

Beyond Networks: Transatlantic Immigration and Wealth in Late Colonial Mexico City*

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Abstract. This article explores the relation between transatlantic immigration and wealth accumulation in late colonial Mexico City, the chief destination for transatlantic emigrants from Spain. In contrast to the prevalent focus in the literature on networks and transatlantic ties, I argue that economic mobility and thus entry into the upper classes of colonial society depended on the social background of immigrants in their home regions in the peninsula. Human capital rather than social capital was the key determinant explaining why certain regional groups, notably the Basques, succeeded economically as merchants and miners, challenging traditional notions of networks and interconnectedness in Atlantic history and beyond. The findings are grounded in quantitative datasets of Spanish immigrants, overcoming both the biases of anecdotal sources and the methodological intricacy of disentangling the causal relationship between wealth accumulation and social ties.

Keywords: Atlantic history, human capital, networks, immigration, Mexico, New Spain

Throughout the colonial period Spanish American elites from New Spain to the Rio de la Plata consisted of a disproportionate number of Spanish-born immigrants. Despite their negligible share of the colonial population, *peninsulares* predominated in the upper classes as high-ranking officials, such as judges and archbishops, and as wealthy entrepreneurs, particularly in commerce and the production of export goods.¹ Whether as administrators or businessmen,

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* I would like to acknowledge the support for my research that came through a Dan David Postdoctoral Fellowship at Tel Aviv University; a Center for Historical Research Fellowship at Ohio State University; and a short-term research grant from the International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World at Harvard University. I wish to express my thanks for their support and comments on previous versions of this article to José Moya, Bill Summerhill, Raanan Rein, Rosalie Sitman, Alan Gallay, Donna Guy and John Brooke. I also thank the four anonymous reviewers for their useful comments.

¹ D. A. Brading, *Miners and Merchants in Bourbon Mexico, 1763–1810* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 36–42; Susan M. Socolow, *The Merchants of Buenos Aires, 1778–1810: Family and Commerce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 16–20;

Spanish immigrants captured the highest positions in colonial society. But unlike officials appointed to a bureaucratic post in the Indies, ‘independent’ entrepreneurial immigrants did not arrive with a fixed status, nor was their prosperity guaranteed. For these immigrants, entry into the elite depended on gradual accumulation of enormous wealth, a fortune that befell only a handful among them.²

Despite the common association between peninsular birth and elite status, which provoked anti-peninsular sentiments as much as it conferred prestige upon immigrants, the peninsular-born population was far from homogeneous, from both cultural and economic viewpoints. Culturally, immigrants brought over regional identities rather than an all-Spanish one.³ Basques, for example, saw themselves as different from Asturians or Galicians, sometimes forming distinct communities in colonial society. But beyond ethnic identities, regional groups of immigrants varied conspicuously in their economic performance. In terms of wealth accumulation, a discernible gap formed between northern and southern Spaniards. By the middle of the eighteenth century, immigrants from a minuscule area in the north of the Iberian peninsula – mostly Basques and *montañeses*⁴ as well as smaller contingents of Riojans, Asturians and Navarrese – predominated in the most lucrative enterprises, making them the richest people in the Indies.⁵ Ironically then, a large component of the colonial elites did not share the Castilian culture, hegemonic in Spain and its empire.

This article is concerned with the regional disparities among peninsular immigrants in terms of wealth accumulation and entry into the economic elite: why did immigrants from some regions become extremely wealthy while those from other regions did not? To address this question we will consider only independent immigrants, thus excluding official immigrants, those who left Spain with a designated post that ensured their social status. Facing

Jesús Turiso Sebastián, *Comerciantes españoles en la Lima borbónica: anatomía de una élite de poder, 1701–1761* (Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid, 2002); Ann Twinam, *Miners, Merchants, and Farmers in Colonial Colombia* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982); Trinidad Zaldívar et al., *Los vascos en Chile, 1680–1820* (Santiago: Editorial Los Andes, 1998).

² D. A. Brading, ‘Government and Elite in Late Colonial Mexico’, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 53: 3 (1973), pp. 389–414.

³ Paloma Fernández Pérez and Juan Carlos Sola-Corbacho, ‘Regional Identity, Family, and Trade in Cadiz and Mexico City in the Eighteenth Century’, *Journal of Early Modern History*, 8: 4 (2004), pp. 358–85.

⁴ Montañeses were natives of the mountains of Santander, roughly corresponding to present-day Cantabria. While politically this geographical area formed only a small part of the province of Burgos, itself part of Old Castile, its inhabitants have maintained a distinct identity up to the present.

⁵ In addition to the works already cited, also see Carlos Martínez Shaw, *La emigración española a América, 1492–1824* (Colombes, Asturias: Archivo de Indianos, 1994).

a competitive environment, the economic mobility of independent immigrants, which sometimes led to phenomenal enrichment, poses a complex problem.

Scholarly views on economic elites in Spanish America, as in other historical settings, have usually related economic success to social capital, that is, networks based on kinship ties, face-to-face familiarity, or *paisano* communality.⁶ I argue, in contrast, that regional disparities within the peninsular-born population resulted from the human capital – personal skills and competencies – which immigrants brought from Spain, rather than their social ties, whether transatlantic or local. In other words, immigrants' economic mobility and success was determined by who they were, rather than whom they knew.

The focus here is on late colonial Mexico City, destination for approximately one-tenth of Spanish transatlantic emigration. Ever since the Spanish conquest, many of the wealthiest families in the Indies had resided in this major administrative and economic centre. By the turn of the nineteenth century the largest city in the New World was home to over 3,000 peninsulares, the largest Spanish-born community in the New World.⁷

The article begins by charting the main features of peninsular emigration in colonial times. The second section describes the economic disparity across regional groups. The third and fourth sections offer a critical discussion of the concept of networks with particular attention to its application to Spanish immigration and colonial elites. The fifth section looks at the immigrants' social background in the peninsula, focusing on human capital as a key explanatory factor. It concludes with some historical and theoretical implications, especially in regard to Atlantic history, a field fond of networks.

⁶ Following the distinction between independent immigrants and officials, the term 'economic elite', as used here, refers to the upper tiers of the wealthy population whose wealth and status derived from accumulation.

⁷ Figures of transatlantic migration are based on my analysis of passenger licences from the Archivo General de Indias, Contratación, vols. 5492–5507 (years 1751–1764); as well as Isabelo Macías Domínguez, *La llamada del nuevo mundo: la emigración española a América, 1701–1750* (Sevilla: Universidad de Sevilla, 1999); Rosario Márquez Macías, *La emigración española a América, 1765–1824* (Oviedo: Universidad de Oviedo, 1995). For the population of Mexico City, the most nuanced estimate is a total of over 150,000 in 1790, offered by Manuel Miño Grijalva, 'La población de la Ciudad de México en 1790: variables económicas y demográficas de una controversia', in Manuel Miño Grijalva and Sonia Pérez Toledo (eds.), *La población de la Ciudad de México en 1790* (México, DF: Colegio de México, 2004). Estimates of Spanish immigrants in Mexico City are based on my own analysis of the census of 1811 (see [Tables 1](#) and [2](#)) and Jorge González Angulo Aguirre, 'Los inmigrantes de la ciudad de México en 1811', in Delia Salazar Anaya (ed.) *Imágenes de los inmigrantes en la ciudad de México, 1753–1910* (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdeés Editores: CONACULTA/INAH, 2002), pp. 114–18. According to John Kicza, 90 per cent of New Spain's wealthiest families lived in the capital: John E. Kicza, *Colonial Entrepreneurs: Families and Business in Bourbon Mexico City* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983), pp. 15–17.

The Contours of Emigration to Colonial Spanish America

Small in scale throughout the colonial period, Spanish emigration had little quantitative impact on the population of either the sending or the receiving side. As a rough estimate, during 300 years of colonial rule around half a million emigrants left for the Indies, in other words, fewer than 2,000 a year. The low magnitude of overseas emigration was a consequence of a conjunction of factors: backward transportation technology, artificial barriers erected by a jealous mercantilistic crown, and social and economic forces on both sides of the Atlantic, all of which acted as formidable constraints.⁸

A highly restrictive policy that had already been launched in the sixteenth century created tangible obstacles to emigration. Established to control all transatlantic traffic, the *Casa de Contratación*'s restrictions allowed emigration only for officials dispatched there or people with personal ties in the Indies.⁹ Economic obstacles, such as a costly journey, lost work days, the high risk inherent in oceanic navigation, and the costs of obtaining a passenger licence, made the transatlantic flow all the more select and small.¹⁰ High costs excluded the poor, whereas the high risk level of transatlantic crossing and New World business volatility discouraged Spain's upper classes.¹¹ As a consequence, the immigrant population was by and large composed of a mid-dling sort.

The typical immigrant was a single young male in his late teens or early twenties seeking to 'make America'. Women formed only a tenth of the

⁸ By the late eighteenth century, Spanish population reached about 11 million. The most frequently quoted estimate of Spanish emigration to the New World is Magnus Mörner, 'Spanish Migration to the New World Prior to 1810: A Report on the State of Research', in Fredi Chiapelli (ed.), *First Images of America: The Impact of the New World on the Old* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 737–82. For the eighteenth century, a more refined estimate of 100,000 emigrants is offered by Martínez Shaw, *La emigración española a América*, pp. 164–7. Emigration was constrained by transatlantic shipping traffic, which was in turn constrained by commercial policy. An *Annales*-informed seminal study of the Cadiz monopoly and transatlantic commerce is Antonio García-Baquero González, *Cádiz y el Atlántico, 1717–1778* (Sevilla: Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos, 1976).

⁹ The Casa de Contratación was transferred from Seville to Cadiz in 1717 and abolished in 1790: see C. H. Haring, *The Spanish Empire in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963 [1947]), pp. 293–309; on policy see also Márquez Macías, *La emigración española*, pp. 34–8.

¹⁰ On the costs of emigration, see Auke P. Jacobs, *Los movimientos migratorios entre Castilla e Hispanoamérica durante el reinado de Felipe III, 1598–1621* (Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 1995), pp. 33–47, 67–71.

¹¹ Illegal immigration, partly comprising members of ships' crews, made possible the participation of the poor, who could not afford the journey: see Pablo Emilio Pérez-Mallaína Bueno, *Los hombres del océano: vida cotidiana de los tripulantes de las flotas de Indias, siglo XVI* (Sevilla: Diputación de Sevilla, 1992); Auke Pieter Jacobs, 'Pasajeros y polizones: algunas consideraciones sobre la emigración española a las Indias durante el siglo XVI', *Revista de Indias*, 43: 172 (1983), pp. 439–79.

overall flow, their share further falling towards the eighteenth century. Family migration was quite uncommon.¹² By the eighteenth century, natives of the mountainous regions north of the River Duero provided over half of the flow, replacing their Andalusian, Extremaduran and Castilian compatriots, who had made up over 80 per cent of the flow in the sixteenth century.¹³ Immigrants could take advantage of networks linking them to relatives and *paisanos* in the New World as well as in Cadiz, the main port of departure.¹⁴ The single young men who ventured to cross the Atlantic composed the pool of entrepreneurial aspirants, the most successful of whom would constitute the economic elites of Spanish America. While many entered colonial society as protégés of wealthy relatives or compatriots, their own attainment of elite status, dependent upon wealth, was anything but guaranteed.¹⁵ Starting from below, usually as an employee, the peninsular newcomer competed with compatriots as much as his creole cousins, all seeking advancement and enrichment.¹⁶ The issue at stake then, is to explain varying patterns of accumulation, emerging most strikingly across regional origins.

The Wealth of Immigrants

How was wealth distributed according to the regional origins of immigrants? We know that in the eighteenth century Basques and montañeses predominated in wholesale commerce and silver mining, the main channels of large-scale enrichment in colonial society. However, the prevalent focus on occupational groups in the historical literature provides a rather limited picture of wealth distribution for two reasons. First, occupational categories obfuscate

¹² Because of the highly skewed gender imbalance, this analysis refers only to male immigrants. The single exception is the data in Table 1, which includes both men and women.

¹³ Peter Boyd-Bowman, 'Patterns of Spanish Emigration to the Indies until 1600', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 56: 4 (1976), p. 589; Macías Domínguez. *La llamada del Nuevo Mundo*, pp. 87–90.

¹⁴ Notable studies that highlight transatlantic immigrant networks are: Ida Altman, *Emigrants and Society: Extremadura and America in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Ida Altman, *Transatlantic Ties in the Spanish Empire: Brihuega, Spain, and Puebla, Mexico, 1560–1620* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); Juan Javier Pescador, *The New World inside a Basque Village: The Oiartzun Valley and its Atlantic Emigrants, 1550–1800* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Immigrants' wealth was accumulated only after arrival in the New World. Pro- and anti-peninsular writers commented abundantly on immigrants' initial poverty. See Brading, *Miners and Merchants*, pp. 109–10. All the works on merchants cited here claim that immigrants started off from scratch, usually as apprentices. Institutional obstacles made the transfer of capital or property virtually impossible, as illustrated by the rudimentary ship baggage inventories of a few immigrants presented in Jacobs, *Los movimientos migratorios*, pp. 183–7. Even if we assume that immigrants arrived with initial wealth, it would have been negligible in comparison to the fortune eventually attained by the more successful among them.

¹⁶ Although we only consider immigrants here, it should be noted that creoles were present in all tiers of wealth. However, their participation in the upper classes was slim.

important wealth disparity between, say, wholesale merchants and minor ones.¹⁷ More importantly, a full understanding of relative economic success requires the context of the entire immigrant population, from which some stood out.

To overcome these limitations, this article examines the entire peninsular-born population using two types of evidence: a dataset of immigrants culled from marriage applications submitted to the church in late colonial Mexico City, and the 1811 census of Mexico City, employed here to analyse wealth distribution.¹⁸

Following the well-known pattern of urban residence – a wealthy centre and a poor outskirts – the city's *cuarteles* (neighbourhoods) were classified into three categories: centre, middle and periphery. Given this pattern, the spatial distribution of the peninsulares suggests significant regional variation. On the whole, peninsulares were heavily concentrated in the city's centre, but some regional groups more so than others. Table 1 suggests that wealth as reflected by residence accrued to northern immigrants more than to their southern compatriots. Each of the northern groups, except Galicia, had over three-quarters of its members residing in the centre. All other groups, notably the large Andalusian community, maintained a smaller presence (about half) in the central neighbourhoods and a more sizeable one in the periphery, attesting to their relative absence from the upper classes. Worse off than other groups from the Cantabrian seaboard, Galicians were the only northern group that resembled southerners.

While residential patterns indicate overall disparity across regional groups, they are not sufficiently sensitive to indicate elite membership, attained only by the wealthiest.¹⁹ To complement the description of wealth distribution a pool of well-to-do immigrants was devised by locating all heads-of-primary-household in the 1811 census manuscripts of neighbourhoods 1, 5 and 9, the wealthiest ones in the city. This pool included all those who appeared as heads of the primary household in each building and who were not salaried bureaucrats. The residence of the primary household, especially in the central areas, was typically defined as *casa* or *vivienda principal*, the type of housing considered most prestigious and invariably headed by an *español* (peninsular or creole). As an opulent household, it included a large number

¹⁷ In many types of records, import-export merchants, lesser ones, and commercial employees were all designated as *comerciantes*. Brading noted the same problem with mining: Brading, 'Government and Elite,' pp. 394. He also commented that extant records inform us about success stories but are silent about the rather frequent cases of bankruptcy: Brading, *Miners and Merchants*, p. 169.

¹⁸ The Appendix describes the Marriage Applications dataset in detail.

¹⁹ Since many immigrants clustered in centrally located commercial houses, where they lived and worked, residential patterns may contain unwarranted biases, especially if we seek to single out the truly wealthy.

Table 1. *Residential Distribution of Peninsulares (men and women) in Mexico City, 1811*

	Centre	%	Middle	%	Periphery	%	Total	%
Basque provs.	275	79.7	50	14.5	20	5.8	345	100
Montaña	318	76.8	64	15.5	32	7.7	414	100
Navarre	79	78.2	14	13.9	9	8.9	101	100
La Rioja	76	83.5	12	13.2	4	4.4	91	100
Asturias	148	80.4	22	12.0	20	10.9	184	100
Galicia	107	58.8	48	26.4	27	14.8	182	100
Andalusia	233	61.5	93	24.5	53	14.0	379	100
Old Castile	27	58.7	12	26.1	7	15.2	46	100
New Castile	47	50.5	28	30.1	18	19.4	93	100
Aragon	14	63.6	5	22.7	3	13.6	22	100
Catalonia	30	46.2	25	38.5	10	15.4	65	100
Extremadura	6	40.0	7	46.7	2	13.3	15	100
Valencia	17	50.0	10	29.4	7	20.6	34	100
Unidentified	299	69.4	105	24.4	27	6.3	431	100
Total	1676	69.8	495	20.6	231	9.6	2402	100

The figures are based on the extant census manuscripts, capturing approximately two-thirds of the city population.

Centre: cuarteles 1, 5, 9, 13; Middle: 10, 11, 14; Periphery: 4, 15, 16, 18, 21, 22, 23, 26, 28, 29, 31

Source: AGN, Padrones, volumes 53–58, 60–72 (Census of Mexico City, 1811).

of family members, employees and servants. Taking residence and status (head-of-primary-household) as indicative of economic standing, this pool heuristically represents an ‘economic elite’ within the peninsular-born population.

Table 2 illustrates the regional composition of this economic elite. Northerners, particularly Basques and montañeses, predominated as the largest groups among the Mexico City’s wealthiest. In terms of regional rates of elite membership, other northern groups were equally, if not more, upwardly mobile than the Basques. While their neighbours from the mountainous north – Riojans, Asturians and Navarreses – did not form sizeable communities in the city, they all maintained a noticeable foothold in the upper classes. Here too, Galicia resembled the centre and south of Spain. Andalusians and Old Castilians did maintain a large contingent of wealthy people but only thanks to their large communities in Mexico City. Notably, their share in the economic elite was significantly smaller than their share in the peninsular-born population. Finally, Old and New Castilians differed significantly in their economic standing, reflecting a localised north-south variation.²⁰ The emerging pattern also confirms the well-known notion that wealth accumulation was underwritten by export-oriented enterprises, in which northern immigrants predominated in the eighteenth century. Not

²⁰ The gap between Old and New Castile – Old Castilians were better off – was observed with regards to all indicators discussed below.

Table 2. *Peninsular Immigrants and Membership in the Economic Elite, 1811*

Region	Immigrants	% of total	Wealthy immigrants	% of total
Basque Provs.	327	16.3	48	22.0
Montaña	409	20.4	46	21.1
Navarre	97	4.8	13	6.0
La Rioja	90	4.5	20	9.2
Asturias	184	9.2	26	11.9
Galicia	168	8.4	12	5.5
Andalusia	298	14.9	23	10.6
Old Castile	199	9.9	18	8.3
New Castile	116	5.8	6	2.8
Aragon	20	1.0	2	0.9
Catalonia	47	2.3	2	0.9
Extremadura	13	0.6	1	0.5
Valencia	34	1.7	1	0.5
Total	2002	100.0	218	100.0

* In the census of 1811 many immigrants gave ‘Castilla’ as their birthplace, concealing whether they were from Old or New Castile, or elsewhere in the kingdom. I extrapolated their relative numbers using the Marriage Application dataset (see Appendix) where registered birthplace was usually more specific. Despite this limitation, figures of the two relative to one another are more reliable, showing the north-south divergence.

Source: Census of 1811 (see Table 1).

surprisingly, nearly four-fifths of the heads-of-primary-household were merchants, the rest being mainly miners and some landowners. Our inquiry now turns to analysing why northern immigrants should stand out in the lucrative export-oriented sectors of commerce and mining, starting with an examination of the factor that might be regarded as the ‘usual suspect’ – networks.²¹

Networks

Since most immigrants were active in commercial enterprises operating on a global scale, it would seem reasonable to assume that kinship and ethnic-regional networks, whether stretched across the ocean or within New Spain, explain success in business, and hence, economic disparity. It is therefore crucial to address the concept of networks, one that historians frequently use to explain various economic phenomena, notably in the Atlantic world.

In its broadest sense, a social network refers to face-to-face relations or informal relations, diametrically opposed to institutionalised, impersonal relations, commonly associated with modernity. In the sociological structure-agency

²¹ Magnus Mörner, ‘Economic Factors and Stratification in Colonial Spanish America with Special Regard to Elites’, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 63: 2 (1983), pp. 335–69.

dichotomy, networks are but structures linking agents.²² As far as economic activity is concerned, the concept of networks relates implicitly to its social embeddedness, whereby economic considerations are framed by, or subordinate to, non-economic ones.²³ The network is understood as a community, even if geographically dispersed. It may develop around a specialised economic activity – long-distance commerce is an emblematic example – and usually involves the personal immediacy of kinship relations or ethnic solidarity. It is assumed that networks provided a valuable mechanism for doing business. Under conditions of limited information and enforceability, transactions involved risk, which could be reduced by interacting with people of social proximity and greater accountability.²⁴

Networks wedded immigration to transatlantic commerce, for the ships that carried goods also brought immigrants who would engage in commerce after their arrival. Immigrants reached the Indies with information and assistance obtained through transatlantic networks largely controlled by merchants. Commerce, in turn, created the demand and incentive for further immigration.

A host of studies has stressed the centrality of networks in explaining commercial activity across the Spanish Atlantic, implicitly drawing a causal link between access to networks and wealth accumulation. Research on merchants in the Spanish empire has been set in two frameworks: networks within colonial society and those that crossed the Atlantic, both based on the premise that commercial enterprises were grounded in personal ties. As peninsulares dominated commercial networks, their prevalence in the economic elite becomes comprehensible.²⁵

²² My discussion of the concept of networks addresses its broad sociological meaning and use in historical studies. Despite their sophistication, Social Network Analysis studies using computerised mathematical modelling frequently suffer from similar flaws to less systematic historical studies, notably the confusion between description and explanation.

²³ The concept of embeddedness goes back to Karl Polanyi who argued that under modern capitalism economic relations were no longer embedded in social relations. An influential work on trade networks and diasporas applying the concept of ‘embeddedness’ is Philip Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 12–14.

²⁴ A key work concerning trust-based networks in the Spanish empire is Xabier Lamikiz, *Trade and Trust in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World: Spanish Merchants and Their Networks* (London: Royal Historical Society, 2010). An extensive literature in economic history follows a similar line of reasoning; see, for example, Janet T. Landa, *Trust, Ethnicity, and Identity: Beyond the New Institutional Economics of Ethnic Trading Networks, Contract Law, and Gift-Exchange* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 36–45. A critique of the concept of trust, arguing for its redundancy, is Timothy W. Guinane, ‘Trust: A Concept Too Many’, *Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 1 (2005), pp. 77–92.

²⁵ James Lockhart, ‘The Merchants of Early Spanish America,’ in James Lockhart, *Things of the Indies: Essays Old and New in Early Latin American History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford

Despite the omnipresence of networks in their various forms, we must be cautious with ascribing them a causal role they did not necessarily play. The argument here is that networks may tell us *how* Spanish immigrants amassed wealth, but they do not tell us *why* some succeeded more than others.²⁶ Rather than being an initial condition for success, networks may well have emerged whenever economic opportunities appeared. The idea presented here is that networks formed and persisted when wealth was accumulated, but not necessarily the other way around. An examination of various types of networks will illustrate the limits of this concept for understanding economic mobility, at least in the case of transatlantic immigrants. To do so, the discussion focuses first on networks confined to the New World, and then on transatlantic ones. In both cases the conclusion is the same: networks do not explain wealth accumulation.

Networks within the New World

One of the principal channels of integration into colonial society was marriage into a local family, the wealthier the better for the immigrant's future prospects. Marriage has also been considered a useful institution for forming business alliances between families, a strategy for vertical or horizontal economic integration. As the argument goes, romantic considerations were pushed aside by cold business interests, making marriage an instrument for economic enterprise. For immigrants marriage presented an opportunity to gain a foothold in colonial business and resources, providing them with social capital, readily translatable into enrichment.²⁷

University Press, 1999), pp. 158–82, provides a synthesis on this theme. Although the term 'networks' is not always used, the idea is the same: commerce was grounded in personal ties. While part of my discussion focuses on commerce, the argument applies to other sectors that immigrants entered, notably silver mining. Both were lucrative yet burdened by heavy risk. Baskes argued that merchants' monopolistic practices emerged as a response to a risky environment, which may highlight the role of networks: see Jeremy Baskes, 'Risky Ventures: Reconsidering Mexico's Colonial Trade System', *Colonial Latin American Review*, 14: 1 (2005), pp. 27–54.

²⁶ In this sense my position differs from studies that view networks, implicitly or explicitly, as a causal factor of economic mobility. Lamikiz argues that Spanish merchants' trust networks embedded in ethnic identity formed a prerequisite for trade, and an independent factor in explaining participation in international trade: see Lamikiz, *Trade and Trust*, pp. 182–5.

²⁷ Examples of this prevalent line of argument include Brading, *Miners and Merchants*, pp. 111–12; Susan Socolow, 'Marriage, Birth and Inheritance: The Merchants of Eighteenth Century Buenos Aires', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 60: 3 (1980), pp. 387–406; Louisa Schell Hoberman, *Mexico's Merchant Elite, 1590–1660* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 64–8; Fernández Pérez and Sola-Corbacho, 'Regional Identity, Family, and Trade', pp. 369–76.

Yet evidence and logic suggest that the argument that immigrants got rich thanks to entry into wealthy families rests on shaky foundations. If anything, the causal relationship was the reverse: good marriage was the consequence rather than the cause of wealth accumulation. Local families and daughters were rather selective in their choice of mates. Mexico City merchants tended to marry late in their careers, suggesting that they first had to amass enough wealth to make themselves desirable partners for daughters of elite families.²⁸ Additionally, a large proportion of merchants never married at all, rendering the institution of marriage entirely irrelevant to their success.²⁹

To overcome the bias towards the elite inherent in the focus on merchants, the marriage-application dataset used in this research offers a more inclusive view, which also shows remarkable regional variation. The median age at marriage was 31 for southerners and 29 for northerners. But more importantly, northerners spent nine years on average after their arrival in the capital until contracting marriage, while their incontinent compatriots from the south waited for only five years.³⁰ Considering that careers started upon arrival, and regardless of class and occupation, marriage seems to have occurred closer to the culmination of economic mobility than to its initiation. If marriage was an important institution for entering or creating networks, then these networks were the product, not the origin of enrichment.

A related type of network, based on transatlantic family ties, formed around a well-known pattern of recruitment and integration, which David Brading called the ‘nephew syndrome’.³¹ According to this pattern, prosperous businessmen in the New World recruited their nephews and other young paisanos valued as trustable employees. As a consequence, young relatives could

²⁸ Some historians have qualified the role of marriage by stressing merchants’ advanced age at the altar, although they did not dismiss it altogether as a channel of social mobility or offer an alternative explanation: Kicza, *Colonial Entrepreneurs*, pp. 164–6. On late marriage among Buenos Aires merchants, see Socolow, ‘Marriage, Birth and Inheritance’, pp. 390–1.

²⁹ Fernández Pérez and Sola-Corbacho, ‘Regional Identity, Family, and Trade’, pp. 370–1. Using evidence from testaments, they show that 40 per cent (!) of Mexico City’s merchants died as bachelors. My own findings, based on the 1811 census, show that about a third of the pool of wealthy peninsulares aged 45 and over were bachelors.

³⁰ This calculation, based on the marriage application dataset, only includes first marriage. In eighteenth-century Spain, males’ average age at first marriage was 26.5 for Basques, 25.0 for Asturians, 25.5 for Galicians, 24.9 for New Castilians, and 24.3 for Andalusians: see Robert Rowland, ‘Sistemas matrimoniales en la Península Ibérica (siglos XVI–XIX): una perspectiva regional’, in Vicente Pérez Moreda and David S. Reher (eds.), *Demografía histórica en España* (Madrid: El Arquero, 1988), p. 95. The overall gap between immigrants and those who stayed behind is remarkable. Furthermore, although regional differences in Spain were modest, they reversed in the New World, suggesting that marriage was responsive to circumstances rather than fixed in cultural tradition.

³¹ Although this type of social capital had a transatlantic dimension I discuss it here because its dynamics in regards to wealth accumulation took place after arrival in the New World: see Brading, *Miners and Merchants*, pp. 104–8, and also Socolow, *The Merchants of Buenos Aires*, pp. 21–2, and James Lockhart, ‘The Merchants of Early Spanish America’, pp. 164–6.

gradually ascend the business ladder to become wealthy entrepreneurs themselves, perpetuating peninsular dominance. However, while the ‘nephew syndrome’ might help to explain who would cross the Atlantic, it does not account for who would become wealthy. It is inconsistent with the shift in the origins of immigrants and the northerners’ economic success in the eighteenth century. If transatlantic ties determined recruitment and integration, given that they were geographically confined in sending regions, then we should expect the continuity of Andalusian and Castilian merchant families, predominant in sixteenth-century Spanish America.

Furthermore, the immigrant starting a career in his relative’s business had to compete with other employees, fellow immigrants and creoles alike, all aspiring to advancement.³² Despite northerners’ predominance in commerce, as employers and employees alike, none of the large regional groups abstained from participating in this sector. Out of the 81 peninsular employees working for a Basque merchant that could be identified in the 1811 census only half were Basque compatriots, though montañés and Asturian merchants did exhibit more ‘exclusivist’ behaviour, co-regionals forming two-thirds of their Spanish-born employees.³³

One may argue that, even if initial employment was meritocratic, nepotism still cannot be ruled out fully, for within a single business the owner’s kin employees enjoyed a certain advantage over non-kin ones. Indeed, another aspect of the ‘nephew syndrome’ was inheritance, whereby the young immigrant received his uncle’s business, thus benefiting him over other potential successors. However, there is little evidence to support this argument. In fact, merchants’ estates rarely went to their nephews. In a systematic study of merchant wills from eighteenth-century Mexico City, Juan Carlos Sola-Corbacho showed that nephews formed only 5 per cent of all designated heirs, while wives and children formed half of the fortunate group.³⁴ Furthermore, even if merchants practised nepotism, high turnover in the merchant elite, in addition to various obstacles to transferring the estate intact to a single heir, pre-empted its potential impact in the long run.³⁵ We may

³² Kicza, *Colonial Entrepreneurs*, pp. 140–1.

³³ Based on the enumeration of the central wards (1, 5, and 9) in the 1811 census. Only peninsular employees were counted.

³⁴ Juan Carlos Sola-Corbacho, ‘Los comerciantes mexicanos frente a la muerte (1765–1800)’, *Revista Complutense de Historia de América*, 25 (1999), p. 191. Although Brading did not argue that inheritance was transferred directly to nephews, his argument, based largely on literary sources, suggested that young relatives from the peninsula ended up taking over commercial ventures, while creole sons received landed estates, an enterprise less risky but also less profitable than commerce, thus leading to cross-generational downward mobility: Brading, *Miners and Merchants*, pp. 208–19.

³⁵ Socolow argued that ‘a combination of business conditions, legal restrictions and fertility patterns seriously impaired the merchants’ ability to transfer their estates intact to the next generation’: Socolow, ‘Marriage, Birth and Inheritance’, pp. 404–5. In a detailed study of

conclude that the economic gap between immigrants probably opened during their early years of residence in Mexico. Marriage, inheritance and other forms of social capital indeed signalled success and probably provided increments to wealth, but did not determine economic mobility in any fundamental way.

Finally, since immigrants also predominated in the colonial bureaucracy, especially following the Bourbon reforms, as judges, intendants and fiscal officials from Spain arrived in greater numbers against the protests of excluded creoles, we should also consider ties between entrepreneurs and bureaucrats.³⁶ Personal connections in the administration could obviously create a tangible advantage. In the mercantilistic environment of the transatlantic economy, factors such as market information, access to the royal mint or to ecclesiastical credit, and outright corruption, all seemed to have made personal ties to the administration highly useful. However, Bourbon fiscal centralisation and the struggle against corruption attenuated any clear-cut advantage for well-connected immigrants. More significantly, regardless of policy, little regional affinity existed between the economic and administrative branches of the colonial elite, making such connections less likely. As Andalusians and Castilians arrived in greater numbers as officials, while northerners went mostly as independent immigrants, this regional 'division of labour' made regionally based entrepreneur-bureaucrat networks less likely.³⁷ If at all, one would expect such connections to benefit southerners, due to paisano ties in the bureaucracy, yet evidently they were worse off.

Transatlantic networks

Another type of social capital potentially available for immigrants was formed by connections with kin and paisanos in Spain. If trade operated through

emigration from the Oyarzun valley in the Basque province of Guipúzcoa, Pescador argued that the extant evidence belies the prevalent notion of kinship-based recruitment and favouritism: Pescador, *The New World Inside a Basque Village*, pp. 82–4.

³⁶ A study highlighting conflicting group interests is Stanley J. Stein and Barbara H. Stein, *Apogee of Empire: Spain and New Spain in the Age of Charles III, 1759–1789* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). On the shift from creole to peninsular dominance in the audiencias, see Mark A. Burkholder, *From Impotence to Authority: The Spanish Crown and the American Audiencias, 1687–1808* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1977).

³⁷ For bureaucrats crossing the Atlantic whose origin is stated in their passenger licence, only 14 per cent came from the north, while Andalusians and Castilians constituted 53 per cent: see Márquez Macías, *La emigración española*, p. 202. Among high-ranking peninsular bureaucrats in late colonial Buenos Aires, Andalusians predominated (6), followed by Navarreses (4) and Galicians (2): Susan Socolow, *The Bureaucrats of Buenos Aires, 1769–1810: Amor al Real Servicio* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 134.

personal connections across the Atlantic, it would seem plausible that immigrants had an important advantage.

The economic success of Armenian, Jewish and Indian global merchant networks, to name but a few well-known examples, has usually been attributed to the ethnic solidarity of these diasporas. Emotional ties and social pressure fostered commitment and trust, which in turn, reduced risk, making long-distance transactions more efficient.³⁸ In that sense, ethnicity acquired the same function as kinship.³⁹

However, several reasons cast doubt on the significance of diasporic solidarity. First, litigation among co-regionals suggests that networks were not always necessary for enforcement. As exemplified by the following Basque court case, formal institutions were not completely ineffective. Juan Bautista de Gogenechea, a Bilbao merchant, sued Ignacio Mena de Ugarte, a Mexico City merchant, originally from Orozco, Vizcaya. Juan Bautista never saw the 10,000 pesos sent by his brother-in-law, Lucas de Careaga, a sea-captain residing in Mexico City, which Ignacio was supposed to deliver when sent on a business trip back to Spain. A counter-lawsuit was initiated by Ignacio, together with business partners in Bilbao and Cadiz, against Juan Bautista and his wife, suing them for a debt of 8,349 escudos.⁴⁰ The case illustrates that resort to judicial institutions was possible even in long-distance conflicts. Furthermore, the transatlantic dimensions of litigation, as much as the less quarrelsome testaments, power deeds and donations, attest to a degree of judicial effectiveness, so that formal institutions complemented diasporic networks in enforcing discipline.

Second, structural conflict between old and new *consulados*, all dominated by the same regional groups of immigrants, meant that economic interests paid little regard to paisano solidarity.⁴¹ The establishment of new consulados in Veracruz and Guadalajara in the late eighteenth century encroached on the

³⁸ Cf. Ina Baghdiantz McCabe et al. (eds.), *Diaspora Entrepreneurial Networks: Four Centuries of History* (Oxford: Berg, 2005); Adrian Jarvis and W. Robert Lee (eds.), *Trade, Migration and Urban Networks in Port Cities, c. 1640–1940* (St. John's, Canada: Research in Maritime History, Issue 38, 2008).

³⁹ Although Lamikiz does not explicitly address Basque ethnicity, it certainly appears crucial: Lamikiz, *Trade and Trust*, esp. 10–14, 122–6. Additional regionally-focused studies on networks include Victoria E. Martínez del Cerro, *Una comunidad de comerciantes: navarros y vascos en Cádiz (segunda mitad del siglo XVIII)* (Sevilla: Consejo Económico y Social de Andalucía, 2007); José María Imizcoz (ed.), *Redes familiares y patronazgo: aproximación al entramado social del País Vasco y Navarra en el antiguo régimen, siglos XV–XIX* (Bilbao: Universidad del País Vasco, 2001).

⁴⁰ Archivo Histórico Foral de Bizkaia, Judicial, file 62/34, (1713–1716).

⁴¹ Antonio Ibarra, 'Redes de circulación y redes de negociantes en Guadalajara colonial: mercado, élite comercial e instituciones', *Historia Mexicana*, 56: 3 (2007), 1017–41. Ibarra goes further to argue that Guadalajara merchant networks posed a challenge to Mexico City well beyond its regional market. On northern predominance in various consulados, see the various articles in Antonio Ibarra and Bernd Hausberger (eds.), *Comercio y poder*

traditional monopoly of the consulado of Mexico City. These new consulados articulated the interests of northern peninsulares who sought commercial independence from their co-regionals in Mexico City. That economic interests, when conflictive, could override ethnic solidarity, suggests that diasporic identity did not suffice to make networks work. Networks of ethnic solidarity could at times require economic ‘harmony’ among their members but they did not necessarily create it.⁴²

Finally, transatlantic connections may appear crucial for economic success because the same regional groups dominant in the New World were also dominant in Cadiz, the funnel for trade in the eighteenth century. However, social ties between Cadiz and the New World did not necessarily play a causal role. If we attribute the success of Basques and montañeses in the Indies to their connections in Cadiz, we are still left with the puzzle of explaining why their compatriots had become prominent in Cadiz in the first place, a crucial point to which we shall later return.

As for the role played by transatlantic networks, we must initially distinguish between explaining transatlantic migration and explaining immigrants’ economic mobility in the New World. We are asking two separate questions: who would migrate, and who would become rich?

As far as access to transatlantic immigration is concerned, two types of connections may have played a role: ties in Cadiz and ties in the New World. Since moving to the Indies was costly and complicated, immigrants depended on the assistance of kin and friends strategically positioned on both sides of the Carrera de Indias. Merchants in Cadiz, as the port monopolising transatlantic traffic, were perfectly placed to facilitate emigration. In addition to valuable information pertinent to the Carrera, they possessed political and economic resources to secure passage for their protégés.⁴³ Yet connections to merchants in Mexico City appear to have been more significant. After all, those who had already ‘made America’ were the very ones who needed young blood for their

en América colonial: los consulados de comerciantes, siglos XVII–XIX (México DF: Instituto Mora, 2003).

⁴² Another corporate conflict of interests casting doubt on diasporic solidarity emerged between the consulados of Mexico and Cadiz: see Pedro Pérez Herrero, ‘Actitudes del Consulado de México ante las reformas comerciales borbónicas (1718–1765)’, *Revista de Indias*, 171: 43, (1983), pp. 97–182.

⁴³ Interestingly, even after the introduction of additional Spanish ports to direct commerce with the Indies in 1778, Cadiz still commanded 40 per cent of ship departures to the Indies as a whole and virtually all departures to New Spain: John Fisher, *Commercial Relations between Spain and Spanish America in the Era of Free Trade, 1778–1796* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1985), pp. 121–4. Furthermore, the marriage applications dataset shows that almost all immigrants from the north arrived through Cadiz instead of the nearby ports of Santander and El Ferrol, attesting to the role of connections in the southern port city.

thriving businesses. Cadiz merchants could provide assistance to emigrants, but Mexican merchants actually needed them.

As one might expect, regional presence in the consulado of Cadiz and the migratory flow to the New World were strongly correlated, as the same regions dominated commerce both in Cadiz and Mexico City.⁴⁴ The Basques, for example, who maintained a substantial representation in the consulado of Cadiz, also dispatched a sizeable contingent of compatriots overseas. By contrast, a region such as Extremadura, a major sending region in the sixteenth century, became ‘immobile’ by the eighteenth, paralleling the absence of its natives from commerce in Cadiz.

When it comes to economic mobility and success, we do not have any systematic examination of transatlantic networks, partly due to a methodological difficulty: networks tend to correlate with commercial success.⁴⁵ One way to overcome this problem is to look at a type of evidence that would allow us to measure the extent of ties by separating them from commercial activity. Grounded in the marriage applications dataset from Mexico City our analysis measures the ‘strength’ of transatlantic networks by using as a proxy variable the length of time immigrants spent in Cadiz prior to departure. Before embarking for the Indies, many immigrants moved around in Spain or, more often, spent some time in Cadiz. Going directly to the New World without roaming in Spain meant prior planning and thus, better connections. The following examples illustrate various types of the migratory process, some smoother than others.

In 1777, aged 16, Ventura Gallinas left his home in Cervatos de la Cueta, a town in Old Castile, going to the town of Llerena, Extremadura, where he lived for eight years. He then left for Cadiz, where he resided for four months until boarding a ship for Veracruz. After two days, he then went to Mexico City, where he was living at the time of his marriage in 1791.⁴⁶

Some immigrants stayed longer in Cadiz before crossing the Atlantic. At the age of ten, Francisco Cruces left his hometown, La Seira, in Galicia, going to

⁴⁴ The Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.98. Data on Cadiz includes 2,071 registered consulado merchants (1743–1823), excluding those born in Cadiz, many of whom were second-generation immigrants: the data used comes from Julián B. Ruiz Rivera, *El Consulado de Cádiz: matrícula de comerciantes, 1730–1823* (Cádiz: Diputación Provincial de Cádiz, 1988). Data on emigrants was taken from the passenger licences granted by the Casa de Contratación between 1751 and 1763, and Márquez’s figures based on the same source for 1765–1824: Archivo General de Indias, Contratación, vols. 5492–5507; Márquez Macías, *La emigración española a América*, pp. 143–51.

⁴⁵ This problem is intrinsic to research based on notarial records, which are not only biased towards the wealthier tiers, but also only describe existing ties. Notarial records tell us about the operation of existing networks but they do not inform us about the significance of networks because what they observe – transactions between individuals – is by definition a tie within a network.

⁴⁶ AGN, Matrimonios, 14, 99.

Cadiz where he lived for 12 years before departing for Veracruz in 1756. Despite living away from home for so long, he maintained his ties. José Conde, his witness, was from Seira too, but arrived in Cadiz eight years after Francisco. Four years later both left for Mexico City.⁴⁷

Others, however, enjoyed a smoother process, arriving in Cadiz straight from their hometown and departing for the New World without any significant delay, presumably thanks to networks that helped to arrange the move starting from their hometowns. It was highly unlikely any would board a ship upon arrival in Cadiz without previous arrangements. In 1759 Antonio González Pavia, a *montañés* from the village of Secadura, left at the age of 22 directly for Cadiz and immediately embarked for Mexico City, where he had been a *vecino* for three years when he married.⁴⁸ In the same vein, in 1755, aged 16, Tomás de Urizar left his Basque village of Larrabezua for Cadiz, where he immediately boarded a ship to Veracruz, continuing directly to Mexico City.⁴⁹ These immigrants avoided any ‘stopovers’ in Cadiz or elsewhere in Spain before embarking.

To make sense of the various types of migratory experience, Table 3 illustrates important differences across regional patterns, looking at various possible relationships between transatlantic networks and economic mobility. Half of the Basque and *montañés* immigrants, the very groups dominant in the economic elite, secured swift passage. Most Galicians and Asturians spent some time in Cadiz, only a third of them embarking promptly. And ironically enough, Andalusians hardly benefited from their proximity to the port of departure, with only a quarter passing through without delay.

How were transatlantic networks related to regional communities of immigrants in Mexico City? Attaching the population data from Mexico City to the figures of time in Cadiz, Table 3 shows that swift migration was related to regional presence in Mexico (column b). Yet the mere size of regional communities did not entirely suffice to engender networks that would facilitate the arrival of new immigrants. Andalusians, for instance, formed one of the largest communities in Mexico City, but they did not command strong links to the peninsula.

Speedy migration was even more closely related to the presence of co-regionals in the economic elite (column c). Wealthy immigrants indeed had a greater leverage in calling over for young blood. They also needed them more than their less prosperous compatriots. Our quantitative data confirms the idea that overseas migration depended to a great extent on recruitment by thriving entrepreneurs already established in the Indies.

⁴⁷ AGN, Matrimonios, 144, 64.

⁴⁸ AGN, Matrimonios, 157, 42.

⁴⁹ AGN, Matrimonios, 12, 62.

Table 3. *Transatlantic Connections and the Peninsular Population in Mexico City*

Region	(a) Direct / total migration	(b) Immigrants	(c) Wealthy immigrants	(d) Success rate (% c/b)
Basque provs.	34/71 (52%)	327	48	14.7
Montaña	42/79 (53%)	409	46	11.5
Navarre	2/11 (18%)	97	13	13.4
La Rioja	3/14 (21%)	90	20	22.2
Asturias	13/37 (35%)	184	26	14.1
Galicia	25/75 (33%)	168	12	7.1
Andalusia	14/52 (27%)	298	23	7.7
Old Castile	10/50 (20%)	199	18	9.1
New Castile	1/7 (12.5%)	116	6	5.2

Sources: column a: Marriage Application dataset (see Appendix); columns b, c, d: Census of 1811 (see Tables 1 and 2).

* The figure of direct migration for Andalusia excludes natives of Cadiz due to inapplicability. Other regional groups were excluded due to a large error margin.

Statistics: Pearson correlation between a and b: $r = 0.81$

Pearson correlation between a and c: $r = 0.91$

Pearson correlation between a and d: $r = 0.15$

However, using strong connections in the Americas to emigrate and get started in the New World was one thing. Getting rich was quite another. While expedited migration and the number of wealthy co-regionals were strongly correlated, there was no correlation between speedy migration and the *rate* of economic success (column d). If swift migration was indeed an indication of access to networks, that access had little to do with the chances of entering the economic elite. A clear example is presented by Riojans and Navarrese. Going in small numbers, they did not particularly benefit from extensive networks facilitating their move to Mexico, as only about a fifth of each group left Cadiz without any delay. Yet, they became wealthy on a disproportionate scale, no less than the large communities of Basques and montañeses.⁵⁰

Although networks played a role in determining who would cross the Atlantic they did not determine who would become wealthy. We know that new immigrants started off as employees, yet only a handful later achieved phenomenal wealth. The crucial point is that those who did succeeded largely regardless of networks, whether transatlantic or local ones, whether based on *paisanaje* or kinship. Networks certainly were important for business

⁵⁰ One may assume that networks were not strictly based on *paisanaje*, allowing for mixed networks of, say, Riojans with Basques. However, that would downplay network embeddedness in ethnic identity, rendering the supposed role of informal institutions irrelevant.

but they expanded or contracted according to economic success, not the other way around. For the same reason, northerners could ‘take over’ colonial enterprises to become dominant in the eighteenth century. In short, networks appear to have been the consequence of wealth accumulation. As such they describe but do not explain immigrants’ economic mobility. They tell us *how* peninsulares became wealthy but they do not tell us *why*. To explain economic mobility a different approach is required, one that searches for its causes in the personal characteristics that immigrants brought from home.

Immigration and Human Capital

If networks did not play a causal role in wealth accumulation, how do we account for the economic disparities among regional groups? The insufficiency of networks leads us to examine social group characteristics instead of social ties or interactions. By so doing, we focus on the aggregate characteristics of the individual members of a given population, instead of their relations within the social structure. The notion of social group characteristics steers away from ties to nodes, to use the jargon of network theory. My findings show that immigrants possessed an important asset, a remarkably high level of human capital. Being a highly select group, the immigrant population was endowed with human capital on a level unmatched by either the sending or receiving society. But more importantly, a conspicuous disparity in human capital existed across regions of origins, and notably, between northerners and southerners. This was the key factor behind the economic disparity among immigrants from different regions.

Conceptually, human capital stands in opposition to social capital. Economists and economic historians view human capital as a form of capital defined by the acquisition of skills and education, an investment reflected in increasing returns to labour. Embodied in personal ability, human capital represents a qualitative improvement in productive input resulting in greater output. The accumulation of human capital has been considered a source of economic growth affecting the entire economy. Likewise, it may account for variation in productivity between social groups within a single economy – why some are richer than others.⁵¹

To measure human capital I used literacy rates derived from the marriage applications, as applicants – both bride and groom – and their witnesses were required to sign their statement. The marriage applications are

⁵¹ In *The Wealth of Nations* Adam Smith regarded human skills as equivalent to physical capital in terms of increasing productivity. Key studies include Theodore W. Schultz, *Investing in People: The Economics of Population Quality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); Gary Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

particularly useful for two reasons. First, they provide the most complete source for examining literacy along with other variables. Second, their scope is the entire peninsular population rather than a narrow elite or an economic sector.

The use of signatures in research on historical literacy is famously problematic, as signatures are blunt enough to conceal the qualitative aspects and quantitative gradations of reading and writing skills.⁵² Nevertheless, across large populations name-signing provides a most reliable proxy for literacy. It is also a useful indicator of human capital, for a chasm separated the literate few from the illiterate many. In pre-modern times, the gap proved all the more remarkable.⁵³ Additional types of human capital like numeracy and bookkeeping, though important for business, could not be measured. At any rate, these skills were grounded in literacy, the more rudimentary type of human capital, which is readily measurable.⁵⁴ We may further speculate that the growing use of *libranzas* and large merchants' financial role in credit transactions, both related to the late colonial liquidity shortage, may have made literacy all the more significant for economic mobility.⁵⁵

Peninsulares in late colonial Mexico City indeed demonstrated an extremely high rate of literacy: 90 per cent of them could sign their name. Considering their selective recruitment through networks linked to their hometowns, this figure is not entirely surprising.⁵⁶ Immigrants' literacy was remarkable in comparative perspective, surpassing the contemporary highly literate 'islands' in Scandinavia and North America which possessed a male literacy rate surpassing 80 per cent, or European urban enclaves led by Amsterdam with 85 per

⁵² These methodological problems are discussed in Carlo M. Cipolla, *Literacy and Development in the West* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1969); Roger S. Schofield, 'Dimensions of Illiteracy in England, 1750–1850', in Harvey Graff (ed.), *Literacy and Social Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 201–13.

⁵³ Nuñez has detected a strong correlation between regional literacy rates, economic growth and gender equality in modern Spain: Clara Eugenia Nuñez, *La fuente de la riqueza: educación y desarrollo económico en la España contemporánea* (Madrid: Alianza, 1992). Psychologists have argued that literacy also enhances cognitive processes, thus having a multiplier effect on human capital: Clara Eugenia Nuñez and Gabriel Tortella 'Educación, capital humano y desarrollo: una perspectiva histórica', in Nuñez and Tortella (eds.), *La maldición divina: ignorancia y atraso económico en perspectiva histórica* (Madrid: Alianza, 1993), pp. 26–7.

⁵⁴ Although business experience could have created an advantage, the previous acquisition of such skills at home or in Cadiz seems unlikely because wealthy immigrants usually came from rural families in the north and went directly to Mexico.

⁵⁵ The *libranza* was a type of a bill of exchange increasingly drawn by Mexico's merchants in the late eighteenth century. With widespread circulation in domestic transactions *libranzas* practically functioned as credit and currency. On the crucial importance of *libranzas* for commerce, and also for the entire late colonial economy, see Pedro Pérez Herrero, *Plata y libranzas: la articulación comercial del México borbónico* (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 1988), especially pp. 195–253.

⁵⁶ By comparison, the literacy rate of creole males in Mexico City based on a sample of marriage applications was 71 per cent, on a par with eighteenth-century European urban populations.

cent. Spain and other Southern European countries lagged behind, falling below 50 per cent.⁵⁷ Ironically, immigrants' literacy and commercial inclinations belie the idea of Catholic aversion to capitalistic rationality, all the more so because Basques were famous for their religious conservatism.

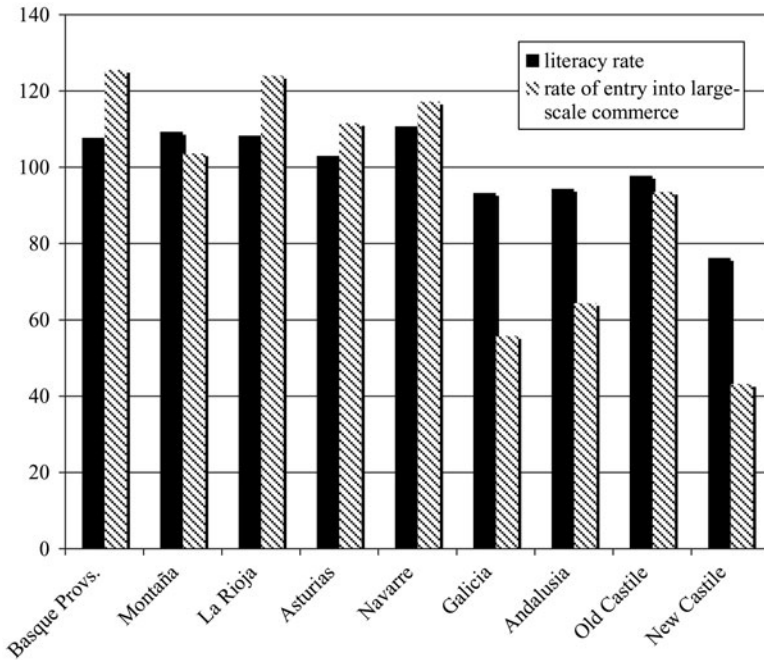
Considering commerce as the principal channel for enrichment, how was literacy related to immigrants' mobility in commerce? Figure 1 illustrates the participation of peninsulares in large-scale commerce. Relying on the 1811 census, it goes beyond the limited category of consulado merchants to include all men engaged in commerce. I created two analytical categories, the first one of affluent merchants, defined as heads of a household with three employees or more, and the second one of commercial employees and small-scale merchants. The more literate regional groups tended to succeed more in commerce. Regions with above-average literacy also entered into large-scale commerce more frequently than the average. In terms of both literacy and representation in large-scale commerce, the disparity between the northern regions and central and southern Spain is unequivocal. Galician immigrants were the only northern group whose performance in commerce was similar to the less successful southerners, reflecting their relatively low literacy.

Literacy seemed to matter more than close-knit networks. Immigrants from all regions engaged in commercial enterprises, small as well as large ones. Andalusians, for example, were not barred from entry, some even becoming extremely wealthy merchants. However, they did not move up on a scale comparable to their northern compatriots, as southerners were significantly less literate than northerners, and accordingly, fewer of them succeeded. Furthermore, although the share of Navarreses and Riojans in the merchant population remained minor, they displayed a high rate of entry into large-scale commerce. The data suggests, once again, that networks influenced transatlantic movement but did not guarantee economic mobility, at least not in commerce. The relatively large number of Basques and montañeses in entry-level positions may well have been the result of social capital, networks that facilitated immigration, but their economic success depended largely on human capital brought over from Spain.

Yet, a focus on commerce may contain unwarranted biases regarding immigrants' mobility and enrichment. To overcome those, I juxtaposed literacy rates with a narrow, occupation-blind pool of wealthy immigrants, defined as heads-of-primary-household of houses in the central neighbourhoods of Mexico City but only those with an annual rent of 600 pesos or above.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ F. W. Grubb, 'Growth of Literacy in Colonial America: Longitudinal Patterns, Economic Models and the Directions of Future Research', *Social Science History*, 14: 4 (1990), pp. 453–5.

⁵⁸ I attached annual rent data from a real estate census taken in 1813 to the population census of 1811. The census of 1813 was published as *Datos sobre rentas de fincas urbanas en la ciudad*

Figure 1. *Literacy and Commerce by Region of Origin*

100 = index rate of total peninsular population (weighted regional average)

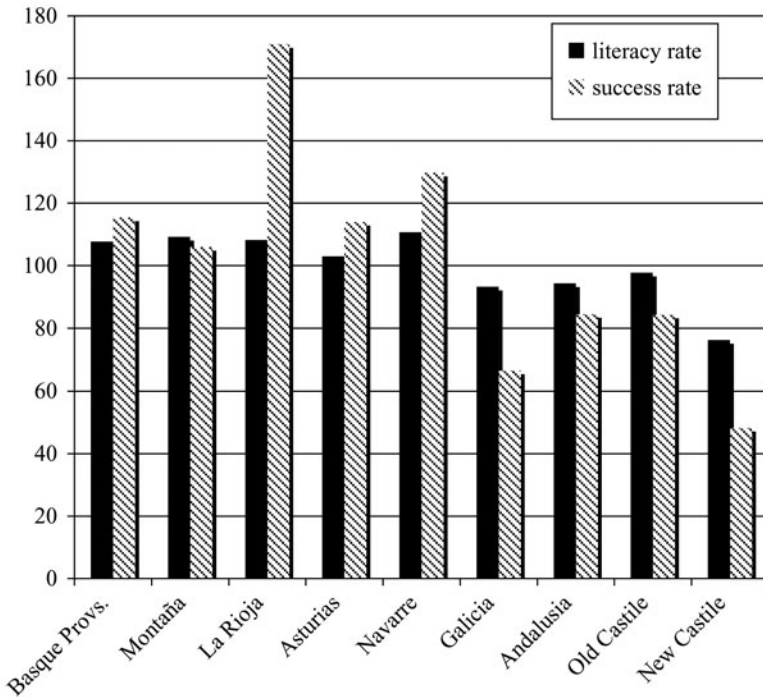
Pearson correlation: $r = 0.91$

Source: Marriage Applications dataset; Census of 1811 (see Table 1).

The results show that economic success, in terms of entry into the economic elite, was positively related with literacy (Figure 2).⁵⁹ Regions with an above-average literacy rate were the same ones whose presence in the narrow elite was above average. Small regional communities, such as Riojans and Navarreses, might have been overshadowed by the sheer numerical visibility of Basques and montañeses, yet, they demonstrated an economic success rate on a similar level or even higher. By contrast, immigrants from central and southern Spain, regardless of their numerical presence, experienced a lower degree of

de México (México DF: Oficina Impresora de Estampillas, 1903). Rent figures refer to entire buildings rather than households. Despite this limitation they are useful for analysing relative wealth across primary households. Total rents by cuartel confirmed the well-known centre-periphery urban disparity. Rent per inhabitant was 23 pesos in the centre and 5 pesos in the periphery.

⁵⁹ The rate of economic success is analytically defined as the share of wealthy immigrants out of the regional immigrant population. Overlap between this pool of the economic elite and the previous pool of wealthy merchants confirms that commerce was indeed the main route to wealth accumulation.

Figure 2. *Literacy and Economic Success by Region of Origin*

100 = index rate of total peninsular population

Pearson correlation: $r = 0.78$

Source: Marriage Applications dataset; Census of 1811.

entry into the elite than their northern compatriots. While the evidence does not tell how other factors, such as networks, affected regional success rates, the overall pattern shows that greater literacy itself resulted in greater chances of entry into the economic elite.⁶⁰

If, as previously shown, the ‘usual suspects’ controlled all profitable large-scale enterprises, not only commerce but silver-mining and the less risky agriculture as well, then we may infer that those endowed with greater human capital entered and predominated in any sector where returns were high. Immigrants were initially attracted to these sectors because of opportunities for enrichment rather than connections. Networks may have ensued but importantly they did not condition any occupational specialisation, often typical of ethnic immigrant communities. Regardless of clannish nepotism or bureaucratic favouritism immigrants accumulated wealth in any sector

⁶⁰ The high success rate of smaller regional groups like the Riojans suggests that networks might not matter, but the figures are too small for any confidence.

Table 4. *Semi-Literacy vs. Full Literacy by Region of Origin*

	Semi-literacy	Full literacy
Andalusia	11 (35%)	148 (25%)
Galicia	6 (19%)	74 (13%)
Centre-South*	8 (26%)	71 (12%)
North*	6 (19%)	293 (50%)
Total	31 (100%)	586 (100%)

Source: Marriage Applications dataset.

* Due to the small number of observations in the semi-literate category, I grouped the two Castiles and Extremadura into what I define as 'Centre-South'. I also grouped the following contiguous regions into 'North': Asturias, Montaña, La Rioja, the Basque provinces and Navarre.

they entered, thanks to their crucial asset of human capital. Any form of social capital at work seemed to derive from economic success, which was primarily conditioned by human capital.

Despite the strong correlation between literacy rates and regional origins, it remains uncertain how human capital was distributed within the literate population of each regional group, simply because the measure of literacy is not sensitive enough to gradations of human capital. Yet, there are two indications that aggregate regional figures for literacy also reflect a qualitative variation. In other words, we may argue that the average literate Basque had a higher level of human capital than the average literate Galician or Andalusian.

The first indication is based on the quality of signatures. I distinguished between coherent, smooth, legible handwriting, and broken, shaky, illegible writing, analytically defining the former as full literacy and the latter as semi-literacy. We can reasonably assume that those with a bad signature had relatively limited writing skills and possibly reading skills as well. Of course, good writing skills do not necessarily signify overall business expertise, but insofar as they reflect long-term gains of primary education they seem indicative. Table 4 shows the relation between signature quality and regional origins. Narrowing the target population to literate immigrants only, signature quality successfully predicts relative wealth. The same regions prominent in the economic elite showed a greater proportion of fully literate immigrants. Southerners and Galicians expectedly had a larger representation of semi-literates, on top of their already large share of illiterates. It is worth noting that out of 33 semi-literates whose occupation is known, 20 worked in commercial jobs, implying that they were not excluded from employment in commerce.⁶¹

⁶¹ Interestingly, five out of the 20 semi-literates employed in commerce worked in wine shops, suggesting that shaky handwriting was possibly related to lifestyle more than literacy.

The second indication involves two aspects of the immigrants' origins in Spain: social circumstances in the sending regions and the filtering process by which immigrants were selected. Both aspects are crucial for understanding the skewed distribution of human capital across regional groups of immigrants.

Spain presented a mosaic of regions, each with its own institutions, social structure and culture, which by the eighteenth century followed divergent patterns of economic development.⁶² Crossing the peninsula from north to south, the prevalence of landowning peasants became less and less frequent, replaced by the landless rural workers on the infamous *latifundias* (Table 5). Three regions with different structures are relevant for our discussion, especially because all three participated in the flow of immigration. A patchwork of tiny plots of land, Galicia suffered from a Malthusian curse of overpopulation, whereby perennial subdivision of land among heirs resulted in general poverty. Formally tenants, in practice peasants, owned the land plots they worked. Yet, the problem was the low productivity of the Galician *minifundios*, partly a result of partible inheritance. In Andalusia, *latifundism* engendered a highly unequal society of a few wealthy landlords and the poor landless masses, a pattern also typical of Extremadura and New Castile. The Basque provinces and Cantabria (*montaña*) presented a unique model of small family landholding, a yeomanry of sorts, which perhaps thanks to impartible inheritance practised Malthusian preventive checks, allowing for modest accumulation by many families. It is perhaps not surprising that the initial stages of Spanish industrialisation took place in these more affluent regions.⁶³ In contrast to Galicia's poor tenants or Andalusia's peons, Basque and *montañés* peasants formed a rural middle class, backbone of relatively egalitarian societies.

Under such circumstances, Basque and *montañés* families were best situated to accumulate human capital translatable to economic success. In these regions the predominance of the stem family structure coupled with widespread landownership acted propitiously to stimulate investment in children's upbringing. Frederic Le Play, father of family sociology, regarded the Basque stem family as a model of social stability and benign development to inspire reformist policies, as he considered partible inheritance a threat to the institution of the family and to a healthy society in general.⁶⁴ Travellers such as the Englishman,

⁶² On Spain's regional diversity, see Carlos Martínez Shaw et al., *España en el siglo XVIII* (Barcelona: Crítica, 1985).

⁶³ Catalonia also demonstrated a similar pattern of development towards early industrialisation and economic growth: see the classic interpretation of industrialisation in Spain by Jordi Nadal, *El fracaso de la revolución industrial en España, 1814-1913* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1975).

⁶⁴ David S. Reher, *Perspectives on the Family in Spain: Past and Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 48-73; William A. Douglass, 'The Basque Stem Family Household: Myth or Reality?', *Journal of Family History*, 13: 1 (1988), pp. 75-89; Pilar Erdozain Azpilicueta and Fernando Mikelarena Peña, '¿Existen las estrategias demográficas colectivas? Algunas reflexiones basadas en el modelo demográfico de baja presión de la Navarra Cantábrica en los siglos XVIII y XIX', *Revista de Demografía Histórica*, 21: 2

Table 5. *Land Ownership in Spain, 1787–97*

Region	% labourers	% tenants	% owners
Andalusia	78.2	13.3	8.5
Murcia	67.8	23.9	8.3
New Castile	60.4	20.7	18.9
Extremadura	53.4	32.7	13.9
Valencia	44.0	38.7	17.3
Aragon	42.4	9.3	48.3
Old Castile	41.2	41.5	17.3
León	35.4	46.1	18.5
Galicia	34.6	63.4	2.0
Basque provs. and Navarre	27.6	37.2	35.2
Asturias	3.1	91.5	5.4

Based on Jordi Nadal, *La población española: siglos XVI a XX* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1976), p. 102. * Under the administrative division of the Old Regime, the Montaña (Cantabria) and La Rioja were provinces within Old Castile. Other indicators, such as crop mix and family structure, suggest that they followed a pattern similar to the Basque provinces.

Henry Swinburne, praised the idyllic Basque countryside, describing its ‘rich studied culture, a clean-looking smiling people, good furniture, neat houses, fine woods, good roads and safe bridges’. For Castile and Andalusia, Swinburne reserved a stark view, commenting on their discouraging poverty, backwardness and banditry.⁶⁵

Historical literacy rates across Spain corroborate these impressionistic accounts.⁶⁶ By 1860, for which comparable data is available, the northern regions of Old Castile (which included Cantabria), the Basque provinces and Navarre were more literate than the national average, while the southern half of the country was placed below the national average. The latifundia created conditions that precluded any potential accumulation by the masses. Peasants did not have the means to do so. Landlords did not have the incentive to improve the lot of their workers through wages or skills. By contrast, Basque and montañés rural folk presented an irrevocable counterpoint to Marx’s disparaging comment on ‘the idiocy of rural life’. In these regions, human capital accumulation contributed to local economic progress and to the prosperity of their diasporas.

(2003), pp. 13–58. Though focusing on French Basques, Arrizabalaga shows how impartible inheritance persisted despite adverse legal circumstances: Marie-Pierre Arrizabalaga, ‘Succession Strategies in the Pyrenees in the 19th Century: The Basque Case’, *History of the Family*, 10: 3 (2005), pp. 271–92.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Raymond Carr, *Spain 1808–1975* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 19; Henry Swinburne, *Travels Through Spain in the Years 1775 and 1776* (London: Elmsly, 1787), pp. 327–34.

⁶⁶ Clara Eugenia Nuñez, *La fuente de la riqueza*, pp. 92–3.

An important source of human capital formation – schooling – started to expand in the north as early as the eighteenth century, if not earlier. Before the onset of urbanisation, schools of *primeras letras* operated across the hamlets of the Cantabrian and Pyrenean mountains.⁶⁷ Qualitative evidence from the Mexican marriage applications suggests that northern immigrants, despite their rustic background, had received primary education. In some cases applicants and their witnesses recounted how they had known each other since a very young age, as they had attended school together. For instance, Francisco Javier del Pino, a witness for his montañés compatriot, Domingo de Gandarillas, in 1777, recounted how as children they went to school together. The two friends grew up in different villages but met at school in Santillana, a town located two leagues away from their homes.⁶⁸ Eighty-five per cent of marriage-application testimonies mentioning school attendance were given by immigrants from the rural areas of central-northern Spain, attesting to their unique background.

Regional social structures resonated in regional communities in Cadiz, a magnet for internal migration, illustrating the selection process of immigrants. We have already seen that the usual groups – Basques and montañeses – became prominent in the city's consulado. Based on the municipal census of 1773, Figure 3 lays out the northern immigrant population resident in Cadiz by three levels of occupational status.⁶⁹ Galician newcomers presented a typical case of labour migration, overrepresented in such occupations as domestic service and menial jobs. By contrast, Basques tended to crowd in high-status occupations, notably commerce. Schematically then, the further west a migrant's birthplace was along the northern seaboard, the lower his social class in Cadiz would be.⁷⁰

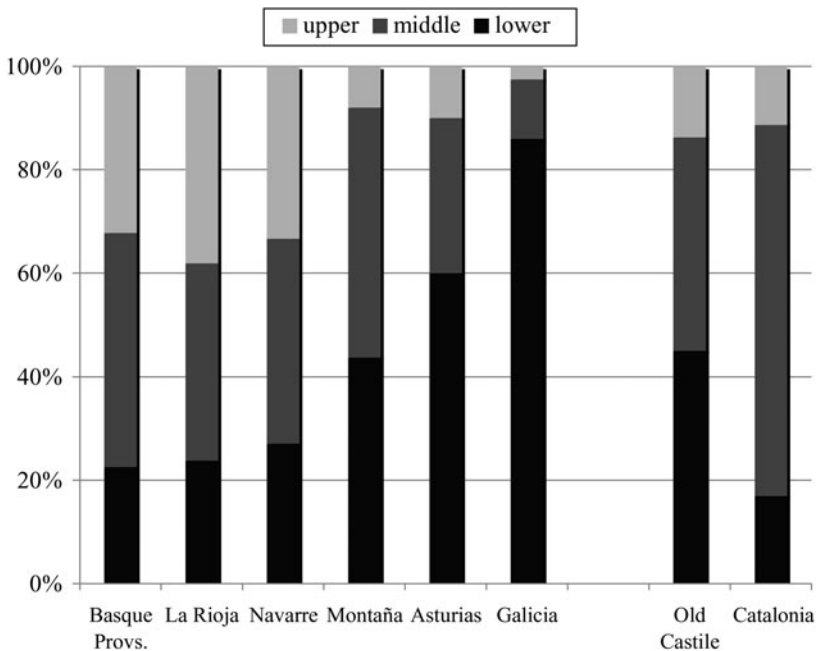
The regional 'division of labour' in Cadiz reflects how immigrants from regions rich in human capital outperformed others, not only in the New

⁶⁷ Despite Spain's linguistic-cultural regional differences, especially the unique case of the Basque language (Euskera) as a non-Romance language, schooling was in Castilian (Spanish), the 'high language' used in administration and commerce, and hence required for upward mobility: Rafael López Atxurra, 'Historia de las instituciones educativas en Euskal Herria. La enseñanza primaria en el antiguo régimen: pautas para la investigación', in Rafael Mieza y Juan Gracia (eds.), *Haciendo historia* (Bilbao: Universidad del País Vasco, 2000), pp. 419–45.

⁶⁸ AGN, Matrimonios, 230, 16. Located at a distance from home, school was also a site of socialisation long before emigration.

⁶⁹ I included Old Castile and Catalonia for additional comparisons, though they should be treated with caution because of the small numbers of migrants from these regions. Still, the Old Castilian population in Cadiz somewhat resembled its northern neighbours. The Catalan population had a low share of lower class migrants, similar to the prosperous Basques, Navarrese and Riojans.

⁷⁰ A similar northern predominance in commerce, excluding Galicia, was observed for Madrid in Juan Carlos Sola-Corbacho, 'Family, *Paisanaje*, and Migration among Madrid's Merchants (1750–1800)', *Journal of Family History*, 27: 3 (2002), p. 7.

Figure 3. *Social Status of Spanish Migrants in Cadiz, 1773*

Lower = servants and non-skilled; middle = skilled workers; upper = high-status occupations. The data is based on a systematic sample of every tenth page of the census's two volumes (4,110 individuals).

Source: Archivo Municipal de Cádiz, Padrón de 1773.

World, but also in Spain itself. This similarity between Cadiz and Mexico City provides further support for an emphasis on regional conditions manifest to some extent in the diaspora. Transatlantic and intra-peninsular networks need not be completely dismissed, as they certainly made the migratory flow highly selective, but since the selection process depended on conditions at home, some regions supplied an immigrant population better endowed with human capital than others.

Taken as two extremes along the northern seaboard, Galicia and the Basque provinces represent contrasting types of home conditions, shedding light on immigrant selection. Impartible inheritance in the Basque provinces may have encouraged non-inheriting children to seek their fortune elsewhere. While Basque children could rely on their extended stem family for economic security, Galicians did not have an equivalent recourse due to the notorious subdivision of the land among many impoverished heirs.

The Basque-Galician contrast in Cadiz also sheds light on its counterpart in Mexico City. Admittedly, high costs and other factors had a levelling effect on

transatlantic migration. If Basque and Galician migrants in Cadiz presented two disparate socio-economic classes, then in Mexico City the gap narrowed, though it did not completely disappear.⁷¹ Certainly, the immigrant population in both cities was not dichotomously split between aspiring entrepreneurs and destitute subsistence seekers. An array of motivations ranging from necessity to ambition governed immigrants' decisions to leave home. On that scale, Galicians were relatively more motivated by poverty, Basques more by business opportunities. Migrating to Cadiz, Basques left behind a rural middle class of extended families to become merchants, while Galicians escaped impoverished nuclear families to become servants. Leaving a cushioned home, Basques had more to lose, and therefore, more likely to have greater expectations in the destination city, all the more so in the New World due to high migration costs. It is therefore hardly surprising that Basques in Mexico City possessed a very high level of human capital. We may further conclude that even among literate peninsulares in Mexico City, Basques possessed a greater level of human capital than Galicians, and by extension, northerners more than southerners.

Conclusions

Modern historians as much as colonial intellectuals have tended to identify colonial elites with peninsulares. Looking at the entire Spanish-born population in Mexico City reveals a great deal of variation in terms of wealth accumulation, which calls for an explanation. Our analysis shows that the usual explanatory suspect – networks – does not account for immigrants' economic mobility. Networks indeed help to explain who would emigrate. But once in the New World immigrants' economic mobility, usually in commerce, depended largely on human capital, a product of circumstances at home. This is why northern Spaniards formed the wealthiest families in eighteenth-century Mexico, as elsewhere in the Spanish empire. To be sure, networks were not irrelevant as they presented the framework of business organisation. However, networks are better viewed as a symptom of economic prosperity, not its cause.

Viewed in that light, we may better understand the shift in emigrants' origins during the colonial period. In the early period, geographical proximity to Seville, along with a strong presence in the conquest, made southerners dominate the flow, endowing them with booty and *encomienda* grants. As the colonial era progressed, their transatlantic networks succumbed to

⁷¹ This is illustrated by the socio-economic indicators discussed. Andalusians were even more negatively selected as they could benefit from proximity to Cadiz. Out of the few servants (32) among peninsulares in Mexico City, 40 per cent were Andalusian: González Angulo, 'Los inmigrantes', p. 118.

economic forces. Equipped with greater human capital, northerners proved more successful in business and gradually outnumbered southerners in the flow.⁷²

We may further speculate that human capital was an important factor behind the overall peninsular-creole disparity. Social filters in the Cadiz bottleneck led to a highly selective flow of emigrants, but once in the New World, political and social connections did not seem to privilege these independent immigrants over creoles in any tangible way. Although further inquiry is necessary, it seems that the peninsular-creole economic gap was not simply a consequence of discriminatory practices or institutions.⁷³

By highlighting the nature of Spanish immigration we may also speculate on the question of long-term inequality. Research on comparative development in the Americas has traced the origins of Latin America's relative inequality vis-à-vis British America to its colonial institutions, which favoured small European elites, excluding mostly non-white populations.⁷⁴ Though addressing a tiny privileged population, the findings here suggest that immigration restrictions, which made the Spanish flow highly selective, may have contributed to the ensuing colonial inequality. There was no Spanish equivalent to British indentured servitude, which enabled immigration from more humble origins, thus

⁷² Coatsworth argued that the crown prevented secure property rights, even for elites, in order to keep them unstable. It seems that under such circumstances economic elites were rather competitive, though not in a Smithian sense, a situation which may have facilitated the shift in origins. See John H. Coatsworth, 'Inequality, Institutions and Economic Growth in Latin America', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 40: 3 (2008), especially pp. 556–62.

⁷³ Reasons to discount the importance of peninsulares' better connections in an administration dominated by compatriots are the same as those discussed above: the regional discrepancy between independent and official immigrants, and the mercantilistic thrust of a revenue-thirsty crown. Viceroy Iturrigaray of New Spain (1803–8), who even showed preference for creoles, was deposed by a peninsular-led revolt protesting against the Law of Consolidation: Romeo Flores Caballero, *Counterrevolution: The Role of the Spaniards in the Independence of Mexico, 1804–1838* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974), pp. 14–38; Mark A. Burkholder, *Spaniards in the Colonial Empire: Creoles vs. Peninsulars?* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), especially pp. 110–28. This is also suggested by the high socio-economic status of Spaniards after independence, especially during the Porfiriato: Clara E. Lida and Pilar Pacheco Zamudio, 'El perfil de una inmigración: 1821–1939', in Clara E. Lida (ed.), *Una inmigración privilegiada: comerciantes, empresarios y profesionales españoles en México en los siglos XIX y XX* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1994), pp. 25–51.

⁷⁴ Stanley L. Engerman and Kenneth L. Sokoloff, 'Factor Endowments, Institutions, and Differential Paths of Growth Among New World Economies: A View from Economic Historians of the United States', in Stephen Haber (ed.), *How Latin America Fell Behind: Essays on the Economic History of Brazil and Mexico, 1800–1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 260–304; Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson and James A. Robinson, 'The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development: An Empirical Investigation', *American Economic Review*, 91: 5 (2001), pp. 1369–401; Coatsworth, 'Inequality, Institutions and Economic Growth'. Despite diverging views on the relationship between institutions (property rights) and inequality, all agree that inequality institutionalised in the colonial era had a long-term impact.

attenuating colonial inequality. Although further investigation is necessary, it seems that mechanisms operating within Europe – immigration policy and networks – could affect colonial society in surprising ways.

Finally, this article has tackled a common confusion, prevalent in Atlantic history, between description and explanation.⁷⁵ The Atlantic ‘system’ is sometimes attributed with an explanatory power that it does not necessarily have. A rigorous investigation shows that some phenomena had little or nothing to do with transatlantic ties, entanglements or systems. The migratory process indeed depended on transatlantic ties, but immigrants’ fortune in the New World had little to do with such ties. It is one thing to show that transatlantic interaction of various kinds took place. It is quite another to argue that this very interaction explains everything happening within the system. This study produces a new understanding of immigration in the Spanish empire in a way that overcomes the premise of transatlantic interconnectedness.

Spanish and Portuguese abstracts

Spanish abstract. Este artículo explora la relación entre la inmigración trasatlántica y la acumulación de riqueza en la Ciudad de México de fines de la colonia, el destino preferido de emigrantes de España. Al contrario del enfoque tradicional en los textos sobre redes y lazos trasatlánticos, se argumenta que la movilidad económica y por lo tanto el ingreso a las clases altas de la sociedad colonial dependió del contexto social de los inmigrantes en sus regiones de origen en la península. El capital humano en vez del capital social fue la determinación clave que explica por qué ciertos grupos regionales, notablemente los vascos, fueron económicamente exitosos como mercaderes y mineros, lo que desafía las nociones tradicionales sobre redes e interconexiones en la historia del Atlántico y otras partes. Los hallazgos se basan en datos cuantitativos de inmigrantes españoles, mismos que ayudan a superar tanto la inclinación hacia fuentes anecdóticas como la intrincada metodología necesaria para desenredar la relación causal entre la acumulación de riqueza y los lazos sociales.

Spanish keywords: historia atlántica, capital humano, redes, inmigración, México, Nueva España

Portuguese abstract. Este artigo explora a relação entre a imigração transatlântica e a acumulação de riqueza durante o final do período colonial na Cidade do México, principal destino de emigrantes transatlânticos da Espanha. Diferentemente do foco nas redes e laços transatlânticos prevalente na literatura, argumento que a mobilidade econômica e, assim, o ingresso nas altas classes da sociedade colonial dependia do

⁷⁵ Alison Games, ‘Atlantic History: Definitions, Challenges, and Opportunities’, *American Historical Review*, 111: 3 (2006), pp. 741–57; David Armitage, ‘Three Concepts of Atlantic History’, in David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (eds.), *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 11–27; Jack P. Greene and Peter P. Morgan (eds.), *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

status social dos imigrantes nas suas regiões de origem na península Ibérica. O capital humano, ao invés do capital social, foi o fator determinante que explica porque certos grupos regionais, notavelmente os bascos, obtiveram sucesso econômico como comerciantes e mineradores, desafiando noções tradicionais de rede e interconectividade na história Atlântica e em outras regiões. As descobertas são baseadas em um conjunto de dados quantitativos sobre imigrantes espanhóis, evitando tanto o viés gerado por evidências anedóticas e as dificuldades metodológicas de destrinchar as relações causais entre acumulação de riqueza e laços sociais.

Portuguese keywords: história do Atlântico, capital humano, redes, imigração, México, Nova Espanha

Appendix: Marriage Applications Dataset

The dataset was culled from the *informaciones matrimoniales* (marriage applications) submitted to the church by couples wishing to get married. I located all application files (337 in total) where the male applicant (groom) was a peninsular residing in the capital from the Matrimonios branch of the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) for the years between 1750 and 1824. In most cases the bride was a creole. The dataset consists of 1,037 immigrants, one-third applicants and two-thirds witnesses.

Each file contains a wealth of readily quantifiable information, as the applicant was required to recount his life prior to departure in order to prove his legitimate status for marriage. The same was expected of the witnesses presented to testify on their behalf. Whenever possible, applicants would prefer a witness they had known since an early age, many times from the same village or province.

The population observed in the marriage records is largely representative of the peninsular-born population in Mexico City. Even if some regional groups married more frequently than others, the dataset agrees with other variables, such as residence and occupation. Social categories of those who did not contract marriage (clerics and bachelors) appear in the dataset as witnesses.

The dataset may overestimate immigrant literacy due to the relative absence of illegal immigrants, who tended to enter the lower tiers of colonial society and were therefore less inclined to marry in the church. However, since these lower-class immigrants came mostly from Andalusia, their absence from the applications may downplay the gap between northern and southern immigrants. Their inclusion would have made the findings and argument concerning regional disparity all the more pronounced.