

A long-term marriage in an urban context: the retail structure of La Coruña during the first third of the twentieth century

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyses some issues related to the structure and evolution of retail in a medium-sized Spanish city, from the early twentieth century to the Civil War (1936–1939), trying to place it in the context of Spanish urbanization. Since the early nineteenth century, La Coruña consolidated as the most important city of the north-west quadrant of the country, competing initially with Santiago de Compostela (the iconic religious capital of the region), and later on with Vigo, the city that underwent the most solid and rapid industrial development in the region since the final decades of the century. Industry appeared late and did not alter the economic base of La Coruña, as the local economy was sustained by commercial and services activities, which had a long-run tradition. This tendency became more accentuated during the first third of the twentieth century. This was not an exception, because most of medium-sized Spanish cities followed a very similar pattern, particularly those which shared a very important factor, the port, as this was responsible for the rise of several tertiary sectors. Besides, La Coruña was a provincial capital, and this meant the growth of administrative functions, and a strong commercial influence on its hinterland.

KEYWORDS

Retail; La Coruña; tertiary sector; Spain; urbanization

Introduction

Since the early nineteenth century, La Coruña consolidated itself as the most important city of Spain's north-west quadrant (the region of Galicia), initially competing with San-tiago de Compostela (the iconic religious capital of the region) and later with Vigo, the city that underwent the most solid and rapid industrial development in this area from the final decades of the century.

Although the modern industrial sector featured during the second half of that century, it did not significantly alter the economic base of the city, as the local economy was sustained by commercial and service activities. Hence, this paper aims to analyse some issues related to the structure and evolution of retail in this medium-sized Spanish city long term because although the focus will be from the early twentieth century to the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), the tertiary sector has a long tradition.

The tendency to consolidate the tertiary sector became more accentuated during the first third of the twentieth century. This was not an exception because most medium-sized Spanish cities followed a very similar pattern, particularly those which shared a very important driving force, namely the port. The traffic generated by ports (passengers, cargoes, fishing, to name but a few) was responsible for the rise of several industrial sectors but it usually had a stronger impact on the tertiary sector. Furthermore, La Coruña was a provincial capital hence the growth of bureaucratic and administrative tasks and a strong commercial influence on its *hinterland*.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first section discusses the context, that is, the dynamization that took place in the Spanish cities long term but drawing particular attention to the interwar period, as this may explain which economic forces were behind their growth. The next section aims to briefly characterize Spanish cities from an economic perspective, in order to differentiate the tertiary and industrial cities as a step towards establishing La Coruña's singularity (or not). Finally, the most outstanding factors responsible for the consolidation of retail in the city will be analysed.

The interwar period and the strengthening of the Spanish urban system

As an economic latecomer, it was with some delay that Spain experienced the transformations that had begun in advanced European countries much earlier. The period between the first third and the end of the nineteenth century had been dominated by several events that aborted the outburst of capitalist development in the country. These were the final moments of the Ancient Regime and the beginning of state articulation.¹ Nevertheless, in opposition to the view supported by traditional historiography (which emphasized the idea of failure of the liberal revolution and industrialization, amongst other things), and in line with the recent arguments of other Spanish historians,² the period from 1890 to 1935 was characterized by a more solid modernization process than in the previous phase, which led to a convergence to the patterns of European development.

Yet, this was not a placid stage. In the political sphere, it coincided with the Restoration (1874–1923), during which a relatively stable political system was established after the failure of the first republican experience (1868–1874). But the tensions that arose during the early twentieth century critically affected the new institutional building. First, with the impact of the First World War, during which the frequent and strong social conflicts began to question the monarchy.³ As a result of the post-war turmoil, the system staggered, with a dictatorship as a temporary solution (1923–1930) that would eventually lead to the second republican period (1931–1936) and the subsequent Civil War.

In economic terms, the key elements that propelled the advance during this period were the outbreak of the second energy transition (with the large-scale development of electrical power), the warlike cycle (1914–1923) that was sustained by European demand and the investment cycle that was planned during Primo de Rivera's dictatorship. This led to the implementation of equipment for the second technological revolution, infrastructures that would have a positive impact on the urban environment and would be decisive for the tertiary sector: energy, transport and communications, water supply and sewerage, amongst others.⁴ In addition, the provincial capitals were the seat for the new educational,

health, welfare and military facilities, which helped the small and medium-sized cities to survive.

Transport infrastructures played a decisive role in the remarkable urban transformation of this period. On the one hand, we are aware of the previous and well-documented impact of railways,⁵ as a specific factor of location of industrial activities both in the cities and elsewhere.⁶ On the other hand, of note is the impact of urban transport, with trams being highly significant in those years, which had already initiated the transition to electric traction.⁷ In addition to the improvements in terms of people's mobility, as well as improving goods and services, trams were responsible for the creation of a new urban economic space.⁸

Much of the funding came from foreign capital⁹ but also from the increasingly developed financial sector, particularly private banks.¹⁰ The commercial bourgeoisie made these transformations, above all in the maritime cities (to which we refer in this paper), especially from the late eighteenth century. The new mercantile groups that were created after the end of the commercial and maritime trade model of the Modern Age and their conversion to the industrial-commercial (capitalist) development of the nineteenth century, led to the construction of a real estate and financial liberal oligarchy that would play a decisive role over the following decades.

Cities benefited from the change. Urban growth was activated, especially when compared with the slow rhythm of the nineteenth century (mostly of a fairly stagnant first half of the century), finally in keeping with the pace of the neighbouring countries.¹¹ This was the first major turning point in Spanish urbanization, which would mark the future development of cities.

The late demographic transition in cities at aggregate level,¹² which is confirmed by many local and regional studies, rapid rural–urban migrations¹³ or the building of new urban family structures that were supported by those movements are phenomena which hatched in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁴ Such migrations were developing in parallel to changes in urban labour markets.¹⁵ We also find some welfare indicators such as increases in income levels, improvements in diet or anthropometric indicators, amongst others.¹⁶ All these elements are related to the changes that will be henceforth described in the economic structure of cities, in some cases with the industry as the driving force and in others with the tertiary sector as the primary responsible factor.

The dichotomy between industrial and tertiary cities

During those years, a new organization of the urban system was consolidated in Spain, with higher growth around the seaside (which would be irreversible), with the sole exception of Madrid.¹⁷ As noted previously, although the largest increase occurred in industrial areas (Basque Country, Asturias and Catalonia),¹⁸ a definite dichotomy between industrial and tertiary cities is underpinned, the latter being based on other growth factors.¹⁹ In that sense, each city improved depending on its previous structures and rhythms and its degree of adaptation to the socio-economic situations of the period. Whilst the largest advanced at a faster pace, small and medium-sized cities lost weight,²⁰ especially after the outbreak of the First World War.

Elsewhere we have argued the existence of different behaviour patterns,²¹ distinguishing between industrial cities (Bilbao,²² Barcelona²³) or those on the way to becoming

industrial, although still with a major influence of the activities of the tertiary sector (Zaragoza,²⁴ Madrid,²⁵ Valencia,²⁶ Seville,²⁷ Gijón²⁸ and Cartagena,²⁹ amongst others) and the cities which were predominantly tertiary. In many of the latter, the commercial sector left a profound imprint (Oviedo,³⁰ San Sebastián,³¹ Albacete,³² León,³³ etc.), as well as in those that did not industrialize (the smallest ones),³⁴ although in both cases non-advanced tertiary functions were still dominant (administration, domestic service, etc.).³⁵ However, there is a specific category, that of port cities, in which the mechanisms that were responsible for growth were fairly common, particularly in those of comparable level in the urban hierarchy. Most of these maintained a strong inclination to trade and commercial activities linked to port traffic of goods or people.³⁶

All these cities with a predominantly tertiary profile display significant differences in their histories, both in terms of their origins and their evolution throughout the pre-industrial age. However, many similarities with dominant economic functions during the contemporary period can also be found.

The perceived backwardness that was installed in Spain throughout the nineteenth century vis-à-vis the Northern standard of modernity led to find alternative routes of development to dodge the deficient industrialization. The only way to prosper was probably to reinforce the tertiary sector. Anyhow, what distinguishes the Spanish case as a whole is the relevance of non-advanced and traditional services, above all retail, and particularly the commercial relationships with the rural environment. There was a close interdependence between cities and countryside, in such a way that this trade was conditioned by the level of peasants' demand. This connection was patent in the link between the frequent agrarian crises of this period and urban growth, which incidentally blocked the diversity and specialization of the tertiary supply, notably of more advanced functions (e.g. financial sector). Domestic service, as well as administrative and military functions, was also outstanding, which fits well with the 'lordly' aspect of most of the cities in the country.³⁷

In the early twentieth century, most of the cities, regardless of their position in the urban hierarchy, were commercial and service cities, supported by retail, domestic services, hospitality and the building sector. In general, they acted as head of their rural *hinterland*, economically, but also politically and socially. And naturally there was a marked predominance of activities that were linked to their role as provincial capitals which were supplemented by the army and the clergy,³⁸ thereby generating a traditional socio-professional structure until well into the twentieth century. From the late nineteenth century, in some cases, and the early twentieth century in others, the emerging services (water supply, sewerage, drainage, paving, public lighting) also found their space in these cities, albeit with some chronological differences between the small cities and the large ones.

In 1900, the tertiary industry was dominant in thirty Spanish capitals. Most of these were located in the northern part of the country and a significant number were in Castile. Nevertheless, in general, the cities with a dominant tertiary profile were those located in the lowest level of the Spanish urban hierarchy or at an intermediate level. With the exception of the cities with more complex economic structures (Madrid, Barcelona) and port cities (La Coruña, Cadiz, San Sebastián and Santander), most of them were located below the mean and the median of the population of the capitals (Figure 1).

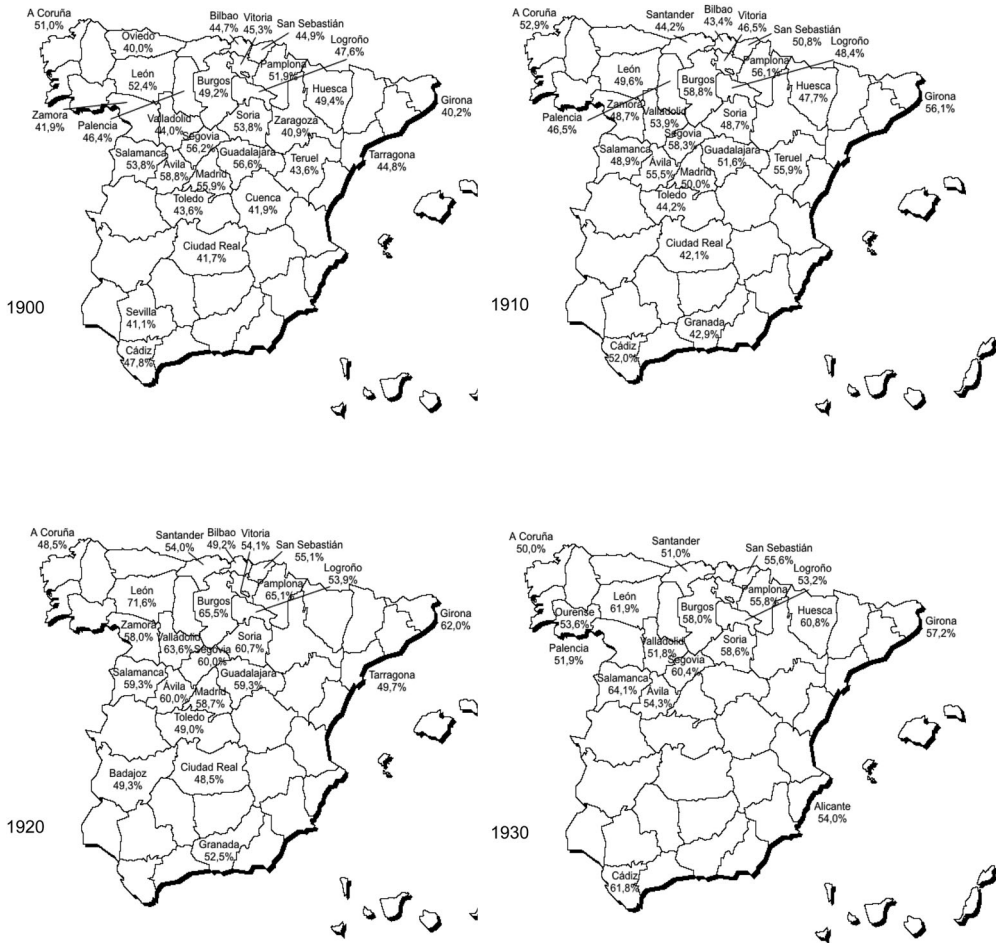


Figure 1. Capitals with a relative weight of the tertiary sector which was higher than the average of the sector as a whole in Spanish capitals 1900–1930. Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística [National Institute of Statistics], Spain’s population census.

Some cities underwent changes, which were signs of slow industrialization, and progressed smoothly during the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries. This small jump awarded these cities an economic growth which was somewhat more accelerated in relation to small and less-developed cities. Partly thanks to that progress, they finally became medium-sized cities. The paradigm of industrial growth during the first third of the century was Seville, in which the presence of this activity was constantly increasing. Nonetheless, the 1930s crisis and the debts resulting from inadequate funding and use of the Ibero-American Exposition of 1929, caused a definite decline in industry. Thereafter, Seville consolidated its traditional role as a trading and redistribution centre, linked to the *hinterland* and to the world market (as a shipment point for agricultural and mining exports), with a large weight of commercial and financial activities. Later, during the 1950s and 1960s, some of these cities found the final boost to become industrialized: León,³⁹ Valladolid,⁴⁰ Vitoria,⁴¹ etc.

However, the medium-sized provincial capitals that had attempted to take off in favourable conjunctures (Primo de Rivera's dictatorship) simply developed and consolidated their tertiary sector, which was already significant before the twentieth century, although it was overly biased towards traditional or administrative services, rather than towards more modern subsectors. In those cities, efforts crystallized in the establishment of craftsmen workshops and very small industrial areas. These were cities whose market area was confined to local (or, at most, regional) spaces, with very little external competitiveness. Thus, many small provincial capitals finally stayed behind, rooted in provincialism.⁴²

The main divergence in growth rates lies in the different intensity of rural-urban migrations, which were more intense in medium-sized cities because of better employment opportunities. These were the result of a more increased diversification of their economic structures. The agrarian sector continued to determine the limits of urban development, so that the evolution of the agrarian base of the Spanish regions largely defined the nature of urban growth.⁴³ Thus, cities with remarkable agricultural activities in their municipal limits grew where they could steer the *hinterlands* production towards the foreign or national market, or acted as intermediaries for the import of inputs or agricultural goods, e.g. Alicante,⁴⁴ Castellón,⁴⁵ Granada,⁴⁶ Las Palmas,⁴⁷ Valencia,⁴⁸ etc. Conversely, those located in less dynamic agrarian environments failed to progress, leading to a semi-pathological service sector, due to the excessive 'atrophy' of employment in bureaucratic functions that were linked to the capital status: Huesca, Cuenca, Teruel, Ciudad Real, Segovia and Ourense.

In 1930, the tertiary sector had been substantially modernized, thanks to the emergence and consolidation of advanced economic functions (financial sector) and the decline of Ancient Regime services (domestic service), even though traditional elements still remained such as the strong weight of traditional retail or bureaucratic and administration functions. The industrialization of the larger cities made them disappear from the top as tertiary cities, consolidating the weight of small and medium-sized cities in this category.

A paradigmatic medium-sized city: structural and cyclical factors in retail in La Coruña

La Coruña will be used as a test of what was happening with other Spanish medium-sized cities, in an attempt to characterize the elements that defined the behaviour of this type of cities. As we have shown elsewhere, during the first third of the twentieth century, significant growth took place in the city, from the economic, demographic and urban point of view⁴⁹ as a result of the confluence of activities that were inherited from the nineteenth century and new ones that emerged during the period that is analysed here. The cohesive factor of growth was the port, which was the *raison d'être* of much of the city's businesses, as they maintained, in one way or another, relationship with traffic generated by the port.⁵⁰

As a starting point, we must take a look back to better understand the keys of economy of the city. It is worth noting the role of the sea, as it is a constant in the historical explanation of La Coruña. It has been a key factor in economic development, as it has been the way through which the city has come into contact with other areas, becoming the main

maritime port in the region for a long time. But it has also been the channel through which the city gained access to opportunities for national and international business.

We can take the origins of these businesses further back to the mid-eighteenth century, at a time when the changes in the markets and patterns of European consumers altered the map of maritime trade routes between Europe and the new economic areas, primarily America.⁵¹

The dominant Spanish presence abroad during the Modern Age required the existence of a set of coastal cities to carry out a transit function. Even though the state exercised a strict control over maritime trade – thanks to the trade monopoly of Seville and Cadiz – Spanish ports did not truly become nodes of regional economic revitalization and played a less important role than other northern cities. Unfortunately, the beginning of imperial decline led most of the ports to a flagging role,⁵² being conditioned in part by the ‘gobbling’ role of Madrid as Spain’s capital.⁵³

La Coruña benefited from excellent conditions: a strategic position in the Atlantic trade routes, a naturally protected and acceptable harbour, a long-run tradition of maritime trade, etc. But it was only a provincial town that was marked by a prominent military and administrative function and in which there was a significant presence of fishermen, sailors and landowners who lived off the rents of an oversized surrounding agrarian sector.⁵⁴

Carlos III’s decision in 1764 to approve trade with America with nine other ports,⁵⁵ including La Coruña and the allocation of the maritime postal service (*Correos marítimos*) between Spain and America changed the history of the city.⁵⁶ This meant they could take advantage of the opportunities provided by this international situation because what began as mail transport, was eventually transformed into freight transport, attracting Spanish (from Catalonia or La Rioja) and foreign businessmen (French). This is what distinguishes La Coruña from other Galician cities, which socio-economically were still anchored in the Ancient Regime.

The later independence of the colonies in the first third of the nineteenth century had a negative impact, similar to what occurred in other ports and in Spain as a whole.⁵⁷ The regional economy then entered a long period of decay throughout the nineteenth century,⁵⁸ in which almost the only exceptions were the ports. In La Coruña, the maritime bourgeoisie was forced to redirect their businesses, amongst others, to the slave and raw materials trade from the remaining colonies in Antilles (sugar and coffee).⁵⁹ This complemented fishing and salting factories of other Galician ports, mainly in the South (Vigo)⁶⁰ and the state naval industry located in Ferrol. But La Coruña would be almost the only means to insert the regional economy in the world (American) market, which would provide a source of capital accumulation that, along with other events, would then determine the direction taken by the economy of the city.⁶¹

The capital that was accumulated shaped a new social class whose economic base was trade. From that point (around the second third of the nineteenth century), the city had traders, merchants, bankers, etc., and capital to be allocated to productive investments, allowing La Coruña to become the fastest growing city of Galicia in an extremely difficult period for entrepreneurial activities of the region.⁶² Consequently, these would probably be the crucial decades of change (although still in their early days), when a small provincial town of about a mere 30,000 inhabitants and still rather close to the parameters of the Ancient Regime, began to undergo significant changes.

From then, the confluence of two factors favoured the establishment of a more modern maritime bourgeoisie. First, businessmen who worked in regional textile exports and American imports had liquidity but also had funding needs for their activities, which led them to engage in credit activities: loans, bank remittances, provision of means of payment (cash, bills, promissory notes ...), services (purchase and sale in Spanish and foreign stock exchange, remittances ...). Therefore, their activities were beyond the local context and were highly integrated into the international financial system. They also devoted part of their funds to the establishment of the first joint stock companies in marine insurance. This pattern is remarkably similar to that described in other cities of similar rank, such as Alicante and Malaga.⁶³

The merchant-bankers were actually important. Their businesses spread to a wide range of activities: commercial, industrial and real estate investments (buildings, land and rents), investments in companies (early railways, Spanish banking), Treasury securities and bank operations. These entrepreneurs extended their influence to an increasing number of cities and towns, gradually becoming one of the pillars of a rising regional financial system.⁶⁴

But, secondly, some of these entrepreneurs found an additional source of liquidity in a new and emerging business. In the mid-nineteenth century, a new phenomenon that marked the contemporary regional history was surging: emigration.⁶⁵ Galicia was deeply affected by the crisis that came with the institutional change from the Ancient to the New Regime from around the 1830s, as it coincided with the collapse of the core of the rural economy, i.e. a strong agrarian stagnation and the disappearance of the peasants' main auxiliary activity (the formerly important domestic linen industry).⁶⁶

The result was the founding of many consignee houses, which in some cases replaced, and supplemented in others, the Antilles trade by the new and lucrative business.⁶⁷ There were also some (small) ship-owners, firms to recruit migrants and services of all kinds (lodging, catering, etc.). And besides, migration had its counterpart in a new flow, remittances of money, which was captured by those merchant-bankers. Therefore, the revitalization of new businesses that were linked to passenger traffic gave new thrust to the most important port economies of the region, La Coruña, Vigo and Vilagarcía.⁶⁸

But the nineteenth-century Galician economy was still a backward economy, which was in the caboose of the poor Spanish industrialization and which started to emerge from its long crisis until the end of the century.⁶⁹ The port-maritime complex played a key role, although in several directions.

One of the sectors that managed to successfully survive the crisis that swept traditional Galician activities was the salted fish industry, which gave rise locally to spillovers on fisheries, shipbuilding and other industries producing inputs, though its strength was considerably higher in the largest regional industrial capital, Vigo, located 150 kilometres in the south.⁷⁰ By the 1880s, the entrepreneurs transformed the small salted fish factories into modern canning. These activities formed a new sector of businessmen who in addition to maritime activities, participated in other private and public businesses: port services, transportation, public lighting, power stations, water supply, etc.⁷¹

Still, in La Coruña, the commercialization of fresh fish was more important than canning. The above-mentioned specialization of the main local entrepreneurs in consignment, representation and transport, activities that were related to passenger traffic (and to a lesser extent, commodities) was followed by a rapid conversion to fishing activities,

specifically to those in which these businessmen could exploit their commercial networks, resources, skills, etc. Until then, La Coruña had not stood out in fisheries at national level, but the opening of the railway line with Castile (1883) accelerated fresh fish consignments.⁷² Thus, in many of the fishing companies that were founded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, entrepreneurs with interests in various commercial and service activities were present.⁷³

Overall, merchant capital dominated manufacturing capital for most of the nineteenth century. Likewise, another important segment that was linked to commercial activities, the financial sector, achieved an increasing magnitude throughout this century, to the point of turning La Coruña into the most important financial city of Galicia in the first third of the twentieth century.⁷⁴

The foundation in 1857 of the *Banco de La Coruña* was the first manifestation of that boom. Its founders included people linked to maritime businesses and several merchant-bankers. In 1876, an influential saving bank was inaugurated, the *Caja de Ahorros y Monte de Piedad de La Coruña*. But the twentieth century brought an interesting novelty. In addition to the *Banco de Vigo* (in 1900), in 1917 the second *Banco de La Coruña* was founded (the first was liquidated in 1874 to join the branch of the Bank of Spain in the city, as a result of a change in national banking law) and the *Banco Pastor*, in 1925.

In the two local banks, there was a notable presence of groups linked to fishing and processing, maritime and ground transport, ship consignment linked to migration traffic and the rising regional mining. The diversification of interests and activities that was characteristic of the local bourgeoisie led these entrepreneurs to carry out a policy of expanding their business into different businesses (not merely local but also regional): land and sea transport of regional goods (cattle, fish, fertilizers, wood, mining, etc.), public utilities, power generation, port services, etc.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the groups that had been created around both banks had a leading role in the construction of the second industrialization facilities, as the suppliers of these services (water, trams, electricity, gas, etc.) were run by the groups that had constituted those banks, and by other maritime entrepreneurs. A complex network of relationships could also be seen which went beyond the business issues, spreading to family and political spheres. This maritime bourgeoisie held a close connection with local politics, as they formed part of the City Council, the Chamber of Commerce, the Port Authority and other institutions.⁷⁵

The city underwent a substantial demographic growth during this period, increasing from 40,000 inhabitants in 1900 to over 100,000 in 1940. This consolidated its position in the national urban hierarchy. The most notable progress took place between 1910 and 1920 and especially between 1930 and 1940. The main factors were the natural increase, the annexation in 1912 of the neighbouring municipality of Santa María de Oza (in 1910 it had 8918 inhabitants), and above all, a rural migration that was especially dynamic in periods when external Galician migration (the First World War and 1930s) was blocked, and people came attracted by an expanding labour market.

On the other hand, we can assert – despite the lack of reliable and consistent statistics – that Galicia suffered from very low-income levels, which even declined during the nineteenth century.⁷⁶ Consequently, the situation in the countryside affected negatively the development of cities, since the insufficient regional demand did not stimulate the emergence of modern initiatives that could solve the regional economic backwardness.⁷⁷ The

result was the vigorous migration mentioned above. However, part of that flow remained in cities such as La Coruña, to the point that by the beginning of the twentieth century approximately over one half of the urban population was born outside the city.⁷⁸ From this, we infer a relatively intense attraction capacity, as a result of a rapid rate of businesses constitution, which were concentrated on consumer goods industries and commercial and service companies.⁷⁹ The diversification of the economic base would then explain the demographic growth of the city.

The years between the First World War and the Civil War were an economically dynamic era, both for the city and the country.⁸⁰ The dominant sector was the tertiary one, although it was relatively bipolarized and divided into low-skilled and advanced services.

By the beginning of the century, retail was one of the most significant activities in the city, although it was limited by the persistence of inefficient structures. There was a large number of small retailers that were scattered throughout the city (foodstuffs, textiles stores, clothing and hardware stores, catering), which were intended to provide the basic needs of a growing population.⁸¹ On the other hand, there were also other traditional functions: administrative, military, law enforcement, transportation, education, public utilities ... , which generated significant effects on employment (Figures 2 and 3).⁸²

The strengthening of an industrial sector that had been partly born during the last quarter of the nineteenth century can be observed. It was favoured by the effects of an industrialization that was linked to sea resources.⁸³ In the fishing industry, a powerful source of employment generation can be seen due to the spillover effects on various subsidiary industries: fish canning, ice making, printing, packaging, by-product manufacturing, mechanical, motor and machinery repair workshops, etc. However, despite the obvious industrial progress of the late nineteenth century, the city was unable to undergo a take-off of the industrial sector. The latter was not sufficiently consolidated, and was dominated by consumer goods industries that were focused on the urban market.⁸⁴ This probably explains why the shock that resulted from the final loss of the colonial empire (Cuba, in 1898) for other cities (Cadiz,⁸⁵ Ferrol,⁸⁶ Malaga,⁸⁷ Palma de Mallorca,⁸⁸ Valladolid⁸⁹) was lower in La Coruña.⁹⁰ In contrast, the subsequent repatriation of capital allowed a cyclical increase in start-ups during approximately the next five years, a common phenomenon in other cities (Bilbao,⁹¹ Gijón,⁹² Oviedo,⁹³ San Sebastián,⁹⁴ Santiago de Compostela⁹⁵ and Madrid⁹⁶).

Manufacturing activities were mostly defined by their small size, craft and family features. The most prominent was food manufacturing (grinding, fish canning or distilleries). There were also some wood processing factories and some small chemical (laboratories, soap or bleach factories) and metallurgical industries. Finally, the building sector continued to be one of the most dynamic, thanks to urban growth.

In the short term, the urban economy went through different phases. The First World War broke the previous upward trend, despite the fact that the war-cycle was positive in general for the whole Spanish economy. The war had a negative impact on the local economy, as the latter relied heavily on its port, which was the main source of wealth accumulation.⁹⁷ The industries of the city were not competitive enough to export, so that the main responsible for the crisis was the decline in the import trade.⁹⁸

After the war, a slight recovery could be seen.⁹⁹ The immediate post-war years were a boom period both for the Spanish and the world economy. Hence the growth of some

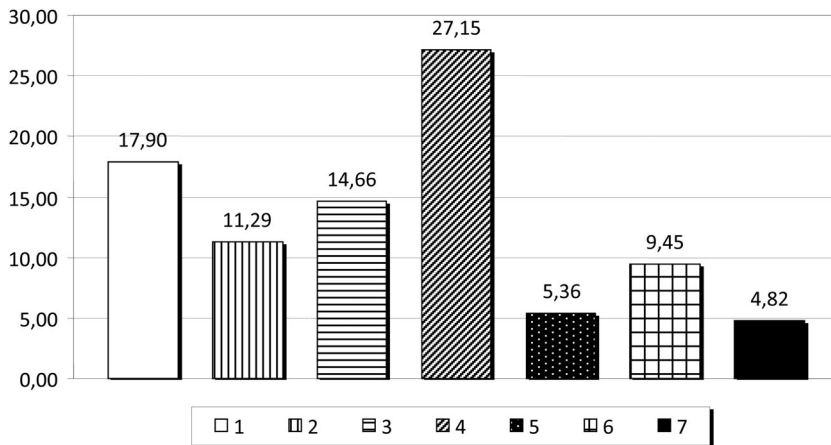


Figure 2. Percentage of the main economic activities in La Coruña with respect to the working population (1900). Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística [National Institute of Statistics], Spain's Population Census (1900).

Notes: 1. Agriculture, fishing, farming, forestry; 2. Army, police; 3. Domestic and personal services; 4. Main industries (food, clothing, building, energy, printing); 5. Other industries (textile, fur, wood, metallurgy, pottery, chemical); 6. Retail and wholesale; 7. Sea and river transport.

sectors: foundries, wood, furniture, fishing or printing industries, building sector, etc. Businesses related to emigration experienced the best cycle of the century, leading to a high amount of money remittances and an encouraging tertiary sector. Besides, some entrepreneurs (mainly the consignee houses) focused on fishing and its commercialization, consolidating their position as ship-owners, ship-chandlers, etc. On the other hand, this was a period of significant changes in Galician agriculture. Increasing

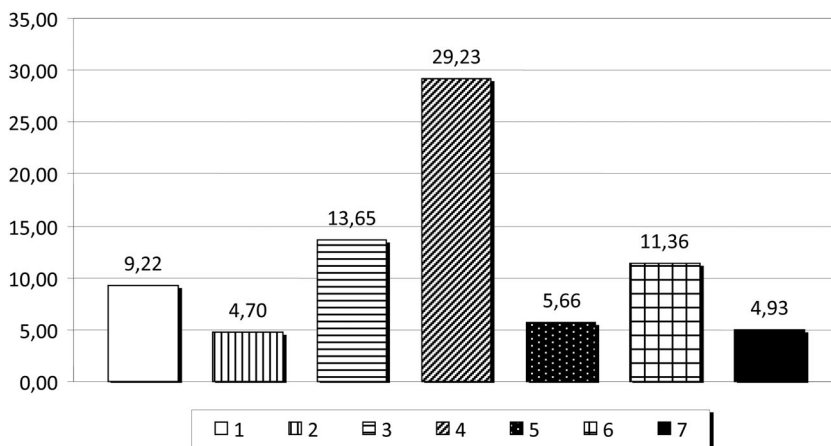


Figure 3. Percentage of the main economic activities in La Coruña with respect to the working population (1930). Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística [National Institute of Statistics], Spain's Population Census (1930).

Note: 1. Army, police; 2. Chemical industries; 3. Domestic service; 4. Miscellaneous industries; 5. Professionals; 6. Retail and Wholesale; 7. Textile industries; 8. Transport.

exportation must be emphasized, as it led to the emergence of new intermediaries who played a leading role in the distribution of goods, thus helping to sustain many firms.¹⁰⁰ The business elite even launched a campaign to transform La Coruña into a potential summertime tourist city,¹⁰¹ imitating what was occurring in other northern Spain's capitals.¹⁰²

By comparing the leading activities in the three largest cities of the province, one can conclude that retail and services were clearly dominant, whilst industry was secondary. But the capital (which in 1920 had 62,022 inhabitants) had a more modern structure, whilst Ferrol (30,350 inhabitants in 1920) and Santiago (37,786) continued to rely on traditional activities. The considerable weight of transport (mainly sea transport) and related activities (consignee houses, shippers, customs agents, brokers, catering, hospitality ...) stands out. In Santiago there were many establishments that met basic consumption needs (food, textiles, footwear), followed by the hospitality industry, partly due to the presence of the University. In Ferrol, the major activities were the food establishments (to a lesser extent, textiles and footwear), and the shipbuilding industry (the state naval dockyard) and those derived from the port function (brokers, ship-owners, consignee houses, customs agencies, etc.) (Table 1).

For other Spanish cities, the growth of the post-war years provoked a proliferation of the number of firms attending to local demand. In many cases, they merged the sale of products with craft manufacturing. And this occurred in the most dynamic cities such as Madrid¹⁰³ but also in medium-sized and even small cities.

Nevertheless, during the 1930s, a shadow hovered over the city. In the beginning, the Second Republic brought a new hope for a broad spectrum of social classes. But it also had to immediately face the opposition of the elite. In economic terms, the deep depression directly affected many sectors in La Coruña.¹⁰⁴ Yet, it is likely that the relative economic isolation of Spain and the Republican redistribution policies contributed to reducing the effects of the recession. For that reason, retail businesses comparatively experienced growth, as they acted as a 'shelter' for the industrial crisis. Instead, the rest of the service sector and industry underwent a clear standstill. The recession of the main economic regional subsectors (cattle, fishing, canning and wood industries, etc.) had a parallel impact on the industrial structure of the city due to the following factors: the drastic reduction of emigration, the decrease in the flow of foreign currencies, the establishment

Table 1. Main socio-economic activities in La Coruña, Santiago de Compostela and Ferrol (1927).

	La Coruña		Santiago		Ferrol	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Foodstuffs	704	17.43	224	14.7	344	23.89
Textile stores	463	11.46	223	14.6	187	12.99
Catering	369	9.13	176	11.5	119	8.26
Liberal professions	253	6.26	106	7.0	81	5.63
Hospitality sector	215	5.32	29	1.9	19	1.32
Transportation	207	5.12	94	6.2	57	3.96
Consignees, commission agents	160	3.96	18	1.2	45	3.13
Wood, furniture	112	2.77	18	1.2	40	2.78
Ironmongers	106	2.62	18	1.2	29	2.01
Financial sector – insurances	56	1.39	16	1.0	13	0.90
	2645	65.5	922	60.5	934	64.9

Source: *Anuario del Comercio*, I, 1276.

of import licences and quotas in many countries, the stagnation of the building sector and the contraction of the national market, amongst others.¹⁰⁵

The Civil War dramatically broke the upward trend that had previously deployed the local (and regional) economy. A 'new Spain' was born, which was not more brilliant but grey. Modernization was interrupted and the country returned to a rancid traditionalism which would mark the economic development of the city over the next two decades.

Conclusions

Retail and commercial businesses have historically had a prominent role in Spanish cities. The persistence of activities of the Ancient Regime (administration, law enforcement and domestic service) still left an imprint in the nineteenth century on urban economies. But the advent of capitalism began to change the economic base of these cities by introducing new dynamics. Industry was one of those factors but its development barely reached a few cities. In most cases, new functions merely appeared that were related to the supply to a population of increasing size.

Retail was somehow halfway between two economic systems. The changes that economic modernization brought to Spain allowed the consolidation of commercial functions thanks to the increase in urban population. That transformation was considerably accelerated during the Restoration period and allowed the larger cities (but also medium-sized and even small ones) to witness a growth of these retail activities.

La Coruña has been regarded as a paradigm of that kind of behaviour. The main difference with the pattern that was described lies in its specific characteristics as a port city and in the close connections, it maintained with more distant economic areas than most Spanish cities did from the later Modern Age. During the contemporary period, this function was definitely strengthened, providing La Coruña with a distinctive profile which still remains. In some way, this also reveals the relative failure of the industrialization of the city. Yet, we also believe that this forms part of a history that emerged in the long run. The history of a set of long-term activities had a more solid presence as compared to other northern Spanish cities. The economic cycles that arose during the first third of the twentieth century (the First World War and post-war, Primo de Rivera's dictatorships and the 1930s depression) did not only change but actually consolidated the historical retail (and tertiary) specialization of La Coruña.

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