

Reflective Essay

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I began working on this thesis project in winter quarter 2023. After listening to a lecture in my Latin American history class, I became interested in the history of French imperialism in Latin America. After a discussion with my professor, he suggested I read David Todd's *A Velvet Empire: French Informal Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*. Todd's book tracks the history of French informal imperialism in the nineteenth century, and argues that the concept of informal empire, which was originally developed to describe behaviors of the British Empire, should be applied to France.¹ Intrigued by what I read, I decided to investigate further, and narrowed my focus onto the French intervention in Mexico and the Mexican Second Empire (1861-1864), when France's Emperor Napoleon III invaded Mexico, and established a monarchy headed by the Austrian Archduke Maximilian.

This "Mexican Second Empire" has traditionally been seen as nothing but a French imposed scam, only supported by a few conservative Mexicans.² In the early 2000's, however, the historian Erika Pani revealed that a large portion of the country's elites collaborated with the foreign established monarchy.³ I became fascinated by these Mexican collaborators and their contribution to French imperialism in Mexico. I started to read as many primary and secondary sources as possible, to get a better sense of the literature on the topic. Of particular interest was Edward Shawcross's *France, Mexico and Informal Empire in Latin America, 1820-1867:*

Equilibrium in the New World, which is the first book length analysis of the French intervention

¹ David Todd, *A Velvet Empire: French Informal Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

² Erika Pani, *El Segundo Imperio: pasados de usos múltiples* (México: Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, 2004).

³ Erika Pani, *Para Mexicanizar El Segundo Imperio: El Imaginario Político de Los Imperialistas*, (México: El Colegio de México, 2001).

in Mexico and the Mexican Second Empire, using informal imperialism as an approach. Despite the fact that I read roughly fifteen secondary sources in this initial phase of my research, I remained unsure of how I could contribute to the historiography on the French intervention in Mexico and the Mexican Second Empire.

In late August and early September of 2023, I went on a ten day trip to Paris to visit the *Archives National* and the *Archives des Affaires Étrangères à La Courneuve*. My goal, while at the French archives, was to look through the collection that previous historians had seen, and find new sources. I found many documents on France's commercial, political, and strategic interests in Mexico. However, when I got back to California, I still felt unsure about what my research would contribute to the existing literature. So I continued to look for digitized primary sources and secondary literature.

About halfway through fall quarter, my professor suggested that I look into the literature about French colonization of Algeria. I agreed and borrowed several books on that topic. I had a breakthrough after reading Jennifer Sessions *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria*. In part two of the book, Sessions argues that the French employed a “fertility myth” about Algeria's environment as an excuse to colonize the arid country.⁴ This “fertility myth” wrongfully posited that Algeria was uniquely fertile in ancient times but that indigenous nomads had since destroyed the country's forests and turned them into desert.⁵ I noticed parallels between this portrayal of the French colony and French sources' characterization of Mexico's environment. More importantly, I saw a number of notable differences between French views about Algeria's environment (which was characterized as damaged and “degraded”), and their portrayal of Mexico (which was fertile yet “abandoned”). These observations became the basis

⁴ Jennifer Sessions, *By Sword and Plow : France and the Conquest of Algeria* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011).

⁵ Sessions, *By Sword and Plow*.

of my analysis of the role that French and Mexican beliefs about Mexico's environment played in facilitating France's informal imperial venture into the country.

Now that I had an original topic that engaged with the literature on nineteenth century intellectual history, environmental history, history of science, and the history of empire, I began the process of honing in and refining this argument. This required me not only to straighten my primary source base, but also to read more secondary sources on a wide variety of topics (including economic histories, geographical works, etc.).

In searching for these sources, I relied on resources available to me through the UC Davis library. I started by either doing a keyword search in the UC Davis library catalog, or by looking through the footnotes of works I had already read. I found many sources this way. However, when this strategy did not yield enough results, I turned to Worldcat, Jstor, and other research databases to look for harder to find books, journal articles, and dissertations. I also found one important source, Victor Bulmer-Thomas's *The Economic History of Latin America Since Independence*, by perusing through the library stacks. I acquired most of this secondary literature through the UC Davis library, and read both digitized sources available on ProQuest, Jstor, etc. and physical books which I borrowed. On a few occasions, I used the interlibrary loan service to get materials that were not available at UC Davis. To effectively evaluate the value of a potential secondary source, I first checked if it was peer reviewed, then I looked at when it was published, and compared its argument with that of other secondary sources, and to the information in primary sources I had seen. If the source appeared useful, and up to date in its argument, then I would use it.

In addition to the primary sources I found at the archives in France (which make up about a quarter of my primary source base), I used a large amount of digitized primary sources to build

my argument. I found the vast majority of these by doing keyword searches on *HathiTrust*, *Galleca*, and the *Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México*. The sources I found in these databases consisted mostly of contemporary pamphlets, books, and newspaper articles, in other words, sources which reveal what French and Mexican elites wanted others to think, but not necessarily what they themselves thought. To answer questions about what elites themselves believed, I turned either to the government sources I photographed at the French archives, or to documents digitized by the Mexican *Archivos Generales de la Nación* and French *Archives des Affaires Etrangères à Nantes*.

This has been an incredibly difficult research project to complete. From the beginning, I was challenged in my capacity to find sources and in my ability to come up with a truly original topic. I was required to read sources in multiple languages, including English, French and Spanish. Additionally, I had to use both online databases and physical archives in a foreign country to find primary sources. This meant that I had to learn how to do archival research fast in order to make my research trip to Paris productive. As a first step into historical research, this was an incredibly ambitious project, and took me over a year to complete. I can confidently say that if not for the resources available to me through the UC Davis Library, researching this thesis would have been impossible.

No AI tools/technologies were used in the writing of this paper.