

As Wal-Marts and Starbucks inundate Mexico's urban landscape, the apparent triumph of market capitalism belies a long history of popular, and often violent, resistance to unfettered free markets. How did Mexico arrive at its present free market orientation? My dissertation explores how, beginning in the 1970s, networks of businessmen cultivated grassroots support for Mexico's transition to a market economy. Mexico's path to neoliberalism - a generic term referring to integrated policies of privatization, international free trade, and dramatically reduced public spending - was a tumultuous one. Yet unlike in other nations of the Global South, where dictatorships forcibly imposed neoliberal reforms, Mexico's transition was largely peaceful. Nor were Mexicans the mere recipients of policies conceived in the intellectual laboratories of economists and policy elites, as prevailing accounts suggest. In Mexico as elsewhere, neoliberalism entailed a shift in ideology and worldview: it was a transnational cultural and political process in which state and non-state actors actively nurtured a new vision of society and of the state's role in it. Businesspeople were integral, though understudied, agents in this process. By examining how the exchange of ideas and strategies among Mexican and U.S. businessmen nourished support for free markets in Mexico, my research seeks to place Mexico's neoliberal transition within its proper transnational and cultural contexts.

With the generous support of the Harvard History Project I was able to further these investigations at the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), in College Park, Maryland, and in the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin. At NARA I examined records, spanning the period from roughly 1970 to 1976, from the U.S. State Department Central Files, which include reports and correspondences from the U.S. embassy in Mexico City as well as from U.S. consulates in Mexico. Of the documents at NARA, the most important to my investigations were consular records from the historically conservative cities of Monterrey and Guadalajara.

Consular officials in Monterrey and Guadalajara held regular meetings with U.S. businessmen operating in Mexico and their Mexican counterparts. Their reports provide valuable insights into the activities, perspectives, and concerns of private sector actors in Mexico. Private sector grievances against the Mexican government, among Mexican as well as U.S. businessmen, became increasingly acute after 1970, when Mexican president Luis Echeverría Álvarez (1970-1976) assumed office. Responding to intense social and political unrest, Echeverría moved official rhetoric decidedly leftward. He stridently criticized both the Mexican private sector and U.S. foreign investors in public speeches and pronouncements, proclaiming an age of "shared development" to supersede the era of capital accumulation that preceded his presidency. Consular records confirm that Echeverría's public tenor was a source of considerable anxiety among U.S. businessmen. Over the course of Echeverría's presidency, U.S. diplomatic officers fielded a barrage of predictable but unusually forceful complaints from U.S. business representatives lamenting economic uncertainties stemming from changing rules and regulations. Citing the president's populist inclinations, many warned, unrealistically, of imminent, widespread expropriations of American holdings in Mexico. More telling than such customary objections, however, consular records from this period reveal a strong convergence in the views and concerns of Mexican and U.S. businessmen, at least among the elite cadres with access to U.S. government officials. Whether Mexican or U.S.

American, business elites were transnational actors, and they interpreted events in Mexico through the lens of global developments.

In their meetings with consular officials, U.S. businessmen frequently expressed concerns, common among Mexican industrialists, that Echeverría was leading Mexico toward socialism. Echoing the warnings of Mexico's more conservative businessmen, they cited Echeverría's public support of Chile's socialist president, Salvador Allende, and his professed "thirdworldism" in the realm of foreign policy as evidence of this goal. Such red-baiting tactics were a historical staple of conservative opposition in Mexico and will not surprise scholars of the period. But in the context of escalating leftist guerrilla violence in Mexico, the election (and overthrow) of Allende in Chile, and the widespread social and economic disillusionment that accompanied the global recession of the 1970s, business leaders were more acutely sensitive to criticisms of the capitalist system. In their meetings with consular officials many spoke of a worldwide assault on free enterprise. Echeverría, in their view, represented a dangerous ideological trend which threatened the very foundations of global capitalism. This perception galvanized business leaders in Mexico, leading them to develop new strategies for challenging the state and for propagating free market ideology. The sources that I uncovered at the Benson Latin American Library in Austin offer a rare glimpse into the nature and implications of these strategies.

My investigations at the Benson Library focused primarily on two private sector organizations: the American Chamber of Commerce of Mexico (AmCham) and the Mexico-U.S. Business Committee. AmCham was an influential actor in Mexico and its members enjoyed close ties to some of Mexico's most powerful businessmen. Although AmCham's influence is widely acknowledged among scholars of the period, because it is a private organization few publicly available sources offer substantive details on its activities. At the Benson Library I mined numerous editions of AmCham's quarterly bulletin, *Business Mexico*. *Business Mexico's* readership, like AmCham's membership roster, expanded rapidly during the 1970s and 1980s. The publication contains a wealth of information on AmCham's individual and corporate members, their perspectives on events in Mexico, and AmCham activities and affiliations. But the magazine, which also had a sizable Mexican subscribership, was itself a forum for transmitting ideas, perspectives, and expertise on a broad range of issues affecting the private sector. While the value of such a rich source resists succinct summation, one theme in particular stands out: corporate leaders were gravely concerned with what they perceived as the deteriorating ideological legitimacy of capitalism—and a concomitant rise in statism—worldwide. Among the most oft-repeated themes in *Business Mexico* articles during the 1970s and 1980s was the supposedly dire need for business leaders to use publicists and public relations activities to counter the diminishing ideological prestige of free enterprise. My earlier research in Mexican sources uncovered a parallel trend among Mexican businessmen, many of whom shared close ties with AmCham members. That such strategies took shape simultaneously among U.S. and Mexican businessmen is illustrative of the kinds of transnational cultural and ideological work that shaped the rise of the free market consensus in the Americas. *Business Mexico* and other AmCham publications will enable me to more accurately assess how these strategies were shared, among whom, and to what effect.

In addition to AmCham publications, the Benson Library also houses a collection of materials on the Mexico-U.S. Business Committee. The Mexico-U.S. Business Committee was a bi-national private sector organization composed of Mexican and U.S. businessmen and sponsored by AmCham, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the Council of the Americas. The limited scholarly work on the committee, which does not incorporate the Benson materials, credits the organization with helping to negotiate the formal parameters of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The committee, however, was active in both the United States and Mexico decades before the NAFTA accords. The collection at the Benson Library not only provides a record of this engagement. The letters and correspondences exchanged among committee members, their allies, and associates reveal the individual voices of private sector actors whose inner thoughts and motives are otherwise inaccessible to researchers. Though I have only begun to analyze the documents that I culled from this collection, they offer uncommon insights into poorly understood aspects of contemporary political and economic history. They constitute an invaluable addition to my source base.

The generous backing of the Harvard History Project has enabled me to address research questions central to my investigations but for which germane printed sources are scarce. Research on the ways that businesspeople helped to construct a free market consensus in the Americas has been slow to emerge. Better known to scholars are the histories of major trade agreements and international accords, of which NAFTA is a key example. Though heavily contested, such agreements were also milestones plotting a broad shift in worldview among the peoples of an increasingly interconnected hemispheric society. NAFTA was more than a contract between governments. It grew out of the shared history of its members – a history formed not only through proximity and policy but through constant movement and exchange among groups and individuals whose interests and identities resounded in the politics and cultures of the societies they traversed. Businesspeople were, and are, vital agents in this shared history. We cannot understand Mexico's neoliberal transition or the global transformations of which it was a part without taking their efforts into account.

I am deeply grateful to the Harvard History Project, the Harvard Joint Centre for History and Economics, and the Institute for New Economic Thinking for facilitating these investigations. Their support has been critical to the development of my research, which I am confident will help to illuminate the transnational and cultural history of contemporary economic life. Whatever contributions it yields will owe much to the History Project.