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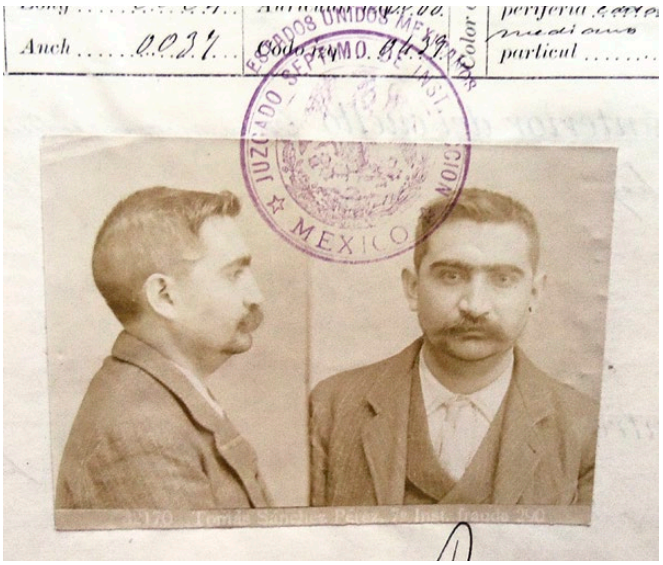
Electrifying Agents and the Power Thieves of Mexico City

One morning in 1908, the fate of Tomás Sánchez, owner of the San Antonio mill on Mexico City's Pueblita Street, took a sharp turn. Alfonso Gómez, inspector for the Canadian-owned Mexican Light and Power Company, or Mexlight, stopped by the mill unannounced and noticed its electric meter was missing a fuse and not functioning. For Inspector Gómez, this was a telltale sign that power was being stolen. When accused of electrical thievery, Sánchez offered an explanation: his friend Manuel Aviera had bought several sacks of maize but had no space to store them, so he asked Sánchez if he could use space at the mill. Sánchez offered the room that housed the mill's engine, where the piles of maize could be stacked high. But three days before Gómez's visit, a carter tasked with retrieving the sacks accidently banged against the electric meter, sending the fuse to the floor. Unconvinced by the story, Inspector Gómez filed a case that landed Sánchez in the city's Belem jail.



Mugshot from Tomás Sánchez's booking record.

The stories of people like Sánchez and Gómez are not the ones historians usually tell about the dawn of electricity. Too often, technologies appear as "black boxes" in popular discourse, or, as historian of technology Thomas Misa puts it, "fixed entities that irresistibly change society and culture." Missing are those who actually employed those technologies and the ambitions that drove them—and how their ambitions and dreams were made real.

If scholars talk about individuals and electrification at all, we generally talk about the "great men" or the companies who made it happen. In fact, in 2008, I set off to research such an account of how Mexico's capital was electrified by using the archives of Mexlight, the company that wired the city in 1905. In 2009, however, the federal government laid off thousands of workers belonging to the Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas (Mexican Union of Electricians), shutting down the company's archive indefinitely. This changed my archival agenda, which turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Had I concentrated on the papers from the company, my research would have been quite straightforward, and I would have eventually written a very different book—and probably a boring one at that.

Instead, deep in Mexico's Archivo General de la Nación (National Archives), to which I turned after Mexlight's archives became inaccessible, I stumbled across the 100-page case history of Sánchez and Gómez. It told a rich story of how electricity was understood, managed, policed, and stolen. Hooked, I went in pursuit of others charged with power theft in the early 1900s. Over the next week, my camera sometimes overheated as I captured thousands of images of judicial documents that collectively detailed dramas of a society undergoing an energy transition. These court cases became a window to the everyday, lived experience of electrification—one that allows us to see individuals such as Sánchez, with his own concerns, ambitions, needs, and desires, as distinct from those of the energy providers. These people imagined how electricity could transform the nation and its industries, along with their neighborhoods, and, most commonly, their own prospects.

Sánchez was just one name on my growing list of *ladrones de luz* (power thieves) who challenged Mexlight rules about access to electric energy. Sixty-three cases were brought against individuals indicted for power theft and tried before the Federal District Higher Court in Mexico City between 1901 and 1918. The story of the ladrones illuminates how electrified machines become integrated into everyday life.

Historians of technology have yet to bring crime into their analysis of technological change. To the question of what we can learn from crime, I say: a lot! Historians working on daily life have emphasized the importance of looking at the subtle aspects of ordinary matters to appreciate the rules that governed everyday behavior. The arrest and resulting trial of Mexico City residents suspected of power theft offers insight into the complexities of the capital's electrification, or, as historian of modern Mexico Pablo Piccato notes, helps "to reconstruct the texture of crime as experienced in everyday life by those who formed the majority of offenders and victims."

Inspector Gómez's stop at the San Antonio mill in 1908 was part and parcel of Mexlight's efforts to police electricity. A year earlier, the company established a department devoted to detecting illegal use with 35 inspectors who, like Gómez, made unannounced visits to commercial, manufacturing, and residential buildings looking for meter tampering, unauthorized reconnections, or illegal hookups to power lines. Inspectors also surveilled overhead power lines, rooting out theft by walking the streets with their eyes fixed on the ever-extending lines crisscrossing the metropolis.

A bright electric light where none should have shone

Mexico City welcomed the twentieth century and its accoutrements of urban modern life. Political stability, substantial foreign investments, and the consolidation of an export-based economy and light manufacturing evinced President Porfirio Díaz's mantra of order and progress. As the jewel of the administration's modernization drive, the capital city underwent numerous sanitation and beautification projects in the face of rapid population growth—doubling to half a million between 1880 and 1910—and early industrialization. Electrification was an essential part of that modernization drive.

By carefully reading the court records of transgressions and the resistance of electricity users, I was able to see how this push to modernization was contested, block by block and home by home, across the city. There was, on the one hand, a company-dictated expectation of how individuals were to secure, use, and record their consumption of electric power. Through a subscriber contract that dictated who had access to electricity and who set the rates, electric companies such as Mexlight set up the parameters of what I came to think of as an "electrical script." But, in practice, the companies had little control over what would occur within the confines of homes, shops, and factories. In those spaces, authorized and unauthorized users, as the judicial cases attest, defied and actively subverted the company's script. It wasn't long before companies realized that their scripts were not final decrees, as they'd intended, but something of a first draft, subject to revision by *capitalinos*.

Negotiating this script meant that Inspector Gómez's work was never easy, and theft could go undetected for days, months, and even years. Simple power theft via an illegal hookup to a power line—often a stunningly rudimentary and crude splice—could catch the inspector's eye quickly. But unauthorized reconnections and meter tampering proved harder to detect, particularly the latter, as subscribers could seamlessly switch from their scripted, proper use of electricity to the ad-libbed, improper use. Policing consumption required diligence, efficiency, and constant alertness. Often the inspectors' only ally as they walked the city streets was the night's darkness; a bright electric light where none should have shone was a sure sign of theft.

One September night in 1915, an inspector spotted an electric light at the house of Enriqueta Ruiz, who had no contract service. Upon knocking on Ruiz's door, a maid answered but denied the inspector entrance, alleging that her boss was sick. As the inspector walked away, he noticed the electric light turn off and candlelight take its place.

A nighttime patrol also confirmed the suspicions of Inspector Manuel Rodríguez at the house of German citizen Federico Jah. Earlier that day, Rodríguez noticed exposed wires in the hallway that could readily be connected, so he returned after dark, accompanied by another Mexlight employee and three policemen. The maid denied them entrance on the grounds that Jah was absent. The party watched from the streets as the electric lights were switched off and the flicker of candles emerged in the windows.

As much as residents of the capital subverted the boundaries between legal and illegal, inspectors keenly felt the cultural boundaries to policing electricity consumption. Could an inspector legitimately gain access to a private home? As inspectors knocked on doors and demanded entry, they were not approaching homogenous structures but rather spaces embedded with cultural meaning. What that space was and who occupied it mattered.

Capitalinos bestowed on their spaces a degree of sanctity and privacy that they would not easily or happily surrender, and an accusation of theft was no minor matter. With it came searches, possible trials, and, frequently, fines and jail time. Inspections, particularly those accompanied by the police, were often interpreted as an insult to the resident's honor. Raids turned questionable private behavior into a public issue, and those who witnessed them, typically neighbors and friends, constituted an intimate audience that held in their collective memory the record of a person's reputation and honor. These were people who constituted an "insider audience," and who held unique power. In early twentieth-century Mexico—without credit scores or other means to establish risk—any questions about one's trustworthiness and righteousness had direct social and financial consequences.

The inner workings of the electricscape

From Belem jail, Sánchez, the owner of the San Antonio mill with the missing fuse, gave testimony that further revealed the inner workings of the Mexico City electricscape. Until recently, he claimed, his mill had enjoyed a sort of monopoly in the area. It was increased competition that had crushed his business, he claimed—not power theft—that explained the discrepancy between his past and current (diminished) power usage. More mills had sprouted up in the neighborhood, damaging his business, but he had not sat idle in the face of financial decline. Rather, he approached Mexlight as soon as he heard rumors of plans to establish competing mills nearby. Providing power service to those proposed mills, Sánchez explained to Mexlight's lawyer, would be extremely detrimental for his business. The lawyer assured him that Mexlight would not service mills. To Sánchez's dismay, the promise was short-lived; the four mills that subsequently opened their doors in the area did so with power serviced by Mexlight.

It is conceivable that Sánchez resorted to theft to keep his business afloat once the arrangement with Mexlight failed to protect his monopoly. As odd and incriminating it might sound, undermining a competitor's access to electricity seems to have been standard business practice at the time. Besides connections to high-level government officials, special compromises kept vital electrical power out of the hands of business rivals, which ultimately enabled two or three companies to control the city's milling industry.

Ladrones de luz included not only individuals, like Sánchez, who ended up in court, but also an assortment of people who sold or bartered the technical skills required to make fraudulent connections, as well as some innovators who manufactured energy-saving mechanisms designed to bypass the electric meters' vigilance. Courts sought to squash these practices and protect the interests of large electric companies, but capitalinos, criminal or not, were not going to be passive participants in the city's electrification. Court documents provide a glimpse into how electrification transformed spaces and relationships and how individuals directed and shaped these transformations. Electricity could reinforce, alter, or flip a capitalino's world upside down.

Modernity's highly contested space

At the level of everyday life, the early twentieth-century adoption of electricity confronted Mexicans with boundaries they frequently contested, or in the case of ladrones de luz, transgressed altogether. In many ways, such instances of modernization foreshadowed today's concerns about boundary-crossing technologies, including facial recognition, unmanned drones, and driverless cars. Scenarios and experiences that fall outside official scripts demonstrate that technology is never a black box and consumers are rarely passive actors. Despite the efforts of designers, manufacturers, and companies to predetermine a user's radius of action, technology is always a highly contested space full of humans. This becomes visible through the types of technologies people adopt (even when they do so through questionable means), or how these are used in new and unexpected ways, or in calling out devices and systems that threaten cultural conceptions of privacy, safety, justice, and fairness.

Even though Mexlight had—through its rates, limited investments, and service quality—conditioned the consumption of electric energy, the experience of users and nonusers of electricity was never limited to their interaction with Mexlight. People became electrifying agents through interactions with the technology in a much wider context of use, wrestling with the challenges and opportunities presented by electrification in creative ways.

Ultimately, these citizens would bring about the end of Mexlight in 1960, when President Adolfo López Mateos nationalized the industry. Having enjoyed a monopoly for over 50 years, the foreign-owned company had become a target for consumers, electrical workers, and, increasingly, government officials. Mexlight's tight grip over rates and workers' wages, as well as its hesitancy to expand generating capacity during the postwar period (precisely as Mexico turned its focus toward industrial development), gave credence to the claim that the company was a rapacious monster that threatened national progress. The Mexicanization of the industry, a goal long pushed by consumers and workers, became López Mateos's ticket into the pantheon of revolutionary presidents who are credited with defending the nation's natural resources in the name of the people.

The national veneration of López Mateos's ultimate subversion of Mexlight's script continues today. In a recent open forum about the future ownership of Mexico's energy sector, Congressman José Gerardo Fernández Noroña, known for his ardent rhetoric, reminded colleagues, specialists, and the general public of the words of López Mateos, who forewarned future generations to remain vigilant about the nationalized grid before "some bad Mexicans" would eventually try to privatize it.

Grounding his defense of the industry in the country's history, Fernández Noroña echoed the presidentialist discourse that emerged with nationalization. But he and other Mexican politicians have much to gain in looking past López Mateos toward those individuals who for decades debated, embraced, appropriated, rejected, and shaped the ways in which electricity entered their lives and spaces. It was those everyday people—not the political, technological, and business elites—who grappled with the hopes, dreams, opportunities, anxieties, and problems of electrifying Mexico.

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