

# Notes on the Humanities of the Mexican Revolution

(1910-1920)

## NOTES ON THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

In brief, the Mexican Revolution began when Francisco I. Madero (1873-1913) was elected President of Mexico against the autocratic previous dictatorial president, Porfirio Díaz. A violent civil war ensued when Madero was assassinated. The contending parties were led, variously, by Victoriano Huerta, Venustiano Carranza, Álvaro Obregón, Emiliano Zapata, and Francisco (Pancho) Villa. The civil war-revolution ended with the eventual victory of Obregón. A general synoptic outline of the events of the Mexican Revolution are found in the [Mexican country notes](#).

## NOTES ON THE NOVEL OF THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

The literary genre of the novel and mural art are the two major humanistic expressions that responded to and arose from the events of the Mexican Revolution. In particular, both humanistic forms can be seen at the center of movement toward regionalism that dominates Latin American humanities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Another way to view this extraordinarily rich phenomenon (which is due to a major historical event) is to say that this intense period is a transition between Mexican naturalism that flourished at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and 20<sup>th</sup> century humanistic trends that develop out of Mexico's revolutionary art forms. The Ateneo de México, which began as the Ateneo de la Juventud Mexicana, Athanaeum of Mexican Youth, was a secular association that began in 1909 and was at the center of the humanities renaissance in Mexico. It became a model for similar societies throughout Latin America. It worked in the fields of culture and art, and it arose as a vigorous response of a generation of young intellectuals who, at the end of the long dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1871-1910), launched a critique against the 19<sup>th</sup> century enthusiasm for determinism and Comtian and Spencerian positivism, which were the basis for Porfirio Díaz's national top-down modernization program. Above all the members of the Ateneo (especially José Vasconcelos, Mariano Azuela, and Martín Luis Guzmán), called for a major campaign to create a broad social and cultural vision for education in Mexico. This generation of Mexican intellectuals is known as the Generación del Ateneo (the Generation of the Athenaeum). Among the issues they promoted were freedom of speech and ideas in schools, and the reaffirmation of cultural, ethical and ethnic values inherent throughout Latin America. In this regard, they opposed the previous generation's focus on European and U.S.A. values, styles, and ideas. In addition, they set out to assess the major changes in Mexican society accompanying industrialization and urbanization. The major voice in this movement was José Vasconcelos.

A parallel movement arose in Brazil in which young intellectuals sought to move away from the Europeanizing modernization prevalent in what, in Brazil, was called the República de los Coroneles (Republic of the Coronels, 1889-1930). For a significant cultural example of this movement in 19<sup>th</sup> century Brazil, see the presentation on Manaus (=> Manaus).

In Mexico, we find that many of the political and economic principles that drove the events of the Mexican Revolution are also found in themes in the novels that arose out of this movement: violence, just redistribution of land for the peasants, nationalization of natural resources, Indians struggle for authentic citizenship, resistance against foreign economic invasion, and conflicts between traditional Catholicism and modern politics. In general, the novelists in this movement were not revolutionaries themselves; on the contrary, they tended to be pessimists, antitheorists, anti-intellectuals, fatalists who admired local *caudillos* (i.e., Latino strongmen or warlords), and bitter. But they all shared a strong fear of returning to the way things were before the Revolution.

Representatives of the various offshoots of the "novel of the Mexican Revolution" are: (1) Indian-centered narratives (*narrativa indianista*) as in some of the novels produced by Gregorio López y Fuentes; (2) socio-political protest literature (José Revueltas); (3) provincial focus literature (José Rubén Romero, Agustín Yáñez, and Juan Rulfo). One other offshoot of this literary movement can be seen in novels about the *Cristero* revolt (1926-1929) as in, for example, *Pensativa* by Jesús Goytortúa (1945).

**Mariano Azuela** (1873-1952). This Mexican intellectual was a liberal medical doctor, and he was a talented humanist and writer. He was thoroughly opposed to the Porfiriato (the dictatorial régime of Porfirio Díaz), and he also opposed General Huerta, who, at the beginning of the Mexican Revolution, commanded Madero's federal forces in order to fight against the leftist revolutionaries Villa and Zapata. In 1913, Huerta concluded a conspiracy with a *golpe de estado* (coup d'état) against Madero by ordering Madero executed. Azuela then joined the federal constitutionalist forces of General Carranza until the latter was assassinated in 1920. After the Revolution, Azuela withdrew from direct political activity. His early works were generally written in the naturalist mode that dominated Mexican cultural expression before the Revolution. His most important work is *Los de abajo* (1916; *The Underdogs*). In this and later works, he demonstrates his talent for keen observation of social reality. At the same time, as a representative Mexican he portrays the Catholic Christian aspects of the Mexican character and social institutions. *Los de abajo* dramatically chronicles the progressive march of the Mexican people toward social maturity, but, at the same time, he highlights the quasi-mythical destiny of *la raza mexicana* (the Mexican people in their ethnic identity) with its inherent strength of character and its age-old stoicism in the face of defeat. This novel, therefore, deploys a tone of bitter despair and the pathos of

heroic failure. It is, in sum, an anti-epic that shows the heroism of the collective will of the *raza mexicana*.

**Martín Luis Guzmán** (1887-1967) was perhaps the most prominent prose chronicler of the Mexican Revolution. He worked in the intellectual and humanistic fields of mural art, journalism, politics, and law. He personally lived the events and traumas of the Mexican Revolution from beginning to end and beyond. He earned his living as the director of several world-class newspapers: *El Sol* (Spain), *El Gráfico* (New York City), and *Tiempo* (Mexico City). Among his major novels are *El águila y la serpiente* (1928, a monumental chronicle in prose fiction of the Mexican Revolution), *La sombra del caudillo* (1929), and *Memorias de Pancho Villa* (4 volumes, 1938-1940). Guzmán's strength lies in his ability to see men in action as individuals in the intricacies of historical events; he depicts heroes and antiheroes equally. In other words, he develops characters a narrative figures that fight and struggle to be transformed into novelistic protagonists. Guzmán captures the look and feel of things, events, and people he knows directly and personally.

**José Rubén Romero** (1890-1952) was a Mexican ambassador to various countries, and he was also an autobiographical novelist. In his most renowned work, *La vida inútil de Pito Pérez* (1938), he projects a provincial, Christian, Mexican middle class point of view that demonstrates a pious care for the underprivileged. Romero evokes provincial life along the Michoacán coast via descriptions of typical people, customs, and places.

**Gregorio López y Fuentes** (1897-1975) was the son of a shopkeeper. He was a teacher, journalist, and novelist who fought with Mexicans against the American invasion of Veracruz at the beginning of the Mexican Revolution. He fought alongside the forces of Carranza against Pancho Villa's forces. In his most famous novel, *El indio* (1935), he uses stylization and allegory to depict life of the downtrodden masses in terms of the clash between two cultures (i.e., Western vs. Indian). In this novel, López y Fuentes attempts to capture the soul of the Indian by searching for ancient psychological traits. The overall tone and effect is that of cold objectivity.

## NOTES ON THE ART OF THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION

Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco are the three major muralists who dealt intensely with themes relating to the Mexican Revolution. For notes on Diego Rivera, see: => [Diego Rivera](#). For notes on Siqueiros and Orozco, see: => [Notes on Mexican Muralism](#).

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