

Some Men Just Want to Watch Mexico Burn

In the introduction to *La Vida*, famed anthropologist Oscar Lewis unfavorably compares Puerto Rico to Mexico:

But perhaps the crucial difference in the history of the two countries was the development of a great revolutionary tradition in Mexico and its absence in Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans sought greater autonomy from Spain during the nineteenth century, but they were never able to organize a revolutionary struggle for their freedom, and the single attempt along this line, at Lares, was short-lived and never received mass support. By contrast the Mexicans fought for their independence from Spain between 1810 and 1821, drove out the French in 1866 and later produced the great revolution of 1910-20 with its glorious ideals of social justice. In the course of these struggles great heroes emerged, men who have become symbols of the Mexican spirit of revolution and independence.

La Vida was published in 1965, just 45 years after the end of the Mexican Revolution. Lewis personally knew many Mexicans who lived through it. But what actually happened during this “great revolution” with its “glorious ideals of social justice”? The best paper I could find on the topic is Robert McCaa’s 2003 paper “Missing Millions: The Demographic Costs of the Mexican Revolution” (*Mexican Studies* 19, pp.367-400). After a detailed review of earlier estimates, McCaa deploys new techniques to reach a grim conclusion:

The human cost of the Revolution was paid mainly in blood. Of a total demographic cost of 2.1 million, excess deaths accounted for two-thirds, lost births one-fourth, and emigration considerably less than one-tenth of the total... The best two-sex inverse projection to 1930, taking into account the age and sex distribution of the population in that year, points to some 3 million missing as of 1921. Census error in the 1921 enumeration reduces this figure by 1 million. Two-thirds of the remainder was due to one factor: excess mortality (1.4 million

deaths), with 350,000 more male deaths than female. Lost births were substantially less at 550 thousand. Smaller still, at less than 10 percent of the total loss, was emigration to the United States, with the persisting number of male “refugees,” generously defined, slightly more than 100,000, and females about three-fourths of this figure.

The basic history of the Mexican Revolution, moreover, was hardly “heroic”:

[O]nly six months passed between Francisco I. Madero’s pronouncement of revolution (November 20, 1910) and the overthrow of the old dictator Porfirio Díaz. The resignation of Díaz came in late spring 1911 and was accomplished with little violence or destruction. The fighting scarcely began until 1911... Victory at Ciudad Juárez came to the revolutionaries on May 10, 1911, after a siege lasting only a couple of days... Although the fall of Díaz was achieved due to uprisings throughout the republic, the cost of the Revolution, to this point, was probably only a few thousand deaths.

The real fighting began as the revolutionaries trained their weapons on one another over the course of the following six years... Zapata, having waited four months to rebel against the hated Díaz, did not allow four weeks to pass before rebelling against the enormously popular Madero. In late November 1911, Zapata, “tired of waiting” for Madero to carry through an agrarian revolution, according to the conventional view, denounced Mexico’s first democratically elected president by proclaiming the Plan of Ayala. Yet, until 1912, Zapatistas did not pose a serious threat to the Madero government. Elsewhere regional bands (and bandits), some with plans, others without, escalated the plundering of the countryside, hamlets, and towns. As is well known, within two years of Díaz’s resignation the nation slid into chaos...

With the assassination of Madero on February 21, 1913 -- probably on

the order of the Madero-appointed commander in chief of the federal army, Victoriano Huerta—civil war erupted. The usurper proved incapable of suppressing the many revolts... [A]fter the failure of the Convention of Aguascalientes to resolve the differences of regional warlords, an even bloodier phase of the Revolution began, as, once again, the victors turned on one another. The year 1915 was the year of hunger. Marauding bands destroyed the few crops that were sown, many before they could be harvested. Destruction continued into 1916, although with the defeat of the northern chieftain Pancho Villa at the Battle of Celaya in April 1915, the violence began to wane, however slowly. Devastation was made worse by the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1918/19, to be examined in detail below.

McCaa thoughtfully concludes:

Given the magnitude of the human losses caused by the Mexican Revolution, the silence of some scholars and disbelief by others is surprising...

For the Americas, both North and South, the Mexican Revolution was the greatest demographic catastrophe of the twentieth century. From a millennial perspective, the human cost of the Mexican Revolution was exceeded only by the devastation of Christian conquest, colonization, and accompanying epidemics, nearly four centuries earlier.

How then could as knowledgeable a scholar as Lewis credulously praise the sordid bloodbath that was the Mexican Revolution? As a Marxist, he was obviously predisposed to positivity. His gushing, however, would probably resonate with many non-Marxists, too.

What possesses anyone to so gush? One could say, “You can’t make *huevos rancheros* without breaking eggs. The war was tragic, but the results were great.” Since we’re talking about Mexico, though, this seems absurd. Sure, it’s a middle-income country, but violence remains a grave problem to this day. And given its proximity to the U.S., gravity

alone should have turned it into a peaceful, First World country by now. The legacy of the Mexican Revolution is one of the better explanations for why this transformation has yet to happen.

In any case, people who admire revolutions rarely bother with counterfactual history. What excites them is revolution itself. Revolution is *romantic*. The vision of tearing down the wickedness of the world, serving wrong-doers their just deserts, charging barricades with our brave leaders, and building a better world on top of the ashes is a thrilling story. Counting corpses and asking, “What was it all for?,” in contrast, is a real downer.

If you share this romantic vision, you might even welcome my analysis: “Yes, I’m inspired by revolutionary idealism. At least they *tried*.” Yet calmly considered, this romantic vision is inexcusable. Launching a bloody war without even asking, “How likely is this war to improve the world?” is as “romantic” as drunk driving at a playground. Giving revolutionaries credit for “trying” is ridiculous. If you combine brutality with wishful thinking about the consequences, your real goal isn’t to make those consequences a reality. Your real goal is just to exercise brutality.

So why did Lewis gush over the Mexican Revolution? Batman’s butler got it right: “Well, because he thought it was good sport. Because some men aren’t looking for anything logical, like money. They can’t be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn.” I’ve learned a lot from Lewis, but the less real-world influence people like him have, the better.