


Business Biography in Mexico: The State of the Genre, its Usefulness, and How to Research One

La biografía empresarial en México: El estado del género, su utilidad y cómo investigar una

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Abstract: This three-part article addresses the genre of business biography in Mexico. In the first part, I evaluate those biographies already written, which can be classified as commissioned works (the majority fall into this category and tend to lack analytical value) or independent creations. I also explain the scarcity of biography in this country as compared to the Anglo-Saxon tradition. In the second part I propose seven reasons why the biography genre is useful for history and sociology; some pertain to Mexican fields of study, while others are relevant to history in general. Complementing this section is a selection of conclusions drawn from my recent book *Jenkins of Mexico*. Finally, I suggest how to undertake the writing of a business biography in Mexico, with references to public, private, journalistic, oral and archival sources.

Key words: Business biography; Emilio Azcárraga; William Jenkins; Carlos Slim.

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Resumen: El artículo trata del género biografía empresarial en México y consta de tres partes. En la primera, valoro lo ya escrito, que se puede catalogar o como libros de encargo —que son la mayoría y típicamente carecen de valor analítico— o como obras independientes; también explico la escasez del género biográfico en este país, a diferencia de la tradición sajona. En la segunda parte, ofrezco siete razones para considerar al género biográfico de utilidad histórica y sociológica, algunas pertinentes al ámbito mexicano y otras relevantes al estudio de la historia en general; complemento esta sección con unas conclusiones tomadas de mi reciente libro *Jenkins of Mexico* (en español: *En busca del señor Jenkins*). Por último, sugiero cómo se puede emprender una biografía empresarial en México, con referencia a fuentes públicas, privadas, periodísticas, orales y archivísticas.

Palabras clave: biografía empresarial; Emilio Azcárraga; William Jenkins; Carlos Slim.

Business is the forgotten pillar of the modern Mexican state. Relative to work on labour, the rural poor, political parties, and popular culture, histories of private enterprise since the 1910 Revolution remain few. For reasons ideological, disciplinary, and practical, business history is uncommon, and independent business history —that is, not counting flattering books sponsored by their subjects— is rarer still. As for Mexican business biographies, with the exception of commissioned works, those are scarce indeed.

This article discusses the condition, the validity, and the practicalities of business biography, as the subgenre pertains to modern Mexican history. First, it surveys the state of the field, a necessarily short section because the field is by no means well cultivated. Several explanations for the scarcity of Mexican business biography will be given. Second, the article offers a number of reasons for biography's utility in the Mexican context, followed by a case that illustrates this with five historiographical justifications: my biography (Paxman, 2017a) of the Puebla-based U.S. businessman William Jenkins (1878-1963). Third, the article collates some practical techniques and sources that may be useful in researching Mexican business biographies. Throughout the article I draw on my experiences researching not only Jenkins but also Emilio Azcárraga Milmo (1930-1997), the media mogul known as *El Tigre*,



and Carlos Slim Helú (b. 1940), the telecoms magnate (Fernández & Paxman, 2000/2013; Paxman, forthcoming).

Before continuing, I must note that my use of the term “businessmen” is deliberate. The Mexican business elite has traditionally been a male preserve, exclusively so until the 1990s.¹ This continues to be the case to an extent far greater, for example, than in the United States. North of the border, some women have created billion-dollar enterprises, such as the TV personalities Oprah Winfrey and Martha Stewart and Meg Whitman at eBay, while others have become CEO of established giants such as Hewlett-Packard, PepsiCo, DuPont, IBM, Yahoo!, and YouTube.² In recent years, in the annual edition “Los 100 empresarios más importantes de México” of business magazine *Expansión*, the list has consistently included just three women.³

MEXICAN BUSINESS BIOGRAPHY: THE STATE OF THE FIELD

When Claudia Fernández and I were doing the press carousel for the first edition of *El Tigre: Emilio Azcárraga y su imperio Televisa* in 2000, we had the impression that our book was Mexico’s first independent biography of a contemporary businessman. This impression was strengthened by our interviewees, many of whom were a little incredulous that we should have written about the late mogul *without his family’s permission*. Indeed, “Is this book authorised?” was the question we had most often been asked when seeking to interview those who knew Azcárraga. (It remains the question I am most often asked as I seek to interview people about Carlos Slim.)

It is worth dwelling on the issue for a moment, because “authorised” means something different in Mexico than in the English-speaking world. In Mexico, an authorised biography is one commissioned by its subject or his or

¹ The first female senior executive at a multibillion-dollar Mexican company was probably María Asunción Aramburuzabala, who in 1996 became vice chairperson of the brewery Grupo Modelo (founded by her grandfather); *New York Times*, 20 July 2002.

² These CEOs are: at HP, Carly Fiorina, 1999-2005, and Meg Whitman, 2011-2015; at Pepsi, Indra Nooyi, 2006-present; at DuPont, Ellen Kullman, 2009-2015; at IBM, Ginni Rometty, 2011-present; at Yahoo!, Marissa Mayer, 2012-2017; at YouTube, Susan Wojcicki, 2014-present.

³ *Expansión*, 1 Oct., 2012, pp. 257-262; 11 Oct., 2013, pp. 242-263; 10 Oct., 2014, pp. 174-202; 25 Sept., 2015, pp. 104-130; 1 Oct., 2016, pp. 75-62; 1 Oct., 2017, pp. 70-161.



her family, or at the very least undertaken with their prior permission, and the contents are subject to their control. An emphatic reminder of this arrangement emerged in 1997, when the family of leading Monterrey executive and business ideologue Juan Sánchez Navarro bought the entire print-run of Alicia Ortiz Rivera's biography of the man before it landed in the bookshops. Sánchez Navarro had approved the manuscript, but several women in his family were unhappy with some of its passages. They demanded the book be reprinted with its franker moments excised, including one (supplied by don Juan himself) that related his teenaged sexual initiation in a Colonia Roma brothel.⁴

By contrast, one of the best books about Rupert Murdoch came about when William Shawcross (1992), an established journalist and biographer of the Shah of Iran, requested the media magnate's collaboration. Murdoch agreed, so out of courtesy Shawcross let him read and comment on –but not censor– the manuscript. (In the event, Murdoch returned the manuscript without comment.) This kind of relationship is common in the UK and USA, even when the subject initiates the process. When Steve Jobs approached former *Time* editor and Einstein biographer Walter Isaacson (2011) to write his life story, the deal they struck enabled Isaacson to interview Jobs forty times; in turn, the Apple founder would read –but not censor– the manuscript.⁵ In the English-speaking world, an “authorised” business biography can be an independent one, even (as in the case of *Steve Jobs*) a fairly critical one.

Mexican business biography mostly consists of commissioned works (sometimes termed *libros de encargo*), typically penned by journalists. The majority are hagiographic, their tone often conveyed by their titles: *Alejo Peralta: Un patrón sin patronos* (Suárez, 1992), *El Enrique Ramírez Miguel que yo conocí* (Treviño Trejo, 2000), and so forth. In a minority of cases, a magnate or his family will hire professional historians, with more respectable results. Three fine examples are a multi-authored biography of Manuel Espinosa Yglesias (Águila, Soler & Suárez, 2007), completed in 1994 while the banker was still alive but unpublished until seven years after his death; Pedro Salmerón's (2001) life of politician-businessman Aarón Sáenz; and Gabriela Recio's (2017) recent portrait of the late Monterrey titan, Eugenio Garza Sada. Effec-

⁴ Miguel Ángel Granados Chapa. Plaza Pública. *Reforma*, 1 December, 1997; conversations with publishers, December 1997.

⁵ The arrangements between author and subject are described in the introductions to each.



tively in the same camp as the commissioned works are several biographies that, while undertaken independently, are laudatory and avoid controversy. These include two books about Carlos Slim (Martínez, 2010; Trejo, 2013) –whose flattery of their subject earned ostentatious displays in the Slim-owned retail chain Sanborns, Mexico’s biggest bookseller– and one about the cement king Lorenzo Zambrano (Fuentes-Berain, 2007). The latter, written by a reputed business journalist, focuses on how Zambrano expanded CEMEX internationally. There is also an oral biography of Lorenzo Servitje and family, the founders of breadmaking giant Bimbo (Cherem, 2008).

Far fewer business biographies are truly independent. Some are journalistic portraits that adopt a “warts and all” approach. In addition to *El Tigre* (Fernández & Paxman, 2000/2013), these include Diego Enrique Osorno’s (2015) biography of Slim (by far the best of the three published to date on this subject) and a novelized but well researched life of Swedish investor Axel Wenner-Gren (Bolaños with Ruiz Esparza, 2008).

Independent business biographies by academics are again small in number. Until recently, the art was rarely practiced at all. Early notable examples include David Walker’s (1986) case study of the elite merchant family Martínez del Río in the mid-19th century and Juan Barragán’s (1993) study of the role played by U.S. entrepreneur John Brittingham in the industrialization of Porfirian and post-revolutionary Monterrey. Walker’s was the only business biography deemed worthy of inclusion in the 600-entry survey *México en sus libros*, by historians Enrique Florescano and Pablo Mijangos (2004).

Recent years have seen a small proliferation of works. These include Paul Garner’s (2011) biography of Porfirio Díaz’s chief public works contractor, the British engineer Weetman Pearson; Jean-Louis d’Anglade’s (2012) life of French immigrant merchant Joseph Ollivier; Evelyne Sánchez’s (2013) case study of textile pioneer Estevan de Antuñano; *Jenkins of Mexico* (Paxman, 2017a); and José Galindo’s forthcoming history of the French immigrant Jean family in textiles and banking. That most of these works study foreigners may owe something to the relative ease of accessing their archives and persuading their descendants to talk, but it also reflects the outsized role of immigrant entrepreneurship in Mexico’s post-Reforma economic development.⁶ Finally, a popular subgenre worth noting here is what might be termed the narcobiography; drug lords are very much businessmen. The best of these include

⁶ On this entrepreneurial tendency, see María Inés Barbero (2003, p. 333).



books by Terrence Poppa & Charles Bowden (1990), Ricardo Ravelo (2009), Malcolm Beith (2010), and José Reveles (2014), the latter two being profiles of Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán.

There are various reasons for Mexico’s lack of independent business biography, some ideological others practical. Dependency theory –which dominated studies of Latin America’s economies from the 1960s to the 1980s, its influence lingering still– emphasised the complicity of capitalists in authoritarian and pro-U.S. regimes. Their readings often depended more on Marxist suppositions than on archival research, assuming that Mexico’s industrialists were uniformly reactionary, parasitic, in thrall to foreign capital, and a bane on the lives of workers. In Mexico, anti-capitalist bias pervaded the academy; as Mario Cerutti (1999, p. 117) once noted, business history in Latin America as a whole was written “more for reasons of ideology than of knowledge”. In some quarters, antipathy towards industrialists persists. Historians may admit, and lament, the influence of big business, but that does not mean they wish to study it.

Within English-language scholarship, the “cultural turn” that began in the 1980s marginalised the business class. The article of faith that holds that the agency of the poor shapes the workings of the state promotes a dualistic understanding of struggle between “bottom-up” and “top-down” forces; this model ignores how business elites are complex actors, who often find themselves at odds with the government and with each other. For three decades now, English-speaking historians have studied the impact upon the nation-state of workers, peasants, women, students, and rebels, but they have seldom considered the impact of industrialists.

There are logistical factors too. Researchers are dissuaded by a long tradition of secrecy within Mexico’s private sector. This tradition is bolstered by the fact that a high proportion of firms (relative to the United States and northern Europe) remain in the hands of their founding family. Until very recently, Mexican moguls were far more media-shy than their U.S. counterparts. Their executives and friends still frequently refuse to talk to a would-be interviewer without an express say-so from the magnate. Corporate archives are typically off-limits, even to contracted historians.⁷ Mexican business re-

⁷ Gustavo del Ángel (2007) was granted only very limited access to the BANCOMER archive for his commissioned company history *BBVA Bancomer: 75 años de historia*; Del Ángel



porting, which until the mid-1990s was at best insipid, at worst sycophantic, has not helped.

THE UTILITY OF MEXICAN BUSINESS BIOGRAPHY

Why It Is Worthwhile

1. The most basic reason for the utility of Mexican business biography is that traditions of concentration of wealth and family ownership of firms have made a relatively small business elite unusually rich and powerful. One might argue that concentration of wealth is a characteristic of any capitalist society, but there remains the matter of degree. For several decades, economists have chiefly used the Gini coefficient to gauge the inequality of income distribution within nations. From the 1950s until about 2000, Mexico's coefficient lay above 0.5, a mark of inequality regularly exceeded only by Brazil among major global economies. Since its entry into the OECD in 1994, Mexico's after-tax Gini coefficient has ranked the highest in the 35-member organization.⁸

Indications of Mexico's concentration of wealth specifically within the business sphere are manifold. Some are quantitative, such as the 1994 *Forbes* ranking of global billionaires, which in the wake of President Carlos Salinas' privatization programme identified 24 Mexican billionaires, more than for any country bar the USA, Germany, and Japan.⁹ Others are more anecdotal, such as the contention, oft-repeated in the 1990s, that "300 families" controlled Mexico's economy.¹⁰ The figure is arbitrary, but the frequency with which it was repeated attests to its imaginative power: that is, to the willingness of the public to believe that Mexico was indeed in thrall to the very

to author, personal communication, 16 June 2007. Similarly, restricted access is evident in Águila, Soler & Suárez's (2007) biography of Manuel Espinosa Yglesias.

⁸ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; www.oecd.org/statistics/

⁹ *Forbes*, 18 July, 1994, 146, 194 f.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Barry (1992, p. 180). The notion of "the 300" may have originated in a 1950s high-society *Who's Who*, *Registro de los trescientos y algunos más*, which surveyed the elite of Mexico City; cited in Hugo Nutini (2004, p. 90). It was popularised in 1987, when on two occasions banker Agustín Legorreta claimed that 300 businessmen control the Mexican economy; cited in Cristina Puga & Ricardo Tirado (1992, 140 f.). Roderic Camp (1989, p. 86) (among others) has made reference to the *thirty* richest families.



rich.¹¹ Its repetition, along with the reverential tone of newspaper business pages, likely helped maintain a deferential public attitude towards the business elite, an attitude that may have facilitated elite influence. As for family ownership, the perpetuation of a privileged few dynasties dominating Mexico's industries –such as television, bread, tortillas, beer, cement, and, since 1990, telephony– is well-attested. It contrasts with the managerial capitalism and fragmentation of shareholding long favoured in the United States and northern Europe.¹²

2. A second trait that makes business biography worth pursuing is the history of interdependence between business elites and political elites. This symbiosis helped steer Mexico on a much more conservative developmental path than the Revolution promised, especially after the oil expropriation of 1938. Businessmen used their political influence to resist the agents of radicalism, from socialistic cabinet ministers to union activists, thereby checking the expropriation of certain industries and plantations; they supported the most conservative governors, which helped incline the PRI to the right in the late 1930s and 1940s; they and their political allies championed capitalistic and often monopolistic development over the redistributive promises of the Revolution.

With the arrival of alternation between parties in the federal government in 2000, the balance of power between the political and the business elite arguably tilted in favour of the latter. Under the PAN, Mexico witnessed a decline in presidential power and the concomitant emergence of much-discussed “de facto powers”, over whom the state seemed to exert only limited judicial and regulatory control. Among them certain business leaders loomed large: Emilio Azcárraga Jean, Ricardo Salinas Pliego, and Carlos Slim. Hence (and despite attempts by the PRI since 2012 to rein in the de facto powers), the study of the business elite has arguably taken on a new urgency.

3. A related reason for business biography owes to the fact that tycoons have often dealt with authorities face-to-face rather than through sector-wide channels. (A caveat: this trait is truer for the capitalists of Mexico City and Puebla than for those of Monterrey, for whom employers' association COPAR-MEX has been an important vehicle since its founding in 1926.) For example,

¹¹ As a journalist in Mexico in the 1990s, this author often heard the “300” phrase, or its “30 families” variant.

¹² See, e.g., Camp (1989). On U.S. managerial capitalism, see Alfred Chandler (1977).



among Mexico's banks, both before and after the Revolution, those that grew fastest were the best-connected, not the most efficient. Such personalism has permeated the business domain (Maurer, 2002, p.11). As the Argentine historian María Inés Barbero (2003) has summarised for Latin America overall: "social networks explain as much as contractual relationships" (p. 328). Here we see how biography's attention to individuals, as opposed to a class of people, assumes particular importance. We also see the limitations of the collective approach to the private sector preferred by Marxist historians and some political scientists.¹³ Very often it is only through personal memoirs and oral anecdotes that we can get at the relationships and exchanges of favour between a given president or governor and a given magnate. Very often those exchanges are sealed in private, that is, not by any chamber-of-commerce delegation at Los Pinos, but by two men meeting for lunch, golfing at a country club, or conversing at a son's baptism or a daughter's wedding.

4. Moving closer still to the individual industrialist, the Marxist tradition that regards owners only as profit-maximisers ignores all sorts of real-world cultural and subjective variables that might orient them or even distract them from "the bottom line".¹⁴ The impact of such variables may have implications for the political, economic, or cultural trajectory of their society, as well as for the profits and the reputation of the elites themselves. For example, businessmen are sometimes motivated by their ideological convictions. The distaste of radio mogul Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta for the radicalism of Lázaro Cárdenas led him to risk backing Juan Andreu Almazán for president in 1940, a move that not only contributed to a close-fought election but also cost Azcárraga the first television concession, which went instead to Rómulo O'Farrill (Saragoza [forthcoming]). Then there is the matter of their conception of themselves as leaders; if they see themselves as feudal lords, as did Azcárraga Vidaurreta's son, Emilio Azcárraga Milmo, they may favour inefficiently large workforces. Another variable is patriotism, which was a principal motive for Azcárraga Milmo's funding of a cable news network (ECO) that would lose \$350 million over 13 years (Fernández & Paxman, 2013, pp. 397-399, 604). Yet another factor is their inclination for philanthropy, diverting profits to hospitals, colleges, and foundations.

¹³ See e.g.: i) Leal (1972); Concheiro, et al. (1979); Leal's study, long a college staple, remains in print; ii) Story (1986); Valdés Ugalde (1997); Schneider (2004).

¹⁴ On subjectivity in business, see e.g.: Hernández Romo (2003).



Of course, patriotic investments and philanthropic projects can earn political capital and business benefits. The charitable commitment by Carlos Slim to Mexico City's Centro Histórico was surely motivated in part by a desire to raise the value of the many properties he owned in the district.¹⁵ But to perceive all corporate philanthropy as entirely profit-driven is simplistic. Some businessmen believe that *la noblesse oblige*. Others have big egos; they want to be recognised as community leaders and are prepared to pay handsomely for such recognition. Still others fund children's charities or art museums for sentimental reasons, and/or to give something to do to their wives, daughters, or mistresses. Mexico City's best modern art museum of the 1990s, the Centro Cultural/Arte Contemporáneo, was one such example, managed by Azcárraga's fourth wife. The Museo Soumaya (2011), which houses the largest collection of Rodin outside Paris, was built to honour the late wife of Carlos Slim, and it is run by one of his daughters.¹⁶ Other sentimental factors may also apply. Slim's devotion to the Centro Histórico stems in part from the fact that it was there that his father, like many of the city's Lebanese immigrants, had his start in business.

5. Within the Mexican context, business biography—in its independent variety—can offer a useful antidote to a culture of public deference towards magnates that long pervaded most of the press, bolstered in turn by biographies contracted by magnates themselves or their families. Enrique Krauze, speaking of Mexico's leaders in general, has termed that culture "*cerpada, cortesana, jerárquica y poco liberal*". This trait is part of a more general post-revolutionary, *oficialista* tendency to divide Mexico's leaders into heroes and villains (Garner, 2012). The problem, of course, is that such magnates are routinely lauded as visionaries and saints, their success owing to a mix of entrepreneurial vision, very hard work, and gracious treatment of their employees. Occasionally, but probably not enough, such accounts will allow for strokes of luck and the decisive actions or innovations of subordinates. They will seldom admit the role of government policy—protectionism in particular—in their success. And they will never admit (except inadvertently)

¹⁵ Slim's commitment dates at least from his backing of the Fundación del Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de México, A.C., founded in 2002; Trejo (2013).

¹⁶ Another example is Puebla's Museo Amparo, established by banker Manuel Espinosa Yglesias in honor of his late wife and for many years run by one of his daughters.



exchanges of favours with politicians, monopolistic practice, the paying of bribes, and so forth.

As a result, the existing historiography of Mexican business has been greatly skewed by self-serving accounts. Independent versions can help us better understand not only corporate histories but the trajectory of state formation at federal and local levels, the growth of the middle classes, and the paradoxically concomitant persistence of inequality. It can put to the test the commonplace that “*el que no transa, no avanza*”, that is, that bribery and other corrupt practices are necessary to advancement in business.

Two further justifications for business biography relate to the analytical advantages of biographies as a genre *per se*:¹⁷ 6. They allow a view of a *longue durée* that is usually unobstructed by the watersheds that most historians favour, lending themselves to debates over the perennial question of continuity versus change. Thus a biography of a long-prominent soldier-statesman, such as Martin Gilbert’s (1991) of Winston Churchill, can offer a view of Britain’s political and social evolution from the late Victorian era to the 1960s. As I shall shortly argue for William Jenkins, his six decades of business activity in 20th-century Mexico shed light on the extent to which the country experienced a revolutionary transformation. (That is, his biography fleshes out the question: Does a revolution do away with most of the business elite, as is popularly believed, or do the oligarchs prove persistent?¹⁸) To take a more recent example, Carlos Slim is popularly believed to have appeared out of nowhere to win the privatization auction of Telmex in December, 1990; as such, he represents the fantastically rapid rise to great wealth enjoyed by a well-connected generation at the dawn of Mexican neoliberalism. But his biography will show that by that date he was already a very wealthy man –worth \$650 million by one banker’s estimate, a fortune largely developed during the so-called “lost decade” of the 1980s.

7. Finally, biographies allow one to consider multiple themes and employ multiple approaches that historians, in this age of intense specialization, are apt to treat separately. For example, the existing histories of Mexican cinema are chiefly exercises in textual analysis. If we are to chronicle that industry in a holistic fashion, one that takes into account its social, political, and economic impact, historians must consider labour history, business history,

¹⁷ Here I draw on Ben Pimlott (1999).

¹⁸ I allude to Mark Wasserman (1993), which incorporates elements of family biography.



political history, and even (due to the rivalry and power of Hollywood) diplomatic history, as well as cultural history. The biography of a film industry mogul such as was William Jenkins in the 1940s and 1950s—who had to deal with all the constituencies that these five fields imply—affords a framework for the interweaving of all these disparate threads.

A Case Study: The Life of William Jenkins

I will now demonstrate the use of business biography with reference to my life of William Jenkins. There are five main themes that it incorporates, and their elaboration illustrates some of the conceptual reasons for the genre's validity in general.¹⁹

1. I trace Jenkins' career to illustrate how business elites negotiated the hazards of the Mexican Revolution and the socialist legislation that followed. Jenkins' trajectory supports revisionist readings of two watersheds: the Revolution and 1940. In the former case, it helps subvert the still-popular view that the thirty years from 1910 were bad for business. Time and again Jenkins found chances for profit. During the Revolution he speculated with great success in property; he also kept his textile mills running. During the 1920s, he amassed huge holdings that included the Atencingo sugar kingdom, benefiting from a selective respect of property rights that favoured the well-connected, a practice reminiscent of the Porfirio Díaz era; likewise, his mutually-supportive relations with politicians harkened back to ties between capitalists and the Díaz cabinet. During the 1930s, facing Cárdenas' wish to seize his sugar plantation, he mobilised his alliance with Puebla's governor to retain its mill and thus most of the profits.

As for the 1940 watershed, during the Ávila Camacho era Jenkins faced three major struggles with labour in which the workers prevailed; in each case, a supposedly pro-business state sided with workers and advocates of public ownership. Again, the old periodization—radicalism up to 1940, conservatism afterwards—seems simplistic.

2. I use the Jenkins story to demonstrate how the success of post-revolutionary capitalists owed much to cozy relations with authoritarian politi-

¹⁹ The following section is based on part of my Introduction to *Jenkins of Mexico* (2017, pp. 5-11).



cians, and how the persistence of such hardliners owed much to the support of the business class. These privileges and exchanges have long been assumed but little studied at the interpersonal level. There is a common term for this kind of arrangement: “crony capitalism”. But the term fails to distinguish between distinct dimensions of the state-capital bond: a broad-based “symbiotic imperative” between the two spheres and a “symbiotic convenience” between individual politicians and entrepreneurs. I propose the term “symbiotic imperative” because, in the wake of the Revolution, state and capital found themselves *compelled* to enter into an interdependent relationship. The state depended on the business elite to help rebuild the economy, through investment, job creation, the paying of taxes, and the securing of loans. Businessmen depended on the state for the restoration of order, the building of roads, the taming of radicalised labour, and the enforcement of property rights. This “symbiotic imperative”, a bond of necessity, is distinct from but often linked with a crony-ish “symbiotic convenience”, which further entwined politicians and business leaders. The latter trend included such mutual favours as covert business partnerships and credit arrangements.²⁰

Since they typically involved front men (*prestanombres*), joint ventures with politicians are hard to verify, but the Jenkins story offers suggestive glimpses. Using symbiotic convenience to their advantage, Jenkins and his kind were the private partners of such politician-moguls as Aarón Sáenz and Abelardo Rodríguez, as well as the more venal Maximino Ávila Camacho. Jenkins repeatedly exploited the symbiotic imperative, too. In Puebla, he made loans and donations to cash-strapped authorities, both state and city governments. The practice helps explain how he, a high-profile *gringo*, accrued and safeguarded vast estates at a time of growing xenophobia and accelerating land confiscation. In the 1940s and 1950s, the two forms of symbiosis (increasingly the convenient kind) underpinned his success in business nationwide. Jenkins lent unparalleled support to the federal government’s perceived need to contain the urban masses, building and operating hundreds of movie theatres –in which senior politicians very likely took stakes– and helping finance a distinctly conservative national cinema.

²⁰ For the Porfiriato and 1920s, see Haber, Razo & Maurer (2003); for Alemán, see Stephen Niblo (1995, pp. 221-244); and (1999, pp. 207-216, 253-303). On “symbiotic imperative” and “symbiotic convenience”, see Paxman (2017b).



Biographies of industrialists such as Jenkins provide hard evidence of the state-capital symbiosis. Indeed, the Jenkins experience suggests that such interdependence was widespread. As noted earlier, biographies also combine various approaches –from cultural to labour to diplomatic history– that enable us to understand the complex matrix of interests at play as the state dealt with individual captains of industry.

3. I “de-centre” state formation by showing how such interdependence begins locally and how a conservative shift at the regional level –as seen in Jenkins’ Puebla– helped elicit Mexico’s gradual right turn of the late 1930s and the 1940s. Everyday exchanges between industrialists and politicians are most frequent at the municipal or state level, yet these often snug relationships are little explored. In response to Puebla’s post-war bankruptcy and volatility, and also to the recurrent seizure of the governorship by radicals who advocated land reform and union strength, the business elite backed conservatives for the office. The hard-fought campaigns of 1932 and 1936, and the extent to which José Mijares Palencia and Maximino Ávila Camacho needed Jenkins and his ilk in order to triumph over leftist rivals, exemplify how such episodes merit fresh inspection that takes not only grass-roots resistance but also elite manoeuvring into account. The President and the ruling party could not simply impose their candidates. Mijares and Maximino had to campaign extensively, so they solicited large wads of private-sector cash. What resulted from their victories was a local entrenchment of conservative rule that privileged industrialists even in the face of federal opposition.

The Jenkins-Maximino alliance not only held sway over Puebla’s economy and politics, it also exerted a rightward influence at the national level. Alan Knight (1994, pp. 100-105) once suggested that regional bastions of conservatism contributed to the rightward shift of the latter Cárdenas years; the Jenkins-Maximino alliance provides evidence of this still-sketchy argument. The strength of business-backed governors, who were poised to dictate vote-counting in key states during the 1940 election, helps explain Cárdenas’ pragmatic decision to back Maximino’s politically moderate brother Manuel as his successor, rather than a left-leaning favourite. Biography helps unearth the details of such state-capital symbiosis and contextualises it within the *modus operandi* of a particular businessman across several decades. In this case, there is evidence of Jenkins exerting an influence over Puebla politics for more than 40 years.



4. I trace how Jenkins functioned in Mexican rhetoric as the epitome of the grasping U.S. capitalist. His image afforded leftist politicians, business rivals, and unions a symbolic bogeyman and inflammatory totem. His reputation dated from his kidnapping, while a consular agent, in 1919. Facing a bilateral crisis, the precarious regime of Venustiano Carranza countered U.S. charges of ineffectual government by claiming that Jenkins had plotted a “self-kidnapping”; the allegation stuck. Though later exonerated, Jenkins remained so tarred by the episode that every subsequent accusation of skulduggery gained a ready audience. This episode and further controversies –over Jenkins as landowner, monopolist, political intriguer, even as a philanthropist– often reveal a common denominator: what I call “gringophobia”, a frequent component of leftist-nationalist rhetoric.

The attacks on Jenkins show not only the prevalence but also the uses of gringophobia. Political benefit could be had from assailing him, above all in 1919, upon his kidnapping, and during the Cold War, within the battle for the soul of the PRI that pitted the pro-business right against the nationalist left. An incoming president like Adolfo Ruiz Cortines (1952-1958) could boost his credibility by pledging to break the “*yanqui* film monopoly”; reporters and editors could polish their leftist credentials (and boost sales) with exposés about this “pernicious gringo”. In turn, criticism of Jenkins contributed to the polarizing of opinion that defined the 1960s, with its student radicalism and consequent bloody repression. This biography’s attention to the *longue durée* enables one to perceive gringophobia across five or six decades, and its focus on an individual allows one to view changes in the nature and uses of such rhetoric by means of a case study in which a key factor –the target of that discourse– remains constant.

5. I show how Jenkins’ career reveals rarely-remarked similarities between business practices in Mexico and the United States, parallels that dispute the conventional wisdom that the two countries have trodden essentially dissimilar paths. After all, monopolistic practice, tax evasion, union-busting, and purchase of political influence are common to both cultures. A transnational biography, in this case following the trajectory of an American who lived for 62 years in Mexico, brings one time and again to consider questions of difference, commonality, and universality between cultures.

Some of the dubious ways in which Jenkins seemingly emulated his Mexican peers had precedent and parallel in the United States. He pursued market dominance: first in cotton hosiery, next sugar, notoriously in film.



Yet, despite state complicity, there was nothing uniquely “Mexican” about such monopolies, which thanks to the likes of Rockefeller and Carnegie were rife in the land that Jenkins had departed. His fortune owed much to covert alliances with the powerful. And for all the venality and cronyism of Mexico’s politicians, were these links so very different from the ties that industrialists were forging with mayors and lawmakers in the United States? Distinctions between business culture do of course exist. The United States set up a national commission to monitor monopolistic practice in 1914, Mexico not until 1993. In the late 1940s, just as Jenkins was gaining dominance over the Mexican film industry, corporate power in Hollywood was being reined in by the Supreme Court. Still, differences exist in much less dichotomized a fashion than the subjects of neighbouring nations are apt to assert; very often they are matters of degree.

HOW TO DO BUSINESS BIOGRAPHY: METHODS FOR CONTEMPORARY MEXICAN SUBJECTS

Here is a series of practical tips for the business biographer in Mexico. The list, condensed to four broad categories, is by no means exhaustive, but it reflects the core of my experience to date in researching the lives of Azcárraga, Jenkins, and Slim. Nor is the order indicated to be taken rigidly. For example, archives may yield repeated references to persons of uncertain relevance, whose relationship with the subject can be clarified only through returning to those one has earlier interviewed. Moreover, business biographers must be flexible and versatile in approach, engaging with archives, periodical collections, and live subjects with equal zeal.

1. Access the personal archive: This step is both the most obvious and, often, the least feasible. When Claudia Fernández and I researched Azcárraga Milmo, his son, the current owner of Televisa, declined to cooperate. When I began researching Jenkins, I found that his right-hand man, the banker Manuel Espinosa Yglesias, had dispatched his archive to be incinerated in the 1970s. However, once persuaded that mine would be a scholarly attempt to demythify a much-misunderstood individual, the family granted me access to what personal correspondence they had saved and the archive of the Mary Street Jenkins Foundation, which not only recorded the donations Jenkins made following its establishment in 1954 but also listed his multitudinous



assets, as little by little he transferred them to build up the foundation's endowment.

So there are business archives to be accessed, some of them open to researchers, some requiring persuasion. The former –although not necessarily complete– include those of Manuel Espinosa Yglesias (at the Centro de Estudios Espinosa Yglesias), Manuel Gómez Morín (at the Centro Cultural Manuel Gómez Morín), Abelardo Rodríguez (one at the Archivos Calles y Torreblanca, another at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California in Tijuana), and Aarón Sáenz (at the offices of the Grupo Sáenz).

Corporate archives that are accessible include the Archivo Histórico Banamex and several textile company archives, such as those of the Compañía Industrial de Guadalajara (at the Universidad Iberoamericana) and the Manuel Martínez Conde company of Puebla (at Notre Dame University, Indiana). Within the last ten years, Celeste González (2012), researching a book on TV news in the 1950s and 1960s, managed to gain access to Televisa's archives, and so did Humberto Novelo (2017), for his doctoral thesis on Televisa newscasts during the Salinas years. With persistence and luck, perhaps anything is possible.

2. Search the press: A good place to start is the Biblioteca Lerdo de Tejada, a dependency of the Secretaría de Hacienda, in Mexico City's Centro Histórico. Here the so-called "Archivos Económicos" series consists of stuffed envelopes of clippings from the Mexican press, catalogued by topic. This series runs from around 1930 to the early 1990s, and digital cameras are permitted. Prominent businessmen, their companies, and all the industrial sectors are included as distinct items.

One can supplement the Lerdo series by means of the Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México.²¹ This searchable database chiefly covers the Independence era to the end of the Revolution, during which period an outstanding resource is the *Mexican Herald* (1895-1915), for its monitoring of foreign business interests. Postrevolutionary contents are subject to change, and some series are restricted to access at the Hemeroteca Nacional (on the campus of the UNAM). But as of this writing useful collections include the newspapers *Excelsior* (for the period 1917-1969) and *El Porvenir* of Monterrey (1919-2006); the news magazines *Tiempo* (1942-1976) and *Mañana* (1943-1973); certain specialised titles like *Examen de la Situación Económica de México* (1936-

²¹ www.hndm.unam.mx/



1976) and *Arquitectura* (1938-1967); and a number of state government bulletins (i.e. *Periódico Oficial del Estado*), such as those of Nuevo León (1912 to 1978), Puebla (1885 to 1977), and Querétaro (1881 to 1975), which include items such as expropriations and sales of confiscated property.²² In Monterrey, the best place to start is the Capilla Alfonsina, the library of the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, which has newspaper and magazine collections useful for researching the city's industrial growth. It also has a searchable periodical database, known as Sircaar.

Several Mexican periodicals offer comprehensive online databases, in some cases limited to subscribers. These include the magazine *Proceso* (founded in 1976) and the newspapers *El Informador* (Guadalajara, 1917), *El Siglo de Torreón* (1922), and *Reforma* (Mexico City, 1993). Mexico's leading business organ, *Expansión*, dates from 1969, but it is not searchable online for material prior to 2007, so a complete review of its contents requires a trip to a library with a good periodicals collection, such as that of the Colegio de México or the Benson at UT Austin.

On the subject of physical collections, several extinct publications provided sporadic but provocative coverage of the business elite. These include *Opinión Pública* (1955-1981), a nationalistic muckraking organ that liked to skewer foreign and immigrant businessmen, such as Jenkins, Wenner-Gren, and Miguel Abed, although it also targeted select Mexicans like Aarón Sáenz; and the magazine *Política* (1960-1967), which was subsidised by the Cuban government and stridently anti-capitalist.²³

Finally, the international press is a good source on Mexican business, particularly for the period since 1990, when the prospect of Mexico's accession to NAFTA caused U.S. news organizations to open or expand bureaus. The most diligent coverage is found in the *Wall Street Journal*, whose paid-access database is searchable from 1984; the *New York Times*, which has a paid-access database going all the way back to 1851 (though some libraries only offer the post-1980 version); and the magazine *BusinessWeek*, whose database is freely searchable from 1991. For the pre-database era, such publications are available on microfilm. Also worth bearing in mind are sector-specific periodi-

²² Note: Covering similar ground for Mexico as the HNDM is the paid-access series, "Latin American Papers (1805-1922)", published by Readex (www.readex.com). Available at many university libraries, it includes not only the *Mexican Herald* but also the first five years of *Excelsior* (1917-1922).

²³ On *Política*: Renata Keller (forthcoming).



cals, such as the entertainment industry magazine *Variety*, which has had a Mexico correspondent since at least the 1930s. Other specialised magazines with Mexico-based reporters have included *Advertising Age*, *Billboard*, *Plastics News*, *Platts* (for the oil industry), *Twin Plant News* (for the *maquiladora* sector), and the online journal *Narco News*.

Several caveats are in order. The most important is that until the 1993 launch of *Reforma*, which raised standards within the national press, business journalism was almost indistinguishable from company press releases. Most business reporters, like Mexican journalists in general, were expected to supplement their meager income by accepting bribes from the sources they covered. Further, they often evinced little understanding of the workings of private enterprise. (A case in point: the term *gerente* might apply to a company's owner, its general manager, or whichever executive the reporter was able to quote. Another: statistics are frequently plain wrong.) Second, independent coverage of business tended to be the preserve of left-wing publications—such as *Política* or *Proceso*—for whom capitalism was inherently suspect. Such coverage tended to regard all businessmen as exploitative. For both of these reasons, biographers must read most historical business reporting against the grain. Third, foreign reporting on Mexican business was only incidental until the Salinas era. Carlos Slim, for example, does not appear in the *Wall Street Journal* until his Telmex purchase of 1990, and in the *New York Times* he goes unmentioned until 1995.

Even today, reporting is compromised by the threat of advertiser boycotts. Mexico City has more than 25 daily newspapers, compared with just eight in New York City, despite the fact that New York boasts a higher aggregate readership and a far larger economy. This means that the local advertising pie is not only relatively small but also highly fragmented, which in turn gives major advertisers—like Carlos Slim (Telmex, Telcel, Sanborns, Sears, etc.), Televisa, and Bimbo—significant leverage over newspaper content. These caveats, taken together, suggest that business biographers in Mexico must rely a good deal less on print media than their U.S. or European counterparts.

3. Conduct Interviews: It may strike the researcher as odd to suggest interviews as the next step. They are the daily practice of journalists but to historians they may be an afterthought, if not an alien pursuit. Besides, I have yet to mention public archives.



One should give interviews particular emphasis because press accounts are so often unreliable and because in many archives the names of businessmen rarely appear. The starting point for investigating any company to which one does not have access might ordinarily be a Public Property Registry or a Notary Archive. These are found in Mexico City and each of the state capitals. According to Mexican commercial law, a limited-liability company had to consist of at least three shareholding partners; after 1934, the law was modified to require five. But what if your subject were an expatriate American (for example, Jenkins), who wished to conceal his assets from IRS agents at the U.S. Embassy? Or what if he were a politician of lucrative ambitions, who wished to conceal the investments he made while in office (for example, Miguel Alemán)? Very likely, he would have designated a *prestanombres* to stand before the notary public in his place. Alternatively, what if your subject owned a large company but wished to lower his tax exposure (for example, Jenkins again, with his giant chains of cinemas, COTSA and Cadena de Oro)? Very likely he would have constituted it as a host of small companies, their names perhaps obscure or unremarkably generic, each of them individually notarised and registered.

For the business biographer, archive hours are more productively spent when one has first interviewed people to discover who the probable *prestanombres* were, what the smaller companies might have been called, which notary public one's subject tended to use, which governors or cabinet ministers were the subject's political protectors, and where the bodies are buried (metaphorically speaking).

Whom to interview? Suppose your subject is dead, or opposed to your project. You may yet have luck with members of his family. The very wealthy are especially subject to frictions over favouritism and inheritance, so there is likely to be at least one family member who will talk. Then there are the subject's senior executives. Out of loyalty or suspicion, some may not speak; others will –if not for attribution– because they believe their boss' reputation to be better served by openness. Next, there are the subject's business rivals, who will often have very much to say. The same goes for those government officials who tried to regulate or tax the subject's businesses (although regulation was all but non-existent in Mexico until the establishment of the Comisión Federal de Competencia in 1993). Perhaps best of all, there are former employees. Some will have parted on good terms and be full of praise, others



will have been fired and sprinkle their anecdotes with venom. By interviewing people from each category, the researcher is better able to adjust for bias.

To some historians, much more comfortable with the tangibility of documents, there is something inherently unreliable about interviews. Interviewees have agendas, faulty memories, a tendency to give themselves starring roles when in fact they were bit players; as they say in Mexico, *tienden a poner crema a sus tacos*. But here we risk a false dichotomy: a document too is subject to error, exaggeration, misrepresentation, not to mention misspelling, and –unlike in an interview– one rarely has the luxury of asking its author what he or she meant by a particular phrase... In sum, *all* sources have to be read in context and with a modicum of scepticism.

Finally, interviews are not solely a matter of oral exchange. They can lead to the perusal of photographs, the consultation of private letters, the lending of unpublished memoirs. Through one interview I was able to identify Jenkins' corporate employer in the mines of Zacatecas in 1905, because his wife had kept a lock of her mother's hair in a company envelope. Through another, I was able to date the building of a school at Puebla's Atencingo sugar mill –a school long ago closed and for which I could find no written record– because the widow of a former millworker had a painting of the mill on her living-room wall, and there in the picture, above the door of the adjoining schoolhouse, was the date that had escaped me: 1928.

4. Dig in the Archives: As noted already, the best places to start are 1) the Public Property Registry or 11) the Notary Archive in the city where your subject was or is resident. Property registry volumes are divided into separate series for company constitutions, company activities (including capital infusions, loan activities, and bankruptcies), property acquisitions, and so on, making them relatively easy to search. The exception here is the Mexico City Property Registry, which does not easily let researchers consult its archive; rather, its staff conduct searches on your behalf, charging about 500 pesos per name sought. Notary archives are divided into separate series for each notary public, so you have to know in advance which notary or notaries your subject used. They are often more accessible than property registries,²⁴ but they are subject to a 70-year embargo, which –at the present time– limits one's searches to the years prior to 1948.

²⁴ This is true, at least, of Mexico City and Puebla.



Other useful archives include: III) The Archivo General de la Nación: For much of the twentieth century, businessmen telegraphed or wrote to the president, as evidenced in the Ramo Presidencial series. Most correspondence is bland, involving congratulations on taking office and invitations to inaugurate factories, but some involves pleas to arbitrate a drawn-out dispute or to refrain from an expropriation. For labour disputes one should check the Departamento or Secretaría del Trabajo series (208-210) and the Conciliación y Arbitraje series (211-212). Another useful series is the Dirección General de Industrias (217), including tax break requests, import & export permits, new industry permits, and copious statistics. Other series that should be useful but await proper cataloguing include the Secretaría de Comunicaciones (220) and the Secretaría de Hacienda.

iv) The Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores: This is a good place to start when researching any foreign or immigrant businessman. The index should produce a general file for each subject, along with separate files pertaining to major legal disputes and expropriations. Files whose reference includes the letters "PB" (for *Permiso de Bienes*) pertain to any intended property purchase made between 1917 and 1930, during which time foreign nationals had to petition the SRE for permission to proceed.

v) Municipal archives: Collections such as the Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de México (AHCM) or the Archivo General Municipal de Puebla are useful sources for evidence of local industrial and commercial activity and public works. Since judicial archives are sometimes hard to access or poorly catalogued, municipal archives may be a good place to find initial evidence of strike activity, labour law compliance, and (in the case of the AHCM, which includes a Jefatura de Policía series) criminal proceedings.

vi) State archives: My experience of the Archivo General del Estado de Puebla (AGEP) was very disappointing, given the tradition of Puebla governors since Maximino Ávila Camacho (1937-1941) of having their records pulped or otherwise kept from public view. The series for the twentieth century that the AGEP retains are of limited use to the business historian. However, state congresses retain their own archives (such as the Archivo del Congreso del Estado de Puebla), which include records of debates and correspondence with congressional leaders, and these volumes can yield useful data regarding local businessmen, especially those who gained concessions (to collect the pulque tax, to operate in a government-owned building, etc.) or who fell afoul of authorities. In Monterrey, the Archivo General del Estado de Nuevo León is well



organised and has several searchable databases. The collection is especially good for researching industry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

vii) Chamber of commerce archives: Since historians have infrequently consulted them, gaining access may require persistence. For example, the most important such archive in Puebla, that of the Cámara de la Industria Textil, is not staffed, so one has to convince the current chamber president of the worth of one's project and then make arrangements with secretaries for access. But the volumes can provide a rich source for tracing the evolution of a local industry and the prominence and politicking of its leading members.

viii) The Oral Archive (Archivo de la Palabra), shared by the Instituto Mora and the INAH: This collection consists of bound volumes of interviews conducted in the 1970s & 1980s, and it is particularly useful for researching the film industry, as many of the interviews in the film industry series (PHO2) are with producers. Other series of potential relevance to business history involve Spanish exiles (PHO10), architects (PHO11 & PHO20), and journalists (PHO21).

ix) INEGI: While the main archives of this federal statistics-gathering dependency are held in Mexico City and Aguascalientes, the vast majority of its collection has been digitized. Holdings potentially useful to the business historian include the industrial census (*Censo Industrial de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos*), held every five years since 1930, and the labour survey (*Encuesta Nacional de Empleo*), updated regularly since 1983.²⁵

x) The National Archive and Record Administration (Washington): The U.S. national archive is a rich source for material about Mexico collected by the U.S. Embassy and other departments. Much of it is available on microfilm and complemented by subject guides. Embassy dispatches, collected by the State Department (Record Group 59), are divided into several series, of which the most useful for business historians are "Internal Affairs of Mexico" (812 series) and "Commerce" (612 series). Other potentially useful record groups are those of the Claims Commissions (RG 76), Foreign Service Posts (RG 84), the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce (RG 151), and the Export-Import Bank (RG 275).

²⁵ See the general catalogue (labelled "Productos") at www5.inegi.org.mx/sistemas/productos/. For a Dec. 2016 report by this author on the physical holdings at Aguascalientes, see www.amhe.mx/uploads/el-archivo-del-inegi-por-dr-andrew-paxman.pdf.



CONCLUSION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The greatest challenge to the business biographer is clearly that of access. Meeting it requires strategizing with regards to the subject, family, friends, and executives. Direct interview requests may well be met with silence. Since personal introductions are key, contacts must be cultivated. My approach to the Jenkins family began with a great-grandson, a businessman about whom I had written when I was a journalist in the 1990s. He introduced me to his father, who was about to assume the presidency of the Jenkins Foundation. This man in turn took me to meet his aunt, William Jenkins' oldest surviving daughter and foremost keeper of family lore, and put me in touch with a cousin, who held a collection of Jenkins' college-age love letters; these lengthy missives, 120 in total, enabled me to reconstruct Jenkins' youth in Tennessee and understand his ambition to make money. Further introductions followed, so I was able to speak to seventeen members of the family in all.

Success in such a process is certainly helped by a track record as a writer, though that is not always necessary. While I had *El Tigre* to show for myself on meeting the Jenkins family, I earlier had very little to show to those whom I wished to interview about Azcárraga. I admit that being a foreigner—and more so, a European—may have opened some doors that would have remained closed to a Mexican. That said, it was my co-author Claudia who landed our hardest-to-reach interviewees for *El Tigre*: Luis Echeverría and José López Portillo. Again, eminences such as former presidents are unlikely to answer the phone. Reaching them requires informal meetings with aides and underlings, sometimes several of them, as one ascends the chain of command. Be prepared to drink a lot of coffee.

The opportunities, meanwhile, are many. The seven or eight decades between the Revolution and the rise of neoliberalism remain virtually virgin territory. A biography of a Mexican businesswoman has yet to be written. Return to any annual edition, recent or past, of the above-mentioned *Expansión* feature, “Los 100 empresarios más importantes de México”: most on the list have yet to meet their biographer, and those that have may well merit revisiting. There are, after all, some eighteen biographies of Bill Gates.



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