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Introduction

IN APRIL 1883 Mexico City police made a grisly discovery in the capital's outskirts: the bloodied, decomposed corpse of a woman. A subsequent investigation concluded that the unknown victim had been surprised by two men as she walked near the fetid Rio del Consulado, a stream located in the city's northeastern periphery. The unidentified individuals had apparently cut her throat, almost decapitating her in the act. They then fled, leaving no trace.

Or did they? The murder was in fact unknown until 1890, when it was incorporated into the criminal trial of Francisco Guerrero, "El Chalequero," a serial killer who had roamed the same area where the unknown woman had died years before. During the 1880s Guerrero had raped and murdered several women with relative impunity, in the process terrorizing the poverty-stricken northeastern *colonias* (neighborhoods) of the Porfirian capital. When police finally tracked him down in 1888, they blamed him for all sorts of crimes, real or imagined, including the 1883 case. Yet no mention was made of this murder for seven years, until Guerrero's 1890 trial.¹

What are we to make of this omission? Was the 1883 incident real or simply invented to suit the needs of both the prosecutors who condemned Guerrero and the voracious reading public, eager for a story? The subsequent Guerrero trials (there were two), and others included in this study, altogether offer an interesting and informative look at

how Mexico City officials not only reinvented the past, but also helped fashion a criminal underworld. Partly based on the real observations of elite critics and officials and partly on their prejudices toward the urban poor, this underworld was imagined to exist along the social and physical margins of the capital. It quickly took on a life of its own, playing a prominent role in the Porfirian discourse on public morality and order and, most importantly, on how the elite saw themselves in relation to the rest of the nation. Yet, as elite observers found out, their criminal underworld also threatened to undermine their own importance in the forging of the Mexican nation.

This nation began in 1876, when the Tuxtepec Revolution catapulted General Porfirio Díaz to power and inaugurated the remarkable thirty-four-year period known as the Porfiriato. Driven by foreign investment and a desire for scientific-based modernity, the Porfirian government relied on the efforts of an elite group of government officials, prominent citizens, politicians, urban professionals, and newspaper editors, among others, to elevate the Mexican nation from what was popularly perceived by this diverse group to be a backward, primitive condition. This group, born out of the liberal revolution of midcentury, was influenced by several currents of thought then in vogue, among them Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism, Auguste Comte's positivism, and scientific liberalism. The Porfirian elite, together with an inner circle of presidential advisers known as *los científicos*, sought no less than the invention of a new, modern Mexico.²

This late nineteenth-century search for modernity was not unique, as Mexico's Porfirian leadership was in essence continuing the post-colonial project of forging a nation out of disparate kingdoms and remote regions.³ What differed were the scope and nature of the tools and the expected results. The "Porfirian Persuasion," as examined by William H. Beezley, favored not only political centralization, but also the imposition of elite-defined morals. The national architects relied on foreign-inspired modernity, as exemplified by railroad technology and modern factories; imported European and North American culture, such as French cuisine and American baseball; and the traditional Mexican emphasis on family to forge a new code of conduct where thrift, propriety, and hard work would play a central role in daily life.⁴

It was more imagined than real. In his study on nationalism, Benedict Anderson observes that in “world-historical terms bourgeoisies were the first classes to achieve solidarities on an essentially imagined basis.”⁵ Mexico City’s ruling class did indeed imagine themselves the future of their country. They also desired to educate and guide the middle class toward this ideal. Yet they also attempted to distance themselves from the other Mexico, the vast indigenous and mestizo population they referred to as *el pueblo*. Long the object of elite scorn, the poor underclass took on new significance in the 1890s, the height of Porfirian power, when the capital city underwent a profound transformation as thousands upon thousands of poor Mexicans, displaced by expansive haciendas and lured by jobs, migrated to the city. The Porfirian elite and the middle class viewed this migratory shift with apprehension and fear.⁶

It was fear that helped create the imagined underworld. Beginning in the late 1880s, Mexico City experienced a wave of highly publicized crimes that led to the public perception that the city was drowning in criminality. Moreover, official efforts to compile statistical information produced a wave of reports that added to the impression of widespread disorder.⁷ Add to this a vigorous program undertaken to prosecute petty theft and drunkenness (an effort that enlarged the definition of crime), and the end result was an image of a criminal underworld. Porfirian elites fantasized about this seamy underside and believed it inhabited by degenerate individuals who allegedly prowled the city’s streets, claimed public spaces for their own, threatened the morality of the *gente decente* (decent and respectable people), and scandalized business interests with robberies and overt displays of drunkenness. For the elite and the middle class, the dream of modernity seemed in peril from the actions of the underclass and their vices. Yet, as several of the cases in this study illustrate, it was the very actions of the middle class and the government that proved most dangerous.⁸

This study is about the way in which urban elites in late nineteenth-century Mexico City imagined, forged, and populated this underworld of crime and vice. In an effort to maintain moral superiority, erect an ideological barrier between the educated and popular classes, and instruct the middle class in what they believed were appropri-

ate behaviors and customs, elites invented a criminal underworld and populated it with imaginary, stock Mexicans: degenerate, foul, drunk, deviant, and murderous. During several celebrated criminal cases, Porfirian elites fashioned moral transcripts that created social ties between the accused and the impoverished residents of the city's marginal colonias. By linking the imagined underworld with the urban poor, for instance in the Guerrero case, elites successfully labeled the underclass as inherently dangerous, allowing for more effective social engineering and control.⁹ Elites also condemned the urban poor for "invading" the commercial heart of the capital and committing robberies, although many of these incidents paled in comparison with crimes committed by the middle class.

Thus the Porfirian elite and their middle-class allies were not free from the influence of criminality. In one noted incident a middle-class clerk committed murder in broad daylight, while in another case a licensed and prominent physician stood accused of performing an abortion that led to tragic results. These cases produced anxiety for the elite, who worried that immoral behavior was spreading among the cultured and breaking the barrier between the social classes. These fears were ultimately confirmed by the Porfirian police's own criminal actions in the celebrated and relatively unknown Arnulfo Arroyo case.

The cases explored in this study are also powerful cultural remnants that help us remember and define the Porfiriato. For example, the Arnulfo Arroyo case remains one of Mexico's most remembered political crimes. The forging of the underworld led to the elaboration of a powerful urban criminal mythology that remains part of Mexico City today. Ironically, in granting potency to an imaginary world, Porfirian elites invented a continuous narrative that stretched backward to a fabled dark past and forward into a dangerous future. The underworld became a looming threat that ultimately outlived the political state that created it. Yet the capital's criminal side was perhaps a necessary product of Porfirian-inspired progress. Angel Rama notes that during the late nineteenth century, modernization created new urban myths throughout Latin America.¹⁰ As Mexico City's urban population increased and its modern character spread, so did

the official perception that crime was widespread. It would seem that order and crime needed each other.¹¹

The new mythology found special nourishment in the oversensationalized crime reporting of the time. Beginning in the 1890s and continuing toward the end of the regime, Mexico City's criminal cases received widespread coverage and influenced public perceptions of the urban poor. Some of these crimes also became part of popular legend and found expression in the penny press. In utilizing this source, I have selected six major criminal cases dating from 1888 to 1908 as the principal sources for this study. These criminal narratives, most previously unknown, represent several aspects of urban crime, including assault, robbery, rape, murder, and police corruption. They also offer insights into topics such as love, illicit sex, and abortion. Originating from the judicial archives in Mexico City's Archivo General de la Nación, the cases transcend mere criminal records and function as important windows into life in the Porfirian capital, telling the personal stories of Mexicans from all walks of life, from artisans and maids to prostitutes and police commanders.

In addition this book utilizes information and opinions from newspapers, travel accounts, and municipal reports. These sources, what Bernard Cohn calls "the cultural technologies of rule," were important tools the Porfirian state utilized to define and delineate urban criminality. Each major case is also framed by numerous smaller incidents whose texts add understanding to the time period and the processes that shaped it.¹²

The role of the media in particular is central to this study. All of the cases explored here were extensively covered by Mexico City's various newspapers, many of which functioned as the unofficial "moral" voices of the regime. For instance, *El Imparcial*, a newspaper that offered coverage of the "underworld," received a direct subsidy from the Porfirian government. Under the guidance of científico Rafael Reyes Spindola, *El Imparcial* benefited from new modern technologies, such as photography advances, that allowed it to maintain essential coverage of the alleged criminal activities of the urban poor.¹³

While previous studies have used the viewpoints expressed in criminology and popular literature to reconstruct the theories and causa-

tions behind Porfirian criminality, this book moves in a new direction, arguing that an elite-forged criminal narrative ran alongside the official story, reinforcing the “ideal” city and making it possible for the elite to draw firm boundaries between themselves and the other side.¹⁴ The Porfirian master narrative valued order and progress and exalted foreign, particularly French culture and devalued the participation of Mexico’s *gente del pueblo*. Yet the underclass did contribute to the construction of Porfirian identity, as elites incorporated the culture and behavior of the underclass into their own definition of what their society was *not*. While the Porfirian state utilized construction projects, modern sports, health programs, and moral discourses to construct the modern Mexican nation-state, it also used criminality to help forge the nation.¹⁵

Tales from the Porfirian Archives

Elite beliefs about crime were founded on long-standing conceptions and beliefs concerning the marginal sectors of Mexico City. By the 1890s the Díaz government had inscribed the Porfirian capital with the landmarks, symbols, and tools of state power. For the elite Mexico City was the showcase of the regime. However, beneath and outside of this official city existed the marginal city, a conglomeration of *colonias populares* (large working-class neighborhoods), *barrios* (small, informal neighborhoods), *pulquerías* (cantinas where pulque, a fermented drink, was sold), and *vecindades* (tenement houses). Chapter 1 examines the cultural topography of this city, focusing on how the spaces were officially transformed into alleged centers of crime. While the urban underclass appropriated and incorporated these cultural spaces into their own urban concept, the elite focused on imagined aspects, believing, for instance, that urban slums were nests of criminality and that *pulquerías* and *bordellos* contributed to the sexual degeneracy of their inhabitants and patrons. Quite interestingly, the city’s official prison, Belén, also became an integral part of the imagined underworld. In numerous official reports, the prison was credited with the existence, whether imagined or real, of an autonomous subculture. Quite literally, the elite believed that the prison and the poor neighborhoods surrounding it were infused with a degeneracy that was quite alien to the official culture.

The idea of degeneration also underlaid elite fears about the poor inhabitants of the capital, who were seen not only as natural criminals, but as a source of moral and sexual contagion.¹⁶ Chapter 2 explores the case of Francisco Guerrero, also known as “El Chalequero,” Mexico’s version of Jack the Ripper. During the 1880s Guerrero raped and killed several women, most of them prostitutes, with impunity. His first trial in 1890 allowed the state to construct a vision of a degenerate, crime-ridden world centered on the serial killer. Guerrero, his humble background, and his victims and friends became part of a new urban myth. Guerrero’s crimes also permitted his transformation into the Porfirian antihero, a dark and shadowy figure who stood in opposition to don Porfirio, the hero of the official city. Guerrero’s notorious reputation survived his long imprisonment; when he returned to Mexico City, he murdered again, and once more the killer and his social class were put on trial. Although Guerrero had become a shadow of his former self, his past crimes had made him a legendary figure and earned him a permanent place in the underworld mythology.

Part of that mythology centered on the invention of stock characters who allegedly populated and prowled the underworld. During the 1890 Guerrero trial, government officials linked the urban poor to Guerrero, thus depicting the underclass as degenerate, vicious, dangerous, and sexually promiscuous—all the qualities that the serial killer allegedly possessed. In numerous press stories, the underclass was also characterized as subhuman and vice ridden. Originating in traditional elite views of indigenous Mexicans, these images conveyed a powerful message that condemned the urban poor to a subordinate position in Porfirian society, placing them outside the social and physical boundaries of order and progress. Further, Porfirian elites warned that this social class posed a dangerous threat to the middle and upper classes.

Elites believed that threat was exemplified by the sensational case of Luis Yzaguirre and María Piedad Ontiveros. In October 1890 Yzaguirre, a middle-class government clerk, shot and killed his lover, Ontiveros, in a coach in one of the capital’s busy streets. The case of Luis and Piedad, examined in chapter 3, focuses on the imagined underworld’s threat to middle-class Porfirian morality. Interestingly, the state’s

discourse is not so much at issue here as are the thoughts and ideas that originate from a series of love letters composed by Yzaguirre and Ontiveros. The letters reveal middle-class anxieties and beliefs about illicit sex, demonstrating how Porfirian moral concepts and warnings were incorporated by individuals. The fates of Luis and Piedad also demonstrate the Porfirian elite's misplaced confidence in their ability to distance the middle classes from the criminality elites condemned.

The fear that crime was inundating the city's ordered spaces and educated classes posed a dilemma for elites, who pondered the most effective way to patrol the imagined border between the ideal and marginal cities. Accordingly, elites believed that downtown Mexico City exemplified modern progress and, in an effort to keep disorderly elements out, posted police officers on practically every street corner. Any confidence in the viability of this effort was misplaced. In 1888 a group of men broke into the home of a downtown merchant, José María Brilanti. The audacious plan easily circumvented the security in place and exposed the illusory safety of the ideological heart of the ideal city. The robbery, however, was only a prelude. Three years later another band of men, this time armed, robbed a jewelry store only a few blocks from the Zócalo, murdering the owner, don Tomás Hernández Aguirre. The La Profesa Jewelry Store Robbery, as the crime came to be known, shocked Porfirian society and attracted attention from the highest government levels. The case not only demonstrated the fallacy of the Porfirian credo of order and progress, it also revealed the inner workings of the official security apparatus. Coming on the heels of a major reorganization of the metropolitan police, the robbery was aggressively investigated by Mexico City plainclothes officers, the Comisiones de Seguridad. Popularly known as the secret police, the Comisiones successfully pursued the La Profesa gang. The robbery not only revealed the Porfirian police to be effective agents of state power, but also demonstrated the labyrinthine efforts criminals often employed to evade arrest.

While the imagined underworld possessed a certain exotic quality that was the product of elite fantasies, the actual world of the urban poor was filled with a complex set of rules and associations

that worked to ensure loyalty and kept the power of the state at bay. The men who carried out the La Profesa robbery relied on an intimate network of family and friends to hide their tracks and stolen wealth. The robbery cases examined in chapter 4 allow for a close inspection of this hidden world and reveal how average Mexicans coped with the intrusive powers of the state.

Official measures intended to classify and control Mexico City's urban population did not rely solely on the potential use of violence, however. The government also employed the new science of public hygiene to maintain the moral boundary between the underclass and the elite. A principal part of this effort rested on the legitimacy of modern medicine and in particular on the alleged respectability of physicians. In 1898 this boundary was breached due to the actions of Federico Abrego, a doctor who stood accused of committing an abortion that resulted in the death of his lover, María Barrera. This case, examined in chapter 5, can be also viewed as part of a larger context in which modern medicine and hygiene were increasingly used as tools by Porfirian authorities to label the world of the poor as infected by crime and vice.

The Porfirian state's efforts to exclude the urban underclass from the official narrative rested on the premise that the government and its elite leadership effectively represented order and progress. At first the September 16, 1897, incident in which a social outcast, Arnulfo Arroyo, assaulted President Porfirio Díaz during a military parade seemed to confirm this idea. Arroyo, a former law student, possessed a reputation as a shiftless troublemaker. This notoriety was said to have prompted an incident on the evening following the assault, in which several armed and angry residents allegedly broke into police headquarters and lynched Arroyo.

The death of Díaz's would-be assassin seemed like popular retribution, but a series of developments in the following weeks would unmask the illusion. Following leads, the capital's newspapers revealed that the lynch mob had actually been composed entirely of police officers dressed in traditional peasant clothing. Naturally, a scandal ensued, which was made worse by the suicide of Eduardo Velázquez, Mexico City's police chief and the mastermind behind Arroyo's murder.

Despite a subsequent trial and sentencing of the officers involved in the lynching, questions remained. This incident, the focus of chapter 6, illustrates how elite pretensions of moral superiority were undermined by actions undertaken by the police and the government.

Imagining a People

The cases in this book are of course not completely representative of the history of crime in Mexico. Instead, they are powerful cultural narratives that tell us much about how the state, through its elite representatives, forged ideas about crime and society. I chose these six cases because each contained important and powerful elements that fleshed out Porfirian Mexico, allowing us to see in detail the daily lives of ordinary people. What emerges in the end is a complex world that intimately links the state with the lives of previously invisible historical actors.¹⁷

It is this link that interests me. Among some of the issues examined by William E. French in his article in the landmark May 1999 issue of *The Hispanic American Historical Review* are the topics of agency and power. French concludes that agency, an important component of how cultural history is written, can also be seen as how people have been imagined. Together with a reading of power relationships, the imagined underworld can be visualized from two perspectives. First, of course, is the elite view, which informs this study. After all, what is crime but a construction of those in power? The inhabitants of Mexico City's slums did not see their world as a criminal culture but realized that the state often viewed their actions as criminal. This leads us to the second perspective, the one emanating from the underclass itself. While this study does not pretend to be a history of subalterns, it does offer a look into their lives, permitting us to examine how the poor viewed crime and negotiated with it (and the state).¹⁸

This brings me to another point. In telling these stories, I employ a narrative approach that emphasizes the actions and languages utilized by the urban inhabitants of late nineteenth-century Mexico City. It is not intended to mirror the sensationalistic approach used by the Porfirian press, but rather to highlight the ebb and flow of a particular case. Essentially, I am telling stories about crimes in a way that

opens doors to the past and lets us imagine the intricacies of daily life in a world long gone. And since these accounts highlight criminal actions, they are by their nature infused with descriptions of violence. Remaining true to my narrative approach, I have chosen to retain the often lurid descriptions of the crimes. I feel this approach strengthens the accounts described in the study, improving their potency.

In the end I am simply telling stories in the best Mexican tradition. The historical actors described in this book were not revolutionaries, but men and women who lived their lives according to passions we can only infer. Perhaps, as indicated by the testimony of some, financial gain was the chief motivating reason to commit a crime. For others lust was the key. Yet others were in the wrong place at the wrong time or maybe were related to the wrong people. For the members of Mexico City's urban underclass then, crime was part of everyday life, a life that was increasingly shaped by the remarkable late nineteenth-century Mexican state.