself from the Centro Vasco’s political beliefs.26

Co-Ethnic Labor

The people who coalesced around Albaitero, Iriarte, and other leading owners constituted a wide net of bakery and mill owners. Many had begun as employees in the despacho, or the retail section of the bakery.27 Indeed, new immigrants provided their established predecessors with long hours and loyalty, at little cost, as clerks, cashiers, and managers. Bakeries had anywhere between one and six despacho employees. Of the 192 employees listed in 1922, 121 were “foreign” — most were doubtlessly Spaniards since the few Chinese and other bakery owners with non-Iberian surnames did not declare having foreign employees.

The dynamic of immigration situated owners’ relatives and countrymen into the despachos as clerks and managers. Many were called upon by their established relatives from whom they received loans for passage, which they gradually repaid through deductions in the wages.28 Their responsibilities ran

---

27 Throughout this text, I use “employees” to refer to people who worked in despachos, and “workers” or “bakers” to refer to those who in the workroom who baked bread. This distinction coincides with the contemporary terms “empleado” and “obrero” or “trabajador.”
from tending to customers, to dealing with peddlers, handing out wages. In
times of labor conflict, employees meted out physical punishment and forcibly
contained the Mexican workers who baked the bread. The wages of despacho
employees varied widely, both within and between bakeries, from a low of
$25.00 to a high of $400.00 pesos a month. Of the 43 listed wages, roughly half
fell short of the estimated minimum of $84.00 a month to sustain a working-class
family of four. The others earned anywhere from $90.00 up to $400, although
most earned between $100 and $160 pesos a month. However, the vast majority
of despacho employees were single, freeing them from the expenses of raising a
family. And many employees lived above the bakery and received meals as part
of their pay, which took care of almost two thirds of their expenses.29

Given the low numbers of immigrants and the gradually multiplying
bakeries, there were enough positions available to accommodate new arrivals
without pushing them into the amasijos as bakers. The clerical positions did not
require high skills that could have precluded entrance to young men from mostly
rural towns, and the average despacho employee earned more than the average
baker. However, while lowly clerks made more than lowly amasijo workers, but
master bakers could earn up to $500 a month much more than despacho

29 This figure was based on estimated cost per diem of the following necessities: “food, $1.42;
clothes, $0.40; room, $0.50; other expenses, $0.43; savings, $0.25.” Aureliano Dorantes, “El trabajo
en México. La industria del pan en la ciudad de México,” Boletín Mensual del Departamento del
Trabajo, 2/1/1922, 5–14.
employees.\textsuperscript{30} Clearly, more was at stake than wages. First, despacho employees
had a higher social status than the manual laborers in the back, regardless of pay
differences. Indeed, for a despacho employee to conduct manual labor would
have been degrading and, moreover, would have constituted a violation of the
agreement between owners and their coethnic employees.\textsuperscript{31} Most importantly,
for the employee, the years of work amounted to an extended apprenticeship,
during which he learned the secrets of the business. From simple clerk, he
advanced to manager. After some 10 or 15 years, once he had saved sufficient
capital, he was able to strike out on his own. In exchange for loyalty and
dedication, his former employer often supported him with credit or loans. In
some cases, he bequeathed him machinery or even the whole shop.\textsuperscript{32}

Of course, this rosy cycle of apprenticeship and social ascension should be
regarded with reserve, for it is the story of those who succeeded. Certainly many
more, who do not appear in the sources I have found, did not prosper and
returned to Spain or tried their luck in another industry or another country. A
1915 guide book written for prospective emigrants warned that the “young men
who work in grocery stores, bakeries, and lending houses, are tough, hardy, and
tireless in their struggle. Observing them working ‘twenty-hour days’ with but

\textsuperscript{30} This figure was based on estimated cost per diem of the following necessities: “food, $1.42;
clothes, $0.40; room, $0.50; other expenses, $0.43; savings, $0.25.” Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} In my interviews in contemporary Mexico City bakeries, the contrasts between the bourgeois
values of the owners and managers and the artisan values of the bakers were evident when each
discussed manual labor. The latter said with some pride that they “never touched flour” while
the former expressed disdain for owners who had “never even touched flour.”
\textsuperscript{32} Oral interviews: Arsuaga, Luque, Zugarramurdi, Fernández.
the hard boards of the counter for a bed, I have felt deeply sorry for the thousands of deceived who leave their homes and suffer endless sacrifices to pursue an illusion.”33 Still, this is an isolated, and admittedly hyperbolic, voice. The same author noted that bakeries were the immigrant’s safest road to success in Mexico. This, I posit, is due to the social networks created by the Navarrese Basques. However, it is also a consequence of the particular characteristics of the Mexico City bread industry.

**Bakeries**

Many Basque businessmen like to emphasize that they arrived to Mexico with little more than their *alpargatas* (espadrilles).34 This is an exaggeration, for if nothing else they possessed the intangible capital of regional identity that opened the door to employment, if not always proprietorship, in bakeries. Nonetheless, even when ethnic solidarity supported the Basques’ fabled industriousness and frugality, their initial lack of capital limited the scope of businesses they could take on. They had neither a love for bread nor a talent for baking; rather, characteristics of the industry allowed them to fulfill their aspirations despite their limitations. By taking up bakeries, they transcended the limited niche demands for specifically Spanish products (such as the wine, oil,

---

ham, and salted cod in the *tiendas ultramarinas*, or essential imported items from the Basque provinces such as “balls from Pamplona, jai-alai rackets, and wool berets” offered at the Apargatería Española\(^{35}\). Bread was an essential and widely-consumed in a city with a rapidly growing population; bakeries could multiply to accommodate the fairly constant stream of immigrants.

The patterns of bread consumption and production in Mexico City made bakeries structurally resistant to the pressures of industrialization. Bakeries remained profitable at a time when centralized, mechanized production was displacing other shop trades.\(^{36}\) The economies of scale that characterized the operation of contemporaneous textile and shoe factories, for instance, created exceedingly high entrance barriers for immigrants short on capital. Bakeries, in contrast, did not require heavy capital expenditures since most were small shops that serviced their immediate neighborhoods. They did not centralize production to a significant degree, and even owners of multiple shops operated several production units. A survey from 1922 indicates that 127 major bakeries combined production and retail at the same site, though they also distributed to retail outlets and stores; only some 20 sites produced exclusively for sale elsewhere and these were by no means large production units. Only 42 bakeries had some

---

machinery, mostly mixers and cutters, that lightened the most time-consuming drudgery. Even the best equipped shops owned by Albaitero and Iriarte, for instance, were far from entirely mechanized. Nor did bakeries employ large workforces: The same 1922 data show that 98 hired between 1 and 15 workers; 16 hired between 16 and 25 workers; and only six had workforces with more than 26.

This structure of many bakeries combining mostly manual production and retail sprang from the nature of consumption. Poor residents bought day-old bread [pan frío] from the markets, but middle- and upper-class customers demanded their bread fresh and warm. Inventive owners repeatedly attempted to mechanize the production of bolillos, the small individual French rolls that constituted the base of many urban families’ diet. But a machine that could put out bolillos all day long was of little use when patrons wanted their bread fresh at only two specific times of the day. The other dozens of sweet and salted breads that bakeries offered were too varied in shape and size to allow for mechanization.

Furthermore, going to the bakery constituted a specific errand, usually carried out by housewives, daughters, or servants. The common phrase, ¿a qué hora sales al pan? (“what time do you go to the bakery?”), is still synonymous with “when are you free from your mother’s or employer’s supervision?”

---
36 The following discussion draws largely from the theoretical framework presented in Waldinger, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Immigrants and Enterprise in New York’s Garment Trades.*
Households also sent errand boys to bakeries, who similarly took advantage to socialize and “make an infernal racket while they wait for their order.” Bakery despachos themselves, overwhelmingly staffed by single men, lent themselves to picaresque exchanges, for instance, when patrons requested breads with names like kisses, panties, and horns (such as those of the cuckold). If more than a few blocks, a trip to the bakery could become a dangerous voyage in the mind of a husband, mother, or employer. Consequently, many shops were dispersed throughout the city.

Finally, bakeries’ resistance to centralization fulfilled a key function within the Basques’ dynamic of chain migration. The very creation and maintenance of an ethnic solidarity depended on the multiplication of bakeries, for it was the promise of proprietorship that justified the cheap, loyal labor that new arrivals provided their established predecessors.

Local Reactions

In July 1869, 250 shopkeepers and peddlers printed an open letter to the Governor of Mexico City to express their “deepest anguish.” “We are victims of the most iniquitous greed of the monopoly of foreign bakery owners, especially three or four of the richest, who also own mills, who have pressured the other bakeries to shut down our humble shops and refuse to sell us bread, so that they

---

37 El Nacional 9/6/1890.
alone can sell it […] with a considerable reduction in weight, size, and quality.”

This control of the wheat-flour-bread complex, they feared, gave foreigners an influence that threatened the sovereignty of the nation. Not only were foreigners controlling industries vital to subsistence, they continued to subjugate Mexicans through oppressive relationships, which rendered hollow the notion of political independence.

What a brilliant achievement of the divine democratic system, covering with empty words the same distinctions between lord and servant, the same vices, and the same oppression that our fathers suffered under the retrograde but overt system?38

Complaints became more frequent as the Basques consolidated their position in the latter quarter of the century. In 1877, there were “insistent murmurs that bakery proprietors regularly meet to discuss how to raise their profits” and accusations that owners were renting bakeries just to keep them closed and thus “exclude any speculator alien to their league.”39 El Siglo Diez y Nueve denounced a “despicable bread monopoly formed to exploit the people.”40 And El Popular alleged that owners had been buying up mills and bakeries, and driving out the “poor Mexican baker” through ruinous competition. Having captured the market, they proceeded to sell bread “at the whatever price and weight that pleases their dictatorial whim, becoming criminally wealthy, poisoning and impoverishing the people.” Their workers were “veritable slaves,

38 Apolonio Atempaneca and 90 other small bakery owners to Juan Baz, Goberador del Distrito Federal, 1869. AHCM, Jurados, vol. 2740, quoted in Maria del Carmen Reyna, La prensa censurada durante el siglo xix (México, D.F.: SEPsesenta, 1976).
39 La Voz de México 8/30/1877.
like the indentured servants in Chiapas.” The authorities’ indifference further “excites their ambition and encourages their greed.” They had become “anachronistic imitations of ancient Roman lords.” Unlike the Romans, however, these “kings of commerce” were unable to appease the masses by giving away bread. And, the paper warned, “the masses are growing tired.”41 According to the anarchist paper *El Hijo del Ahuizote*, the Spaniards continued to claim and rename the country, just as they had been doing since the Conquest.

Spaniards have monopolized all the bakeries, all the flour mills. Spaniards NEVER give Mexican names to their businesses and factories. They erase the indigenous name and invariably replace it with the name of some saint, bullfighter, or *pelotari* [jai-alai player]. Rarely do they marry Mexican women, and when they do, it is generally in pursuit of their wretched, greedy interests. It is time to openly wage the economic struggle toward the patriotic goal: ¡MEXICO PARA LOS MEXICANOS!”42

**Labor Conflicts: Despacho and Amasijo**

This anti-Spanish sentiment increased markedly when bakery workers began to protest their labor conditions. Even before the Basque immigrants arrived en masse to Mexico, working conditions inamasijos were harsh and dangerous. “Bakers,” declared the Federal District Governor in 1867, “are one of society’s most miserable classes who find themselves in a slavery contrary not only to all human sentiment, but also to the guarantees expressly granted by the

---

40 *El Siglo Diez y Nueve* 8/8/1881.
41 *El Popular* 12/4/1897.
42 *El Hijo del Ahuizote* 10/23/1898.
fundamental law of the Republic.” 43 The practice of picking up poor men, whom the police considered to be “vagrants,” off the streets and forcing them into amasijos along side convicts began in the colonial period, but continued up to the mid-nineteenth century.44 Little distinguished prisoners from the “free” workers. For the convicts, working in the bakeries was part of their punishment; but their “free” counterparts who suffered the same fate for only slightly higher wages must have wondered what crime they had committed.45 Many prisoners had simply failed to pay a debt to previous employers—a danger all workers faced, as debt peonage was widespread in bakeries.

Bakery conditions worsened at the end of the century when the Basques had taken over the industry. The growing concern among modernizing government officials over hygiene turned working conditions into a public matter. The whiteness of bread—itself often a product of adulteration—stood in sharp contrast with the filth of most amasijos. Cockroaches and rats crawled about, and the sweet aroma of burning sugar mixed with the stench from the shit hole dug in the amasijo floor. Popular lore had it that the perspiration streaming from bakers’ half-naked bodies gave bread its salty flavor. But kneading with their feet—which bakers called “dancing the dough”—was intolerable to the

43 Boletín Republicano 11/30/1867.
45 A 1867 decree ordered that “With the object of promoting the trade of bakers, this Government and the judges may send prisoners of light infractions who only deserve correctional punishment as apprentices is bakeries, in which case the owner will pay the prisoner the going wage.”
hygienists. Although an 1893 decree prohibited the practice, that same year a newspaper reported that workers merely put on their shoes before leaving. Nonetheless, “the traces of dough” were still “visible through their sandals.”

Infrastructure problems were also left unresolved. The buildings that housed amasijos were prone to collapse as the wooden beams, commonly infested with a termite-like pest, caught on fire from the sheer heat of the ovens. Albaítero and Arrache’s flour mill lodged workers and their families in conditions so deplorable that one night the roof collapsed upon a mill worker, his wife, and their four children. “Although the house was in ruins,” the press obsequiously noted, “the proprietors were in no way guilty since they had asked the family to abandon the room it had been occupying at no charge.” Bakers illuminated the amasijos with petroleum lamps, which occasionally capsized onto the back of the worker who accidentally bumped into them.

Working conditions were hardly conducive to harmony to begin with. But tensions among bakers increased as bakeries multiplied. The guild-like hierarchy among bakers may have rankled the less experienced workers. Maestros often took naps and drank pulque, leaving the heaviest chores to the lower bakers. But when the latter made mistakes, maestros meted out humiliating physical

---

46 La Patria 4/18/1893.
47 El Siglo Diez y Nueve 5/22/1895; El Demócrata 11/3/1895; El Chisme 6/7/1900.
48 La Voz de México 9/1/1889.
49 La Voz de México 1/16/1894.
punishment, smacking their legs with firewood or rolling pins. Brawls between bakers over matters of professional honor became regular pabulum in the 1890s crime pages. For instance, Angel Castro and José Castro, bakers at Vanegas, got into a fight just as the night labor began around 6:00 PM, over what the press called “personal issues.” Angel stabbed a hook into José’s chest. Gravely injured, José was still able to crash a piece of firewood over his adversary’s head. In another case, Manuel Ruiz reportedly had grown tired of bakers mocking his shoddy craftsmanship. He took revenge on José Ugalde, whose work the other bakers praised. Ruiz greased a strip of paper with lard, placed it over Ugalde when he was asleep, and lit it on fire, causing him serious burns. At the Tompeate Street bakery, someone tossed a ball of dough at Pedro García. Certain that the perpetrator was Luis García, Pedro stabbed him 17 times with his dough cutter. Adelaido Ramos and Antonio Terán, who worked in a bakery on Estanco Street, “had been enemies for some time on account of matters of their trade.” Ramos launched a slightly malicious innuendo (una indirecta) at Terán; when the latter responded “insolently,” Ramos smashed his face with a piece of firewood. Likewise, Eustaquio Suárez and Manuel Franco were working in the

50 Oral interviews with Alfonso Ortega Ríos, May, 2005; Mario Anguiano Trejo, June 2005; Pascual Ortiz, June 2005.
51 El Tiempo 3/28/1890.
52 El Popular 3/19/1902.
53 El Imparcial 1/22/1899.
54 El Popular 8/30/1902.
amasijo in the bizcochería on Arcos de Belén Street when, “for a trifle,” Franco stabbed Suárez to death. Suárez’s blood gushed into the dough.55

The increase of bakeries also brought on competition between owners, who tried to outsell each other by lowering prices, increasing the number of retail outlets, and sending peddlers beyond their immediate areas. The press called it a “merciless war, in which some loose up to $200 a day.”56 This, in turn, generated more frictions with bakers. Owners sought to compensate for reduced profit margins by demanding more from their workers, and severely limiting their freedom of movement. Customarily, bakers were free to leave between 2:00 PM and 6:00 PM; however, in 1895, the Spanish owners collectively decided to enclose workers in the amasijos during the period of their contracts. Owners argued that since they paid bakers at the onset of their contacts, which could last for weeks, the system of “encierros” (lock-ups) ensured that workers would not go to the pulquería between shifts and return drunk, or flee entirely with their pay and all the flour, sugar, eggs, and lard they could carry. What’s more, owners insisted, encierros were part of their paternal duty to ensure that workers did not “squander the product of their labor.” Encierros also contributed to the social order, for “order is already disturbed when they are locked up, but out on the street they get drunk and are later unable to fulfill their duty to the public.”57

55 El Tiempo 8/12/1910.
56 El Siglo Diez y Nueve 7/20/1895.
57 El Universal 8/1/1895.
This imposition of encierros led to bakers’ first work stoppage. More precisely, the strike broke out when one bakery loosened its grip on workers.\textsuperscript{58} Instead of getting drunk or disappearing, the some fifteen workers went from bakery to bakery, requesting that employers let their workers out after their shift. A gendarme quickly arrived and, when he was unable to disperse the group, called for reinforcements.\textsuperscript{59} The bakers threw mud at the police, and spent five days in the Belem prison.\textsuperscript{60} The next week, workers at Arrache and Córdoba’s La Moderna and the Aldama Street bakery also demanded to leave. They banged down the door and joined with bakers at the San Dimas Street bakery. Faced with a group of eighty workers, the San Dimas manager acquiesced to their rather civil demand to go the police station and negotiate with maestros from the three bakeries. They agreed to twelve-hour shifts—from 6:00 PM to 6:00 AM—and daily wages at $3.00 for maestros, $1.75 for oficiales, $1.50 for medio oficiales.\textsuperscript{61}

By then most bakers had decided to leave the amasijos. Only a few shops remained open, such as the Calle Real bakery, which paid its workers double in hopes of compensating with huge sales, and the Alameda bakery, which sent its despacho employees back to the amasijo where they bumbled through the degrading manual labor. Bakers at San Pedro y San Pablo also decided to strike but owner Antonio Buerba managed to “dissuade” them by having three of the

\textsuperscript{58} Shortly before, Braulio Iriarte had “experimented” with open shifts, but after “horrible results” (“the few bakers that returned to work were completely drunk”), he reinstated the encierros. \textit{El Tiempo} 8/2/1895.
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{El Siglo Diez y Nueve} 7/20/1895.\textsuperscript{60} \textit{El Monitor Republicano} 7/21/1895.\textsuperscript{61} \textit{El Siglo Diez y Nueve} 7/31/1895; \textit{El Tiempo} 8/1/1895; \textit{El Siglo Diez y Nueve} 8/1/1895.
leaders arrested for “introducing disorderliness.”62 Another, unnamed owner invited bakers to continue working “in his house” if they accepted the lock-ups. If not, “they were free to act as they pleased.” However, he warned, “bad things could happen” to them if they left. The workers took their chances out on the street.63

The striking bakers complained of “being kept like prisoners, watched over even when they speak and eat with their families.” Enclosed in the amasijos, they declared, “they lack the comforts of home.”64 But in a deeper sense, they demanded shifts and regular salaries because these were rights accorded to them by the laws of the Republic. In an anonymous letter to the Governor of the Federal District, General Pedro Rincón Gallardo, they demanded the freedom from slavery and equal treatment under the law, that is, recognition of their citizenship. Referring to José María Morelos, the martyred independence hero who declared the abolition of slavery, and Benito Juárez, the Zapotec Indian who as president oversaw the drafting of the liberal Constitution of 1857, their cause was a “glorious second independence from slavery” and a continuation of the great liberal struggle.

The good name of the Nation will never allow [...] the unequal application of the law, because we bakers of sweet breads [bizcocheros] are enslaved and in name of the law we must act. Before the Governor we

62 Some owners sent employees as far away as Puebla and Veracruz to look for replacement workers. El Siglo Diez y Nueve 8/2/1895.
63 El Siglo Diez y Nueve 8/1/1895.
64 El Universal 8/1/1895.
have a single sentiment and objective, to realize what is written in the Fundamental Law, as it was written by Benito Juárez.  

Their “exalted sentiments of patriotism” failed to sway their employers, the government, or the press. Rincón Gallardo and the Police Inspector General met with the dominant bakery owners—Arrache, Iriarte, Oteira, Echandi, Galnares, Montellano, Mancebo, Zabalbur, and Buerba—at the latter’s Tacuba Street bakery. The meeting, which lasted for most of the day, represented a uniting of forces against the workers’ insubordination. Rincón Gallardo declared that “bakery proprietors have the most perfect right to demand that their employees remain in their establishments, just as private individuals have with their servants, and no one would think to make claim to such an absurd liberty.” Less than modern proletarians—indeed, less than fully adults and citizens—bakers were servants dependent on the authority of their bosses. Nonetheless, the strike continued unabated. Owners gathered at Los Gallos. Refusing to meet with the strikers, they instead proposed their own terms to end the conflict. They agreed to stop paying workers in advance and to adopt a “common tariff of wages” to be paid every day. “If they are in a state that allows them to fulfill their labor [i.e., sober], they may return to the amasijo; if not they’ll be fired.” These changes appeared to have satisfied the bakers, who returned to work. The press condescendingly noted that the strikers had damaged their own interests. With advanced payments, they could “provide

---

65 *El Tiempo* 8/2/1895.
themselves with the objects they needed and enjoy their leisure time only once.” But now, reporter continued, referring to bakers’ penchant to drink, “they’ll have the occasion to do so every day.” Owners similarly tried to conceal their bitterness by portraying the resolution as a Pyrrhic victory that the bakers would ultimately regret. Such contrition never came: three months later, when the owners together decided to lower wages and reinstate encierros, some 100 bakers immediately declared a strike.

After 1895, conflicts continue to irrupt as employers tried to increase production by asserting greater control over bakers while they were in the amasijos. In 1897, workers at Iriarte’s El Factor bakery attempted to leave the amasijo between tasks. The manager “opposed this tenaciously.” Together with his clerks, he kept the door closed long enough for police to arrive and “calm the belligerent bakers.” A year later, “a formidable scandal” with similar motivations occurred the Tompeate Street bakery. “It seems,” the press reported, “that workers were upset because of an increase in their work.” At the beginning on the shift, one baker “refused to work and tried to jump over the counter and leave the bakery.” The manager, Simón Ganastachua, tried to “reduce him to order” by slapping his face. The other bakers reacted by smashing the bakery windows with firewood. Two gendarmes arrived, followed by twelve more. One of them, “known as ‘the Hare,’ penetrated the amasijo, perhaps to prove how

---

66 El Monitor Republicano 8/3/1895.
67 El Siglo Diez y Nueve 8/5/1895.
68 El Tiempo 8/1/1895; Gil Blas 10/26/1895; El Demócrata 10/26/1895.
unfair his nickname was.” The bakers received him with a beating before he shot into the air. A detachment of mounted police took the 34 bakers to the Belem prison.70

Employers also tried to crack down on bakers’ customary drinking in the amasijo. When the manager of Los Gallos refused to allow a worker to bring a “bucket of pulque” into the amasijo, the whole crew walked out, “dragging with them the [despacho] employees who tried to stop them.” Outside the bakery, they “screamed insults against their bosses” who rushed inside after trying to convince them to return to work. The bakers then went to a hardware store and grabbed a “great number of canes” to threaten their bosses with, and “several bunches of fireworks,” which they let off in front of the bakery. Again, the police arrived and arrested the “scandalous bakers.”71

**Revolution: Class Conflict, State intervention, and Tlachiches**

These spontaneous and short-lived actions that bakers carried out to defend their customary rights and privileges continued up to the outbreak of the Revolution in 1910.72 The Revolution generated profound hopes among urban residents.

---

69 *La Voz de México* 4/4/1897.
70 *El Tiempo* 5/27/1898.
71 *El Imparcial* 1/6/1902.
72 My dissertation examines the famine that occurred in Mexico City residents in 1914 and 1915, which led to riots directed at Spanish-owned stores, particularly bakeries. Collaboration between the local government and Basque bakery owners ultimately resolved the crisis. I look at how the famine changed relations between the state, owners, and consumers. In particular, the crisis led government officials to ally with the Spanish bakery owners in order to end the famine and prevent future ones.
workers; however, initially, it changed very little the relationship between bakery workers and their Basque employers. The contrast between the promise of revolution and the continuity of old regime practices was particularly evident in labor relations. The Constitution of 1917 spelled out basic rights for workers, including eight-hour shifts, one paid day-off per week; it also sanctioned unions and strikes, and prohibited monopolies. Nonetheless, employers continued to deny workers these rights, and the state continued to squelch worker actions.

In the 1920s, bakers were among the most active and militant of Mexico City workers and frequently clashed with the owners’ organization, the Union of Bakery Proprietors of the Federal District, led by the Navarrese Jerónimo Minondo, Victoriano Loperena, Marcelino Zugarramurdi, Félix Aramburuzabala, Juan Iturri, and other Spaniards Maximiano Gutiérrez and Aurelio Díaz. The particularities of bakery workers’ organization, actions, and ideological influences is discussed at length in my dissertation; suffice to mention here that the defensive character of their demands and the personal, direct clashes between workers and despacho employees gave way to organized strikes that encompassed most of the city’s bakers and demanded the implementation of the constitutional articles. What remained the same, however, was state’s position on such actions. Throughout the decade, police consistently protected strike-

74 Minondo was from the town of Nagore; Loperena and Zugarramurdi were from Arizcun; Iturri was from Garralda; I do not know where Aramburuzabala was from, but the surname is unmistakably Basque. See Appendix in Arcelus Iroz, *Presencia de Navarra en México, 1870–1950*. 
breakers and arrested strikers. In 1919, the chief of police explained the contrast between law and practice with impeccable old regime logic: Bakers, he declared, were free to strike, but only as long as they did not infringe upon the “independent workers’ indisputable right to work.”

This cycle of demands, refusals, strikes, and strike-breaking ended toward the end of the decade with the implementation of a reglamento—a series of regulations that was to govern all the city’s bakeries. Representatives of owners, unions, and local officials drafted the regulations and updated them approximately every year. The change represented a victory for bakers, who had been calling for a normalization of conditions for a decade, and strikes became less frequent. However, the reglamento redrew the lines of conflict between Spaniards and Mexicans and redirected violence toward a new contender: the independent Mexican baker.

Although these shops had certainly existed for as long as the larger bakeries had, they emerged publicly during this period of labor strife, seeking to exploit the momentary opportunities that the strikes afforded them. They were commonly known as “tlachiches,” and their owners, “tlachicholes,” terms that probably derive from the practice of using the sediment of sweet pulque (tlachique) as leaven. Government officials and Spanish bakery owners called then “clandestine bakeries” since before they were beyond or beneath the gaze of health inspectors and tax collectors, either on the physical margins of the city or

---

75 El Pueblo 3/17/1919.
half-hidden in the jumble of the streets. Herein lay both their strength and their vulnerability. Caught between the two forces of labor and capital, the small bakeries suffered an almost ontological anguish. “We are considered neither workers nor industrialists,” complained their representative (who called himself the “apostle of small bakers”). “But rather something in between, with no defined situation.”

A few Mexican bakery owners initially joined the Basque-dominated Union of Bakery Proprietors. But they soon withdrew, complaining in a letter to President Calles that the Spaniards were attempting to drive them out of business.

When we were invited to join the Union of Bakery Proprietors of the Federal District a year and a half ago, we attended in good faith, believing that we were all going to work together to improve our businesses. Unfortunately we were mistaken. Since most of the bakeries are in the hands of Spaniards, represented by the TRUST formed around the Eúskaro flour mill that controls everything from the fields where wheat is sewn to the bakeries where the bread is sold, none of our proposals or initiatives has ever been taken into account. You, señor Presidente, must understand what a formidable enemy we have. Their greed is so enormous that they want to ruin our small shops.

The fears of these Mexican bakers increased with the implementation of the first reglamento in January 1929. In addition to regulating working conditions within the Spanish-owned bakeries, the reglamento sought to severely restrict the Mexican bakeries’ production and access to consumers. Now it was illegal to bake bread in buildings connected to private living quarters.

---

76 La Prensa 5/3/1936.
affected the rudimentary workshops in tenement patios, but exempted the major bakeries whose second-story dormitories had separate entrances and addresses. The reglamento also strengthened the Basques’ dominance of the physical space of the city by mandating that no bakery could be within 500 meters of another. Likewise, retail outlets had to be 300 meters apart; these distances were later shortened to 400 and 300 meters, respectively. The hundred or so Spanish-owned bakeries were located throughout the central neighborhoods, effectively controlling the market. Moreover, corner stores and peddlers, which offered the independent bakers access to the public, could only sell bread that licensed bakeries produced. Finally, the reglamento set out punishments ($1,000.00 and/or two weeks of prison) for “persons or associations that effectuate any combination that would constitute improper competition, with the pretext of making special offers to the public.”

The government emphasized that the provisions related to distance and illicit “combinations” would protect the small shops from price wars waged against them by the large bakeries. But, as the small bakers pointed out, it was the “Spanish monopoly” that insisted on these rules. Now that the major bakery owners were under pressure to implement the constitutional mandates related to labor, they insisted that they small shops that did not comply enjoyed an unfair advantage. Hence, “improper competition” did not refer to the Basques’

78 Diario Oficial 1/15/1929, 7–8.
simultaneous ownership of wheat fields, mills, and bakeries—which had been illegal during the colonial period—but rather to the small bakers’ practice of selling bread at cheaper prices. Later reglamentos made this explicit by fixing prices and weight: on the one hand, these controls protected consumers from “microscopic” bread that consumers continually bemoaned; but, on the other, they prohibited bread that weighed more and cost less. Officials responded to the complaint that the minimum weight provision hurt consumers by arguing that “prohibiting the sale of such bread is imminently revolutionary” since heavier bread meant more work for bakers. Consumers, furthermore, “obtain no benefit,” since such pieces were “undoubtedly of inferior quality.” In 1869 the critics cited above had attributed under-sized bread to foreigners’ greed and official indifference; now the revolutionary laws appeared to sanction and defend that greed.

The logic of state formation helps to clarify what seemed arbitrary to both consumers and small producers. The state depended on the large bakery owners because they controlled the supply of wheat and flour throughout much of the country, and provided the city with the bulk of its bread. Furthermore, by the time of the Revolution, many had become central promoters of industrial development. In addition to the concrete services these entrepreneurs provided, the state needed their political influence; if the political elite could not always

count on their support, it at least needed to prevent their opposition. By sponsoring negotiations between owners and workers, the state was in a position to make concessions to the bourgeoisie while maintaining some leverage over it. Leverage came in the form of support for labor; concessions, in the repression of the independent bakers—an notably expendable group that neither offered nor threatened. Similar considerations determined the state’s treatment of labor. Incorporating workers allowed the state to mollify labor radicalism and at the same time legitimize itself as the faithful interpreter of the Revolution. Organized labor also became an instrument of the state to counterbalance the force of the bourgeoisie. By bringing together both forces in negotiations, the state asserted itself as the necessary arbiter of conflict, the fulcrum of social equilibrium.

Yet, such a balance was elusive, and the reglamentos did not end conflicts between owners and workers. Although few strikes broke out in the 1930s, antagonism between the two groups was constant. The purpose of negotiations now was to avoid strikes, rather than resolve them. Owners used the negotiations to pressure local officials to crack down on the small bakeries. For instance, in 1932, a settlement between owners and the union over wages was followed by a wave of repression against the independent bakers. Health inspectors and city police barraged them with fines, confiscated their bread, closed their shops, and arrested their peddlers.\footnote{\textit{El Gráfico} 12/6/1932; Sebastian Moreno to Abelardo L. Rodríguez, México, D.F., 11/21/1932, AGN Presidentes, ALR, caja 202, exp. 561.8/5; Marcelino Feria to Abelardo L. Rodríguez, México, D.F., 11/21/1932, AGN Presidentes, ALR, caja 202, exp. 561.8/5.} Such actions continued
throughout the decade as organized labor and the “Spanish monopoly” negotiated their mutual grievances. Indeed, if there were fewer strikes in the 1930s than in the previous decade, it is largely because the small bakeries paid the price of the major owners’ concessions.

When strikes did break out, the small bakers attempted to take advantage of the momentary opening to sell more bread. This earned them the animosity of organized bakers, who launched considerable violence upon them. During strikes, armed unionists patrolled the streets and even the entrances to the city to prevent any sales of bread that could weaken their position. They terrorized the small, Mexican-owned shops, damaging machinery, breaking furniture, and beating the bakers inside. At least once, strike-breaking bakers were stoned to death. At other shops, the police arrived together with the strikers, “making the non-unionized bakers (libres) suspend their labors and close in order to prevent the striking workers from causing more bloody clashes.” By defending their own position, the unionist bakers unwittingly also became the shock troops of their employers.

In vain, the small bakers appealed to the federal government for protection. Local officials not only turned a blind eye to the violence, but actively persecuted small producers, confiscating bread, closing their shops, and refusing the renew their licenses, even when they fulfilled all the reglamento’s

---

81 *La Prensa* 1/4/1938; *El Gráfico* 1/6/38; *El Universal* 1/7/1938; *Excélsior* 1/7/1938.
conditions.\textsuperscript{83} Even the President’s weekly radio broadcast, “La Hora Nacional,”
denounced the “illegal competition” and the “reactionary agitation” of the small
bakery owners.\textsuperscript{84} At the end of the 1930s, advisors to President Lázaro Cárdenas
warned that if the former owners of the small bakeries closed in the decade did
not find employment in other sectors, fascism could take root among them, just it
was among small shopkeepers in contemporary Germany.\textsuperscript{85} This was clearly a
misrepresentation for, although they had little to thank the Revolution for, the
small, independent bakers had no clout to offer any movements led by the
“Reaction.” Their real threat, as the report itself noted, was indirect, in that their
situation publicly highlighted a contradiction between the anti-capitalist,
nationalist rhetoric and actions of the Revolution—embodied in the
expropriation of petroleum of 1938—and the repression of independent artisans
in support of immigrant entrepreneurs.

\textbf{Conclusions}

\textsuperscript{83} María Nieves Viudad de Rivera Gómez Viudad de Rivera, dueña de expendio en Plaza
Garibaldi to Oficina de Licencias e Inspección Jefe del Departamento Central, México, D.F.,
4/8/1936, AGN Presidentes, LCR, caja 355, exp. 415.2/21; Sebastián Moreno to Lázaro Cárdenas,
México, D.F., 4/2/1937, AGN Presidentes, LCR, caja 637, exp. 521/8; Sebastián Moreno to Lázaro
\textsuperscript{84} Excélsior 1/9/1939.
\textsuperscript{85} Jesús Dr. Díaz Barriga to Lázaro Cárdenas, México, D.F., 1/16/1939, AGN Presidentes, LCR,
caja 637, exp. 521/8.
What had begun as a clear and compelling struggle between exploited Mexican workers and repressive Spanish bosses before the Revolution, shifted toward inter-class collaboration against a third group in the Revolution’s aftermath. This collaboration should not be overstated: antagonism between workers and employers increased together with the repression against the independent bakers and climaxed when the leader of the baker’s union shot dead a Spanish owner inside the Conciliation and Arbitration Bureau. Indeed, the attacks on small bakeries were a consequence of this antagonism: as these two dominant forces became increasingly strong, the always imperfect and elusive resolution of their conflicts occurred at the cost of weaker groups—indeed, independent bakers and, to a lesser degree, consumers. This triangulation of contentions reveals not only a state that manipulated and co-opted the labor movement, but also how class conflict benefited precisely the group that revolutionaries had previously excoriated.

---