

Mexican Fertility, Agricultural Regeneration, and French Informal Imperialism in Mexico, 1861-1867

By
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Introduction

In the midst of an unexpectedly difficult and unpopular campaign to establish a monarchy in Mexico, an anonymously written 1863 French pamphlet characterized the campaign's aim as "to help Mexicans establish— by their own free will— a government with a chance of being stable."¹ Why did Mexicans need this new government? The pamphlet's author gave many reasons, including a perceived need to save the "Latin" race in Mexico and a hope to "regenerate our transatlantic commerce."² However, of note was the author's lengthy description of Mexico's unmatched "wealth" and "fertility," and his accompanying question, "why is it that [Mexico's] inhabitants have not benefited more from [the country's wealth and fertility]?"³ His answer lay in Mexico's political instability – it was therefore imperative to rescue this "unfortunate" country with "the intelligent liberalism of the French flag."⁴

My thesis examines the exaggerated notion that Mexico was exceptionally rich and fertile yet abandoned and underdeveloped (what I call the Mexican "fertility trope"), and its uses to justify the French intervention in Mexico (1861-1864) and subsequent Mexican Second Empire (1864-1867). Guiding this thesis are four questions: First, where did this Mexican fertility trope come from and to what extent did French ideas about the Mexican people's level of "civilization" influence this trope? Second, how did Mexican government and intellectual elites view their country's environment, agriculture and/or fertility? Third, to what extent did French

¹ *La France, Le Mexique, Et Les États Confédérés* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1863), 8, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.hx2nz6&seq=16>.

² *La France, Le Mexique, Et Les États Confédérés*, 10.

³ *La France, Le Mexique, Et Les États Confédérés*, 13.

⁴ *La France, Le Mexique, Et Les États Confédérés*, 17.

ideas about agriculture, the environment, and fertility influence the Mexican elite's ideas about Mexico's agriculture and fertility? And finally, did Mexican elites take advantage of French ideas about Mexico's fertility and/or influence the conduct of French officials in Mexico?

In answering these questions, I argue that the French partially reproduced certain ideas and tactics from the colonial Algerian precedent into the informal imperial Mexican project (both deliberately and coincidentally). Of these, this thesis focuses on an adapted and less extreme version of what historian Jennifer Sessions calls the Algerian "fertility myth" into an exaggerated belief that Mexico was uniquely suited for agriculture but that the land had been "abandoned" by Mexicans.⁵ From this belief, it followed that French forces needed to intervene in Mexico and help its inhabitants "regenerate" their country. In contrast to the Algerian version of a "fertility myth", and in line with French ideas that Mexicans were more or less "civilized," French intellectuals praised the ancient Aztec' agricultural techniques, and did not view Mexicans as degrading their country's environment (as was the case with indigenous Algerians).

This idea that Mexico was uniquely "fertile" and in need of "regeneration" was appealing to some Mexican elites (especially those Erika Pani calls the "imperialistas"), who, inspired by the same sources as their French counterparts (particularly the works of Alexander von Humboldt) held their own, parallel, and independently conceived fertility trope about Mexico's environment. These elites collaborated with the French, especially through scientific mediums like the *Commission Scientifique du Mexique* and the *Commission Scientifique, Littéraire et Artistique*, to take advantage of the French fertility trope and refine/implement their own state building and "modernization" goals which they shared with their peers across Latin America. Despite this shared view, the inherently unrealistic and dreamy nature of the fertility trope created tensions

⁵ Jennifer Sessions, *By Sword and Plow : France and the Conquest of Algeria* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 208.

when applied to real policy issues. This was especially true in the realm of migration policy, where both sides hoped to encourage agrarian migration to the empire, but Mexican government officials had to reign in many of their expectations when forced to deal with the realities of governing the empire.

Ultimately, I argue that analyzing this event through this lens of agricultural development and its associated beliefs allows for a more nuanced understanding of French goals, philosophy, and objectives in Mexico. Moreover, this analysis allows for a more complete understanding of the role that local elites, and their hope to modernize Mexico, played in the French imperial project in that country, the reasons why those elites collaborated with and legitimized an imperial project in their country, and the limits of this collaboration.

Background

In the 1820's nearly all of the Iberian peninsula's American colonies gained independence. In the years that followed, the region's Creole (Latin American of Iberian origin) elites, faced with the challenge of consolidating and governing their new countries, became early participants in the nineteenth century's state building frenzy.⁶ This happened while much of Europe and North America were industrializing. Feeling that they were missing out, Latin America's Creole elites became obsessed with the idea of modernizing their countries through immigration, industrialization, and agricultural development (with an emphasis on exportable cash crops/raw materials like cotton, coffee, sugar and silver).⁷ The region, however, spent much of the century

⁶ Fernando López-Alves, "Modernization Theory Revisited: Latin America, Europe, and the U.S. in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century," *Anuario colombiano de historia social y de la cultura* 38, no. 1 (2011): 243–279.

⁷ López-Alves, "Modernization Theory Revisited."

Casey Marina Lurtz, "Developing the Mexican Countryside: The Department of Fomento's Social Project of Modernization," *The Business History Review* 90, no. 3 (2016).

Victor Bulmer-Thomas, *The Economic History of Latin America since Independence*, Third edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 36-41.

plagued by continuous political instability, unstable economic growth (with regional variations),⁸ and foreign interventions.⁹

Mexico presents a particularly poignant example of this instability. The country won its independence in 1821. Unlike Spain's other former colonies, Mexico began not as a republic, but as a monarchy. The country's "First Empire" was ruled by the independence leader Agustín de Iturbide, but the "Plan de Iguala" under which it was organized had originally called for a European monarch, Spain's Fernando VII, to become Mexico's emperor.¹⁰ Iturbide's regime did not last, and in 1822, the First Empire was toppled and Mexico was declared a republic. In the years that followed, the country experienced a wave of civil wars and foreign interventions culminating in the loss of nearly half of the country's territory in a war with the United States in 1848.¹¹ In 1857, Mexican liberals mounted a successful rebellion against the conservative Antonio López de Santa Anna, declared a liberal constitution, and proclaimed religious tolerance (up to that point, Catholicism had been Mexico's established religion). The ensuing war of the "Reforma" between supporters of the new constitution and religious conservatives ended in victory for the liberals in 1860.¹²

In 1861, having just won the Reforma, and with the country's finances in disarray, Mexico's new president, Benito Juárez, canceled debt payments to foreign creditors and set the stage for the French to intervene in Mexico's affairs. In response to Juárez's action, and taking advantage

Leida Fernández Prieto, "Islands of Knowledge: Science and Agriculture in the History of Latin America and the Caribbean," *Isis* 104, no. 4 (2013): 788–797.

⁸ Bulmer-Thomas, *The Economic History of Latin America since Independence*, 37.

⁹ France blockaded Vera Cruz in the late 1830's, France and England blockaded the Río de La Plata together in the late 1840's, and the United States invaded Mexico in 1848.

¹⁰ "1821, The Plan of Iguala" (2019). *Mexican Government Documents*. 2. https://digitalcommons.esumb.edu/hornbeck_mex_2/2, Article 4.

¹¹ Alfredo Álvila and John Tutino, "Becoming Mexico: The Conflictive search for a North American Nation," in *New Countries : Capitalism, Revolutions, and Nations in the Americas, 1750-1870*, ed. John Tutino (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 266-269.

¹² Erika Pani, "Juárez vs. Maximiliano: Mexico's Experiment with Monarchy." In *American Civil Wars, 167-196*, ed. Don Doyle (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

of the Civil War in the United States, the governments of France, Britain and Spain organized a military expedition to collect their debts. It soon became clear that French Emperor Napoleon III had broader ambitions for regime change, and the two other powers pulled out of the war. In 1863 the French army entered Mexico city, and with the help of a group of friendly Mexican collaborators, the Mexican Second Empire was declared with the Habsburg prince Maximilian (Franz Joseph' brother) at its throne.¹³ This regime, however, never controlled the entire Mexican territory (Juarez and his compatriots held much of its north), and only lasted until 1867, when, due to a combination of U.S. pressure and geopolitical instability in Europe, Napoleon III suddenly pulled his troops out of Mexico, and Juarez's guerrilla force captured and executed Maximilian.

The French intervention in Mexico, and subsequent Mexican Empire occurred during a period when successive French governments prioritized a policy of informal imperialism abroad over direct colonial control (the notable and key exception being Algeria). This policy was favored between 1815 and 1870, when a politically unstable France was governed by a succession of monarchies, a pattern only briefly interrupted by the short-lived Second Republic (1848-1852). These monarchical governments, and especially the last, Napoleon III's "Second Empire,"¹⁴ were notable in their dedication to economic liberalism, and they specialized in the export of luxury products and an associated "neo-courtly" culture as a form of soft power.¹⁵

Nineteenth century French political culture and foreign policy was heavily influenced by the ideas of the Saint-Simonian political cult. Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) was a French

¹³ Pani, "Juárez vs. Maximiliano."

Franz Joseph was the Emperor of Austria. In addition, Maximilian was a cousin of Brazilian Emperor Pedro II.

¹⁴ Napoleon III (Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte) was Napoleon Bonaparte's nephew. He won the French Presidency democratically shortly after the establishment of the Second Republic in 1848. In December 1851 he initiated a self-coup and eventually declared himself emperor of France in early 1852.

¹⁵ David Todd, *A Velvet Empire: French Informal Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 14.

nobleman and early socialist who advocated for creating a society built on “industry” and work.¹⁶ Saint-Simon was fascinated by the emerging scientific disciplines of the early nineteenth century and envisioned an “industrious” society based on and governed by the sciences.¹⁷ His ideas would inspire a group of young intellectuals to establish the Saint-Simonian intellectual cult.¹⁸ This group included many influential figures, including Prosper Enfantin, Auguste Comte and Michel Chevalier.¹⁹ Inspired by Saint-Simon’s glorification of science and “industriousness,” the Saint-Simonians appropriated their founder’s ideas and created an intellectual religion which informed their thoughts about society, science, economics, etc. The cult was initially persecuted by the French authorities.²⁰ However, as the nineteenth century progressed, former Saint-Simonians became increasingly powerful in French society and intellectual circles, particularly in Napoleon III’s cabinet, where they influenced the regime’s economic policies, its conduct in Algeria, and its dedication to informal imperialism elsewhere.²¹ The cult’s glorification of science would also influence intellectuals beyond France, including in Latin America.²²

The establishment of Mexico’s Second Empire was the culminating example of mid-nineteenth century French informal imperial policy. French officials made it clear from the start that their intention was not to create a colony in Mexico. One anonymous pamphlet outright declared that “France does not want a conquest of Mexico.”²³ Instead, French officials opted to

¹⁶ Antoine Picon, “La religion saint-simonienne,” *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 87, no. 1 (2003): 23–37.

¹⁷ Picon, “La religion saint-simonienne.”

¹⁸ Picon, “La religion saint-simonienne.”

¹⁹ Osama Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity: Saint-Simonians and the Civilizing Mission in Algeria* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2010), 27.

²⁰ Todd, *A Velvet Empire*, 51-58.

²¹ Todd, *A Velvet Empire*, 58.

²² Lurtz, “Developing the Mexican Countryside.”

Erika Pani, “Dreaming of a Mexican Empire: The Political Projects of the ‘Imperialistas,’” *The Hispanic American historical review* 82, no. 1 (2002): 1–32.

²³ *Que Ferons-nous a Mexico?* (Paris, E. Dentu, 1863), 30, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5428013m>.

turn the country into a highly collaborative puppet state, which they claimed, would reflect the “habits” and “desires” of the Mexican people.²⁴ Although Mexico’s new regime relied on continued French military occupation for its survival and became a testing ground for French financial ventures,²⁵ the regime itself was governed by a clan of elite Mexican politicians and intellectuals attracted to the empire by its promise of political stability.²⁶

Historiography

Because of the fairly broad scope of this thesis project, the literature which it utilizes is also broad. Nevertheless, this thesis is primarily steeped in the historiography on “informal imperialism.” This concept, first popularized in the mid-twentieth century in studies of the British Empire, describes a kind of asymmetrical relationship between states and governments. Contrary to formal imperialism or colonialism, informal imperial control manifests itself through economic domination, cultural influence, and/or gunboat diplomacy as opposed to the direct control of a territory by a colonial power.²⁷ Informal Imperialism has become a central component of the historical analysis of British and U.S. relations with nineteenth and twentieth century Latin America.²⁸ Whether a specific relationship between sovereign states is imperial in

²⁴ Edward Shawcross, *France, Mexico and Informal Empire in Latin America, 1820-1867: Equilibrium in the New World* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018).

J. P Douchon-Doris, *Lettre adressée à S. Exc. M. le ministre du Commerce, de l'agriculture et des travaux publics: sur le Mexique et les conséquences de l'expédition française dans ces riches contrées* (Bordeaux: Eugène Bissei, 1864), Gallica, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k54257452/f5.vertical>. Miquel De La Rosa, *French Liberalism and Imperialism in the Age of Napoleon III: Empire at Home, Colonies Abroad* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 137-179.

²⁵ Noah Glaser, "The Age of Regeneration: Capitalism and the French Intervention in Mexico (1861-1867)," Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Chicago, 2022. 7-9.

²⁶ Erika Pani, *Para Mexicanizar El Segundo Imperio: El Imaginario Político de Los Imperialistas*, (México: El Colegio de México, 2001).

Shawcross, *France, Mexico and Informal Empire in Latin America, 1820-1867*.

²⁷ John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade,” *The Economic History Review* 6, no. 1 (1953).

Matthew Brown, “Introduction to ‘Informal Empire in Latin America,’” in *Informal Empire in Latin America: Culture, Commerce and Capital*, ed. Matthew Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 3.

²⁸ Brown, “Introduction,” 1-22.

nature, however, can be difficult to determine. Imperial relationships in general, and informal imperial relationships in particular do not have easily identified “winners” in a dominant state, and “losers” in a subordinate one.²⁹ Moreover, informal imperial relationships are highly collaborative, and require a certain degree of consent from elites in states subject to imperial domination.³⁰ The case study examined in this thesis is a clear example of such an informal imperial relationship, but my analysis of the ways that elites in Mexico helped legitimize Napoleon III’s imperial project in the country shows just how murky these relationships can be.

While “informal imperialism” as a concept has existed since the 1950s, it only began to be applied to nineteenth century France in the late 2010s and 2020s. A recent and important work adapting this concept to France is David Todd’s *A Velvet Empire: French Informal Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (2021), in which he provides a broad overview of French foreign policy between 1815 and 1870 and argues that the concept of “informal imperialism” should be applied to nineteenth century France. Furthermore, while the British Empire used the production of cheap manufactured goods as its primary tool of informal influence, the French specialized in the production of luxury products (thus a “velvet” empire).³¹ Despite its importance for this project, *A Velvet Empire* is limited by its broad geographic and temporal scope. Edward Shawcross’ *France, Mexico and Informal Empire in Latin America, 1820-1867: Equilibrium in the New World* (2018) is the first book length analysis of the French intervention in Mexico (and French foreign policy in general) adopting an informal imperial approach.³² Shawcross’ focus on French imperialism in Mexico is why this specific work is particularly valuable to my analysis.

²⁹ Alan Knight, “Rethinking British Informal Empire in Latin America (Especially Argentina),” in *Informal Empire in Latin America: Culture, Commerce and Capital*, ed. Matthew Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 29.

³⁰ Todd, *A Velvet Empire*, 1-2.

Brown, “Introduction,” 1-22.

³¹ Todd, *A Velvet Empire*, 20.

³² Shawcross, *France, Mexico and Informal Empire in Latin America, 1820-1867*, 81-110.

Mexican historiography on the Second Empire has traditionally dismissed the regime as an imposed puppet government that was only supported by a few conservative traitors.³³ At the turn of the millennium, historian Erika Pani introduced an alternative perspective. In her book *Para Mexicanizar el Segundo Imperio* (2001), Pani argued that although the empire was established by the French, it was nonetheless supported by a clan of influential Mexican elites. The “Imperialistas,” as she calls them, came from different backgrounds and political affiliations, yet, for various reasons, they chose to collaborate with, and work for the Second Empire.³⁴ This book, and Pani’s work in general, is extremely important to this project. That said, Pani chooses to omit most mention of France’s role in establishing and maintaining the Second Empire. This shortcoming is addressed in Shawcross’ *France, Mexico and Informal Empire in Latin America*, in which he argues that an analysis of the second empire needs to be both “Mexiconized” (as Pani argues) and “Imperialized.”³⁵

This thesis responds and adds to the above historiography by analyzing the role that the French aspirations to exploit Mexico’s supposedly superior yet untapped and abandoned “fertility” played in France’s imperial project in Mexico. Because this fertility trope was also held by Mexico’s elites who collaborated with the French (in part because of it), examining French informal imperialism through this agrarian lens demonstrates just how important the willing collaboration of Mexican elites was to French imperialism in Mexico. By extension, this analysis will reveal some of the limitations of informal imperialism in the country, especially within the realm of migration policy.

³³ Erika Pani, *El Segundo Imperio: pasados de usos múltiples* (México: Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, 2004), 55-88.

³⁴ Pani, *Para Mexicanizar El Segundo Imperio*, 20-21.

³⁵ Shawcross, *France, Mexico and Informal Empire in Latin America, 1820-1867*.

To better understand the French and Mexican views on agriculture during this period, I familiarized myself with a particularly diverse array of works. Jennifer Sessions' *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria* (2011) analyzes French settler colonial policies in 1830s and 40s Algeria, and in part, argues that a French myth about the Algerian soil's "fertility" was a major motivation behind French colonization of the arid country.³⁶ Although the book does not mention Mexico, and focuses on formal colonization, it is nonetheless valuable because of the parallels between what Sessions calls the Algerian "fertility myth" and French portrayals of Mexico and its environment. To further contextualize and understand the background behind this fertility myth, I read geographer Diana Davis' *The Arid Lands: History, Power, Knowledge* (2016), which tracks the history of negative attitudes towards desert biomes and argues that the modern concept of "desertification" is a myth which originated from European misconceptions about native people in colonies who had used their arid lands in a "degrading" manner.³⁷ Finally, the article "El mito de la riqueza de México variaciones sobre un tema de Cosío Villegas" (2003) by Pedro Salmeron Sanginés, traces the intellectual history behind the Mexican "richness myth" held by many of the country's elites in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This article is valuable because it tracks the origins of the Mexican fertility trope. It does not, however, mention the Second Empire or the role that this myth might have played in its policies and governance.³⁸

My investigation into the intellectual history of Mexican agricultural development and fertility during the French intervention in Mexico/ Mexican Second Empire is relevant to the history of nineteenth century French imperialism and the Mexican Empire because elites on both sides of

³⁶ Sessions, *By Sword and Plow*, 208.

³⁷ Diana Davis, *The Arid Lands: History, Power, Knowledge* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 2-4.

³⁸ Pedro Salmerón Sanginés, "El Mito de La Riqueza de México Variaciones Sobre Un Tema de Cosío Villegas," *Estudios de historia moderna y contemporánea de México* 26, no. 26 (2003).

the Atlantic consistently stressed the role of agriculture as the keystone of “civilization” and as an important tool to build “modern nations.” The Mexican fertility trope heavily informed both French views about Mexico’s level of “civilization” and ability to govern itself, and Creole ideals about what a modern, “strong” Mexico would look like. In other words, examining the role that agriculture and “fertility” played in informing French imperialism in Mexico is crucial because elites of the time thought it was important.

Structure

The remainder of this thesis is composed of two parts (each comprising three subsections) followed by a brief conclusion. Part one, *French Intellectuals and the Mexican Fertility Trope*, analyzes the intellectual origins, uses, and peculiarities of the Mexican fertility trope among French intellectual elites. Its temporal frame spans the entire period in which French troops invaded and occupied Mexico (1861-1867). Part two, *Mexican Collaborators and the French Fertility Trope in Mexico*, focuses on the Mexican political and intellectual elite, and analyzes how the political elites who worked in Maximilian’s government interacted with and responded to the French fertility trope. The temporal frame of part two is therefore much narrower, and focuses on the period of the Mexican Second Empire (1864-1867).

Part One

French Intellectuals and the Mexican Fertility Trope

The French intervention in Mexico was largely influenced by two interrelated factors. On the one hand, French anxiety about the decline of a global “Latin” race (based in a philosophy known as “pan-latinism”) provided much of the ideological basis behind the French project, and informs most academic analysis of the intellectual history behind the intervention.³⁹ On the other hand, the French government was highly motivated by financial, strategic, and commercial interests, and set out to establish the empire with the expectation that the friendly regime would be good for business.⁴⁰ Part One of this thesis, *French Intellectuals and the Mexican Fertility Trope*, emphasizes the role that French views on the state and the potential of the Mexican environment and agriculture played in connecting this pan-Latinist ideology with French financial objectives in Mexico. It tracks the intellectual origins of French views on Mexico and its environment, and contrasts the notion that Mexico’s agriculture was “abandoned” with the similar, yet distinct French portrayal of the Algerian desert as being a “degraded” yet formerly fertile landmass.⁴¹ By analyzing these French views and perspectives, Part One analyzes the important role that notions of agricultural regeneration played in rationalizing the French imperial venture in Mexico.

A “Fertile” yet “Abandoned” Nation: French Views and Objectives for Mexico’s Agricultural Regeneration.

³⁹ Shawcross, *France, Mexico and Informal Empire in Latin America*, 119-155.

Christina Carroll, “Imperial Ideologies in the Second Empire: The Mexican Expedition and the Royaume Arabe,” *French historical studies* 42, no. 1 (2019): 67–100.

Nancy Barker, “The Factor of ‘Race’ in the French Experience in Mexico, 1821-1861,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 59, no. 1 (1979).

⁴⁰ Todd, *A Velvet Empire*.

Glaser, “The Age of Regeneration.”

⁴¹ Davis, *The Arid Lands*.

Sessions, *By Sword and Plow*.

After both Britain and Spain pulled out of the Mexican intervention in 1861, French politicians and intellectuals justified their goals of regime change in Mexico through a “Pan-Latinist” lens.⁴² “Pan-Latinism,” popularized in the early nineteenth century by the Saint-Simonian Michel Chevalier (1806- 1879), posited that the world was divided into distinct “races.” In the Americas, the two dominant races were the “Anglos,” who resided in the U.S., spoke a Germanic language, and practiced Protestantism, and the “Latins,” who represented most countries south of the U.S., and like the French, spoke Romance languages, and practiced Catholicism.⁴³ With this perspective, French intellectuals viewed the loss of Mexico’s northern territories to the U.S. in 1848 as threatening the “Latin” race. It followed that intervening in Mexico (and hopefully putting an end to its political instability) would not only lead to Mexico’s “regeneration”, but also to that of the Latin race in general.⁴⁴ While Pan-Latinism was important to French supporters of the intervention, it was not the full story. French elites were also crucially motivated by a connected yet distinct view that Mexico was “abandoned” and needed to be agriculturally “regenerated” with French help.

In spite of the flamboyance of the Pan-Latinist philosophy, as the French intervention in Mexico dragged on, and it became increasingly costly, the French public grew wary of the project.⁴⁵ The intervention occurred shortly after Napoleon III’s government loosened a series of gag laws put in place soon after a December 1851 *coup d’etat* that marked the start of his regime. This allowed the opposition “Liberal Party” to speak freely against some of the policies of the

⁴² Shawcross, *France, Mexico and Informal Empire in Latin America*, 119-155.

⁴³ Todd, *A Velvet Empire*, 51-58.

⁴⁴ Shawcross, *France, Mexico and Informal Empire in Latin America, 1820-1867*, 119-155.

⁴⁵ Jean Mayer, “Las Oposiciones francesas a la expédition du Mexique,” in *El poder y la sangre : guerra, estado y nación en la década de 1860*, Palacios, Guillermo, and Erika Pani, eds (México: El Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios Históricos, 2014).

regime of Napoleon III and organize a sustained opposition campaign to the Mexican project, further undermining its legitimacy among the French public.⁴⁶

In response to an increasingly sour atmosphere, supporters of the intervention published numerous books and pamphlets justifying the war. These works of propaganda reveal that French intellectuals believed that, in addition to protecting the Latin race in the Americas, the intervention was necessary because Mexico was uniquely “rich” and “fertile” and establishing a French-backed monarchy would help French economic interests. For example, in an 1864 open letter from a Bordeaux merchant to France’s Minister of Commerce, Agriculture and Public Works, the author, J. P Douchon-Doris, wrote that “Mexico can cultivate, harvest, and provide for commerce ... diverse ... products, in higher quantities than any other colony or country in the Americas and Asia,” and that with the help of the French, Mexico had the resources to become one of the “richest” countries in the world.⁴⁷

This notions of “richness” and “fertility” were intimately tied to the financial and commercial motives behind the intervention. Despite the many utopian and pan-Latinist justifications given by government officials, the Mexican project remained a highly financial venture, and commercial interests formed the basis behind ideas of “regenerating” Mexico.⁴⁸ Of particular importance was the desire to increase the export of French textiles to Mexico.⁴⁹ But this was not the only goal. In an 1863 letter from the French foreign minister, Édouard Drouyn de Lhuys, to

⁴⁶ De La Rosa, *French Liberalism and Imperialism in the Age of Napoleon III*, 148.

⁴⁷ J. P Douchon-Doris, *Lettre adressée à S. Exc. M. le ministre du Commerce, de l'agriculture et des travaux publics: sur le Mexique et les conséquences de l'expédition française dans ces riches contrées* (Bordeaux: Eugène Bissei, 1864), Gallica, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k54257452/f5.vertical>, 9-10.

⁴⁸ Glaser, "The Age of Regeneration," 18-27.

France, Ministry of Agriculture, Commerce and Public Works, “September 19, 1863 Communication on textile exports to Mexico,” September 19 1863, 29NCOM (186-186.5), Négociations Commerciales, Archives Des Affaires Étrangères, La Courneuve, France.

Todd, *A Velvet Empire*.

⁴⁹ France, “September 19, 1863 Communication on textile exports to Mexico.”

France, Ministry of Agriculture, Commerce and Public Works, “November 24, 1863 Letter on textile exports to Mexico,” November 24, 1863, 29NCOM (196-196.5), Negotiations Commerciales, Archives Des Affaires Étrangères, La Courneuve, France.

France's minister to Mexico, the Marquis de Montholon, Drouyn de Lhuys stated that the intervention would not be successful unless it succeeded in “developing commercial relationships between [Mexico] and France, and . . . foster[ed] a sturdy solidarity of interests between the two empires.” This letter further suggested that an increase in French imports, and Mexican production of cash crops and raw materials would be key to achieving this goal.⁵⁰

Along with developing Mexico’s agricultural output, French intellectuals were interested in exploiting Mexico’s mineral “wealth.” This goal, however, was not separate from that of “agricultural regeneration.” In the eighteenth century, the Spanish colony of New Spain (later re-baptized Mexico) was famous for its silver mines. As the Mexican wars of independence (1810-1821) broke out, and then dragged on for over a decade, the mines were abandoned and eventually fell into disrepair.⁵¹ Post-independence Mexican politicians made reviving this industry a priority, and with the help of mostly British foreign investors, the mining sector somewhat recovered by the 1840s.⁵² Aware of this, French officials viewed mining as one of the most promising ways to make a short-term profit. In an 1861 report on Mexico’s mineral potential, the author wrote that “Europe is ignorant of Mexico’s mineral wealth” and that this “wealth” could be lucrative if only France “succeeded in the pacification of this unfortunate country.”⁵³ This interest in mining was not, however, distinct from French agricultural goals. As far as French elites were concerned, the key to “regenerating” the “unfortunate” and war-torn Mexico lay in both a short-term increase in mineral exploitation, and in a longer-term investment in Mexico’s agricultural production. For instance, an 1863 geographical report on the northern

⁵⁰ Édouard Drouyn de Lhuys, “17 November 1863 Letter to Montholon,” in *Documents Diplomatique* (Paris: Imprimerie Imperiale, 1864), 182, Gallica BfN, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k92169j/f186.item.r=document%20diplomatie%201864>.

⁵¹ Ávila and Tutino, “Becoming Mexico,” 253-255.

⁵² Bulmer-Thomas, *The Economic History of Latin America since Independence*.

⁵³ “Notes on Mines of Mexico, 1861, 31MD/10 (1-6.5), Mémoire et Documents. Archives Des Affaires Étrangères, La Courneuve, France.

state of Senora declared that “in Senora, like in California, metals are not the true source of wealth” and that the state’s current population and “future immigrants” would need to develop the state agriculturally in order for it to prosper.⁵⁴ A different 1863 pamphlet about the mineral potential of Sonora and Chihuahua assured its readers that the soil of those two northern states’ could easily feed future miners and colonists. Therefore making those states ripe for exploitation.⁵⁵ Although these sources were most concerned with Mexico’s mineral “wealth” rather than its agricultural “fertility,” the fact that they too emphasized developing the country’s agriculture, either to feed future miners, or for export, shows just how important this fertility myth was to the French Imperialists.

The French fertility trope championed by French elites in Mexico painted a rosy and picturesque portrait of the country’s environment as an untapped gold mine of potential wealth. This view is contrasted by an analysis of sources produced by French diplomats in Mexico. In an April 28, 1864 letter from the Marquis de Montholon to Drouyn de Lhuys, Montholon responded to a demand for cotton from a Parisian trade group and stated that the group's wish for “30 to 40 thousand bails ... seem[ed] exaggerated.”⁵⁶ Although Mexico produced some cotton in the nineteenth century, its domestic textile industry saw significant growth and modernization during the turbulent years of the Reforma. This was because the government chose to lift a package of protectionist policies meant to benefit domestic cotton growers, allowing U.S. cotton to flood the market, and textile factories to obtain extra raw materials to supplement the small amount of cotton grown domestically.⁵⁷ French diplomatic sources indicate that government

⁵⁴ Mofas, “Notes sur la Senora” (April 1863), 31MD/10, 172-179, Mémoire et Document, Archives Des Affaires Étrangères, La Courneuve, France.

⁵⁵ Achille Poussielgue, *Ce qui va arriver au Mexique* (Paris: Furne, 1863), 5, Gallica, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5427619v/fl_vertical.r=Argent%20, 13-14.

⁵⁶ Marquis de Montholon “28 April 1864 Letter to Lhuys,” 28 April 1864, 202CCC/8 (25), Correspondence Commerciales, Archives Des Affaires Étrangères, La Courneuve, France.

⁵⁷ Aurora Gómez Galvarriato, “Fragilidad Institucional y Subdesarrollo: La Industria Textil Mexicana en el Siglo XIX,” in *La industria textil en México* ed. Aurora Gómez Galvarriato (México: Instituto Mora, 1999).

officials were aware of both the existence of this industry (which they described as a competitive obstacle to imported French textiles), and of its reliance on U.S. cotton,⁵⁸ however, the fact that Montholon had to make it clear that Mexico could not meet demands for the export of 30 to 40 thousand bales of cotton demonstrates just how widespread the Mexican fertility trope was at the time.

To explain the disparity between Mexico's supposed fertility and reality, French elites and intellectuals coupled their portrayal of Mexico as exceptionally "rich" and "fertile" with a parallel negative and racist view of Mexicans as having "abandoned" and "neglected" their country. For example, an 1862 geographical volume argued that Mexico's agriculture was in a "deplorable state," and the country was capable of producing a lot more wheat, beans, cacao, coffee, cochineal, and cotton, the latter of which was produced in such low quantities that it "cannot even supply the small number of factories" in Mexico.⁵⁹ When explaining the cause of the "deplorable" state of Mexican agriculture, the author blamed the country's state of "permanent civil war" and the locals' "laziness, their pride and their prejudice."⁶⁰

This paternalistic view of the abandonment of Mexico by the Mexicans informed an assumption by French officials that the increasingly expensive war in Mexico would be "reimbursed" once Mexico was "regenerated." As one 1863 pamphlet posited, the intervention and its objectives were "noble," but expensive, but stabilizing Mexico and exploiting its mineral

Rafael Dobado González, Aurora Gómez Galvarriato, and Jeffrey G. Williamson, "Mexican Exceptionalism: Globalization and De-Industrialization, 1750-1877." *The Journal of Economic History* 68, no. 3 (2008).

⁵⁸ France, French consulate in Vera Cruz, "Notes on the Port of Vera Cruz," April 1864, 29NCOM/4, *Négociations Commerciales*, Archives Des Affaires Étrangères, La Courneuve, France.

France, "September 19, 1863 Communication on textile exports to Mexico."

⁵⁹ V. L. Baril, Comte de la Hure, *Le Mexique, Résumé Géographique, Statistique, Industriel, Historique Et Social à l'usage Des Personnes Qui Veulent Avoir Des Notions Exactes, Récentes Et Précises Sur Cette Contrée Du Nouveau-monde*, (Douai: Ve Ceret-Carpentier, Imprimeur-libraire, 1862), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000024792806&seq=7>. 196.

⁶⁰ Baril, *Le Mexique, Résumé Géographique, Statistique, Industriel, Historique Et Social*, 195.

“wealth” would “quickly and completely reimburse” the costs of the intervention.⁶¹

Douchon-Doris, for his part, made that exact same argument with an added emphasis on agricultural development.⁶²

The French government did indeed attempt to make this plan a reality and have Maximilian’s government reimburse it through public debt. Although Napoleon III had employed Juarez’s refusal to pay French creditors as an excuse to intervene in Mexico, French investments were relatively limited during much of the country’s early history.⁶³ After the French army successfully toppled the Mexican government, however, Napoleon III’s regime devised a plan to make Mexico pay for the invasion. Two bonds were issued through the Paris stock exchange in 1864 and 1865 and managed by a commission headquartered in Paris.⁶⁴ The bond’s value collapsed in 1866, but before that, Maximilian’s government only saw about 15% of the proceeds of these loans.⁶⁵

The notion of Mexico’s “fertility” and “richness” therefore allowed French elites to justify the intervention in a way that sounded both humanitarian and profitable. According to their vision, “regenerating” the “Latin” race in Mexico first required developing the country’s agriculture and mines. This development would in turn benefit the French financial sector and commerce, therefore making the French fertility trope in Mexico extremely useful, even if it was exaggerated. To fully address the origins of this French trope about Mexico, however, it is important to understand the events, people, and theories that shaped the views of nineteenth century French intellectuals.

⁶¹ Achille Poussiègue, *Ce qui va arriver au Mexique* (Paris: Furne, 1863), 5, Gallica, Bibliothèque Nationale de France. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5427619v/fl_vertical.r=Argent%20.

⁶² Douchon-Doris, *Lettre*, 11.

⁶³ Steven Topik, “When Mexico Had the Blues: A Transatlantic Tale of Bonds, Bankers, and Nationalists, 1862-1910,” *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 3 (2000).

⁶⁴ Todd, *A Velvet Empire*, 219.

⁶⁵ Todd, *A Velvet Empire*, 220.

The Algerian “Fertility Myth,” European Explorers, and the Intellectual Roots of the Mexican Fertility Trope.

After French forces invaded the Ottoman regency of Algeria in 1830, many intellectuals began to see and use the territory as a means to implement emerging ideas about agriculture, and the ideal way to structure society.⁶⁶ To help with this, French elites claimed that Algeria was uniquely “fertile” in ancient times, but that the locals had since turned the land into desert.⁶⁷ The French colonial project in Algeria also became a testing ground for new and brutal counterinsurgency military tactics to effectively “pacify” and subdue the intense resistance of indigenous Algerians. These new tactics would later be adapted to help “pacify” Mexico.⁶⁸ The concept that Algeria was uniquely “fertile” was also partly transplanted to Mexico by the French (whether accidentally or by design), but with major caveats stemming from the French’s fundamentally different objectives in the two projects, and the different ways that Europeans had traditionally portrayed the two landmasses.

Soon after the French government committed itself to Algeria, elites and intellectuals argued that the acquisition of this new territory provided an opportunity to put their ideas and philosophies on how to best structure society into practice. Influenced by the Malthusian belief that French cities were overcrowded, leading to crime and immorality, French intellectual and political elites saw Algeria as an opportunity to create an “ideal” agrarian colony where they could send France’s “excess” population.⁶⁹ Implied in this concept of an ideal colony was the

⁶⁶ Sessions, *By Sword and Plow*, 200-207.

Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity*, 1-16.

⁶⁷ Sessions, *By Sword and Plow*, 200-207.

⁶⁸ Sessions, *By Sword and Plow*, 309-313.

Jean Mayor, *Yo, el francés : la intervención en primera persona : biografías y crónicas* (México: TusQuets Editores, 2000), 332.

⁶⁹ Sessions, *By Sword and Plow*, 200-207.

intention to emulate settler colonies like the United States and create an extension and “province” of France itself.⁷⁰ To facilitate the implementation of this plan, and to implement directed migration schemes, French intellectual and political elites relied on the false belief that Algeria was the Roman Empire’s “breadbasket,” but that indigenous nomads had since moved in and turned the land into a desert. According to this view, Algeria needed to be exploited by Europeans and their agricultural techniques in order to be returned to this former state of immense “fertility.”⁷¹

This “fertility myth” was based on an emergent “desiccation” theory which became a powerful way for nineteenth century imperial powers to subjugate colonized people.⁷² French intellectuals were some of this theory’s primary developers, and became some of its most avid proponents.⁷³ Desiccation theory is based on a negative view of desert biomes as former forests made arid by human impact and management. Believers of this theory thought that forests and vegetation attracted precipitation and that certain (mostly indigenous) land practices like herding and controlled burning damage the land, strips it of its vegetation, and ultimately transforms it into arid, useless, and desert wasteland (in the twentieth century this concept would become known by the familiar term of “desertification”).⁷⁴

Desiccation theory as a concept was popularized by the late eighteenth/ early nineteenth century by the German geographer and explorer Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), who also popularized the idea that Mexico was uniquely rich and fertile. Humboldt traveled extensively in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and his descriptions of Central/South America and Central Asia were widely cited throughout the nineteenth century.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Sessions, *By Sword and Plow*, 200-207.

⁷¹ Sessions, *By Sword and Plow*, 208-263.

⁷² Davis, *The Arid Lands*, 94-116.

⁷³ Davis, *The Arid Lands*, 94-116.

⁷⁴ Davis, *The Arid Lands*, 94.

⁷⁵ Davis, *The Arid Lands*, 83-87.

Humboldt was influenced by the French scientists who were developing and refining desiccation theory, and much of his work reflects its themes.⁷⁶ However, in his descriptions of New Spain (which he visited at the height of the silver boom), he described a rich and infinitely fertile country ripe for agricultural and mineral exploitation -- a description that would be repeated by later European explorers.⁷⁷ As a result, and because of his wide appeal, Humboldt and his work were important in popularizing both the desiccation theory and the Mexican fertility trope.⁷⁸

Aside from the appeal of Humboldt's work more generally, it is also possible that the Algerian fertility myth had a more direct influence on the French fertility trope in Mexico. The officials who crafted France's colonial policy in Algeria were heavily inspired by the Saint Simonians.⁷⁹ This was especially true of a group of military officials known as the "Arabists."⁸⁰ These officers believed in an "associative," somewhat collaborative, relationship with Algeria's indigenous. They based their ideology around a belief that societies develop in stages and that indigenous Algerians, rather than being inherently "uncivilized," were at an earlier stage of civilization than their French colonizers.⁸¹ These Arabists became most influential during Napoleon III's reign when, for a brief moment, the French government became more interested in the plight of the colony's indigenous peoples.⁸²

In Mexico, nearly 60% of the French officer corps were veterans of the Algerian campaign.⁸³ As historian Jean Mayer has noted, many of these veterans were influenced by the Arabists, and they used their experience to advance the idea that developing Mexico agriculturally would be an

⁷⁶ Davis, *The Arid Lands*, 83-87.

⁷⁷ Salmerón Sanginés, "El Mito de La Riqueza de México."

⁷⁸ Davis, *The Arid Lands*, 83-87.

Salmerón Sanginés, "El Mito de La Riqueza de México."

⁷⁹ Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity*, 1-16.

⁸⁰ Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity*, 1-16.

⁸¹ Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity*, 1-16.

⁸² Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity*, 1-16.

⁸³ Mayor, *Yo, el francés*, 332.

inevitable and useful tool to “pacify” it.⁸⁴ Despite this, the metropolitan authors who wrote the propaganda examined in the last subsection were probably not military officials, and they tended to avoid comparing Mexico to Algeria directly. Nevertheless, it is likely that the debates about Algerian colonization informed their portrayal of Mexico, and particularly the notion that Mexico was “fertile” yet also “abandoned.”

In spite of these connections and similarities between the Mexican and Algerian fertility tropes/myths, there were also key differences. Unlike in Algeria, French intellectuals avoided the direct use of desiccation theory when discussing Mexico, even when talking about the country’s arid regions. Instead of being “damaged” or “degraded” by the locals, Mexico was “underdeveloped” and “abandoned.”⁸⁵ The portrayal of Mexico as being “unfortunate” and in a state of “permanent civil war” also implied that Mexicans were not entirely to blame for “abandoning” their country.⁸⁶ This difference was partly due to the fact that the Mexican project was an informal imperial venture rather than a colonial one.⁸⁷ On a related note, and as historian Miquel de la Rosa has noted, French officials consistently framed the intervention as a “regenerating” mission, rather than a “civilizing” mission like Algeria.⁸⁸

The language of “regeneration” was consistent with the Pan-Latinist belief that Mexicans belonged to the wider “Latin” world and therefore had to be more or less “civilized.”⁸⁹ This observation does not, however, fully capture the particularities of the French perspective on the origins of Mexican “civilization,” and its connections with the contradictory, paternalistic French view that Mexicans were incapable of governing themselves and were prone to “permanent civil

⁸⁴ Mayor, *Yo, el francés*, 332.

⁸⁵ Douchon-Doris, *Lettre*.
Baril, *Le Mexique*, 195.

⁸⁶ Douchon-Doris, *Lettre*.
Baril, *Le Mexique*, 195.

⁸⁷ Todd, *A Velvet Empire*.

⁸⁸ De La Rosa, *French Liberalism and Imperialism in the Age of Napoleon III*, 137-184.

⁸⁹ De La Rosa, *French Liberalism and Imperialism in the Age of Napoleon III*, 137-184.

wars”. To understand this more nuanced view, it is important to investigate the role that agriculture played in the beliefs about Mexican society and civilization held by the French officials of the time.

The Aztecs’ “Remarkable Industry”: “Ancient Mexican” Agriculture and the Origins of Mexican “Civilization.”

French officials and intellectual elites regularly expressed a fascination with the ancient Aztec civilization in their writings about Mexico. They expressed a belief that the origins of Mexicans’ somewhat “civilized” nature stemmed at least in part from the fact that these “ancient Mexicans” were sedentary. Unlike in the case of Algeria in which French elites viewed the ancient Romans as a fundamentally different “race” from modern Algerian nomads,⁹⁰ the French elites who wrote about Mexico did not clearly separate “ancient” Mexicans from their “modern” counterparts.⁹¹ This belief was equally if not more important than Pan-Latinism in informing the assumptions behind the Mexican fertility trope and the apparent need for regeneration.

In an 1864 report on the goals and objectives of the committee on “Political Economy, Statistics, and Public Works” of the *Commission Scientifique du Mexique*, Michel Chevalier -- an ardent supporter of the intervention and the committee chair -- declared that “one of the ancient Mexicans’ most remarkable industries was their agriculture.” He gave an exaggerated, and sometimes outright false,⁹² rundown of the specific kinds of crops that were cultivated by “ancient Mexicans.”⁹³ Chevalier concluded his report by recommending that the committee begin

⁹⁰ Sessions, *By Sword and Plow*.

⁹¹ E. Dubois, *Le Mexique, ou Les Français à Mexico* (Rouen: Mégarid et C, 1864), 8, Gallica, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6360080m/f1.vertical.r=Agriculture%20>, 187.

⁹² Chevalier claimed that pre-Columbian Mexicans cultivated silk when the silkworm is native to Asia and New Spain only began to produce the fabric in the 1500’s.

⁹³ Michel Chevalier, “Report from the ‘Comité d’Économie Politique, Statistique, Travaux Publics, Administration.’” in *Archives De La Commission Scientifique Du Mexique; Publiées Sous Les Auspices Du Ministère De L'instruction Publique* (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1865), 174-175, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015027956831&seq=174>.

its investigation into Mexico's potential for the production of cash crops and raw materials by researching the agricultural techniques of these so-called “ancient Mexicans.”⁹⁴ This glorification of pre-Columbian Mexican agriculture is not unique to Chevalier. In *L'Excursion d'un touriste au Mexique pendant l'année 1854*, the explorer, author, and diplomat, Just-Jean-Etienne Roy dedicated a portion of his text to the “barbaric” yet “brilliant” Aztec civilization.⁹⁵ Despite the depiction of the Aztecs as “barbaric,” Roy praised Aztec agricultural techniques and provided a detailed analysis of specific crops native to Mexico and their importance to modern society.⁹⁶

Unlike descriptions of Algerians, French intellectuals did not clearly separate “ancient Mexicans” from their modern counterparts, nor did they see Spanish colonization in an entirely positive light. In the book *Le Mexique, ou les Français à Mexico*, the author declared that “the same blood circulates in [modern Mexicans’] veins” as in that of “ancient Mexicans.”⁹⁷ The author notes, however, that the reader “should not forget that in the modern Mexican we see nothing but a concord race” that is the victim of “centuries of tyranny.” Implied in this statement was the notion that this “tyranny” was at least in part due to Spanish colonization.⁹⁸ This is not the only text which espouses some version of this argument. In an illustrated history of Mexico published in 1863, the author praised Fernando Cortez’s conquest of the Aztec empire, but when turning his attention to the Mexican war of independence, he referenced the works of Bartolome de las Casas, and specifically to colonial slave labor schemes like the *repartimiento*. By doing so he portrayed the Spanish colonists as having been exceptionally barbaric to Mexico’s “resigned and laborious” indigenous and mestizo populations.⁹⁹ In the text's epilogue, the author praised

⁹⁴ Chevalier, “Report from the ‘Comité d’Économie Politique,’” 174-175.

⁹⁵ Just-Jean-Etienne Roy, *Excursion D'un Touriste Au Mexique Pendant L'année 1854* (Tours: A. Mame, 1863), 131.

⁹⁶ Roy, *Excursion D'un Touriste Au Mexique*, 146-148.

⁹⁷ Dubois, *Le Mexique, ou Les Français à Mexico*, 187.

⁹⁸ Dubois, *Le Mexique, ou Les Français à Mexico*, 187.

⁹⁹ E. Muramour, *Le Mexique. Conquête du Mexique par Fernand Cortez. Guerre de L'Indépendance et République. Exposition Française aux Mexique, 1861-1863* (Paris: Bureau des « Annule Contemporains, » 1863).

135. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6365870j/f413.vertical.r=Agriculture%20>.

Maximilian for accepting the Mexican throne but warned of the daunting task that lay ahead, and of the need to pacify the war torn country and to “make bloom [Mexico’s] abandoned agriculture.”¹⁰⁰

Despite their Hispanophobia, and focus on the “tyranny” of the Spanish empire, French elites acknowledged what they thought were the positive effects of the “Christianizing” nature of Spanish colonization. For example, the Abbé Emmanuel Domenech (who visited Mexico in the 1850’s) defended contemporary Mexicans as civilized victims of instability.¹⁰¹ In discussing the country’s history, Domenech stated that Mexico had “Indians [who] like the Egyptians, had a very high level of civilization” and added that the Spanish had “Christianized” these indigenous Mexicans and brought “medieval civilization, with both its qualities and defects.”¹⁰² Moreover, some French intellectuals held relatively benign attitudes towards Spanish colonization in Mexico. Michel Chevalier, for example, argued that the Spanish had been less cruel to Mexico’s indigenous peoples than to those of their other colonies.¹⁰³

These works reveal a two-sided belief about the origin of Mexican “civilization.” On the one hand, French intellectuals believed that because of their Spanish colonial heritage, their Catholicism, and their use of a Romance language, Mexicans belonged in the wider “Latin” world. On the other hand, these same French intellectuals saw Aztec agriculture as proof that “ancient Mexicans” were a more or less “civilized” people, and had mixed feelings about the effects of Spanish Colonization. This complex belief about Mexicans formed the intellectual basis behind the reluctance of French intellectuals to portray Mexico as “degraded” and the idea

¹⁰⁰ Muramour, *Le Mexique*, 413.

¹⁰¹ Emmanuel Domenech, *Le Mexique Tel Qu’il Est: La Vérité Sur Son Climat, Ses Habitants Et Son Gouvernement* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1867), 11-13, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015027974537&seq=33&q1=M%C3%A9di%C3%A9vale>.

¹⁰² Domenech, *Le Mexique Tel Qu’il Est*, 25.

¹⁰³ Michel Chevalier, *Le Mexique, Ancien et Moderne* (Paris: L. Hachette et cie, 1863), 257, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uva.x001127722&seq=269>.

that Mexico needed to be “regenerated” with French help. In other words, French intellectuals based much of their belief that Mexico ought not to be a colony, but an independent nation under French influence, on what they thought was the fundamentally agrarian and therefore civilized nature of Mexicans.

Part Two
Mexican Collaborators and the French Fertility Trope in Mexico

Aside from its reliance on the production and export of luxury goods as a form of soft power, nineteenth century French imperialism was notable for its “collaborative” nature. This collaboration included both working with other imperial powers, and a commitment to finding local elites to do France’s bidding in countries subject to its influence.¹⁰⁴ Given this fact, the focus on French ideology in Part One of this thesis is unsatisfactory. For this reason, Part Two, *Mexican Collaborators and the French Fertility Trope in Mexico*, takes the perspective of Mexico’s political and intellectual elite, and analyzes how they responded to and/or took advantage of the French fertility trope in Mexico. In doing so, Part Two argues that although they often did so begrudgingly, Mexico’s political elite willingly collaborated with French officials and intellectuals in a ploy to take advantage of the view that Mexico was exceptionally rich and fertile --a view that conveniently paralleled their own exaggerated notions of Mexico’s wealth.

The “Scientific Conquest” of Mexico: Franco-Mexican Collaboration and the French Scientific Commissions.

In early 1864, Napoleon III established the *Commission Scientifique du Mexique* (CSM) and tasked his minister of education, Victor Duruy, with leading the “scientific conquest” of Mexico.¹⁰⁵ At around the same time, Archile Bazane, the head of the French Army in the country, started his own *Commission Scientifique, Littéraire, et Artistique* (CSLA). Unlike the CSM, which was headquartered in France and had an entirely French membership, Bazane sought to encourage Mexican intellectuals who “honor science and love their country” to join the CSLA.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Todd, *A Velvet Empire*, 23-24.

¹⁰⁵ Victor Duruy, “8 February, 1864 Letter to the Sociedad,” in *Archives De La Commission Scientifique Du Mexique; Publiées Sous Les Auspices Du Ministère De L'instruction Publique*, 14 (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1865), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015027956831&seq=174>.

¹⁰⁶ Paul N. Edison, “Conquest Unrequited: French Expeditionary Science in Mexico, 1864-1867,” *French historical studies* 26, no. 3 (2003): 459–495.

Many elite Mexicans did, including a number who had opposed the intervention.¹⁰⁷ Although Mexicans could only join the CSM as “correspondents,” and they were barred from becoming full members, many collaborated with that commission as well.¹⁰⁸ Among the reasons behind the decision of many Mexican elites to work with the commissions was a strong desire to take advantage of their French counterparts’ Saint-Simonian inspired aspirations to explore Mexico’s agricultural and environmental “fertility,” and they used the commissions as a means to further their own state building goals.

Despite this willingness to collaborate, many French intellectuals and government officials held negative, racist, views about the elite Mexicans in the CSM and the CSLA, and tried to limit their influence. For example, in an April 20, 1864 letter about the establishment of the *Commission's Scientific du Mexique*, the Marquis de Montholon informed Drouyn de Lhuys that Archile Bazane was organizing a similar commission primarily comprised of Mexican scientists (the CSLA), but admitted that he was glad to hear of the CSM’s establishment because he had “little confidence in the results that [the CSLA] can obtain, given that it is mostly comprised of men of the country” who were “taken by the insolent mindset which characterizes the Mexican race.”¹⁰⁹ The CSLA was therefore made subordinate to the highly hierarchical, and France centered CSM, ensuring that Mexican intellectuals had as small an influence on French scientific study as possible.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Edison, “Conquest Unrequited.”

¹⁰⁸ France, *Archives De La Commission Scientifique Du Mexique*, 18.

Almanaque imperial (México: Imp. de J.M. Lara, 1866), 83,

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89005676382&seq=107&q1=Fomento>.

“Explorations scientifiques du Mexique: Correspondents,” F/17/2911 (Correspondent, affaires générales), Commission de l'exploration scientifique du Mexique. Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte sur Seine, France.

¹⁰⁹ Marquis de Montholon “Letter on the establishment of a scientific commission to study Mexico,” 20 April 1864, 46ADP/7, Affaires Diverses et Politiques, Archives Des Affaires Étrangères, La Courneuve, France.

¹¹⁰ Edison, “Conquest Unrequited.”

Nadia Prévost Urkidi, “La Commission scientifique du Mexique (1864-1867): un exemple de collaboration scientifique entre l’élite savante française et mexicaine ?” *Revue d’histoire des sciences humaines* 19, no. 2 (2008): 107–116.

Many French officials, however, believed that Mexico's scientific elites were capable of becoming good scientists, and viewed their limited collaboration in institutions like the CSM and CSLA as an important aspect of their informal imperial project. In Montholon's April 1864 letter, for example, he praised the possibility of sending "intelligent men" from France to inspire Mexican scientists.¹¹¹ He further believed that "there are here, some more or less hard-working men of science who have been prevented from doing any serious research by the never-ending civil wars," and he concluded that the skills these "more or less hard working" scientists possessed (such as knowledge of indigenous languages) would be useful to French researchers.¹¹²

These occasionally disliked Mexican members of French commissions had a few things in common. For one, most held powerful positions within the Mexican Second empire, and were part of a group that historian Erika Pani calls the "Inperialistas." They were also active members of the *Sociedad Geográfica y Estadística*.¹¹³ The *Sociedad*, (which founded in 1833, was one of the oldest statistical societies in the Americas) was friendly with the French commissions, and publicity celebrated their establishment.¹¹⁴ For instance, in a May 15, 1864 letter from the *Sociedad's* Vice-President, J. Urbano Fonseca (who was also a council of state) to Victor Duruy, Urbano Fonseca assured Duruy that the CSM's voyagers would be greeted "with goodwill" and that the *Sociedad's* members would gladly collaborate with the commissioners.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Marquis de Montholon "Letter on the establishment of a scientific commission to study Mexico," 20 April 1864, 46ADP/7, Affaires Diverses et Politiques, Archives Des Affaires Étrangères, La Courneuve, France.

¹¹² Montholon "Letter on the establishment of a scientific commission to study Mexico."

¹¹³ *Almanaque imperial*, 83-102.

¹¹⁴ Alberto Soberanis, "Sabios, militares y empresarios Sansimonismo y exploración científica", Perez-Siller, Javier, et Chantail Cramaussel. *México Francia : Memoria de una sensibilidad común; siglos XIX-XX. Tomo II*. Mexico : Centro de estudios mexicanos y centroamericanos, 2013. (pp. 243-268).

¹¹⁵ *Almanaque imperial*, 26.

J. Urbano Fonseca, 15 May, 1864 Letter to Victor Duruy," in *Archives De La Commission Scientifique Du Mexique; Publiées Sous Les Auspices Du Ministère De L'instruction Publique*, 15 (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1865), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015027956831&seq=174>.

The French government had always enjoyed support from a few diehard monarchists, particularly the exiled José Hidalgo and José María Gutiérrez de Estrada, who spent decades lobbying European powers to install a monarchy in Mexico before Napoleon III's intervention.¹¹⁶ However, the Mexicans who collaborated with the scientific commissions were much more politically diverse and moderate. Some had even opposed the intervention, and begrudgingly joined the imperial government. Manuel Orozco y Berra, for example, served in Juárez's liberal regime, and José Fernando Ramírez painted his house black in mourning when Maximilian and his wife Charlotte (or Carlotta) first arrived in Mexico City.¹¹⁷ In spite of their varied political backgrounds, and as Pani notes, these men were attracted to the Second Empire's promise of a strong, "scientific," orderly state, and by the French promise of "regeneration."¹¹⁸ Moreover, these men had witnessed the humiliation of the Mexican-American war, and were extremely wary of the United States.¹¹⁹ In this environment, many Mexican intellectuals saw the French backed Mexican Second Empire as a realistic government option.¹²⁰

This Mexican collaboration with the CSM and CSLA indicates the extent of and reasons why Mexican intellectuals colluded with the French military and intelligentsia. The *Commission Scientifique du Mexique* had as a primary goal the collecting of artifacts for French museums and the 1867 World's Fair.¹²¹ The military's *Commission Scientifique, Littéraire et Artistique* had more practical goals, and – along with the objective of stocking French museums – was focused on Franco-Mexican collaboration and the development/exploitation of Mexico's natural resources.¹²² However, and in large part due to their Saint-Simonian influence,¹²³ both

¹¹⁶ Shawcross, *France, Mexico and Informal Empire in Latin America, 1820-1867*, 81-118.

¹¹⁷ Pani, "Dreaming of a Mexican Empire."

¹¹⁸ Pani, "Dreaming of a Mexican Empire."

¹¹⁹ Pani, "Dreaming of a Mexican Empire."

¹²⁰ Pani, "Dreaming of a Mexican Empire."

¹²¹ Edison, "Conquest Unrequited."

¹²² Edison, "Conquest Unrequited."

¹²³ Soberanis, "Sabios, militares y empresarios Sansimonismo y exploración científica".

commissions had committees focused on development and environmental exploitation. J. Urbano Fonseca's May 1864 letter to Victor Durey indicates that this French interest in agricultural and commercial exploitation was a major motivation behind Mexican collaboration with the two commissions. Evoking an earlier letter Victor Durey addressed to him, Urbano Fonseca praised Napoleon III for having:

[Designated] people for whom we will give the necessary instructions and instruments to come and study the soil and water, climate and [agricultural] productions, race and languages, monuments and memory of these regions where there remains an abundant and precious harvest to collect.¹²⁴

Although Urbano Fonseca mentioned the CSM's interests in archeology and anthropology in the form of "race and languages, monuments and memory," the wording of his letter expresses particular interest in the CSM's goal of aiding France's mission of agricultural "regeneration" of his country. This is reflected first through his description of the CSM's objective of studying the soil, water, climate etc., and through his characterization of Mexico as having "an abundant harvest to collect," a metaphor which recalls the fertility trope championed by French intellectuals to describe Mexico's untapped environmental wealth.

This focus on agricultural production and exploitation runs contradictory to some of the CSM's stated objectives, as the commission had an additional, important cultural goal. In his report on the CSM's mission, Victor Duruy cited Napoleon I's Scientific expedition to Egypt and praised its achievements in "scientific conquest" and study of the "religion, history and chronology of this old world." He suggested that this would also be a primary focus of the new

¹²⁴ Urbano Fonseca, 15 May, 1864 Letter to Victor Duruy," 15.

Original quote in French: *désigné des personnes à qui l'on donnera les instructions et les instruments nécessaires pour venir étudier le sol et les eaux, le climat et les productions; la race et les langues, les monuments et les souvenirs de ces régions où il reste encore une abondante et précieuse moisson à recueillir.*

Mexican commission.¹²⁵ Duruy spoke at length about the commercial benefits that the Egyptian expedition had achieved, and indicated that the Mexican commission would also foment commercial exploitation, but he painted this goal as equally important to the cultural (imperialistic) ones, not as its primary objective.¹²⁶

It would be misleading to suggest that the CSM's goal of studying the "religion, history and chronology" of Mexico did not appeal to Mexican officials who supplemented their work in Maximilian's government with research for those two French commissions, as it most certainly did. After all, Urbano Fonseca still expressed an interest in exploring Mexico's history and culture. Moreover, The CSM and CSLA's goal of researching the country's history, culture and archeological sites certainly appealed to some Mexican government elites, and could have helped them refine a national narrative about Mexico's history. Manuel Orozco y Berra, for example, was a member of the CSLA committee tasked with investigating Mexican history.¹²⁷

However, it is important to emphasize the ways that the state building goals of Mexican elites prompted them to take advantage of the fertility trope popularized by French intellectuals, and to collaborate/use institutions like the CSM and CSLA. Mexican intellectuals were sympathetic to French views on their country's environment, fertility, and possibility of being "regenerated." Although French elites allowed limited collaboration on the part of Mexicans (and did not always take their contributions seriously), Mexican elites used this limited opportunity to work with the French, even though this collaboration was sometimes done begrudgingly.

¹²⁵ Victor Duruy, "Rapport à L'Empereur," *Archives De La Commission Scientifique Du Mexique; Publiées Sous Les Auspices Du Ministère De L'instruction Publique*, 1 (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1865), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015027956831&seq=174>.

¹²⁶ Duruy, "Rapport à L'Empereur," 1-5.

¹²⁷ Archile Bazane "Letter on the establishment and Membership of a scientific commission to study Mexico," 24 March 1864, F/17/2902, Commission de l'exploration scientifique du Mexique, Archives Nationales de France, Pierrefitte sur Seine, France.

“Power and Prestige”: The Aspiration of Mexican Elites for Agricultural Development.

Mexican elites had their own long held aspirations to develop their country’s agriculture and exploit Mexico's natural resources. This Mexican dream, however, was not directly influenced by French thought, and was inspired in large part by the agricultural “success” of the U.S. Mexican elites nonetheless created their own exaggerated notion of Mexico’s fertility and suitability for agriculture. While this domestic fertility trope mirrored the French one, and was influenced by the same works (mainly those of Humboldt), Mexican intellectuals developed it independently from French elites, and were informed by the long-held creole belief in Mexico’s unique “wealth”.

The French intervention in Mexico occurred as elites on both sides of the Atlantic (and especially in Latin America) were refining the contours of the modern concept of the “nation state.”¹²⁸ Key to the Mexican version of this movement was a desire to build a strong and efficient governing administration that would “strengthen,” “modernize,” and protect Mexico from future U.S. aggression.¹²⁹ Mexican intellectuals therefore became receptive to Saint-Simonian inspired French discourses about effective governance, science, and the creation of a “modern” society.¹³⁰ They were also influenced by a long standing domestic “richness myth” that predated the Mexican nation itself. This myth originated in the late eighteenth century during the peak of New Spain’s silver era, when the colony’s creole population developed an intense nationalist fever and began to describe their home as being exceptionally “rich” environmentally.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Pani, *Para Mexicanizar El Segundo Imperio*, 15-24.

¹²⁹ Pani, *Para Mexicanizar El Segundo Imperio*, 108-109.

Pani, “Dreaming of a Mexican Empire.”

¹³⁰ Pani, “Dreaming of a Mexican Empire.”

¹³¹ Salmerón Sanginés, “El Mito de La Riqueza de México.”

Therefore, as part of their “modernizing” project, Mexican intellectual and political elites consistently stressed the importance of agricultural development and modernization.

Exemplifying this is a December 1864 speech to the *Sociedad Geográfica y Estadística*, in which the honorary member José Andrade stated that research into agricultural production was “one of the points ... which is especially deserving of our attention, in order for it to become the base of national prosperity.”¹³² Mexican elites also believed and argued that increasing agricultural exports would help grow the country’s “strength” and “prestige,” and protect it from future U.S. aggression.¹³³

As Andrade’s speech implies, this Mexican wish for increased agricultural production relied on a glorification of modern science, and its possible applications in the creation of a “modern” or “civilized” nation. In an 1865 anonymously written article published in the empire’s official newspaper *El Diario del Imperio*, the author argued that agriculture has been important to societies since ancient times, and it distinguished civilized groups of people from savage ones.¹³⁴ Creating a “modern” agricultural nation (as was needed in Mexico) required using the sciences, and in particular the emerging discipline of statistics, as a means to increase agricultural production.¹³⁵

The *Ministerio de Fomento* (ministry of development) was an important institution created to implement this goal. Conceived in 1853 during Santa Anna’s last regime, the ministry (which

¹³² Jose Andrade, “Speech given to the Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística on December 28, 1864,” in *Boletín De La Sociedad Mexicana De Geografía Y Estadística* (México: Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística, 1866), 75. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.tz1pqz&seq=83>.

¹³³ Tomas Moran y Crivelli, “El Sistema de Hacienda en México, Según la Teoría Francesa,” *La Sociedad*, November 16, 1865, <https://hndm.iib.unam.mx/consulta/publicacion/visualizar/558a3afe7d1ed64f1701e18a?intPagina=3&tipo=pagina&palabras=Agricultura&anio=1865&mes=11&dia=16>.

Pani, “Dreaming of a Mexican Empire.”

¹³⁴ “Agricultura,” *El Diario del Imperio*, April 21, 1866, <https://hndm.iib.unam.mx/consulta/publicacion/visualizar/558075be7d1e63c9fea1a21a?pagina=558a33977d1ed64f1697e8d5&palabras=Agricultura&anio=1866&mes=04&dia=20&coleccion=>.

¹³⁵ “Agricultura.”

was developed as much of Latin America was experimenting with similar institutions) was created to encourage Mexico's development in multiple sectors, such as industry, mining, transportation, agriculture, etc.¹³⁶ Inspired by the positivist philosophies of Auguste Comte (who was himself inspired by Saint-Simon), the ministry's members envisioned using science and statistics to modernize the Mexican countryside, which was relatively undeveloped in the nineteenth century due in part to Mexico's political instability and spotty transportation networks.¹³⁷ This ministry became important during the second empire as both Mexican elites and their French counterparts sought to exploit Mexico's supposedly endless wealth and fertility.

As the works and goals of institutions like the *Sociedad Geografica y Estadistica* and the *Ministerio de Fomento* (and the viewpoints of their members) suggests, Mexican elites, like their French counterparts, believed that Mexico was blessed with an unusually fertile land and a unique level of mineral wealth, although they understandably did not blame the country's perceived underdevelopment on Mexican's "laziness," as the French did. One particularly salient example of this domestic fertility trope is in the 1865 report from the "Special Commission on Agriculture" of the *Sociedad Geográfica y Estadística*, where José Rafael de Castro (a Professor of accounting and law at the *Escuela Especial de Comercio*),¹³⁸ wrote that Mexico was "so rich that there is no fruit of the earth that cannot acclimate easily."¹³⁹ This exaggerated belief in Mexico's agricultural "wealth" is very similar to the French version, and alongside the interest of Mexican elites in using the sciences to increase agricultural production, this partly explains why

¹³⁶ Lurtz, "Developing the Mexican Countryside."

¹³⁷ Alejandro Tortolero, "The Mexican Path toward Agricultural Capitalism," *Études Rurales*, no. 205 (2020).
Lurtz, "Developing the Mexican Countryside."

Blumer-Thomas, *The Economic History of Latin America*, 43.

¹³⁸ *Almanaque imperial*, 359.

¹³⁹ De Castro, Rafael, "Dictamen de la Comisión Especial de Agricultura," in *Boletín De La Sociedad Mexicana De Geografía Y Estadística* (México: Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística, 1865) 69,
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044094356920&seq=75&q1=Rafael+de+Castro>.

some Mexican elites thought it useful to collaborate with the CSM and the CSLA despite the limitations that French officials placed on their collaboration.

This parallel fertility trope was mostly developed independently from the French version, and the similarities it had with French thought was mostly due to convergent evolution rather than direct influence. In a February 1866 article published in *El Mexicano*, the author quoted Alexander von Humboldt to argue that if not for agriculture tied to mining operations, much of Mexico would have “remained” or become desert.¹⁴⁰ This allusion to desiccation theory and the author’s reference to Humboldt demonstrates how French and Mexican intellectuals read and were highly inspired by the same works, but it also suggests that they developed their theories about Mexico’s agriculture and fertility independently (or at least partly so).¹⁴¹ To be clear, I do not argue that French philosophy, and in particular that of the Saint-Simonians, did not have a deep impact on the thought of Mexican elites, rather, I am arguing that Mexican elites willfully adopted and adapted European ideas to strengthen their own state building goals.

While Mexican intellectuals saw France as a legal and cultural ideal, when it came to agricultural policy, they were much more likely to cite the U.S. or other primarily American models rather than referencing France or its colonies.¹⁴² In one November 1865 article published in the newspaper *La Sociedad*, the lawyer and honorary Consul of State, Tomás Moran y Crivelli, complained that in the late eighteenth century, the U.S. exported less cotton than Mexico, but that ever since that balanced had shifted, and U.S. cotton exports had grown, so had

¹⁴⁰ Luis de la Rosa, “Memoria sobre el cultivo del maíz en México,” *El Mexicano*, January 2, 1866. <https://hndm.iib.unam.mx/consulta/publicacion/visualizar/558a35397d1ed64f16b35ebd?intPagina=3&tipo=pagina&palabras=Agricultura&anio=1866&mes=02&dia=01>.

¹⁴¹ Davis, *The Arid Lands*, 82-94.

¹⁴² Pani, *Para Mexicanizar El Segundo Imperio*.

Moran y Crivelli, “El Sistema de Hacienda en México.”

Luis Robles Pezuela, *Memorial Del Ministro De Fomento L. Robles Pezuela: Año 1865* (México: Andrade, 1866), 98-99, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=ucm.4900337061&seq=107&q1=Colonizaci%C3%B3n+>.

“the prestige and power of that nation.”¹⁴³ The author argued that in order to help Mexico increase its agricultural exports, it ought to adopt a “French system” of property taxes, but adapt it with an extra tax on “excess” lands to encourage landowners to increase agricultural productivity and bring in immigrants to work the land.¹⁴⁴

As part of their plan to “modernize” Mexico, the country’s intellectual and political elites created their own trope about Mexico’s unique fertility and agricultural capacity. This trope, however, was not a reproduction of the French version, and although it repeated many of the same ideas (and therefore made Mexican elites more receptive to collaborating with the French), it was nonetheless developed independently. Moreover, although Mexican elites admired France, they were more interested in reproducing the agrarian policies of American models like the U.S. than European ones. Because of this interest, Mexican elites became convinced that like in the U.S., encouraging agrarian migration to the empire would be the best way to achieve their agricultural goals.

The “Sap of Nations”: Agrarian Migration and the Limits of French Influence in Mexico.

French and Mexican tropes regarding Mexico’s fertility, and the need for “agricultural regeneration” manifested themselves clearly in migration policy. Because of this, migration policy also reflected the dreamy and inherently unrealistic nature of the Mexican fertility trope, and led to tensions between French intellectuals and Mexican government officials who were forced to balance their aspirations with hard realities on the ground, such as the availability of land, lack of funds, and the fact that the empire did not control all of Mexico.

¹⁴³ Moran y Crivelli, “El Sistema de Hacienda en México.”

¹⁴⁴ Moran y Crivelli, “El Sistema de Hacienda en México.”

Almost immediately after establishing a monarchy in Mexico, French officials became very interested in the possibility of using agrarian migration to achieve their goal of “agricultural regeneration” in the country. In his November 1863 letter to the Marquis de Montholon outlining France's goals and objectives in Mexico, Drouys de Lhuys instructed Montholon to begin negotiating with the new Mexican government on a scheme to encourage the emigration of Europeans and North Americans of “Latin” descent to Mexico. This scheme was intended to increase the country’s agricultural production, mineral exploration, and facilitate trade with France.¹⁴⁵ Drouys de Lhuys’ view was not shared by everyone, and after the establishment of the empire in Mexico, some diplomats began to advise greater caution. But even then, migration was still considered important. In July 1864, for example, Montholon objected to a request to submit a proposed migration scheme to the Mexican government and wrote that although European immigration was necessary “to regenerate” the country, it was too early to submit such a plan.¹⁴⁶ Despite Montholon’s call for caution, he still insisted that migration to Mexico would be necessary long term, and he more or less agreed with Lhuys’ vision for “regenerating” the country.

On the other hand, Mexican elites had long believed that the key to “modernizing” Mexico was to emulate settler colonies like the U.S. and encourage migration into its less populous regions.¹⁴⁷ Like their peers elsewhere in Latin America, Mexican elites in the early nineteenth century were convinced that developing and modernizing Mexico required migrants.¹⁴⁸ One such early plot to settle Anglo-Americans into Texas backfired when the settlers rebelled, leading to

¹⁴⁵ Drouys de Lhuys, “17 November 1863 Letter to Montholon.”

¹⁴⁶ Marquis de Montholon, “26 June 1864 Letter to Lhuys,” 26 June 1864, 202CCC/8, Page 40-42.5, Correspondence Commerciales, Archives Des Affaires Étrangères, La Courneuve, France.

¹⁴⁷ David K. Burden, “Reform Before *La Reforma*: Liberals, Conservatives and the Debate over Immigration, 1846–1855.” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 23, no. 2 (2007).

¹⁴⁸ Jürgen Buchenau, “Small Numbers, Great Impact: Mexico and Its Immigrants, 1821–1973,” *Journal of American ethnic history* 20, no. 3 (2001): 23–49.
Burden, “La Idea Salvadora.”

the U.S.-Mexico war, but many Mexican elites nevertheless continued to advocate for migration to Mexico after the war.¹⁴⁹ Most of these schemes, however, were handicapped by the country's continued instability and economic troubles.¹⁵⁰

The promise of political stability that accompanied the establishment of the Second Empire brought with it renewed hope for settling Mexico. In his report to Emperor Maximilian on the work of the *Ministro de Fomento* in 1865, then Minister of Fomento Luis Robles Pezuela argued that immigration was the “sap of nations,” and that well run “nation[s]” are preoccupied with adding “new arms, new capital, and new industries” through migration. He singled out the U.S., Brazil, California, and Australia as especially successful examples of this kind of development through migration.¹⁵¹ Robles Pezuela further argued that although previous Mexican governments had attempted to encourage immigration, the country's political instability discouraged potential migrants from coming.¹⁵² Despite this history, Robles Pezuela assured his readers that once stabilized, Mexico's “good climate,” and economic opportunities would bring people in. However, this *Laissez-faire* migration policy would not be enough on its own, as those migrants:

...will tie themselves to large population centers, where they will dedicate themselves to commerce and the arts, and will stay without populating our deserts, and while denying agriculture the impulse that it needs to produce the abundant and precious fruits which they [the migrants] would undoubtedly make into the main source of public wealth.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Burden, “La Idea Salvadora.”

¹⁵⁰ Buchenau, “Small Numbers, Great Impact.”

¹⁵¹ Robles Pezuela, *Memorial Del Ministro De Fomento*, 98.

¹⁵² Robles Pezuela, *Memorial Del Ministro De Fomento*, 99.

¹⁵³ Robles Pezuela, *Memorial Del Ministro De Fomento*, 99.

Original quote in Spanish: *se fijará siempre en los grandes centros de población, en donde se dedicara al comercio y a las artes, quedando sin poblarse nuestros desiertos, y sin que la agricultura reciba el impulso que necesita para producir los abundantes y preciosos frutos que la harían sin duda la fuente principal de la riqueza pública.*

Indeed, many migrants of European descent who resided in Mexico at the time of Robles Pezuela's writing were city dwelling merchants, a fact that did not please Mexican elites hoping to recreate the agrarian migrations of settler colonies like the U.S.. Over the course of the nineteenth century, this group of expatriate Europeans and North Americans became very economically powerful despite their small numbers.¹⁵⁴ Elites in Mexico's new government wished to discourage a continuation of this kind of purely commercial migration. With this in mind, the Imperial government established a *Junta de Colonización* and made encouraging migration a priority of the *Ministerio de Fomento*, and the Imperial government as a whole.¹⁵⁵

In this friendly environment, a number of foreigners took the opportunity to devise elaborate migration schemes and obtain government support for their projects. The largest of these schemes involved relocating recently defeated Confederates from the U.S. South to Mexico, where, with the help of their "formerly" enslaved, indentured workforce, they would become cotton growers.¹⁵⁶ This scheme was devised by Matthew Fontaine Maury, a famous scientist and former Confederate official who, after the defeat of the Confederacy in the U.S. Civil War, took advantage of his connections with Maximilian's government to move to the Empire.¹⁵⁷ Maury became the Empire's top immigration official in September 1865, allowing him to effectively implement his scheme and encourage around 5,000 Southerners to join him between 1865 and 1867.¹⁵⁸ This, however, was not the only migration scheme during the Mexican Second Empire,

¹⁵⁴ Buchenau, "Small Numbers, Great Impact."

¹⁵⁵ "November 27, 1865 Development Plan for Mexico," *La Sociedad*, December 1 1865, <https://hndm.iib.unam.mx/consulta/resultados/visualizar/558a3afe7d1ed64f1701e388?resultado=24&tipo=pagina&intPagina=1&palabras=Maury%3BColonización>.

"Junta de Colonización," *El Diario del Imperio*, November 3, 1865, <https://hndm.iib.unam.mx/consulta/publicacion/visualizar/558a33947d1ed64f1697b3a6?intPagina=3&tipo=pagina&palabras=Colonización%3BCalifornia&anio=1865&mes=11&dia=03>.

¹⁵⁶ Todd W. Wahlstrom, *The Southern Exodus to Mexico: Migration across the Borderlands after the American Civil War* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2015), 31-38.

¹⁵⁷ Wahlstrom, *The Southern Exodus to Mexico*, 31.

¹⁵⁸ Wahlstrom, *The Southern Exodus to Mexico*, 12.

as there were numerous other projects to import people from the German states,¹⁵⁹ Belgium,¹⁶⁰ and California (among others).¹⁶¹

Despite their enthusiasm, government efforts to encourage agrarian migration were faced with serious challenges regarding the acquisition of land for potential immigrants. This problem arose from the fact that, even in regions which the empire did control, Mexico was not an open oasis of untapped land, and much of the arable land in the country was tied up in large landed estates or *Haciendas*.¹⁶² To avoid angering the powerful Hacienda owning class, Mexican government elites based their migration policy on the assumption that landowners would willingly sell, provide, or give up their land for colonization.¹⁶³ However, seeing that the imperial government was always short on funds, getting ahold of this land was often impossible.

Because of this, officials in the *Ministerio de Fomento* had to regularly turn down unrealistic migration schemes and proposals due to a lack of funds and/or land. For example, in a September

¹⁵⁹ Werner Erzenberg, "German Migration Letter," 26 July 1865, Segundo Imperio 136, Caja 29, Expediente 28, Archivos Generales de la Nación, México. Guía General de los Fondos en Línea, <https://archivos.gob.mx/guiageneral/visorimg/visorimg2.php?CodR=MX09017AGNCL02SB01FO014GSSC12SIUI29UC028>.

Durán-Merk "Identifying Villa Carlota."

France, Ministre des Finances, "Courriers du Mexique 'Colonization'," March 1 1865, 400AP/63, Fond Napoléons III, Archives Nationales de France, Pierrefitte sur Seine, France.

¹⁶⁰ Tiers, "Belgium Migration Letter," 6 November 1865, Segundo Imperio 136, Caja 29, Expediente 28, Archivos Generales de la Nación, México. Guía General de los Fondos en Línea, <https://archivos.gob.mx/guiageneral/visorimg/visorimg2.php?CodR=MX09017AGNCL02SB01FO014GSSC12SIUI29UC028>.

¹⁶¹ Charles Thiles, "Letter on the Immigration of 'Franco-Californians,'" 15 July 1865, Segundo Imperio 136, Caja 29, Expediente 28, Archivos Generales de la Nación, México. Guía General de los Fondos en Línea, <https://archivos.gob.mx/guiageneral/visorimg/visorimg2.php?CodR=MX09017AGNCL02SB01FO014GSSC12SIUI29UC028>.

France, Ministre des Finances, "Courriers du Mexique 'Colonization'," May 1 1865, 400AP/63, Fond Napoléons III, Archives Nationales de France, Pierrefitte sur Seine, France.

¹⁶² Buchenau, "Small Numbers, Great Impact."

¹⁶³ Mexico, *Decrees for the Encouragement of Immigration And Colonization*: Office of Colonization, Mexico, November, 1865 (Mexico: printed by Ignacio Cumplido, 1865), 12.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nc01.ark:/13960/t52g4kt79&seq=3>.

Durán-Merk "Identifying Villa Carlota," 20-30.

Manual Orozco y Berra, "September 2, 1865 Letter on Land for Immigrants," 2 September 1865, Segundo Imperio 136, Caja 29, Expediente 28A, Archivos Generales de la Nación, México. Guía General de los Fondos en Línea, <https://archivos.gob.mx/guiageneral/visorimg/visorimg2.php?CodR=MX09017AGNCL02SB01FO014GSSC12SIUI29UC028A>.

1865 report on the acquisition of land for colonists, Manuel Orozco y Berra (then the ministry's sub-secretary) vehemently denied a claim made by "several newspapers" that the ministry had turned down "thousands" of potential migrants.¹⁶⁴ Orozco y Berra admitted, however, that the Ministry only allowed migrants to enter if it was sure that it could provide them with land.¹⁶⁵ Additionally, he complained that not all of the migration schemes proposed to his ministry were realistic or sincere, and many purported immigration agents were only interested in speculating off Mexican land rather than settling it.¹⁶⁶ This reality sometimes led to tensions between Mexican government officials and their French counterparts/migration agents, whose schemes were often unrealistic and/or speculative. A prime example of this involves a short lived 1865 plot to emigrate a group of French prospectors from California to Mexico's northern provinces (which were mostly controlled by liberal guerrilla fighters, rather than the French military).¹⁶⁷

Shortly after the U.S. acquired California, gold was discovered in the territory and the California gold rush began. Among the thousands of people who migrated to the region was a group of about thirty thousand French men.¹⁶⁸ Like other non-Anglophone prospectors, these migrants were targets of xenophobia and many returned to France by the mid 1850's.¹⁶⁹ A select few of these "Franco-Californians" crossed the border into Mexico and established themselves in the country (although the exact number of people who did this is unknown).¹⁷⁰

In 1865, Charles Thiles (a self-described Franco-Californian himself) took advantage of the Mexican Empire's favorable policy towards migration and, with the backing of Archile Bazane,

¹⁶⁴ Orozco y Berra, "September 2, 1865 Letter on Land for Immigrants."

¹⁶⁵ Orozco y Berra, "September 2, 1865 Letter on Land for Immigrants."

¹⁶⁶ Orozco y Berra, "September 2, 1865 Letter on Land for Immigrants."

¹⁶⁷ Pani, "Dreaming of a Mexican Empire."

¹⁶⁸ Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Rush to Gold: The French and the California Gold Rush, 1848-1854* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 17.

¹⁶⁹ Rohrbough, *Rush to Gold*, 2-4.

¹⁷⁰ Chantal Cramaussel, "El Perfil del Migrante Francés a México a Medios Del Siglo XIX," *Cahiers des américanistes (Paris)* 47, no. 47 (2004): 139-156.

proposed to emigrate the remaining Franco-Californians into Mexico's north and west.¹⁷¹ These potential migrants, Thiles claimed, were "[in California] for many years, denied justice and oppressed" and would use their extensive mining knowledge to exploit their new "Latin" home.¹⁷² Like many of his contemporaries, Thiles believed that this mining scheme would eventually lead to increased agricultural production in Mexico's arid regions, and assured the government that he would eventually send "agrarians" to Mexico.¹⁷³ Maximilian's government was initially receptive to this scheme and gave Thiles an official position as an immigration agent for the empire, but that did not last.¹⁷⁴

The "Franco-Californian" scheme ran into problems from the moment of its inception. Notwithstanding his French backing, Thiles got into arguments with government officials regarding the financing he needed to implement the plan, and the fact that the government did not control the provinces he wanted to settle and did not have any land to give Franco-Californian settlers.¹⁷⁵ Luis Robles Pezuela was particularly wary of the plot, and on November 14, 1865, he allegedly ordered Matthew Fauntaine Maury to fire Thiles.¹⁷⁶ Despite his official support for directed migration, Robles Pezuela and his ministry simply could not back such an unrealistic scheme.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷¹ Charles Thiles, "Sommaire des demandes faites par M. Ch. Thiles de S. Francisco pour obtenir L'admission dans L'empire Mexicain des Français du Pasifique, Légation de France à Mexico, Affaires politiques. 432PO/1/232, folder 2, pg 72-75, Archives Diplomatique du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Nantes, France, <https://archivesdiplomatiques.diplomatie.gouv.fr/ark:/14366/vnlwmzq2xj4r/cf3976cd-720b-47d9-a65a-30330395d883>.

¹⁷² Thiles, "Letter on the Immigration of 'Franco-Californians.'"

¹⁷³ Charles Thiles, "August 11 letter on the Plan to emigrate Franco-Californians," 11 August 1865, 432PO/1/232 (65-103), Archives Diplomatique, Nante, France. <https://archivesdiplomatiques.diplomatie.gouv.fr/ark:/14366/vnlwmzq2xj4r/becca3e7b-abbd-481e-8d76-60fca212fdb0>.

¹⁷⁴ Thiles, "Sommaire des demandes faites par M. Ch. Thiles."

¹⁷⁵ Thiles, "Sommaire des demandes faites par M. Ch. Thiles."

¹⁷⁶ Charles Thiles, "Letter and Report to the French Minister in Mexico," 14 November, 1865." Légation de France à Mexico, Affaires politiques. 432PO/1/232, folder 2, pg 85, Archives Diplomatique du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Nantes, France, <https://archivesdiplomatiques.diplomatie.gouv.fr/ark:/14366/vnlwmzq2xj4r/442a186c-c018-4bfa-a8bd-c0350ea7af69>.

¹⁷⁷ Thiles, "Sommaire des demandes faites par M. Ch. Thiles."

Ultimately, this episode demonstrates the limitations of the ideologies which drove the French to intervene in Mexico and illustrates how the Mexican “fertility trope” created tensions between French officials/agents and Mexican elites when faced with the realities of governing the Second Empire. Although Luis Robles Pezuela believed that Mexico needed migrants to become a “modern” nation, and took advantage of the Mexican fertility trope, he, and other imperial officials, like Orozco y Berra, were ultimately hamstrung by chronic shortages of land and funds. In other words, although French intellectuals could afford to believe in a myth about Mexico’s untapped fertility and use it to justify their Mexican imperial project, their Mexican counterparts were forced to take reality into consideration and dial back some of their hopes for development and migration.

Conclusion

The intellectual history of the French intervention in Mexico has traditionally been focused on the personality of Michel Chevalier and on his “pan-Latinist” worldview.¹⁷⁸ As this thesis argues, Chevalier’s views about Mexican “civilization” did not merely rely on a belief that Mexicans were part of a global and declining “Latin” race. Chevalier and his contemporaries believed that agriculture formed the basis of civilization, and they assumed that because the Aztecs had been sedentary, even Mexico’s indigenous peoples were relatively civilized. This notion that agriculture formed the foundation of “civilization” was a keystone of the ideologies of intellectuals from both France and Mexico.

The belief that agriculture forms the basis of “civilization” also inspired the French myth that Mexico was uniquely rich and fertile but that it had been abandoned by Mexicans and required “regeneration.” This agrarian justification for the intervention was not separate from French commercial motives in Mexico, rather, it allowed French officials to effectively argue that the intervention would be beneficial to French interests, would pay for itself (partly in the form of interest on loans issued to the new Mexican government), and would help the “unfortunate” Mexican people. Moreover, although the fertility trope seems to contradict the pan-Latinist assumption that Mexicans were civilized because they were Latin (or that they spoke a Romance language and were Catholic), it nonetheless cohabitated alongside pan-Latinism in the minds of French government and intellectual elites.

The fertility trope, however, was most powerful in Mexico itself where it provided French officials with a way to legitimize their informal imperial project. Mexican intellectuals held their own parallel myth about Mexico’s “richness” and used the French fertility trope for their own

¹⁷⁸Shawcross, *France, Mexico and Informal Empire in Latin America*, 119-155.
Carroll, “Imperial Ideologies in the Second Empire.”
Barker, “The Factor of ‘Race’ in the French Experience in Mexico,”

ends. These Mexican political elites thought that developing Mexico's richness and fertility would be key to building a "modern" nation. For those reasons, the limited roles offered to them in French scientific institutions like the *Commissions Scientifique du Mexique* and the *Commissions Scientifique, Littéraire et Artistique* provided an opportunity for Mexican elites to refine their domestic state building project, and the French backed Second Empire offered them a way to implement this project (even if their dreams were ultimately stymied by Mexico's chronic financial problems). Conversely, openness of Mexican government elites to French portrayals of their country's environment and agricultural capacity, and their collaboration with Maximilian's empire, allowed French officials to argue that the Mexican Second Empire was far from an imposed puppet state and was actually supported by the Mexican people.

The uneasy symbiosis created by this transnational glorification of Mexico's "wealth" and "fertility" was not without tension. From its inception, the Mexican Second Empire was hamstrung by problems relating to lack of land and funds, and did not control the entire Mexican territory. This limited the ability of idealistic Mexican politicians to effectively implement their policy preferences and state building objectives.¹⁷⁹ It also occasionally led to conflicts between French officials and their Mexican counterparts. A case in point concerns migration policy, where, inspired by what they saw as "success" in the U.S., Mexican elites came to see agrarian migration as an important way to modernize and develop Mexico agriculturally. Despite this enthusiasm, Mexican political elites had trouble finding land for prospective colonists and had to turn down numerous proposals. French government officials, like Mexico's elite, thought that the key to "regenerating" Mexico lay in migration, and backed several schemes to settle migrants into Mexico. In some cases (such as that of the "Franco-Californians"), the Mexican government was unable to approve such French backed plots.

¹⁷⁹ Pani, "Dreaming of a Mexican Empire."

In hindsight, the French intervention in Mexico seems puzzling, and the French objectives behind it outright unrealistic. Indeed, the traditional historiography for the event has portrayed it as an “adventure,” and the Mexican Empire as a pathetic and entirely foreign puppet regime and/or a French scam.¹⁸⁰ This thesis confirms that the intervention and Mexican empire were indeed driven by an exaggerated trope. However, just as the revisionist histories of the Second Empire have emphasized that the regime did not seem unrealistic at the time,¹⁸¹ I would like to suggest that the Mexican fertility trope was not unreasonable. Yes, it was mostly false and/or exaggerated.¹⁸² But both French and Mexican sources sincerely believed it was true, and came to that conclusion because of the “scientific” knowledge of the time (no matter how flawed it was). The idea that Mexico could be “regenerated” and benefit French interests in the process was therefore perfectly logical. What this trope does reveal is the sheer power of the concept of agricultural “regeneration” at the time – so powerful that many Mexican intellectuals were willing to play Napoleon III and his allies’ imperial game.

¹⁸⁰ Pani, “El Segundo Imperio.”

Glaser, “The Age of Regeneration.”

¹⁸¹ Pani, “Dreaming of a Mexican Empire.”

Pani, *Para Mexicanizar El Segundo Imperio*.

¹⁸² Salmerón Sanginés, “El Mito de La Riqueza de México.”