

The Underdogs: Mariano Azuela, Writing, and Infrapolitics

Mariano Azuela's *The Underdogs* (*Los de abajo*, 1915) is generally considered to be the first novel of the Mexican Revolution. Indeed, it was published (in El Paso, Texas) while the conflict was still ongoing—the armed phase of the revolution began in late 1910 and continued even after the declaration of a new, revolutionary constitution in 1917. There was fighting until at least 1920, with sporadic further violence even thereafter. The fact that the struggle to forge a new Mexico was so long and drawn-out is a sign that the revolution was a messy affair, involving many different factions featuring rival leaders with distinct aims and agendas, some of whom turned on each other, prolonging the upheaval. Azuela's novel puts us in the middle of things: set in 1913 to 1915, it depicts a point at which much of the initial enthusiasm for revolutionary change had already turned to disenchantment, and yet the turmoil showed no sign of abating. The revolution was becoming a way of life.

Even in the midst of its twists and turns, Azuela faced the twin problem of how to narrate the revolution, how to turn it into a story that made a kind of sense, while acknowledging that the conflict was not one thing but many, not one story but many stories, and that it could (still) have many different and perhaps contradictory outcomes. There was also the question of how to do justice to people's experience of a period that often did not seem to make sense, before a narrative arrived to construct order and impose a chain of causes and consequences. Sense-making is a matter for writers, for intellectuals and politicians, who are almost always late to the scene and neither fully part of it nor able entirely to transcend or rise above it. In Azuela's novel, such ideologues are supplements (parasites), who stir up trouble as they idealize the fighting, but who also fade away, defeated by it. Ultimately, the task of imposing retrospective narrative logic and order on the turmoil was taken up by the PRI, the Institutional Revolutionary Party that governed Mexico from 1929, which told the story of the Revolution in such a way as to amass a stock of political capital that lasted over seven decades, until they were finally voted out of office at the end of the century. By contrast, *Azuela reveals aspects of the Revolution that are apolitical, anti-political, or even infrapolitical (the non-political conditions of possibility for the political), in that he depicts it in terms of drives and emergent habits that have not yet fully coalesced into political form.*

1. *From Affect to Ideology*

The book's central figure is Demetrio Macías. We are told that he had been a fairly ordinary highland peasant who took up arms after a run-in with the local *cacique* or political bigwig, with whom he had a relatively minor disagreement: "I spit on his beard 'cause he wouldn't mind his own business, and tha's that, there's nothing else to tell." The *cacique* heads to the nearest town to seek help from the army detachment stationed there, accusing Macías of being "about to rise up and join the revolution" (40), but this is a self-fulfilling prophecy: by the time he returns, Macías has indeed run off, gathering a few other local malcontents to head up what is effectively a guerrilla band loosely affiliated with the forces of famed revolutionary Pancho Villa. He is propelled into permanent rebellion, with no turning back, when the Federales (government troops) burn his house down. Over the course of the novel, his group nomadically wander around northern Mexico, picking up more fellow-travellers, more or less following directions from revolutionary high command, but more generally causing gleeful mayhem wherever they go—the revolution is almost a game to them; "We're just about ready to tell Villa and Carranza to go off and play without us," says Macías at one point (128). By the end, he has been promoted to General, but his group has disintegrated in the face of the enemy's superior fire power and technology ("unleash[ing] its machine guns" [133]). Macías is alone again, cornered and vastly outgunned, but going down fighting: "His famous marksmanship fills him with joy. He hits everywhere he sets his eye" (134). As a "pure white fog" descends, he fades from sight, into the violence.

The novel's other main figure, Macías's counterpoint, is a very different kettle of fish, and by the novel's conclusion he has long disappeared from the action, to another fate altogether. This is Luis Cervantes, a "medical student and journalist" (20), who stumbles into camp early on, a deserter from the other side. Viewed with suspicion and contemptuously called a *curro* (a "city slicker" or dandy) by Macías's men, he takes some time to be integrated into the group—and even then he does not stick around for long. We last hear from him via a letter that he sends back from north of the border, where he is seeking capital to set up a business. But so long as he is with Macías and his gang, he declares himself a "coreligionist": "I am a believer of the same ideals and [. . .] I fight for the same cause." Asked, however, what that cause is, Cervantes is "disconcerted, [he] did not know how to answer" (20). Tongue-tied for a change, the student has nothing to say.

So what *is* Cervantes's cause? And what does the difference (but also the complicity) between him and Macías tell us about the Revolution? How do the two men complement or contrast with each other? Jot down some notes—again, you can also put them in the comments. While you do that, I'll have a glass of Mezcal, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Mezcal

There is a lot of drinking in *The Underdogs*: beer, wine, tequila, mezcal, and other spirits. At times, “the drunken yelling and the loud laughter and singing are ceaseless” (77). Alcohol helps to motivate and fuel the revolutionaries. They are in a bar, “packed to the gunnels,” when the news comes through, transmitted by Luis Cervantes, that they “have been ordered to leave immediately and go after the Orozquistas.” The response is immediate: “Everything was cheer and rejoicing. In the excitement of drunkenness, Demetrio's friends offered to join his ranks” (95, 96). But although everyone drinks, social demarcations prevail: intellectuals or would-be intellectuals such as Cervantes drink wine; Macías and his men tend to drink beer, tequila, or mezcal; Macías “prefers the clear tequila of Jalisco to bubbly champagne that fizzes under dim candlelight” (73). But on breaking into the house of his old nemesis, the *cacique* Don Mónico, he orders wine—“Bring me wine right here!” (88)—as though to assert that the two men are now on the same level. Mezcal, meanwhile, a spirit distilled from the agave cactus, is here associated with parties and merriment, and is drunk “for the pleasure of meeting you” (61).

As critic Patrick Duffey observes, one of the key distinctions between Macías and Cervantes, is that the latter can read and write, while the former belongs to a predominantly oral culture: “What separates Demetrio's reality from Luis's is literacy” (“A War of Words” 175). Moreover, this is not simply a distinction but also an antagonism. In Duffey's words, there is a “conflict between the situational, concrete thinking of the oral culture represented by Demetrio and others, and the generalized, abstract thinking of the literate culture represented by Luis and others” (173). Indeed, Macías and his men are often actively hostile towards the technology of writing: they break open a desk, they burn books and papers (*The Underdogs* 77-79). At one point, one of them buys a looted typewriter that has been circulating through an “unruly mob,” rapidly depreciating every time it is bought and sold, as nobody has much idea what to

do with it. Its final owner, then, buys it for a mere twenty-five cents and solely for “the pleasure of lifting the machine in his hands and hurling it hard against a big stone, where it shattered loudly” (62). In some ways, this is an indignant protest against machine culture—and not without reason, in that it is the introduction of machine guns that ultimately puts paid to Macías and his gang. But there is also a specific animus and suspicion towards the written word and all that comes with it.



Postcard featuring Pancho Villa and his general staff

At the same time, there is a complicity between Cervantes and Macías, and between orality and literacy, that goes both ways. For better or worse, for instance, the revolutionary high command seems to communicate though the written word, and when a missive arrives it falls to Cervantes to “[scan] the communication” and report to Macías on what it says (107). Moreover, Macías and his men recognize that there is power in literacy. There are times at which they are more ambivalent, suspicious but grudgingly respectful, towards Cervantes and his capacities: “Truth is,” one of them comments, “he’s one of those who understands things good, since he knows how to read and write” (43). The *curro* is useful to them, which is why they do not simply send him packing when he

turns up unbidden. Specifically, he “explains things,” as Macías notes, by which he means that Cervantes is able to transform a rebellious drive rooted in affect and habit (“We go along fightin’ as best as we can” [41]) into eloquent and persuasive discourse: “You have risen up against the cacique system itself, the system that is devastating the entire nation. We are constitutive pieces of a great social movement that will lead to the exaltation of our motherland” (42). Cervantes may not have a cause of his own, but he is able to articulate the discontented and somewhat chaotic energies of the rural revolutionaries and frame them as a coherent political project. He translates revolutionary violence into lofty sentiment. He makes ideology out of affect.

2. *From Sublime Articulation to Infrapolitics*

It is not just among the revolutionaries that we see the transformative power of discourse, or of a certain type of discourse, that takes material facts of violence and presents them as something almost sublime. On the government side, we see how, almost in the midst of battle, a Lieutenant Campos is already proleptically preparing the certified narrative of what will have happened: “well satisfied with himself, he began to pace back and forth and to think about the official dispatch he would write in his rendering of events. [. . .] ‘It is my pleasure to congratulate you, esteemed Minister, for this triumph on behalf of the troops of the Republic. Long live His Honor General Don Victoriano Huerta! Long live Mexico!’” Immediately thereafter, however, “a report of gunfire went off, leaving [Campos’s] ears ringing” (54), as though to give the lie to the lieutenant’s attempt to provide a heroic narrative that would glorify the nation state and its leaders. Even so, it is startling how quickly the story of the revolution—even competing stories—begin to ossify and become entrenched in political form.

Even Macías and his men are entranced to hear their own—but not really their own—story told to them, and learn to parrot it for themselves. One of them, Venancio, is “nearly beside himself” on first hearing Cervantes’s reformulation of what the Revolution was about: “Yes, yes. Exactly what I was thinking” (42). French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe such *post hoc* claiming of a subject position (saying “I” to a discourse articulated by others) in terms of “a wonderstruck ‘So *that’s* what it was’” (*Anti-Oedipus* 18). Similarly, when another would-be intellectual, an otherwise disenchanted officer in the revolutionary camp named Alberto Solís, somewhat cynically “use[s] his free-flowing words and the same deeply sincere tone to congratulate Macías effusively

for his deeds in battle," the former peasant is "charmed" to hear "the recounting of his exploits, composed and embellished in such a manner that he himself almost did not recognize them. In fact, the tales sounded so good that he ended up recounting them in the same way and in the same tone, and even believing that that was how they had actually occurred" (60). The story is so good that even its protagonists are seduced into believing it. In the process, they become political subjects, subjects and not simply objects of a narrative that has been woven for them in line with a pattern set elsewhere.

But Azuela is interested in forestalling this process, if at all possible. He wants us to remain in the middle of things! He repeatedly returns to these moments of articulation, points of inflection in which the revolutionary subject becomes political, as though to try to understand how they work, knowing that in the end they explain nothing. When the news comes that Villa has been defeated—his opponent "Carranza's winning everywhere. We're ruined!"—one of Macías's men responds: "Villa? Obregón? Carranza? X . . . Y . . . Z! What do I care? I love the revolution like I love an erupting volcano! I love the volcano because it is a volcano and the revolution because it is the revolution!" Affect persists, despite everything: he turns for a bottle of tequila, "his soul brimming with joy" (124). Later, asked why he is "still fightin'," Macías "picks up a small rock, and throws it toward the bottom of [a] canyon. [. . .] 'Look at that rock. . . how nothin' can stop it now'" (132). The revolution has its own logic, its own ceaseless energy, which might be better seen not as political but as what Alberto Moreiras calls "infrapolitical" in so far as infrapolitics is "the absolute difference between life and politics, therefore also between being and thinking. Of which no expert can speak. Of which you can speak only while not speaking" (*Infrapolitics* 85). Even Solís seems to come to a similar conclusion when he thinks he finds "a symbol of the revolution in [. . .] clouds of smoke and dust rising fraternally, embracing each other, blending together and then dissipating into nothing. / 'Ah!' he exclaimed suddenly. 'That's it!'" Almost immediately, however, he hears "a buzzing in his ears. . . Then eternal darkness and silence. . ." (*The Underdogs* 69). It is not that the Revolution is ineffable and abstract. There is, after all, nothing more elementally material than smoke: the basic particles of materiality, suspended in the air. They simply cannot fully be contained, cannot be captured or articulated without becoming something else, even if that be no more than dust, dirt, or ashes.

Ultimately, Cervantes abandons the revolutionaries, sending back only a letter encouraging one of them to come north of the border, open a Mexican restaurant, “and in a very short time we can be rich” (120). Yes, he opts out of the corruption and the ceaseless violence. Yes, as a result, he is the only one to survive to the novel’s final pages. But that is because, however much he tries to articulate the spirit of the Revolution, it is clear at every moment that he misses it entirely. The revolution forever escapes its political articulation; it lurks beyond the horizon of representation.

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Song: “La Adelita” (Amparo Ochoa)