

Nicaragua. It was a wise choice. The book comes together nicely in the second half of the conclusion.

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James Alex Garza, *The Imagined Underworld: Sex, Crime, and Vice in Porfirian Mexico City* (Lincoln, NE, & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), pp. x + 220, £25.00, hb.

*The Imagined Underworld* offers a fascinating look at media representations of crime and criminality in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Mexico City: a period known to historians as the Porfiriato in deference to its central political figure, long-time president Porfirio Díaz (1876–1880, 1884–1911). Indeed, General Díaz figures prominently in the book: courting foreign investors, reforming Mexico City police, hosting public festivals, fending off assassins, purging his administration of potential embarrassments, and pardoning (or not) convicted criminals. So does Mexico City with its underworld (real and imagined), its class tensions, its anxieties, its corruptions and its frustrated dreams of social hygiene and modernity.

James Alex Garza structures his book around six Porfirian *causes célèbres*: a serial killer, a crime of passion, two robberies, a botched abortion, and the attempted assassination of Porfirio Díaz. For the most part, Garza acknowledges, these stories function as ‘powerful cultural narratives that tell us much about how the state, through its elite representatives, forged ideas about crime and society’ (p. 10). At the same time, however, his study also offers ‘a look into [subaltern] lives, permitting us to examine how the poor viewed crime and negotiated with it (and the state)’ (p. 10).

Chapter 1 provides a concise moral geography of Mexico City from the perspective of metropolitan elites who tended to see the city in terms of bad barrios, borderline barrios and good neighborhoods, with the colonial/commercial center as the hub in, around, and through which these many Mexicos mixed, revolved and passed. As part of his vice tour, Garza pauses to examine the role of specific sites – *pulquerías*, bordellos, a Belén jail – in fostering elite anxieties about the morality and hygiene of the city’s lower classes.

The crime stories proper begin with chapter two which recounts the moral panic generated by the gruesome rapes and murders of several Mexico City women of ‘ill repute’ – some but not all of them prostitutes – by Francisco Guerrero, aka ‘El Chalequero’ (aka ‘The Mexican Jack the Ripper’). Tried and convicted on two separate and very public occasions (1890 and 1908), Guerrero, a one-time butcher turned shoemaker from the peripheral barrio of Peralvillo, became an emblematic figure of lower-class degeneracy for a Porfirian elite ‘obsessed with the alleged danger posed by the imagined sexual prowess of shiftless poor men who prowled the urban colonias, seeking women and adventure’ (p. 43). According to Garza, Guerrero’s two trials provided Mexico City reporters with the perfect opportunity to take their readers on a horrifying (and titillating) trip to the ‘other side’ where killer, victim and barrio functioned symbolically as the ‘constitutive other’ – a term Garza resists using – of modern, civilised Mexico City and its more respectable residents (p. 66).

Chapter three involves a better part of town, a better class of criminal, and a different kind of news coverage. In this case, the odd man out in a classic love triangle is a mid-level government clerk, Luis Yzaguirre, who was tried and

convicted of the brutal shooting death of his sometime lover, María Piedad Ontiveros, who had taken up with his friend and patron at the National Treasury, Carlos Rodríguez. In contrast to the sordid tales spun around the life and times of the lower-class serial killer, 'El Chalequero', the Mexico City press – inspired perhaps by the recovery of the lovers' surprisingly frank correspondence – used the Ontiveros murder to explore the secret passions of the *gente decente*. Garza senses a certain 'discomfort with the murder as well as with its implied sexual history' on the part of Porfirian elites who 'pretended to direct the moral future of the country' (p. 72) because it exposed the criminality of the middle classes. Public fascination with the story is probably more complicated than that. According to influential European criminologists like Cesare Lombroso and Enrico Ferri (much cited by their Mexican counterparts), crimes of passion were typically the acts of 'occasional' criminals in response to specific circumstances. Rather than demonstrating the inherent criminality of a 'born' psychopath like Guerrero, the occasional criminal was often highly civilised – the victim of an overactive imagination and high strung personality. This reading of Yzaguirre's crime would have reinforced rather than subverted the classist attitudes of the Porfirian bourgeoisie.

Chapter four examines the public narratives generated by the brazen robberies of the private residence of prominent downtown merchant José María Brilanti and the La Profesa Jewelry Store (which also involved the murder of proprietor Tomás Hernández Aguirre) by informal gangs of *rateros* (street criminals). According to Garza, 'the Brilanti incident and the Profesa robbery undermined the façade of public order and, mostly importantly, brought the underworld to the ideological and social center of Porfirian modernity' (p. 98). In both instances, however, surprisingly thorough and successful police investigations demonstrated to concerned Mexico City residents (and potential foreign investors) 'how effectively the Porfirian regime could respond if its interests were perceived to be under attack' (p. 130). Garza's well-paced re-creation of those investigations also provides a fascinating look at the informal networks of mutual aid, protection, and coercion that sustained the capital's urban underworld – although in this case they failed to thwart the determined efforts of the recently modernised (if still brutal) Porfirian police.

Chapter five retells the story of the botched abortion of obstetrics nurse María Barrera by her lover Doctor Federico Abrego. Garza convincingly ties intense public interest in this case to the inroads of modern medicine and state-sponsored public health campaigns in Mexico and Latin America. At the same time, his argument that it 'threatened not only to undermine official efforts to promote modern medical science, but to link professional medicine with the imagined underworld' (p. 132) seems a bit overstated – especially since a combination of solid police work and careful forensics resulted in Abrego losing his medical license and military commission (even though medical commissioners couldn't determine whether Abrego rather than Barrera herself had committed the abortion). Stories like the Barrera-Abrego incident and the Brilanti and La Profesa robberies do reveal contemporary anxieties about dramatic social changes in the late Porfiriato but the successful resolution of the cases themselves could just as easily have worked to build confidence in the Porfirian regime and its modernisation efforts.

Chapter six recounts the well-known events surrounding the murder in his prison cell of failed presidential assassin Arnulfo Arroyo, probably on the orders of Mexico City police chief, Eduardo Velázquez, who subsequently committed suicide after his

own arrest. Here again, Garza sees the case undermining the regime because ‘the Porfirian inner circle ... worried that the entire scandal would tarnish Mexico’s international image’ (p. 171) without considering that its willingness to punish one of its own – Velázquez was an enthusiastic admirer of Porfirio Díaz – when he violated the law to curry the president’s favor could also be read as a sign of integrity. Although Porfirian efforts to criminalise the Mexico City underclass ‘ultimately ... collapsed under the weight of the government’s own criminality’ (p. 181), the Arroyo affair, like the others stories Garza retells so well, likely had little to do with that collapse since in every instance the forces of justice managed to prevail – which was probably not the case with more ordinary, less high profile crimes.

It is unfortunate that a short review provides no opportunity to convey the richness of detail that is *The Imagined Underworld’s* greatest virtue. Although Garza tends to oversimplify a complex discursive/ideological field – assuming a unified elite perspective, ignoring alternative interpretations, and so forth – he does so with admirable concision and clarity. Combined with his gift for re-telling a good story, these virtues make *The Imagined Underworld* an eminently readable and teachable book, one that will likely fascinate and educate students of Mexican history for some time.

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Iván Molina Jiménez, *Anticomunismo reformista: Competencia electoral y cuestión social en Costa Rica (1931–1948)* (San José: Editorial Costa Rica, 2007), pp. 222, pb.

This book is a valuable contribution to the study of social reform in Costa Rica in the 1940s and the civil war of 1948. The author sets out to explain the development within the *Partido Republicano* (PR, right-wing Liberal) of a Catholic social reform tendency, under the electoral leadership of Dr. Rafael Angel Calderón Guardia and the spiritual guidance of the Archbishop Victor Manuel Sanabria, head of the Catholic Church. According to Molina, the emergence and expansion of this group were accelerated by three key events. Firstly, the establishment of the Costa Rican Communist Party (CRCP) in 1931 and the appearance of its weekly magazine, *Trabajo*; secondly, the election of Communist legislators and municipal leaders, and; third, the increasing influence of the CRCP within labour unions. The selection of Calderón Guardia as the PR’s presidential candidate for the 1940 election, according to Molina, increased the influence of this new tendency. Nevertheless, the PR was soon replaced by a tripartite alliance between the CP, the Catholic Church and Calderón’s government. The emergence of the CP increased its right-wing adversaries’ fears; but it also provoked the emergence of more sophisticated adversaries, willing to update and improve their strategies, programmes and social commitments. Molina claims that Calderón’s approach of Catholic Social Reform was aimed, fundamentally, at combating the CP’s electoral successes.

In Molina’s opinion, the CP knew how to take advantage of its electoral opportunities in an open political system and capitalised on the social demands made acute by the 1929 world crisis. As with Jorge Volio’s Reformist Party, a reformist spirit emerged, only this time not under the Liberal aegis but rather as a new current of Social Catholicism. Molina sees this reaction as a response to the electoral challenge provoked by the CP, through the electoral exploitation in its favour of the so-called social question. Although the initial objective was to electorally defeat the CP, what