

Excerpts from

Julio Guerrero, *La génesis del crimen en México: un estudio de psiquiatría social*

(Mexico City, 1901)

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### **Abstract**

The author's major idea is that crime has social and historical origins (rather than being determined by geography). Guerrero argues that rural poverty and war overcrowded the cities, degenerating people and increasing criminality. Large urban centers implied that there was not enough work for all people (in this view, farming is the moral reserve and true wealth of a country) and unemployment makes work vicious and turns people lazy. The author shows how poverty and a poor diet result in social stagnation and degradation. Dissolution has historical origins. For Guerrero, the wars of independence and ensuing political instability and civil war was the historical origin of social dissolution. Despite the peace of the present day (circa 1900), the history of conflict appears again as an atavism, a habit. In the final chapter, the author proposes that civil war resulted in a religious crisis of catholicism that affected all groups of society, including the ruling classes. In contrast to the grim outlook of this work, the tone suddenly changes in the last paragraph when the author praises positivism and the firm leadership of Porfirio Díaz for saving Mexico from moral corruption and launching it to modern civilization.

### **Rural poverty and war (129-133)**

In effect, the insecurity that during seventy years reigned in the Republic concentrated people in the cities, destroyed many towns, and left the countryside abandoned... In the very rough struggle for existence, which produced the military period of our political evolution, people took refuge in isolated villages, [...] the cities being the places where the winners established themselves; and where one could, therefore, and, albeit intermittently, try some shadow of justice...

But this systematic exclusion of strange blood: natural and foul procreation of the refugees from the wars, the general misery of the country and the deep immorality of the lower classes everywhere, were the constant reason that in many places the rural population degenerated or was the prisoner of disgusting and contagious diseases... In remote train stations, there are always herds of beggars like those at Los Reyes; and in other times misery was so general in the small villages that travelers stopping in them risked starving to death if they were not carrying enough rations. In other parts ... it was said that their inhabitants were road thieves, arsonists...

In order to avoid, as much the dangers of a general lack of security, that are greater in small towns, and as well as the contact with folks of such moral corruption, the sane and honorable people, or simply those of moral habits no matter how humble they were, left the countryside as soon as they could and took refuge in the cities, a phenomenon already seen in medieval Europe and that happens as soon as the life of wars and banditry takes a permanent character. But then, this results, as it did in Mexico, in overcrowding in the cities, that became as dense compared to their means of subsistence as in the Chinese cities [...], at the same time that many and vast sections of the country were (and still remain) totally unpopulated.

### **Low wages and unemployment**

The insufficiency of salary caused by the human agglomeration in our cities has contributed in many ways to keeping people in stagnation for long years, since, as it barely maintains the day laborer, he could never set aside anything for savings, it was impossible for him to increase his comforts on life, to undertake something, even if it were on a reduced scale that permitted him

some spontaneous activity and some part of the benefits of production. On the contrary, labor competition has forced him to turn over to the tasks of his job all the time that was not necessary to him for the immediate satisfaction of his animal needs. He had been therefore condemned to not learn anything about a life different from his pigsty and his workshop; his intelligence had stagnated; and on top of it all he became inept to carry out a job superior to or distinct from the one he learned to earn money to eat with. These conditions have produced the social classes: that is to say, groups in which the progress in physical wellbeing, intellectual development and participation in general businesses in the community has remained subject to impassable limits, sometimes from generation to generation, obliging its members to live the same customs as their parents, forming or them a special intellectual coefficient and even a physical type to each one.

It is true that these consequences have been neutralized in part and are more so every day due to the growing relief that the labor market has been experiencing, as much because of immigration of the idle to other regions, as because of the increase of industrial enterprises. Thus we have seen that in only one year the salary of Mexico City has gone up, thanks to the deportation of petty thieves, the spontaneous emigration of other workers, who, taking advantage of the railroads, go where they can increase their daily wage or improve the environment where they live; and principally, thanks to the ease of changing jobs, which permits the growing industrialization of the capital. The definitive and fatal application to one and only one vocation therefore is disappearing, as well as the stagnation of aptitudes and the restriction on the commodities that he can enjoy...

### Social groups: The lowest class<sup>1</sup>

(a.)- Unfortunate men and women who have no normal or certain means of subsistence they live in the streets and sleep in public sleeping places crouched in the portales, in the shelters of doorways amid the rubbish of buildings in construction in some meson if they can pay for the space three or four centavos a night or stowed away in the house of some compadre or friend. They are beggars, gutter snipes, paper sellers,

grease buyers, rag pickers, scrub women, etc. With difficulty they earned twenty or thirty centavos daily now they may receive more but the general rise in prices leaves them in the same condition of misery. They are covered with rags they scratch themselves constantly in their tangled hair they carry the dust and mud of every quarter of the city. They never bathe themselves save when the rain drenches them, and their bare feet are cracked and calloused, and assume the color of the ground. In general, they do not attain to an old age, but to a precocious decrepitude, worn out by syphilis, misery, and drink.

The men and women of this class have completely lost modesty; their language is that of the drinking-house; they live in sexual promiscuity, get drunk daily, frequent the lowest pulquerias of the meanest quarters; they quarrel and are the chief causes of disorders; they form the ancient class of Mexican leperos; from their bosom the ranks of petty thieves and pickpockets are recruited, and they are the industrious plotters of important crimes. They are insensible to moral suffering, and physical suffering pains them but little, and pleasures give them little joy. Venereal disease and abortion render the women of the group refractory to motherhood; paternity is impossible on account of the promiscuity in which they live; these two natural springs of altruism destroyed, they are indifferent to humane sentiments and egoistic in the animal fashion.

Everywhere they may be seen, the repulsive feature of our streets. In speaking they reveal a dwarfed intelligence, as sadly ruined by their life as is their body. Their ideas are rudimentary notions derived from the common talk of the streets, comments on public events — the escape of one criminal, the sentence of another, the deportation of their companions, the capture of some "crook." They are godless, with feeble superstition regarding the saints depicted on their scapulars or the medal of the rosary, which they wear beneath their filthy shirt. Their number is enormous; they constitute the dregs of the laboring classes, and their presence betrays the vortices of vice, where the outcasts of civilization are dragged down.

<sup>1</sup> This section is taken from Starr's translation in *Readings from Modern Mexican Authors*, 165-167.

### Industrial workers (164-168)

(b.) – The industrial movement, which has developed lastly in the Republic, has formed the class of workers or machine operators; that is to say, of the workers without special knowledge of any profession, enter to carry out the muscular tasks of factories and workshops... They are between 14 and 40 years of age, they rarely live longer; and their daily wage, which in 1896 was from 37-75 cents, today fluctuates between 35-100: the boys do not arrive at the first rate; and the women have half a daily rate; between that of the adults and that of the adolescents. Of the free classes this is the first that uses shoes and pants. The women wrap themselves in shawls (rebozos), they wear suit jackets and petticoats of percale and they show up at work, hair done in two braids that come together down the back...

They live in rooms surrounded by the neighborhoods of the barrios [...] and they split the rent sometimes between two or three workers for three of four pesos a month. The use of artificial light begins in this class, although restricted to the first hours of the night: the use of housewares also begins in it, with some cheap clay pieces, a little table of white sticks, the bed a sleeping bag on benches. The image of some saint nailed to the wall, and a vase for the always-burning oil lamp complete the housewares.

They brag about being free to break off any romantic relationship, with marriage being very rare among them. The women try not to have more than one lover at a time, in theory; but in reality they have many men. The men, for their part, get entangled with all the women they can, which frequently causes brawls between rivals, which, with more or less bloodshed, they finish with a change of lover and of residence.... For some, the workplace instills civilizing discipline, some ideas of order, personal decorum, altruism and subordination to duty; but they abandon them easily when they labor outside of their influence, and following their personal inclinations. The foremen need much vigilance to avoid thefts; and they have special employees who register them as they leave the workplace.

They are completely illiterate; the majority does not know how to read: of the world, they sometimes do not know more than their neighborhood; that of the factory and some neighboring towns of the capital... the scandalous chronicle of their neighborhoods, and some outlandishly adulterated episodes of national glories complete their illustration.

### Artisans and the middle classes (171-173)

The third class has evolved more than those previously mentioned; and it is composed of men and women who form a definitive home, although not insoluble, and confront all the responsibilities that the formation and maintenance of a family implies...

This group is composed of artisans, gendarmes, low-level business employees, and public offices, clerks, subordinate officers of the army, etc.: Very rarely are they joined by civil links: the majority are only linked that way through religious marriage: or through a simple living together, but this becomes a lifelong connection often. Instead of room they inhabit clean housing, and in more central neighborhoods than the workers: they drink pulque with their food, but they condemn drunkenness, at least in theory. The men wear suits of goat hair composed of a suit plaid *jacket* and felt hat. The women wear percale and a rebozo at home: a shawl of black merino *to go out*. They adorn themselves with earrings, brooches for scarves and silver rings: they use silverware at meals; they have a maid generally: they light their homes with kerosene: and they know the use of pantyhose and scarves: but they do not use a corset or other undergarments.

Masculine fidelity is broken often, but women keep their sworn faith; and they are modest and chaste and disgusted by obscene words and acts. The men have their inconstancy of religious incredulity; but the women are sincerely Catholic; lifting up their creed in many degrees compared to the worker woman...

Their dominant passion is vanity of the women for the position of their husband or lover, and the dominant passion of the men is valor. They always speak of exploits over drinks of anis liquor they themselves carried out and while they play dominoes in the corner cantina. They do not get past primary school; they read slowly, they write with crooked letters, and they keep track of the expenses and purchases with chickpeas and beans. They go to *shows* on Sunday afternoons, they sing pieces of traditional operettas, they dance to violin, flute and *bandolón* (guitar) and songs and *folkdances* and in their homes on their saints' days, and although they usually end in arguments, very seldom do they require police intervention.

The men have an education far superior to that of the women, although still of a low level, and besides the techniques of their job or the one

that give them their occupation, they are familiar with a large part of the Republic; because the majority are *out of towners*: they form a rather clear idea of news and newspaper articles; but they are furiously affectionate of the fabulous and the tragic. In matters of politics they form a very considerable group of budding Jacobins, although there is no lack of feeble spirits among them, who without fixed political opinions, reject categorically the tenets of Jacobinism.

### **The ruling classes (177-182)**

The last class includes [...] lawyers, professors, large merchants, ranch owners, military members, high employees of the government, etc. They live in single family houses or main housing with different parts for distinct domestic needs, and with different housewares for each of them. *Comfort* begins in them; and it becomes luxury according to resources; but there is a general condition of clothing among them: as it is, the carpet, the dress in style, freeing themselves of traditional patterns, gloves for formal occasions, and for street clothes, on the women, parasols, hats, perfumes and underwear.

Morally, they are characterized by honesty in the language and private habits. The heads of families regulate them in a constant manner... The women are faithful and they are united to their husbands by civil and religious ties, which they do not break by divorce, or by illicit separations; even though the husbands in general have more or less transcendental slip-ups of love. But above all what characterizes them is an inexhaustible altruism, and a delicacy of sentiments entirely peculiar to them... Daughters of Spanish and mestiza ladies from the colonial period, educated in the same maxims of virtue as them, and glazed in the bloody period of our political uprisings, are the end product of a long educational selection that has constituted them in a psychic type of the human species. They are genuinely aristocratic creatures; that is to say, exquisite organism in which many of the selfish instincts have atrophied; and whose needs and psychic manifestations have lost the organic roughness of nature. They always have sentences of compassion for all miseries: they pardon all faults; and before the head of the household they are untiring intercessors, in order to impede the public and domestic authority at their husbands' disposal is exerted with severity. They always find ways to economize, in order to give bread to the

needy; and orphans, poor shamefaced girls, or old handicapped people never go to them without receiving from them clothes, or help in the form of money, while the women never show off their charity....

The *decent lady*, which is what one designates a Mexican woman who fulfills these conditions, and who in herself condenses the most valued qualities of our society, also has a national type. Of tall stature rather than short; svelte of figure and with well-rounded breasts, the face of a pale wheat color that easily turns red with flushes of modesty; soft, long, abundant black or dark brown hair, small feet and hands, black almond-shaped eyes, and half-closed looks, in which the most pure ideas shine; they come and they go constantly, with their nervous walk, through halls lined with flower pots and birds, or under the *portieres* of the parts of the house, carrying the child clutched onto her skirt and spreading life and happiness in the house where they reign over husbands, brothers, sons and domestic staff with the empire of love.

It is true that other, very different types coexist along with her. There is the skinny and long prudish woman, of dark brown and polish by a lack of cleanliness, a tobacco user who neglects her obligations to live at Church, or to slander among cigar smoke, and in circle of female companions, her neighbor or relatives. There is the clandestine neighborhood conniver, who in her desire to appear rich, sells the honor of her husband and spends on beauty products and hats the income of the house or the weekly budget. There are others, lazy and obese, without more ideas in their heads than future menus or the memory of famous balls, others in whom physiological rickets dries their spirit, and who, full of somber ideas, slide through their existence like ghosts in dark and silent houses, with closed doors and images of Dolorosas and crucifixes. There are hysterical ones, nervous ones, irritable ones, intransigent ones, meddling in everything that does not matter for them; and whose presence in the house is revealed by their shouts at their husbands, nagging their children, disputes with the help and arguments with the neighbors...

### **The historical origins of violence (214-220)**

Military regimented bands prowled from the Mountains of the South to the steppes bordering Coahuila... The Ministers of State who were moving from Querétaro to Mexico City were assaulted, part of their escort killed and the other

scattered ; and the Congress could not meet on July 6, 1848, a fixed day in the session, because, fearing the thieves, the deputies did not dare put themselves on the road. On the 19th, no more than twenty-two deputies arrived at the capital, that is to say, less than half necessary for a *quorum*.

Theft generalized until consciousness of its immorality was lost, and still the government exercised it like feudal lords from the Middle Ages; the king of Abyssinia or the emperors of Morocco. Santa Ana, for example, in 1835 entered Zacatecas and his soldiers, asking for the expulsion of foreigners by shouts, robbed the stores and appropriated armaments worth \$2,000,000... Fresnillo was sacked and Santa Ana seized 20,000 metal charges belonging to private citizens. The official newspaper said with all cynicism that: "public coffers being exhausted, Divine Providence had helped them with that find."

With that official incentive, the continued existence of thieves was exacerbated and in 1852 the travelers on the Alameda in the capital were assaulted; and mounted squads were posted in the *watchtowers*, lying in wait for travelers, whom they roped, dragged and robbed...

A moment arrived in which [...] trade no longer transported currency on the roads, and even household goods were destroyed. Theft became a plague, and even in the center streets of Mexico City those who had a reputation of wealth were assaulted... We arrived at the economic epoch of the primitive towns, in which the *only wealth* accessible to the prowling bands of the villages was man himself, they catch him and sell to other tribes, as the Tuaregs of the Sahara and Sudan still do.

The most famous of the professional thieves that devastated the Republic, and whose fame is perhaps without rival in all human history, was the Indian Manuel Lozada, known as the "Tiger of Alica", who in the mountains of Nayarit in the state of Jalisco enthroned himself as absolute despot for close to thirty years; without the federal or state governments being able to dominate him... In order to finish him off two campaigns and a full-blown battle, that of the Mojonera, which cost the federal troops 203 dead, 115 wounded and 193 missing. Lozada attacked with a force of 6000 men and three pieces of artillery.

### **The crisis of religion (389-390)**

The twilight of religion that came to Mexico with the clash of Church and State [...] was then tragical to all society because it corrupted the authorities with the same logic that dissolved family. If all society did not follow the corrupting example of officers and the skeptic thinkers and Jacobins, it was because of the same isolating elements that resulted from its almost secular anarchy, and because in those empty roads, which remained deserted for entire months, it was impossible to move as a single mass under a single impulse. Virtue found refuge in modest households, and under the security of the prevailing military order, small towns laid tree-lined streets and white houses to receive the purity of the women, the honor of the men and other virtues of the old creoles and Mexican mestizos who ran away from the capital cities. And, yet, the disease would have reached even there and society would have disappeared in a swamp if it were not for ... the scientific training of professionals; if industrialism had not implanted the workshop moral in the masses; and if a Chief of State of untouchable customs had not, with his example and twenty years of administrative effort, purified the public offices. Since then, scientific altruism, the utilitarianism of contracts, and legal obligation constitute the superior moral faith with which the Mexican people, unattached to catholicism, has launched themselves to cooperate in the modern civilization.