

The Sausage Rebellion: Public Health, Private Enterprise, and Meat in Mexico City, 1890–1917. By Jeffrey M. Pilcher. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006. x + 245 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, notes, index. Paper, \$29.95. ISBN: 0-826-33796-1.

Reviewed by William Schell Jr.

In *The Sausage Rebellion*, Jeffrey M. Pilcher continues his culinary exploration of Mexican national identity by taking on the topic of “the Mexico City meat supply,” which, he observes, “stands at the intersection of important historical themes: production and consumption, political and moral economy, business and labor, and the marketplace and the state” (p. 14). To unpack these relations in the age of Porfirio Diaz, Pilcher analyzes a decades-long struggle “by local officials, butchers and consumers to retain control of the Mexico City meat supply against the foreign meatpacker [John W.] DeKay and his patrons within the Porfirian regime.” He gives special attention to “the inherent tension between public health and private enterprise,” describing how Mexicans’ “cultural preference for freshly slaughtered meat . . . helped to shape the political arena” as they resisted the state’s efforts to extend its power by implementing health regulations (pp. 1, 3, 14).

Pilcher recounts the history of Mexico City’s meat trade, from its roots in the colonial *abasto de carne* (municipal meat monopoly) through the liberal reforms that culminated in the Porfirian modernization. Livestock merchants known as *introdutores* (importers) organized the meat trade through informal cartels that effectively controlled access to the municipal slaughterhouse. *Tocineros* (hog butchers) had their own cartels, but while cattle slaughter was centralized, hogs were butchered in dozens of locations until 1886, when a municipal hog abattoir was opened and production became “more tightly concentrated” (p. 39). Problems of supply and sanitation led to increased state control of butchering and demands for modernization of the meat-trade infrastructure in the name of public health. Paradoxically, while the presumably liberal Porfirian reformers rejected the free-market North American model of private packinghouses in favor of the centralized French model of a municipal abattoir, the importers defended

tradition by employing liberal concepts of laissez-faire and private property to denounce the regime's proposal, which they compared to the colonial-era monopoly. Importers also adopted the language of science and medicine (insofar as they understood it) to resist oversight by health officials by challenging the efficacy and impartiality of the inspections.

Pilcher presents the struggle to replace the ancient San Lucas abattoir with a modern facility as a microcosm of "the broader flaws in the development strategy of Porfirian state capitalism" (p. 86). Built in stumbling stages over years by a series of Mexican and *yanqui* contractors, the Peravillo plant's design flaws were obvious within days of its opening in 1897, and immediately shortages and higher prices resulted. When an earthquake leveled the structure two years later, the regime awarded a contract to rebuild and run it to Alberto Terrazas, who operated slaughterhouses in Torreon and Parral. Although importers and their butcher *cuadrillas* (crews or gangs) feared they would be cut out when Peravillo reopened in 1905, the Diaz regime proved even handed in dealing with the large importers, whose acceptance of this arrangement Pilcher characterizes as a "retreat from liberalism" (pp. 102, 115).

In 1901, hustling yanqui businessman John DeKay left a meeting with Diaz bearing a concession for his scheme to bring refrigerated Mexican meat to local consumers and to the world. For six years he scrambled to secure American and British capital for his Mexican National Packing Company (Popo) while simultaneously seeking Mexican political capital by associating himself with Vice President Ramon Corral and securing from Finance Minister Jose Limantour a five- year tax moratorium. However, DeKay would find his political capital insufficient. In 1908, Corral inaugurated the Uruapan packing plant, praising it as modern Mexico incarnate—scientific, sanitary, and efficient. But when Popo's first shipments arrived in Mexico City, Limantour impounded and destroyed the meat for nonpayment of taxes, making it clear that the problem would go away if DeKay bought Terrazas's struggling Peravillo operation. DeKay had little choice but to pay Terrazas 2.5 million dollars for his slaughterhouse concession ("five times the cost of construction") and to give him a seat on Popo's board (p. 136). DeKay financed this through the United States Banking Company (USBC), naming the bank's president, George Ham, a Popo director. In turn, Ham made unsecured loans to DeKay.

DeKay employed a yanqui-style marketing campaign to overcome the Mexican aversion to chilled meat, offering low prices and lottery drawings for inexpensive, hand-cranked White Sewing Machines. Crowds grew so large at shops selling Popo products that owners had to call the police to maintain order. In addition, DeKay sought export markets by concluding a contract with Sir Thomas Lipton, who “also made a substantial investment in . . . company bonds” (p. 146). Despite DeKay’s best efforts, Popo hemorrhaged capital and was forced into receivership, dragging USBC with it into bankruptcy and forcing Ham out of the presidency. Ham was sacrificed to save Popo, which was still in receivership when the 1910 revolution brought Francisco Madero to power. After a bit of nationalist posturing, Madero approved DeKay’s plan to reorganize Popo with Canadian capital, but Victoriano Huerta’s coup wrecked the plan.

The sausage rebellion ultimately eliminated foreign ownership and restored the sale of the freshly slaughtered meat preferred by the Mexican public. It brought to the industry, however, not “social revolution” but, rather, “authoritarian control,” or what Pilcher terms “Leviathan at the stockyards” (p. 3). When DeKay died in 1938, his Uruapan plant “had already fallen into ruins.” Peralvillo, however, continued to operate until 1955, when it was replaced, not by a modern facility but, rather, by another traditional abattoir, Rastro Ferreri, which Carlos Salinas eventually closed as a public nuisance over the predictable warnings by importers that meat shortages would ensue (p. 185).

There is much to recommend *The Sausage Rebellion*. It provides fascinating glimpses of characters and concurrences, but it also has some problems. Its narrative is undermined in part because Pilcher is not overly concerned with chronology. This results in questionable assertions of cause-and-effect. For instance, he writes that the “careful arrangement [balancing Terrazas’s interests with those of the importers] was soon destabilized with the arrival of meatpacking interests from the United States” (p. 117). Yet DeKay launched his enterprises in Mexico simultaneously with Terrazas’s reconstruction of Peravillo. Thus, Pilcher’s assertion of a cause-and-effect relationship is not only incorrect—it also obscures a more complex situation. Finally, although Pilcher provides four tables of statistical data, he uses it impressionistically and, although he cites Stephen Haber, Edward Beatty, and other New Institutional Economic historians, he

makes no use of their core insights. The result is that Pilcher's good work is less than it otherwise might have been.

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