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## Preface

Ostensibly concerned with banditry and culture in Mexico, this study is, above all else, a narrative about the struggles of oppressed people for justice, dignity, and redemption. For more than a hundred years, Mexican and foreign elites waged war in Mexico to secure their access to power, privilege, and wealth. They glossed their behavior with stirring rhetoric, appeals to patriotism and destiny, and the assertion of moral principles. At the end of the day, however, their conduct resembled little more than banditry organized on a massive scale. Yet they are not remembered as such, for among the perquisites of victory is the right of the winners to demonize their opponents and to decide who among them is or is not a bandit. Most often, the Mexican and foreign elites pinned the label of “bandit” on lower-class outlaws and rebels who resisted exploitation and oppression—not merely because most bandits emerged from among the poor, but also because these elites generally assumed that plebeian Mexicans were prone to criminal activity. It is small wonder, therefore, that lower-class Mexicans, when confronting systematic social injustice, often identified with bandits in popular culture as heroes who opposed the excesses committed by social superiors. This is not to assert that all bandits, or even most of them, were in fact popular champions; it is to recognize and understand the class-based character of banditry and the narratives that foreigners and Mexicans created about it in the decades that spanned the achievement of Mexican independence and the outbreak of the revolution.

Today in contemporary Mexico, many of these bandit-heroes live on in popular memory, and some are now lauded as national heroes by a state eager to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the people. This is not a uniquely Mexican phenomenon. Perhaps like most other children in the English-speaking world, I first encountered the figure of the bandit in the form of the Robin Hood myth. I knew the name

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even before I understood what it represented, for in Canada the imagined Anglo-Saxon profile of this legendary outlaw was, and still is, emblazoned on the packages of every product sold by Robin Hood Multifoods Inc.<sup>1</sup> There is a curious juxtaposition between, on the one hand, the mythical reputation of an outlaw who robbed from the rich and gave to the poor, and on the other, the marketing strategies of a corporation devoted to acquiring profit by exploiting labor and accumulating capital. But this illustrates well how the elites can maintain hegemony by appropriating and co-opting elements of oppositional popular culture. Most readers will probably be able to identify similar examples from their own experience, for this dynamic—the production of bandit-heroes in popular culture and their appropriation by the dominant culture—operates in almost every society. At the same time, this strategy can have the unintended consequence of helping to preserve in popular memory a narrative that—at historical moments when social tensions are sharp and conflictive—authorizes banditry as a form of rebellion. This, for example, is what lent such resonance to ballads such as Woody Guthrie’s “Pretty Boy Floyd,” which, in the midst of the Great Depression of the 1930s, celebrated the exploits of an outlaw who provided “Christmas dinner / For the families on relief.”<sup>2</sup> This logic continues to operate to this day. The corporate-run television and cinematic industries in North America profit from dramas that feature outlaws and antiheroes; but these coexist and compete with more-critical narratives that continue to circulate. Even as I was researching this book, Billy Bragg and Wilco released a critically acclaimed compact disc that featured another Woody Guthrie bandit ballad, “The Unwelcome Guest,” while author Peter Carey won the Booker Prize for his novel about the legendary nineteenth-century Australian bandit Ned Kelly.<sup>3</sup> None of this would exist or have any particular appeal if, at some level, people did not feel the need for a Robin Hood.

## Introduction

### *Memory, Legend, and History*

The serious historical study of banditry is only just beginning.

—Eric Hobsbawm, *American Historical Review*, 1988

There is no doubt that history is written by the victors. But it is also true that legends are written by the people.

—Speech at Pancho Villa's grave, from Oscar W. Ching Vega, *La última cabalgata de Pancho Villa*, 1977

Postcolonial Mexicans have been telling stories about their bandits ever since they won independence. So too have foreigners, both travelers and those who observe Mexico from afar. Narratives about the “Mexican bandit” have appeared in almost every form of culture since the early nineteenth century: novels, memoirs, travel accounts, newspapers, academic literature, movies, ballads, and the graphic arts. For the most part, we have grown accustomed to thinking about these tales and images as historical relics or curiosities, just like the bandits they purport to represent, but they continue to cast a long shadow over the Mexican present. Literary narratives still circulate widely, speaking to intellectuals who aspire to understand historical bandits, or influencing debates about the character of real and alleged outlaws in contemporary Mexico: narco-traffickers in the Gulf of Mexico, taxicab hijackers in Mexico City, or latter-day Zapatistas in Chiapas. Narratives from the past also survive in the oral traditions of popular culture, such as *corridos* (ballads). These are preserved in audio recordings, in archives, and in published collections, but they are also alive today on the streets, in the cantinas, and in the homes of Mexi-

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cans. Sometimes, memories and images of historical bandits are resurrected in expected ways, as in the performances of the mariachi bands that gather daily in Mexico City's Garibaldi Square. At other times, the shadows of historical bandits are lurking and unanticipated. A scholar researching bandits can spend long days plundering criminal records in the former prison that now houses the Archivo General de la Nación, then return to his or her apartment near the Monumento de la Revolución, where Pancho Villa's remains are interred, and later dine in the San Angel market at the Restaurante Chucho el Roto, which bears the sobriquet of a celebrated nineteenth-century bandit. It is no exaggeration to assert that the imagined bandit is ubiquitous in Mexican culture. But what does this mean?

This book is a cultural history of banditry in Mexico from independence to the end of the revolution, based on narratives produced by Mexicans and English-speaking foreign visitors during this period. Rather than arguing whether or not certain outlaws were social bandits, or Robin Hoods, I will examine why and how people told stories about them during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of these narratives now constitute part of the national heritage of Mexico, forming the tradition that helps to express a sense of being Mexican, *lo mexicanidad*. Meanwhile, narratives by visitors from three English-speaking countries—Great Britain, the United States, and Canada—helped to shape Mexico's image abroad and its relations with foreign countries. This study argues that bandit narratives were integral to broader processes, involving Mexicans and foreigners in forms of national and class struggle, to define and create the Mexican nation-state. These narratives have not come to the present effortlessly, as a seamless and unchanging process, without conflict and sacrifice. Nor do they have any meaning free of the contradictions, explicit or submerged, that continue to fracture Mexico along the fault lines of class, ethnicity, and gender. In one way or another, all narratives about Mexican banditry, whether contemporary or historical, are linked to social and political struggles—continuing to this day—about what it means to be a Mexican.

Consider, for example, how the best-known of Mexican bandits,

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Francisco “Pancho” Villa, came to enter the pantheon of officially sanctioned heroes of the revolution. Villa is now interred, along with other revolutionary contemporaries, in the Monumento de la Revolución. But this was a long-belated acknowledgment. For forty-three years after Villa’s death in 1923, the Mexican state refused to recognize his revolutionary credentials. In 1915, when revolutionary unity collapsed into a fratricidal civil war, Villa ended up on the losing side. Afterward, the victorious faction coalesced into a ruling clique known as the Revolutionary Family. The winners anathematized Villa as a counter-revolutionary bandit until 1966. In a culture where patriarchal relations and patronage still dominate social and political life, Villa was the black sheep, the unrecognized bastard son of the revolution. So why is he now a hero? There can be little doubt that his rehabilitation was an attempt to shore up an increasingly unpopular regime. But it was also a triumph for the tenacity of the rural and urban poor, who refused to forget a man they regarded as a more ideal patriarch than most of Mexico’s post-revolutionary leaders. Vast numbers of lower-class Mexicans insisted on remembering Villa as a champion of the poor, a man who protected the interests of his *gente*, or *los de abajo*. They ignored the official censure of Villa and clung to his memory, inscribing a popular mythology about him in corridos that are performed in Mexico to this day. These memories are so closely intertwined with the post-revolutionary aspirations of Mexico’s dispossessed classes that oppositional movements of the political left and right have identified themselves with Villa’s legacy throughout the twentieth century. No other historical figure in Mexico can lay claim to such enduring popular appeal, with the exception of Emiliano Zapata, whose name is now invoked to impart meaning and prestige to the indigenous peasant guerrillas in Chiapas.

The tension between popular myths about Villa and the exclusions of official history were such that it was quite impossible for intellectuals and artists, in Mexico and abroad, to refrain from debating this bandit’s legacy. By no means have they all given Villa a positive review. The corpus of intellectual and popular literature dealing with Villa is not only polemical but also vast. According to Friedrich Katz,