

# Foreign Machetes and Cheap Cotton Cloth: Popular Consumers and Imported Commodities in Nineteenth-Century Colombia

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*Abstract* This article examines the consumption of foreign machetes and, to a lesser extent, imported textiles by peasants, smallholders, and artisans in nineteenth-century Colombia to show that the popular sectors of society were the largest consumers of foreign goods and as such were able to change market conditions and make specific demands regarding the quality of imported products intended for their consumption. By so doing, the article questions the premise that because of their poverty Colombian popular classes were always drawn to buying cheaper imported goods and sacrificing quality for price. Thus, the article adds not only to the recent historiography of consumption in Latin America but also to the broad literature on nineteenth-century popular groups by inviting historians to start viewing peasants, artisans, and smallholders as active participants, both as citizens and as consumers, in a new political and economic reality.

In 1891, the Intercontinental Railway Commission sent a group of engineers to Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Colombia to test the waters for an international railway in South and Central America.<sup>1</sup> Their mission led them to travel extensively throughout the region, departing from New York to Quito and then to Ibarra, in Ecuador, and to Ipiales, Pasto, Popayán, Cali, Medellín, and Cartagena, in Colombia. Due to the nature of their task, these professionals encountered a myriad of people and witnessed their different labor conditions. Among what they saw were the tools preferred by natives for their daily tasks. “The *machete* is an article of personal furniture used by countrymen throughout Spanish America as universally as pocket-knives among us,” they

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1. *Report of the International American Conference.*

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reported; “Collinsville in Connecticut is reputed the best make, and is the only source of supply.”<sup>2</sup>

They were neither the first nor the last foreigners to notice this preference. American officials residing in Puerto Rico, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico also spoke of the fondness for the Collins machete in Latin America. John D. Hall, the United States consul in Puerto Rico in 1894, could not help but show his admiration for the popularity of the American tool. “A machete bearing the name of ‘Collins’ is a current passport for the standard of merit in that article, and it enjoys a well-established and deservedly good reputation that nothing can break down,” Hall wrote in his report.<sup>3</sup> Equally struck by the success of this commodity among popular classes was the United States consul in Mexico, who in 1896 declared that “the famous ‘Collins’ machetes and axes are favorites here still, although Germany sends an exact imitation; but no peon will use this if he can get the ‘Collins.’”<sup>4</sup> But it was Henry Isaac Sheldon who forewarned in 1897 that in Nicaragua, “curiously enough, the machetes are all made by one man, a Mr. Collins of Hartford, Connecticut, and the natives will buy no others.” Although “European makers sen[t] out machetes stamped Collins,” Sheldon observed, locals could “tell the genuine steel by glancing across the blade when turned up to the light, and they will take no other.”<sup>5</sup>

Colombia was not exempt from this trend. By the turn of the century P. L. Bell, a trade commissioner for the US Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, declared that “the universal tool in Colombia is the machete, which is always carried by the people of the country districts.”<sup>6</sup> Official reports, travelers’ accounts, and newspaper advertisements give weight to Bell’s observations. For instance, in 1897 the United States consul in Barranquilla cited the Collins machete as exemplifying how in the region “United States tools of all kinds are preferred to European ones,” being “better finished, lighter, and more convenient, but at the same time . . . also more expensive.”<sup>7</sup> Colombian peasants knew the Collins and, like their Latin American peers, could not be easily tricked into buying low-priced European imitations that, although cheaper, would not last as long as the American brand. When it came to machetes, Colombians were knowledgeable consumers.

2. Intercontinental Railway Commission, *Transactions*, 99.

3. BFC, *Consular Reports*, 196.

4. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of Manufactures, *Monthly Consular*, 191–92.

5. Sheldon, *Notes*, 52.

6. Bell, *Colombia*, 176.

7. BFC, *Commercial Relations*, 866.

Notwithstanding the potential value of studies of consumption for understanding Latin America's social and cultural history for the nineteenth century, historians of this period had paid little attention to the impact of foreign-made commodities in the region. This lack of emphasis on imports and thus on consumers is not surprising. For decades Latin American economic history's main purpose was to explain how the region gradually set aside the colonial economic model and joined the world market as a supplier of foodstuffs and raw materials for Europe first and then the United States. Consequently, scholars have emphasized the links between the export sector and local Latin American markets, export boom and bust cycles, foreign lending, and fiscal policies, largely to assess why Latin America fell behind.<sup>8</sup> Due to this, the nineteenth century has been recognized as the region's export age, a framing that has accordingly relegated imports and the social impact of their consumption to a secondary level in the scholarship. Although this framework of analysis has not completely removed imported commodities from view, it has often set them aside.<sup>9</sup>

In the last two decades, however, imports as a subject of historical examination have caught the attention of a few Latin American scholars, the most representative works being Benjamin Orlove's 1997 edited volume and Arnold J. Bauer's 2001 study.<sup>10</sup> Unlike some previous studies on nineteenth-century Latin American elite practices of consumption, both these works constitute an initial attempt to approach directly the social and cultural factors internal to the region that created a strong desire for foreign goods among a wide sector of the population throughout the century. This was no minor contribution. Latin American historiography on this period had largely limited its reference to foreign commodity consumption to the upper classes' desire for luxury goods.<sup>11</sup> By opening the spectrum of social sectors considered, these new approaches furthered an interest in Latin America for studies on nineteenth-century consumption, mostly focused on dress, fashion, and food.<sup>12</sup>

In spite of this opening, it has been mostly historians of twentieth-century Latin America who have addressed studies on popular consumption. Their

8. Haber, *How Latin America Fell Behind*.

9. Among the studies that treat imports in this way, see Cárdenas, Ocampo, and Thorp, *Export Age*; Bethell, *Cambridge History*; Bulmer-Thomas, Coatsworth, and Cortés Conde, *Cambridge Economic History*.

10. Bauer, *Goods*; Orlove, *Allure*.

11. For instance, see Needell, *Tropical*; Beezley, *Judas*.

12. Among these works, see Root, *Couture*; Earle, "Nationalism"; Earle, "Two Pairs"; Novoa, "Dilemmas."

contributions are invaluable, as they emphasize the need to study workers and members of the middle classes as consumers.<sup>13</sup> Still, the fact that these two sectors of society came into being in the twentieth century should not limit our analysis of popular consumption to this period. Such literature instead reminds us of the potential of an approach that questions how the popular sectors (in the case of nineteenth-century Latin America, artisans, peasants, and smallholders) participated in the economy not just as a labor force but as consumers without overlooking their specific economic, social, and cultural context.

Colombian historiography has not been immune to most of these trends. As in the rest of Latin America, historians in Colombia have focused primarily on export economy rather than imports.<sup>14</sup> Brief comments and anecdotes on the consumption of luxury goods by the upper classes have also been a common practice of the country's economic historians. Historians of everyday life, for their part, have focused on the social and cultural practices of the elites.<sup>15</sup> Frank Safford's contribution in 1965 is still the only that directly studies consumption patterns in the country and the social implications of imports for the Colombian population.<sup>16</sup> And although Safford's studies have undoubtedly influenced Colombian historiography to the present day, they have encouraged the country's business history rather than analysis of the history of consumption.

My article contributes to this emerging literature. By studying the consumption of foreign machetes and, to a lesser extent, imported textiles by peasants, smallholders, and artisans, I show that the popular sectors of society were the largest consumers of foreign goods in nineteenth-century Colombia and as such were able to change market conditions and make specific demands regarding the quality of imported products intended for their consumption. Unlike what has been previously maintained by historians of nineteenth-century Colombia, I demonstrate that the country's popular sectors not only consumed foreign goods but also made detailed requests concerning the size, shape, and attributes of their imports—including machetes and textiles. By so doing, I wish to invite scholars to cease seeing nineteenth-century

13. Among these works, see Owensby, *Intimate Ironies*; Moreno, *Yankee*; Elena, *Dignifying Argentina*; Bunker, *Creating Mexican Consumer Culture*; Milanesio, *Workers*.

14. Ocampo, *Colombia*; Ocampo, *Historia económica*; Kalmanovitz, *Nueva historia económica*.

15. See, among others, Martínez Carreño, *La prisión*; Martínez Carreño, *Mesa*; Peralta, *El ritmo lúdico*. Those devoted to women's history have also offered great insights into elite practices: see Londoño Vega, *Religión*; Londoño Vega, "La mujer santafereña"; Velásquez Toro, Reyes Cárdenas, and Rodríguez Jiménez, *Las mujeres*.

16. Safford, "Commerce."

Latin America—and Colombia, for that matter—as the “dumping” ground for foreign merchandise.<sup>17</sup>

My research also questions the premise that because of their poverty, Colombian popular classes were always drawn to buying cheaper imported goods, sacrificing quality for price. On the contrary, these classes’ behavior in relation to American machetes and English textiles shows the various factors that popular consumers took into account when purchasing foreign commodities. Foreign tools in particular are studied here to explore the extent to which peasants and artisans purchased them not only as crop production aids but as possessions in their own right or, to put it better, as everyday commodities. As such, I argue, they reinforced nineteenth-century peasants’ and artisans’ identity.<sup>18</sup>

My study also adds to the extensive literature on popular groups in nineteenth-century Latin America. Since the early 1990s, the historiography of nation and state formation in the region has emphasized the active role played by the popular sectors—peasants, Indians, artisans, laborers, smallholders—in shaping national politics and life. Most of these studies have paid special attention to these sectors’ political participation no longer as subjects of a Spanish monarch but as newborn citizens. This literature has also stressed popular participation in the postcolonial political landscape as either petitioners of the state, soldiers, partial allies of the elites, or voters.<sup>19</sup> Popular sectors are considered by this historiography as economic subjects only to the extent that their actions are directly linked to political claims—for instance, indigenous peoples’ demands over property rights or artisans’ claims for tariff reductions.<sup>20</sup> I propose in this essay that we start viewing peasants, artisans, and small landholders as active participants, both as citizens and as consumers, in a new political and economic reality, within a somewhat incomplete yet not entirely fragmented national network.<sup>21</sup> Processes of national construction

17. On this line of thought, see Platt, *Latin America*, 51.

18. Otero-Cleves, “From Fashionable Pianos.”

19. This literature has grown too large to cite comprehensively, but see especially Mallon, *Peasant*; Joseph and Nugent, *Everyday Forms*; Chambers, *From Subjects to Citizens*; Sanders, *Contentious Republicans*; Guardino, *Time of Liberty*; Lasso, *Myths*; Echeverri, “Popular Royalists.”

20. Good cases in point are the works of David Sowell, on the artisan movement in midcentury Bogotá, and James Sanders, on the political participation of subalterns in nineteenth-century Colombia. See Sowell, *Early Colombian Labor Movement*; Sanders, *Contentious Republicans*.

21. Many historians, among them Frank Safford, argue that nineteenth-century Colombia did not have an integrated national economy and that high transportation costs

should be studied, I argue, in tandem with the incorporation of the popular sectors into the political as well as the economic realm—not simply as laborers but also as consumers.

This article is organized into three sections. The first provides an overview of the impact of imported goods in nineteenth-century Colombia, so as to discern which were the chief commodities for the Colombian market and who were its main consumers. The second section demonstrates the extent to which peasants, artisans, and small landholders became active consumers in the second half of the century by making specific demands over the quality and design of imported products, particularly the Collins machete. Although this product is one of the best examples from nineteenth-century Colombia of an active interaction between producer, merchants, commercial agents, and popular consumers, I will also briefly discuss similar demands over imported textiles in order to illustrate how the popular classes' discerning attitude toward foreign goods was not restricted to American machetes but embraced other types of imported commodities.

The final section explores how the consumption of foreign machetes helped to strengthen and consolidate the identity of popular groups throughout the nineteenth century, since it became an essential part of the attire of *arrieros* (muleteers) and remained central to the rituals and everyday activities of other members of the popular classes. As social anthropologists and cultural historians have stressed, by examining more closely specific consumer goods it is possible to understand how new forms of consumption emerge and to trace the cultural meanings attached to them.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, studying the foreign machete constitutes an excellent entry point for questioning how this product was appropriated in the popular sectors' everyday lives. It is also an ideal case study

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limited trade even at the regional level. However, some scholars have called for a reassessment of this notion that the country's market was isolated and fragmented. Historian and geographer Marta Herrera Ángel, for instance, has argued that we should not underestimate the number of national and regional commercial exchanges present throughout the nineteenth century. Her conclusions are based primarily on the reports of the Comisión Corográfica, which record in detail internal trade exchanges between provinces and cantons. According to Herrera Ángel, such information puts into question ideas about fragmentation and national disarticulation. I fully share Herrera Ángel's assessment. My research has also led me to conclude that small traders and national and foreign merchants in nineteenth-century Colombia had strong commercial relations that were much more fluid than historians have recognized to date. See Safford, "El problema"; Herrera Ángel, "Comentarios."

22. On the benefits of focusing on the history of a particular good, see Kopytoff, "Cultural Biography"; Appadurai, "Introduction."

to cast doubt on the long-standing theories of consumer emulation that have been used to explain nineteenth-century Latin Americans' attraction to foreign objects, an attraction seen as part of their desire to adopt a well-regarded cosmopolitan culture.<sup>23</sup> As will be seen in this third section, popular classes carved out throughout the century a new set of consumer values, including but not limited to convenience, self-expression, and class identity. The article ends with some brief conclusions and suggestions on how to formulate new questions about popular consumers in nineteenth-century Latin America and their place in nation-building processes.

### The Largest and Most Important Consumers

P. L. Bell wrote in 1921 of Colombia that "the Negroes of the coast and river valleys . . . live in a very primitive manner, to say the least . . . with no modern furniture or conveniences of any kind whatever, and their principal article of purchase is the commoner grade of cotton cloth; this and an occasional machete are about all the foreign-made goods taken by these people."<sup>24</sup> Surely, Bell's cavalier attitude toward the country's population resembles a great share of accounts on consumer practices given by foreigners who had visited the country since its transformation into an independent republic a century earlier.<sup>25</sup> For one, Bell's depiction of Colombia's inhabitants as primitive is not uncommon. What is surprising is that despite thinking them uncivilized, the American acknowledged that inhabitants of the coast and the river valleys consumed at most two types of foreign objects: cheap cotton cloth and machetes.

His account, at least with regard to Colombians' consumption habits, was accurate. A review of import figures demonstrates that textiles were Colombia's chief import in the nineteenth century. No imported commodity was more consequential in the country's trade than foreign textiles, which came to represent two-thirds of Colombia's imports from midcentury to the 1870s.<sup>26</sup> Although their impact decreased gradually, textiles still accounted for about

23. Thorstein Veblen and Norbert Elias first formulated the theory of consumer emulation. Recent scholars have questioned this approach, among them Maxine Berg, Colin Jones, Woodruff Smith, Dena Goodman, Amanda Vickery, Lorna Weatherill, and sociologist Colin Campbell. Although Bourdieu, *Distinction*, seems to reinforce the emulation thesis insofar as Bourdieu stresses consumption's role in social differentiation, he demonstrates that lower social groups are not necessarily inclined to imitate their sociocultural superiors.

24. Bell, *Colombia*, 42.

25. To name just a few, Cochrane, *Journal*; Hamilton, *Travels*; Stuart, *Bogotá*.

26. Melo, "Las vicisitudes," 189.

49.5 percent of the country's import economy by the beginning of the twentieth century. Of all textiles imported into Colombia between 1870 and 1879 (65.5 percent of the country's total imports), the most significant were cotton goods (44.2 percent of all imported textiles), followed by woolen (7.8 percent) and linen fabrics (5.9 percent), with a very small amount of silk (1.4 percent). Ready-made clothing amounted to only 6.1 percent of imported textiles at the time.<sup>27</sup>

Cheap cotton goods were, therefore, bought abroad throughout the century for the consumption of peasants and artisans, middle-quality woolen cloth for government employees, prunellas and taffeties for priests' cloaks, and small amounts of silk to satisfy upper-class consumers. By the 1850s it was clear that local production was incapable of meeting local demand for manufactured goods. The frailty of native production was, however, not new. In 1771 the political economist Pedro Fermín de Vargas had already warned the colonial administration that contraband trade with Jamaica had significantly weakened textile production.<sup>28</sup> Such was the impact of smuggling foreign goods to New Granada that in 1809 the Cabildo, Justicia y Regimiento de la Villa del Socorro—the government body overseeing one of the viceroyalty's most important areas of textile production—had declared that the region's "industry is reduced to coarse cotton textiles that almost all poor people . . . dress with."<sup>29</sup> The situation worsened in the nineteenth century with the dramatic expansion of English fabrics, which were produced in conditions of higher productivity. By the 1820s, even low-quality textiles from Manchester were bought by the lower classes instead of those produced in Socorro, Santander.<sup>30</sup>

The immense volume of imported textiles and the lack of self-sufficient national production suggest that imported commodities were not for the sole consumption of the upper classes. Yet such an inference needs to be tested against other kinds of evidence, such as the composition of the country's population. Colombia was predominantly rural throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup> The census made in 1869—which calculated a total of 2,890,637 inhabitants, 48.7 percent men and 51.3 percent women—estimates the population distribution by occupation and illustrates the predominance of agricultural

27. Ocampo, *Colombia*, 159.

28. Vargas, *Pensamientos políticos*.

29. "Instrucción del Socorro al diputado a la Junta Central Gubernativa de España e Indias, en la cual aluden a la formación de una constitución, octubre 20 de 1809," in Vanegas Useche, *El constitucionalismo revolucionario*, 1:45.

30. Mollien, *Viaje*, 92. See also Raymond and Bayona, *Vida*.

31. Melo, "Las vicisitudes," 158; Mejía Pavony, *Los años*, 233; Urrutia M. and Arrubla, *Compendio*.



activity among adult males (64 percent of males) and an important portion of adult women engaged in crafts (21 percent of females).<sup>32</sup> Additionally, among the parents of children born in the first half of 1892 professionals, public servants, and teachers were the groups least represented, while farmers, artisans, miners, and manufacturers were the most significant.<sup>33</sup> Although I will return to these figures later on in more detail, it is indisputable that in a primarily rural country imports were meant for the consumption of many more than a small urban population. Clearly, the country's limited upper classes could not fully exhaust the supply of the wide range of textiles and other consumer goods brought into Colombia from Europe.<sup>34</sup>

Foodstuffs (including beverages) and metal goods—the latter a category that included machinery, tools, railings, nails, cauldrons, sewing machines, and cutlery, to name just a few—were respectively the second and third most important types of imports after cotton textiles from the 1830s to the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>35</sup> Although the importation of metal manufactures into Colombia is notorious, it is impossible to know exactly the products imported, since customs data recorded weight and not quantity of cargo.<sup>36</sup> Official statistics show, however, that consumer goods and tools, including machetes, comprised a substantial portion of the metal goods imported. In 1891, the country imported a total of 132,953 kilograms of machetes—47 percent from Germany, followed by 25 percent from Great Britain and close to 18 percent from the United States.<sup>37</sup>

These last figures deserve close analysis. It is not completely surprising that Germany was the major provider of foreign machetes to the Colombian market. Several sources reveal that German machetes were well known in Spanish America, even before independence. For instance, Alexander Walker, unquestionably a promoter of free commerce between Britain and Colombia, published in 1822 a pro forma account of British exports to Colombia, which included 6,000 machetes. According to the Englishman, Spanish Americans

32. *Estadística mercantil*.

33. *Ibid.*

34. By the 1820s, at least 95 percent of Colombian imports were consumer goods. This decreased slowly to 85 percent in 1910. Capital and intermediate goods (building materials, metal bars, and a few chemicals) represented only 15 percent of the country's imports in the early twentieth century and probably never reached 10 percent before 1880. See Ocampo, *Colombia*, 158.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Bushnell, "Two Stages."

37. *Estadística mercantil*.

“have been accustomed to be supplied with this article from Germany, and the most esteemed are those called *Del Perrillo*, from having a small dog in a running posture stamped upon them, or a large half-moon and stars, which are the marks of a particular manufacture, and give them additional value.”<sup>38</sup>

The predominance of German and, to a lesser extent, British machetes was maintained throughout the century because Europeans knew the market better than the Americans did, understood Colombians' need for flexible and extended credit, and were experts in the art of packaging.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, wrapping was essential for the Colombian trader since duties were levied on the cargo's gross weight, including crates and packing materials. But it was not only a matter of import taxes. All merchandise had to be carried to the country's interior by either a native, who carried a package weighing from 100 to 125 pounds on his back, or a mule, able to carry on each side a similar cargo. European goods therefore were sent in light boxes made of tough wood and secured by light iron strips, which also minimized the risk of damage to goods due to transshipment, muleback journey, and exposure to heat and rain. American boxes, by contrast, could not be carried easily by mule, since they exceeded standard cargo length and would thus gall the animals' hips and shoulders. It is possible that German and English resilience as the largest suppliers of many products, including machetes, had to do in great part with such knowledge about the Latin American market, as well as the rise in the region of certain primary export commodities for Europe (in the case of Colombia, tobacco, cinchona bark, and coffee).<sup>40</sup>

Trade and market conditions, however, do not explain why a product, upon arrival, is preferred by consumers over another commodity, whether local or foreign. Although we know that the volume and range of imported consumer goods in Colombia were not solely for the upper-class sector of society and that a notable share of those products was meant for consumption by the country's rural population, we still know little about consumers' preferences and how they altered the country's import trade. As stated above, consumption practices can be better understood if we focus our analysis on the circulation of specific goods—in the present case, textiles and, to a greater extent, American machetes. Although the latter by century's end represented only 18 percent of the country's imported machetes, the study of a specific American brand,

38. Walker, *Colombia*, 241.

39. Alfred Balch, “Open Letters: Trade with South America,” *Century Magazine* (New York), June 1890, p. 316.

40. The literature on Latin America's export economy is extensive. For Colombia, see, among many others, Ocampo, *Colombia*; Ocampo, *Historia económica*; Palacios, *El café*.

Collins, offers an excellent case study for exploring how popular consumers became active agents in nineteenth-century Colombian trade, especially given how, possibly due to consumers' and local merchants' closer relations with American manufactures, the Collins Company came to dominate the Latin American market for the next half century.<sup>41</sup>

### Peasants, Artisans, and Small Landholders as Active Consumers

In 1884 the US House of Representatives formed a commission "to ascertain and report upon the best modes of securing more intimate international and commercial relations between the United States and the several countries of Central and South America."<sup>42</sup> The commission held various conferences in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Orleans, San Francisco, and Boston, and interviewed a good share of merchants engaged in Latin American commerce. When the commission interviewed Mr. José María Muñoz, a merchant involved in the import trade in Colombia, he explained that Europe undersold North America in some classes of goods because Europeans manufactured inferior articles specifically for the Central and South American market.

Questioned about this matter, the merchant claimed that what really determined trade in Colombia was the purchaser's "immediate ability to buy." He noted that while "of course there are people in some places" who "are wealthier and in better condition, and are able to pay the better price for the better goods," generally the "people look out for the present, and do not take into consideration that the better goods will last twice as long."<sup>43</sup> Muñoz was partly right. To argue that Colombian peasants and artisans were buying foreign goods without regard for high prices and their own limited economic capacity would be inappropriate. Yet Muñoz's observation should not be taken at face value. Export merchants were well aware that certain commodities, though expensive, were preferred by popular sectors. They also knew that popular Colombian consumers could reject foreign goods, in spite of low prices, because their style or color did not match preferences.

Take, for example, the behavior of these consumers toward English textiles. Since the English had been involved with the Colombian market before independence—by way of contraband trade from Jamaica—they knew about the country's tastes. They appreciated that most of the purchasers in Bogotá were somewhat conservative in their preferences and consequently favored

41. Morello, "Alfanje."

42. Sharpe et al., *Report*.

43. *Ibid.*, 87.

goods of darker colors with narrow stripes. They also knew that people of the coast and Indians of the south desired textiles of sharp colors and with large figures and designs.<sup>44</sup> The American Alfred Balch recognized this in a very eloquent open letter to the *Century Magazine* on the occasion of the First International Conference of American States, held in Washington, DC, in 1890. “American manufacturers,” Balch stated, “have been in the habit of forwarding to Colombia such goods as they thought the Colombians would buy, and have then been surprised to find they made no sales.” Unlike his commercial equals, Balch was not surprised in the least by Colombian peasant women’s purchasing choices. He noted how American manufacturers, in shipping to Colombia colored prints that “have been very bright and pretty, and have been such as have sold well in [the United States],” ignored how “the majority of Colombian ladies wear nothing but black and white, and the peon women do not want the new patterns.” The brightly colored prints failed to sell because, as Balch explained, “if there is any person on earth who is conservative, it is the peon woman.” He concluded that these women wanted for their colored prints “chiefly purples with white spots,” “the same pattern and the same material her mother and her grandmother wore before her and which her daughter will wear after her. . . . worn by the lower-class women in Colombia for centuries.”<sup>45</sup>

Balch’s comments deserve close attention. On the one hand, they show that Colombians’ demands regarding foreign textiles forced European producers and exporters to assess the traditional needs and wants of the Colombian population, according to their climate, customs, and temperaments. Colombia was certainly not a priority for British traders, but this did not translate into the total imposition of British models and designs onto the Colombian market, let alone a misunderstanding of the country’s tastes and preferences. From very early on, calico printers in Lancashire were asked to pick styles especially for the Colombian consumer and, furthermore, for specific regions of the country.<sup>46</sup> If merchants perceived that a local design was directing consumer tastes, they sent a sample of the design from Cartagena to Lancashire to be copied and introduced into the market at a cheaper price. Therefore, just as Lancashire had specially manufactured locally preferred clothing for Asia and Africa such as sarongs, saris, and *kangas*, it produced for the Colombian market *carmelitas*, ponchos, and *bayetas*.<sup>47</sup>

44. Zimmern, “Lancashire.” For British knowledge about the South American market, see also Llorca-Jaña, *British Textile Trade*.

45. Balch, “Open Letters,” 316.

46. Zimmern, “Lancashire,” 58.

47. *Ibid.*; Platt, *Latin America*, 177–78.

On the other hand, Balch's assertions show that popular consumers, irrespective of wealth, were more demanding in their tastes and desires than scholars have given them credit for. Although imported textiles might have flooded the Colombian market and certainly restricted consumer choices, peasants still decided not to consume those fabrics that did not fit their tastes. Certainly, contrary to what had happened with the consumption of textiles by the upper classes—who eagerly followed European fashion—foreign traders adapted to Colombia's popular tastes and needs, not the other way around.<sup>48</sup> Purchasing choices were subject to product quality and texture; tactile engagement was key for peasants and laborers in choosing among fabrics, as is colorfully shown in Joseph Brown's ca. 1840 painting of arrieros feeling the fabrics at a store on a main street in Bogotá (figure 1).<sup>49</sup>

Demands by the Colombian popular classes over the quality of foreign goods were not limited to textiles. In their consumption of American machetes—especially those produced by the Collins Company of Collinsville, Connecticut—the Colombian popular sectors demonstrated perhaps most comprehensively their active and exigent attitude toward foreign merchandise, imposing high demands on origin, brand, and quality. Records of the Collins Company indicate that the firm—founded in 1826 by the brothers Samuel H. and David C. Collins—began to market their products to South America around the 1840s.<sup>50</sup> According to the company's official history from 1926, "In 1845 the demand for axes was greater than could be supplied and in that year the Company began to make machetes for the foreign trade." By then, Collins came to realize that "men care not where a tool comes from if it is better than that which they possess, and doors had begun to open in all lands for Collins products."<sup>51</sup>

48. This was clear even to contemporaries. In a September 29, 1884, letter to the US commission for the improvement of trade with Latin America, the Colombian commission house S. Samper & Co., based in New York, stated how "it is well known how diligent the dry goods manufacturers of Manchester are in accommodating their customers in all their requirements, as there the principal rules in purchases that the buyer is the party to be accommodated, and not the seller; then they not only are agreed as far as the possibility may allow them as to the purchaser's requirement about width, finishing, cutting the pieces, assorting the irregular cases with a variety of patterns, &c." Sharpe et al., *Report*, 186. On the upper classes, see Otero-Cleves, "Jeneros."

49. On tactile engagement with fabrics and other commodities as a key feature of consumer practices, see Styles, *Dress*. Thanks to the *HAHR* reviewer for calling my attention to this point.

50. Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Historical Manuscripts, Historical Memoranda, Collins Company Records, 1826–1950, box 3, folder 2.

51. Collins Company, *One Hundred Years*, 17.



Figure 1. *The Interior of a Store in the Principal Street of Bogotá with Mule Drivers Purchasing* (ca. 1840), by Joseph Brown (signed "J. Brown pinx," from an original by J. M. Groot). Courtesy of the Royal Geographical Society.

By the 1860s, Collins was considered by contemporaries "the largest establishment in the world for manufacturing axes and edge tools."<sup>52</sup> According to an 1872 account, "In the West Indies and in South America it is almost impossible to sell an axe or a machete bearing any other [name]; those tropical people are suspicious of Americans, but think themselves quite safe when they see the familiar stamp."<sup>53</sup> Whether South American consumers were suspicious or not, by the turn of the century their liking was undeniable. As a connoisseur of the Latin American market, Ernst B. Filsinger, stated in 1919, "The imitation [of the Collins brand] has often been placed in stock by dealers who have sought to make a larger profit than was afforded by the American article, but they were compelled to abandon the sale when the natives returned the imitation with the complaint that it was far inferior to the one they had been accustomed to use."<sup>54</sup>

52. Quoted in Greeley et al., *Great Industries*, 124.

53. *Ibid.*, 142.

54. Filsinger, *Exporting*, 49.

The presence of the Collins brand in the Colombian market is discernible when one reviews advertisements in local newspapers and commercial directories. In 1877, for instance, *El Mensajero Noticioso* of Medellín called for artisans to buy Collins handsaws and an “assortment of North American tools” including iron door hinges, locks, bit braces, latches, screws, and padlocks.<sup>55</sup> Other shopkeepers took advantage of the country’s political environment to promote this type of merchandise. Once the civil war of 1876–1877 had finished, a merchant from Medellín invited artisans to return to work by placing an advertisement titled “Peace and Work.” “Now that peace has been achieved,” the advertisement read, “[we are] offering a complete assortment of magnificent tools for artisans,” including Collins axes of all sizes, angle brackets, smoothers, hammers, scissors, and fret saws, among many other commodities.<sup>56</sup> Since the Collins machete was still favored due to its durability and lightness, agents and commissioners of German and English merchants were compelled to announce regularly that they would replace their competing machetes if they broke. Keuffel & Esser, a firm in Elberfeld, Germany, was one of the companies that offered this guarantee in Bogotá by 1887.<sup>57</sup> Like Keuffel & Esser, other brands of European machetes also advertised in newspapers and weeklies. An advertisement in San Juan de Córdoba’s *El Noticioso* in 1889 grabbed the attention of its readers by declaring in capital letters “No more Collins!!” and urging them to purchase instead machetes of the credited house of Ralph Martindale & Co., from Birmingham. As an incentive to buy this brand, the merchant also guaranteed to replace any axe or machete if needed.<sup>58</sup>

“El Collins”—as the machete came to be known in Colombia—gradually gained esteem in Latin America for other reasons besides its exceptional quality. Company officials maintained a fluid correspondence with their agents in the region, who in turn transmitted their customers’ suggestions concerning product design. It was standard for “natives” to try the machetes out, according to the Collins Company’s official history; “Soon strange, often very crude, native-made implements, wooden models, or outlines traced on paper, began to come in, with the question: ‘Can you make one like this?’” The Collins Company went on to follow these models exactly, even “if the hand-made blade from some native smithy was queer in shape and perhaps did not seem to hang just right in the hands of the workers at Collinsville”; the company “took it for

55. *El Mensajero Noticioso* (Medellín), 1 June 1882.

56. *Boletín del Comercio* (Medellín), 4 Aug. 1877.

57. *Directorio general*.

58. *El Noticioso* (San Juan de Córdoba), 16 Nov. 1889.

granted that [the customer] knew what he wanted and gave it to him.”<sup>59</sup> Such was the extent of consumers’ contributions that the Collins machete’s number-one design was based on a sketch sent from Cuba in 1850.<sup>60</sup> It is also believed that the Collins Company, whose first and main product was axes, started to produce machetes as a result of the diversified needs of the South American nations: Nicaraguans’ desire for a wider blade tool to cut thick bush, Puerto Ricans’ preference for vermillion-painted blades, and Colombians’ need for a light machete for harvesting coffee, among others.<sup>61</sup>

Reports from the Collins Company’s president to shareholders give an idea of the company’s attitudes toward both its agents and consumers. For instance, while the company sold to commercial houses from New York, it also recruited agents to sell its products to more distant consumers. Some of these agents had worked with the company for over 20 years and had extensive knowledge of the local and foreign markets. According to the company’s president, Samuel W. Collins, one agent visited the factory “every month to confer with us and to see [if] the shapes and sizes are right to suit the customers.” Another agent, who had visited Havana and gathered important information about the Cuban market and competitors there, spoke “the Spanish language,” something that by 1867 was “very desirable and almost a necessity now that we have much business with Spanish customers.”<sup>62</sup> That the company’s directors considered agents the real intermediaries between the firm and the final consumer is evinced in Collins’s 1867 statement that “with the agents we have, they selling our goods [have] acquired a good reputation and a responsible position, they have their active participation in the business and knowledge which is . . . very important for us.”<sup>63</sup> The agents’ expertise was put to good use, no doubt, not only to meet the needs of the North American market but also to understand the demands of the foreign one. Agents were essential to conveying the consumers’ suggestions to the company.

It is somewhat difficult, however, to pinpoint exactly to whom the sources are referring when they speak about the consumers, labeled variously as “peons,” “natives,” “peasants,” and “working people,” to mention just a few

59. Collins Company, *One Hundred Years*, 25.

60. *Ibid.*, 26.

61. Anne Biernacki, “The History of a Company Town” (unpublished manuscript), Torrington, 23 Dec. 1974, Connecticut State Library, Hartford, F104.C64 B54 1974, p. 12.

62. Report of Samuel W. Collins to shareholders, Collinsville, 1 Oct. 1867, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Historical Manuscripts, Historical Memoranda, Collins Company Records, 1826–1950, box 3, folder 2, fol. 158.

63. *Ibid.*



descriptors. One can look more closely at the composition of the country's predominantly rural population in the second half of the nineteenth century to determine who were the potential consumers of foreign machetes. The *Anuario estadístico de Colombia* of 1875 offers a good starting point, as it classifies the population by "social condition," allowing one to identify the percentage of the population dedicated to each trade and activity. If we exclude infants, vagrants, students, and the clergy from the total population—assuming, for the time being, that none were engaged in productive activities—then an estimated 70 percent of the total population was economically active—that is, 2,026,171 inhabitants.<sup>64</sup> Of these, farmers comprised 40 percent, 83 percent of them men. Artisans constituted 15 percent of the economically active population, while arrieros, miners, cattle ranchers, and fishermen comprised a meager 3.75 percent. It is highly probable, therefore, that close to 60 percent of the economically active population might have needed for their everyday activities a good machete, especially due to its ability to be used in a great variety of tasks—a point to which I will return later.

We also need to know, in addition to the share of potential consumers, how many of this heterogeneous group had the economic capacity to buy an American machete. According to John Bidlake, the United States consul in Barranquilla, the cost of a Collins machete in 1883 was \$10.50, while German machetes sold from \$8.50 to \$8.90.<sup>65</sup> Despite the price difference, according to the consul, the former was preferred. When we consider this in light of the wages in 1886 for Colombia's skilled and unskilled workers—compiled by Agricultural Department head Carlos Michelsen Uribe and included in the British Foreign Office's report on Colombian trade—it is possible to conclude that a Collins machete was worth more than two months of labor for rural workers and at least twenty days for those who worked in towns. In both cases, evidently, it was not an insignificant amount.<sup>66</sup>

It is worth corroborating Michelsen Uribe's observations with other sources, especially since there are still no specific studies of rural wages for nineteenth-century Colombia.<sup>67</sup> According to United States consul Thomas

64. *Anuario estadístico*.

65. BFC, *Commercial Relations*, 866. All money figures in the essay are in US dollars.

66. According to the report, the daily wages for skilled and unskilled laborers were as follows: mason, \$0.80; bookbinder, \$0.70; saddler, \$0.80; printer, \$0.80; shoemaker, \$1.20; carpenter, \$1.60; smith, \$2.00; upholsterer, \$2.00; watchmaker, \$4.00; baker, \$0.80; painter, \$1.00; town laborer, \$0.50; rural farm laborer, \$0.15. Great Britain, Foreign Office, "United States of Colombia," 4.

67. There is, however, a detailed study of urban wages: Urrutia M., *Precios*.

Dawson, weekly wages for agricultural laborers in Barranquilla in 1884 ranged from \$4.84 to \$20.15—that is, from \$0.14 to \$2.87 daily.<sup>68</sup> His colleague E. Richard Esmond reported similar evidence that same year to the Department of State: “The rates for every class of labor in [Antioquia],” he argued, “vary only in the expertness of one laborer over another, independent of the vocation, whether mining, mechanical, or agricultural. Price per day, from 4 rials to 1 peso (32 to 80 cents), and if away from their homes board included.”<sup>69</sup> These figures are similar to those provided by historians today. For instance, Frank Safford estimates that the great mass of agricultural and unskilled urban labor earned between \$70 and \$75 per year—roughly \$0.20 daily.<sup>70</sup>

What these sources allow us to conclude is that the income of the working classes was substantially low and that the economic effort made to buy a foreign machete was not at all negligible. Yet in nineteenth-century Colombia, wages were not paid solely in money—even if workers sometimes preferred this form of payment, as shown by Malcolm Deas for the coffee hacienda Santa Barbara in Cundinamarca. Because they often did not have enough liquid capital, hacendados and mining companies made other arrangements to pay their workers, such as payment in food, goods, land, or housing.<sup>71</sup> Machetes were certainly imported by commercial houses run by Antioqueño entrepreneurs who also participated intensely in mining and coffee production. Such was the case for the trading house Ospina Hermanos in Medellín—run by sons of the country’s former president, Mariano Ospina Rodríguez—which imported in 1885 from Europe, along with porcelain dolls and silk handkerchiefs, a 75-kilogram box of machetes.<sup>72</sup> These could have been given to peons as their wages or simply as tools to carry out agricultural or mining activities.

Still, not all those occupied in agricultural tasks were paid workers; some were tenant farmers. As Catherine LeGrand has shown, many hacendados and producers, in order to tie labor to their land, signed different types of tenancy contracts with peasants. In exchange, the latter were allowed to grow their own

68. *Labor in America*, 172.

69. *Ibid.*, 177.

70. Safford, “Foreign.”

71. Deas, “Una hacienda cafetera.” Most of the literature on the working conditions of farmers and mining-sector laborers focuses on recruitment procedures rather than means of payment. On labor relations in nineteenth-century Colombia, see Ramírez Bacca, *Historia laboral*; Kalmanovitz and López Enciso, *La agricultura colombiana*. On mining, see Botero, *La ruta*.

72. Ferro Medina, “Arrieros antioqueños,” 1054–55.

food crops, raise cattle, or keep part of the farm's crops.<sup>73</sup> And they could use their surplus to acquire the products they most needed in the village market or town fairs.<sup>74</sup> Peons and peasants could also engage in agricultural activities as independent workers. An inhabitant of the Atlantic coast, for instance, could live on a plot of land where he grew plantains, sugarcane, bananas, and yucca, among other crops. He could also have a fair supply of fish, if settled close to a river, and furnish his family with meat by hunting wild animals when needed.<sup>75</sup> "His only necessity for money," the United States consul in Barranquilla stated in 1885, was "to provide salt, rum, tobacco, clothes, and the machete, a long knife which he uses for every purpose, from picking his teeth to cultivating his lands."<sup>76</sup> The money needed to obtain such commodities was gained by cutting wood for the Magdalena River steamers, catching and drying fish for the city markets, or cultivating his grounds in excess of his own requirements.

A somewhat similar situation prevailed in the state of Antioquia. The ground's "natural fertility" made it easy for the laborer "to possess a garden spot sufficient to produce the necessaries of life, with but little taken from his wages to accomplish the same."<sup>77</sup> Indeed, it was usual for small-scale coffee growers to cultivate maize, kidney beans, cacao, plantains, and rice, to name a few crops, both to meet their basic needs and to have a surplus to sell at the nearest market.<sup>78</sup> Almost every family in the region kept "a few hens and a pig to fatten, the pig being their only savings bank"; the earnings from their sale were "not used for living expenses, but in reducing the little store debt or reenforcing the clothing of the family."<sup>79</sup> Although few inventories for small-town stores

73. LeGrand, "Labor Acquisition."

74. One of the best-known town fairs was the Feria de la Candelaria, in Magangué. In 1873 Francisco Javier Balmaseda, a Cuban writer who had visited the fair, calculated that 30,000 to 40,000 people of various nationalities and regions converged there via the Magdalena River. "It is impossible to describe all the Colombian products offered for sale," he claimed. Balmaseda also found foreign goods, such as "Manchester percales . . . white cotton fabrics from Liverpool . . . jewelry [from Paris]; corals from Italy; *listados* from Hamburg . . . [and] *agua florida*, *machetes de Collins* . . . from the United States." Balmaseda, *El misceláneo*, 175.

75. Parsons, *Antioqueño Colonization*, 69–95.

76. *Labor in America*, 174.

77. *Ibid.*, 177.

78. Parsons, *Antioqueño Colonization*, 69–95.

79. *Labor in America*, 179. It is possible that expenditures were subject to a household economy and therefore that the acquisition of a machete was subject to household strategies, much in the sense that Jan de Vries has argued for eighteenth-century Europe. See de Vries, *Industrious Revolution*.

survive, both local newspaper ads and the structure of the country's import trade suggest that foreign goods made their way to smaller towns and villages.

That foreign machetes reached diverse provinces proves that there was a demand for these products in nineteenth-century Colombia. But we need to dig deeper in order to grasp the extent to which consumers knew foreign machetes and could choose one brand over another. Since consumers' testimonies are rare, we must turn to other observers, preferably those without a direct interest in the ongoing trade. Someone like the Canadian trade commissioner Major H. A. Chisholm, who gave a report in 1920 about the state of the Colombian market and its potential for Canadian products. According to the major, there were three brands of machetes popular in Colombia, "one English (Martindale), one American (Collins), and one German."<sup>80</sup> His description is consistent with the above-quoted figures on the market for foreign machetes in Colombia.

Yet what is noteworthy about Chisholm's account is that he describes witnessing a peon buy a machete. Chisholm recalled how while he "was interviewing a Colombian merchant, a peon entered his store and asked for 'a trumpet,' and the merchant gave him a machete of the 'trumpet' trademark." After Chisholm inquired further into the scene, "the merchant explained that as very few Colombian peons can read or write, when they wish to purchase an article of a certain well-known brand they ask for the trade mark on it—not the maker's name." It was clear to the trade commissioner that peons were quite familiar with foreign brands and that they knew the products that they demanded: "these simple people may be seen daily in any store in the country asking for such articles as a 'trumpet,' 'kettle,' 'alligator,' 'the arm with a dagger' . . . and the merchant knows, of course, that his customer must have the machete . . . carrying the trade mark demanded, and that, moreover, he will have no other brand."<sup>81</sup> Although in this case the peon was not buying a Collins machete, his attitude does show that he had a specific desire for a foreign product that he knew well.

So far, we know that there was widespread demand for foreign machetes and that peons, laborers, and artisans were familiar enough with the products' quality and durability, so much so that they chose one brand over the other. We also know that, although expensive, foreign machetes were preferred and, more important, that popular consumers were willing to make a financial effort to acquire them. And, no less important, we know that there were different

80. H. A. Chisholm, "Canadian Products for the Colombian Market," *Weekly Bulletin* (Ottawa), 1 Aug. 1921, p. 186. This was the official publication of Canada's Department of Trade and Commerce.

81. *Ibid.*

alternatives—town fairs, shops, credit, wages—to do so. What remains to be determined is what these products meant for their consumers. In other words, what did it mean for a Colombian peasant to own a foreign machete in the mid-nineteenth century?

### Machetes and Popular Identity

The cultural and social meaning of objects is one of the major concerns of those who study consumption and material culture. Still, many have warned us about the risk of forgetting that the utility of the object is itself critical for understanding why some consumers prefer it to other products. In order to understand in depth the significance of the foreign machete in the Colombian market, we must take into account the tool's function and form as well as its cultural appropriation by the popular classes. As we will see, these were both essential in nineteenth-century Colombia.

Because of the country's complicated geography, the machete was crucial for traveling in many regions. But more important, it was the principal tool of the rural population for performing a great range of agricultural work, such as clearing the land, weeding, and harvesting crops. Long machetes were also widely used in the rubber-gathering industry, on tobacco farms, and on sugar plantations.<sup>82</sup> As many observers suggested, this ubiquity owed much to the state of farming in Colombia. In his address for the inauguration of the Sociedad de Agricultores Colombianos on March 31, 1878, Salvador Camacho Roldán, a renowned Colombian politician and entrepreneur, reviewed the critical state of the country's agriculture.<sup>83</sup> Among the many difficulties, he noted that Colombian farmers with very few exceptions did not use ploughs or fertilize their land. In general, according to Camacho Roldán, they lacked any technical knowledge.<sup>84</sup> Accounts of this nature were not limited to locals; consuls offered similar ones since midcentury. The US commissioner of agriculture reported in 1876 that in Colombia "the processes of agriculture are rude . . . farm-machinery is very rough and primitive."<sup>85</sup>

Ten years later, the perceptions of both locals and foreigners had not changed much. The United States consul in Barranquilla noted in 1886 that "no land is in need of agricultural implements more than this, inasmuch as a crooked

82. For the machete as work tool, see, among others, *Informe*.

83. Salvador Camacho Roldán, "Discurso pronunciado por Salvador Camacho Roldán, 31 de marzo de 1878," quoted in Francisco Zea, *Juan de Dios Carrasquilla*, 82–85.

84. *Ibid.*, 84.

85. *Report of the Commissioner*, 275.

stick is often seen to take the place of a plow.”<sup>86</sup> In 1888, the British Foreign Office published a report on agricultural conditions in Colombia that reiterated the backwardness of the country’s agricultural techniques. According to this document, knowledge of anything resembling scientific agriculture was confined to a few of the richer landowners residing in the capital and larger towns, though “they seldom put what they have learnt into practice.” Although there were two iron factories in Bogotá that made simple mule-powered machines with iron rollers, the cheapest cost from \$500 to \$600 and were therefore beyond the means of most of the small sugar growers.<sup>87</sup>

Similar observations were still to be heard at the turn of the century from those who, like Camacho Roldán, were involved in Colombia’s agricultural projects. In 1911 Phanor J. Eder, an experienced manager of large plantations and cattle ranches in Colombia, stated that agriculture as a science was still unknown in the country. The common method for planting and growing maize was, according to him, restricted to burning weeds and brush and then planting seeds in holes made with a stick. Sugarcane was still processed mostly via little hand mills made out of tree trunks, horse-powered vertical mills, and mills driven by waterpower. According to Eder, two areas were exceptions to this: the Sabana de Bogotá, where ploughs and harvesting machinery of American manufacture were being employed, and the large-scale sugar plantations of the Cauca Valley.<sup>88</sup>

These reports show that agricultural machinery in Colombia was owned only by the wealthy and that, above all, demand for such machinery was strongly linked to how agriculture was developing in the country. By the end of the century, coffee was grown on smallholdings in Antioquia, Tolima, Santander, and Cundinamarca worked by a farmer and his extended family.<sup>89</sup> Evidently, because of the size of many of these parcels, peasants could not afford any of the “labor-saving modern appliances” with the exception, in some cases, of locally produced hand-operated *despulpadoras* (small machines used to separate the coffee beans).<sup>90</sup> But this lack of sales was also due to the fact that the machete

86. *Reports from the Consuls*, 302.

87. Great Britain, Foreign Office, “Report,” 7–8.

88. Eder, *Colombia*, 140.

89. Parsons, *Antioqueño Colonization*; Deas, “Una hacienda cafetera”; Bergquist, *Coffee*; Palacios, *El café*; LeGrand, *Frontier Expansion*.

90. “Colombia: Trade for the Year 1895,” *Monthly Bulletin of the Bureau of the American Republics* (Washington, DC), July 1896, p. 770. On *despulpadoras*, see Machado C., *El café*, 106; Brew, *El desarrollo económico*, 354; Palacios, *El café*, 282. See also London, “Cultural Politics,” 40–50. I want to thank Christopher E. London for his suggested additions to this literature.

was still the best alternative for the *desmonte* (forest and land clearance) needed for the land colonization involved in coffee growing and livestock grazing.

For all these reasons, machetes were used far more than other agricultural tools. In his address to the Pan American Commercial Conference of February 1911, Isaac A. Manning, consul in La Guaira, Venezuela, noted the versatility of the machete in Colombia and its ability to substitute for agricultural tools that the peasant and laborer could not afford: "I have seen the machete in use where a hoe, a modern plow, a scythe, a brush hook, an axe or a saw would have been far better, and in every way a more effective implement for the work. One will find the farmer cutting down weeds in his corn field and cotton with a machete where the modern corn and cotton grower uses a plow or cultivator."<sup>91</sup> Paradoxically, it was the backwardness of the country's agriculture that ensured the Colombian peasantry's enormous demand for one specific imported tool: the machete.

Yet the machete was not only a working tool. As evidenced by the country's tariff legislation and the testimony of contemporaries, the *machete para desmontar* and the *peinilla*—also referred to as a "banana knife"—were the types most commonly used in Colombia.<sup>92</sup> While the former was used for agricultural work, the latter type became part of the *arriero antioqueño's* attire, along with his drill pants, long-sleeved flannel shirt with horizontal stripes, *mulera* (small linen ruana), *alpargatas* (hemp sandals), and *carriel* (shoulder bag). It became common for rural residents of Antioquia to own more than one machete: one for performing their main agricultural tasks (the *machete para desmontar*), the other to wear on public occasions such as town meetings or trips to the Sunday market (the *peinilla*).

Midcentury literature shows that the machete became a representative object of the peasantry, something that they inherited and cherished. In 1855, the writer and politician Juan de Dios Restrepo—under the pseudonym Emiro Kastos—wrote a short story about his *compadre* (close friend) Facundo, a *gamonal* (village chief) of Antioquia who only inherited from his father a machete and a horse. Poverty was not an obstacle for Facundo, who "with some small savings he had . . . loaded his horse with a small provision of food, put on his waist a good machete," and went on to colonize little by little the inhospitable terrain of the Cordillera Central.<sup>93</sup> Restrepo's story speaks of the machete as a tool that peasants owned throughout their lives; Facundo used it from

91. Pan American Union, *Proceedings*, 32.

92. "Resolución 23 de 1898: Sobre clasificación de machetes y cuchillos," in Romero y Girón and García Moreno, *Complemento*, 536.

93. Kastos, "Mi compadre Facundo," 59–60.

childhood to adulthood. But the story also speaks of the machete as a tool to defend the honor and life of its owner. It was thanks to his machete that Facundo was able to defend himself against a “gang of seven blacks.”<sup>94</sup>

Other members of the popular classes used machetes to protect their honor or property.<sup>95</sup> Manuel María Madiedo narrates a machete fight between *bogas* (rowers) at the Magdalena River that began because one of them accused another of being a braggart.<sup>96</sup> The machete fights were a custom whose origins date all the way back to colonial times.<sup>97</sup> Criminal records for the first two decades after independence prove that machete fights were still common in Colombia. Such was the case of the criminal proceeding against Santos de Ávila, an Indian from the militias, and Hipólito Serpa for injuring each other “in a fight with machetes” in Santa Rosa on February 5, 1824.<sup>98</sup> Some of these fights took place at fairs or festivals. General Joaquín Posada Gutiérrez regretted that at the traditional Fiesta de San Onofre in Cartagena province during the first half of the nineteenth century bloody collisions occurred frequently because of the “excesses on these plebeian bacchanals.” And when fights started, “the vile and cowardly machete”—Posada Gutiérrez uses the word *peinilla*—was always put to use. He bitterly protested how “the canteens of *currulao* or *mapalé* [Afro-Colombian folkloric dances] celebrate in their wicked songs the feats of the *peluqueros* [those who used the machete] and the agony of the victims, and when any verse impresses the dancers shout enthusiastically: Long live freedom!”<sup>99</sup>

Dances with machetes, or *baile a golpe de machete*, appear to have been a custom in the coffee region, a tradition that is still practiced today. The machete was also important for other types of activities. Civil wars were fought in a scattered and unstructured manner and often with ragged troops armed only with machetes.<sup>100</sup> Many of the accounts of the civil wars bear witness to the use of this weapon to face opposing forces—so much so that Colombian law by the

94. *Ibid.*, 61.

95. Scholars have shown the link among agricultural workers between masculinities and machetes as a tool for both work and self-defense. See, for instance, for another time period and place, Marquardt, “Pesticides.”

96. Madiedo, “El boga.”

97. Archivo General de la Nación, Bogotá (hereafter cited as AGN), Sección Colonia, Criminales (Juicios), SC.19. 76, D.23, fols. 766–818 (1808).

98. AGN, Asuntos Criminales de la República, SR.12. 61, D.16, fols. 358–428 (1824).

99. Posada Gutiérrez, “Fiestas.” 85.

100. Deas, “Pobreza.” See also the drawing by Peregrino Rivera Arce (1877–1940) entitled “Una carga al machete,” at the Colección Museo Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá.



end of the century prohibited the importation of machetes in times of civil unrest.<sup>101</sup> María Martínez de Nisser, who left a written record of her experience in the civil war of 1840, registers that “spears, machetes, and a few firearms” were given to the troops in order to prevent the departure of *ministeriales*, or those who supported the government of President José Ignacio de Márquez.<sup>102</sup> The national guard also equipped its troops with machetes. On September 24, 1851, for instance, the national guard colonel in Socorro forwarded to the nation’s treasurer “13 machetes and 2 jackets of the troop’s uniform,” left over from a previous shipment.<sup>103</sup> There is also evidence that the police confiscated machetes from civilians a year after the 1893 *bogotazo*.<sup>104</sup> On April 3, 1894, the minister of government was informed that the police had seized in Bogotá, from the room of Jesús A. Concha, “30 machetes and some . . . girdles with the inscription ‘Viva el Trabajo.’”<sup>105</sup> Machetes even helped women to cope with economic difficulties during war. Such was the case for Carmen García, who in 1902 in Ibagué pawned to María González two machetes.<sup>106</sup>

By 1900, the popularity of the machete was unquestionable. It came to represent the arriero’s strength, the boga’s wildness, and the artisan’s bravery. It was an object with the popular classes throughout their lives but also an instrument by which they were identified and self-identified. However poor a man was in nineteenth-century Colombia, he could use the machete to cope with his work, defend his honor, and even engage in lively entertainment. This largely explains the demands made by these social groups over the machete and their need to become sharp and sensitive consumers in the national and international market.

### Conclusion: Popular Consumers as Citizens

Historians of nineteenth-century Latin America have emphatically stressed that, in their effort to build a modern nation, one of the major concerns of midcentury elites was figuring out how to integrate the popular classes—and to what extent—into a European-modeled culture, economy, and polity.<sup>107</sup> This

101. See “Colombia: Trade for the Year 1895,” 770.

102. Martínez de Nisser, *Diario*, 42.

103. AGN, Documentos Militares, T4, D6, fols. 202–23 (1851).

104. Sowell, “1893 *Bogotazo*.”

105. AGN, Sección República, Fondo Policía Nacional, T5, fol. 797 (1894).

106. Archivo Histórico de Ibagué, caja 339, fols. 412–14 (1902), as cited in Jaramillo Castillo, *Los guerrilleros*, 147–49.

107. Safford, “Race,” 20.

inevitably required a better understanding of the social, economic, and cultural conditions of the continent's inhabitants. The Comisión Corográfica—the first systematic geographic study of Colombia in the republican era—was tasked by the country's government to study these conditions.<sup>108</sup>

Politicians and intellectuals who participated in the commission (such as Manuel Ancízar and Felipe Pérez) and their contemporaries (notably, José María Samper) devoted great attention to issues relating to racial and cultural integration. All of them believed that cultural improvement could be achieved through the material betterment of the lower classes. In his writings, for instance, Manuel Ancízar associated whiteness and industriousness with the possession of “comodidades” (comforts). He saw in peasants' desire and ability to consume promise for their civilization.<sup>109</sup> And we should not forget that in the eyes of nineteenth-century Colombian elites, being civilized granted one the right to belong to the modern nation.<sup>110</sup>

Indeed, for mid-nineteenth-century Colombian elites—who overwhelmingly agreed on a liberal economic framework—those who manifested a profit orientation and wished to buy consumer goods were worthy of being called citizens.<sup>111</sup> It is striking, therefore, that contemporary history has until recently set aside the role of nineteenth-century popular sectors as consumers. Certainly, recent studies on state formation and nation building in Latin America have detailed in great depth how subaltern groups used various strategies to deal with the new states and to improve their own social, economic, and political condition.<sup>112</sup> Unsurprisingly, the desire and efforts of subalterns to become citizens have dominated the historiography in the last three decades. We now know more about how they shaped national politics, formed political alliances with the elites, and participated in the electoral system and civil wars. But we still need to understand how the efforts of peasants, small landholders, and artisans to become citizens of the newly constituted states related to their role as consumers.

108. On the Comisión Corográfica, see Appelbaum, “Envisioning the Nation”; and her most recent book, Appelbaum, *Mapping*. See also Sánchez, *Gobierno*; Arias Vanegas, *Nación*.

109. For instance, Ancízar saw the lack of consumption by Indians in Tunja province as a sign of their lack of civilization. Consequently, he thought that several tile-roof houses in the district of Garagoa—some 100 kilometers from Zipaquirá—proved “the increasing wealth and comodidades not based on the oppression of the people but on the freedom and welfare of all, achieved thanks to proper land distribution and domestic trade.” Ancízar, *Peregrinación*, 321.

110. Martínez, *El nacionalismo cosmopolita*.

111. Reinhardt, “Consolidation.”

112. See footnote 19.

In this essay I have shown that by looking more closely at the popular sectors' place in the national market and economy—looking at them not only as part of the country's labor force but as individuals interested in the consumption and adoption of new needs and comforts—we can gain new insights into Latin America's nation-building processes. We have seen that although peasants and artisans' options as consumers were limited by Colombia's economic and geographic conditions, they were able to express their dissatisfaction over foreign products if needed and sought various alternatives to access the products they liked and preferred. The popular sectors were critical agents in a national and international market and as such became—as wished for by their elite contemporaries—citizens.

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