

VILLA AND POPULAR  
POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY  
IN MARIANO AZUELA'S *Los de abajo*

Chapter 2

MEXICAN LITERATURE DISCOVERS A SOCIAL CLASS

In October 1914, physician and novelist Mariano Azuela joined the troops of Villista general Julián Medina in Guadalajara with the rank of colonel. "I then satisfied one of my greatest longings," he wrote many years later, "to live together with the genuine revolutionaries, the underdogs, since until then my observations had been limited to the tedious world of the petite bourgeoisie."<sup>1</sup> The novelist's encounter with the "genuine revolutionaries," that is, the peasants who had taken up arms against the federal government, had a decidedly literary goal: to observe their world; to immerse himself in its atmosphere and language; and, eventually, to write a work that would reveal the human dimensions of the armed conflict. Azuela's contact with the Villista army also provided an invigorating spiritual antidote to the conventional and socially rigid world of which he was a part, and it proved to be a productive experience. A year later, in October 1915, a newspaper in El Paso, Texas, began publishing his campaign notes in installments under the title *Los de abajo: Cuadros y escenas de la revolución actual* (The Underdogs: Views and Scenes from the Current Revolution).<sup>2</sup>

Azuela's literary project was innovative. *Los de abajo* was not centered on the petite bourgeoisie, as had been most literary production during the Porfirian dictatorship.<sup>3</sup> Instead, Azuela focused on the popular classes, whose overwhelming presence during the revolution, especially between 1913 and 1915, had become a human reality that Mexico's dominant society could no longer ignore. This change in focus from one social group to another incorporated new social terrain, expanding the human register of the Mexican novel and giving it a breadth previously unknown.<sup>4</sup>

Azuela is credited with founding the "novel of the masses" in Mexico.<sup>5</sup> He accomplished this in three main ways. First, for the first time in the history of the Mexican novel, he assigned the role of protagonist to the "bajo pueblo," the rural lower classes. The construction of this collective

character was unprecedented at the time in Mexico. It demanded innovative narrative techniques that used montage sequencing, quick cuts in action and setting, and a rapid, nervous tempo as the author moved back and forth from the affairs of the masses to those of individuals.

Second, Azuela was able successfully to re-create the language of the masses, which he collected during his months of campaigning with the Villistas. The great number and variety of colloquial expressions that appear in the novel are strongly rooted in the forms of popular speech.<sup>6</sup>

Third, Azuela's narrative offered a view of "a social division among the characters, between the guileless and the spontaneous (of rural extraction) and the opportunists and corrupt (of urban extraction)."<sup>7</sup> These three elements, along with the readily identifiable events that make up the historical background of the novel guaranteed its overwhelming truth effect.

Despite these elements and formal innovations, *Los de abajo* went largely unnoticed for ten years. The reasons for this neglect by Mexico's literary critics are not difficult to ascertain. Literary criticism, a precarious enough activity even under normal circumstances, was necessarily brought to a halt by the revolutionary war. This hiatus lasted through the early 1920s. In addition, the fact that Azuela was a writer from the provinces who was living outside the literary circles of Mexico City delayed the appreciation of his undeniable skill as a novelist. Finally, time had to pass for a new cultural climate to emerge in Mexico, one inspired by the social struggles of the revolution and stimulated by the state's cultural policy, before Azuela's *Los de abajo* could begin to receive the recognition it deserved. Beginning with Calles in 1924, the revolutionary governments began explicitly to favor the production of literary works with a social orientation and designed to contribute to an understanding of the recent conflicts and to instill in readers an awareness of the social problems facing Mexico.<sup>8</sup> This cultural policy was largely directed not at the rural classes but at an urban, middle-class population that needed to be educated about and "sensitized" to the terrible reality of abuse, exploitation, and violence that reigned in the countryside. Azuela's audacious look into the world of revolutionary peasants began to achieve renown in the context of this predominantly urban cultural project.

Critics have extensively analyzed the history of the discovery of *Los de abajo* by Mexico City's intellectual elite and its eventual acceptance as the quasi-official text of the revolution.<sup>9</sup> Briefly, the "discovery" happened in the context of a 1925 debate "that may be taken as the foundation of the revolutionary political and cultural project desired for twentieth-

century Mexico.”<sup>10</sup> Azuela’s novel came into its own in the course of this controversy between the old guard of literary critics and a younger group of emerging middle-class intellectuals who were in many respects more attuned to the social and aesthetic changes taking place in Mexico and abroad. The old guard bemoaned the fact that no truly “virile” (i.e., revolutionary) literature existed, able to express the courage, epic spirit, suffering, and redemptive meaning of the armed struggle in Mexico. The new critics pointed to *Los de abajo*, at the time a little-known novel by an unknown writer, as evidence that such literature did indeed exist. A lively debate ensued for several months in Mexico City’s newspapers.<sup>11</sup> As the novel gained notoriety, Azuela’s focus on peasant rebellion became exemplary of the literary nationalism espoused by the postrevolutionary regimes, and his work eventually came to be regarded as *the* paradigmatic text of the revolution.

Three basic questions are posed by this gradual institutionalization of Azuela’s *Los de abajo* within modern Mexican culture. First, what image does a Liberal writer molded by the positivist education of his time construct of the rebellious peasant, and what vision of society does this image support? Second, what are the structural factors that place ideological limits on Azuela’s narrative? Third, is it possible to extract from the novel itself a subaltern perspective on the peasant revolution, a perspective that may even run contrary to the author’s own ideas? A rigorous rereading of Azuela is required to answer these questions, paying particular attention to the symbolic dimension of Villismo in the novel.

The sociohistorical structure of *Los de abajo* parallels the history of the Villista movement in Jalisco between 1913 and 1915, as Stanley Robe has demonstrated.<sup>12</sup> Villismo is not, however, merely a historical point of reference. Mónica Mansour has observed that the distant, ethereal figure of Pancho Villa is the “implicit axis of the novel.”<sup>13</sup> The cultural semiotics at work in this novel can readily be discerned by studying the construction of the figure of Villa as well as the attitudes of the characters and of the narrator toward him.

Two very different and antagonistic conceptions of the revolution fuel this semiotic. The dominant conception is that of the narrator and is articulated through a discourse that tends to distance itself from events. It rejects what Villa represents for the masses, that is, popular power as a valid revolutionary option. It tends to be explicit in the ironic commentaries of the narrator and in the voices of characters with a more sophisticated cultural background, forming a cohesive discourse that shapes the specific ideological attributes of the text.

The less-articulated conception is expressed primarily in the actions and the speech of the peasant characters, who offer the only real hope for social justice. It is made up of peasant actions and popular dialogue, is subordinated to the first, and is used to validate it. Thus, Azuela elects to circumscribe and resemanticize the different forms of popular revolutionary consciousness that enter into the elaboration of the plot.

The only possibility of glimpsing a subaltern perspective of the popular revolution, of even partially recovering “autonomous” peasant consciousness and political orientation, is to not get caught up in the novel’s semiotic. This implies a reading that is more attentive to the cultural perspective of the characters represented in *Los de abajo*. A summary review of orthodox interpretations of the novel is in order, not to surpass or reject these interpretations, but to argue for new methods and forms of evidence that challenge or question the accepted readings and show their limits. A brief description of the novel’s principal social actors, as well as the relationships between them, is also required, since it is through the characters that the author formulates the meaning he intends to assign to events. I shall discuss other historical and cultural references about peasant consciousness in order to examine the novel’s ideological premises regarding revolutionary discourse. Finally, by drawing on recent subaltern studies regarding recovery of the voice and world vision of the oppressed and marginalized,<sup>14</sup> I shall develop an exegesis which argues for a broader understanding of the political subjectivity of the peasant inherent in the text.<sup>15</sup>

## THE TEXT

### *Peasants*

The novel’s protagonist, Demetrio Macías, is a *serrano*, or mountain dweller, from Juchipila Canyon, a “pure-blooded Aztec” (“indígena de pura raza”) who embodies the virtues and the limitations of the Mexican peasant.<sup>16</sup> Azuela uses him to present his ideas regarding the failure of the popular peasant movement. Macías cuts a heroic profile—he is fearless, proud, and unaffected. He is not moved to revolutionary action by political credos, about which he is almost completely ignorant, but by more basic principles: the right to live free of harassment; the preservation of his human dignity. In his instinctive struggle against injustice and his spontaneous armed rebellion, Macías is the incarnation of a prototype: the “unconscious” revolutionary. His rebelliousness derives from a hun-

ger for justice, and this, not adherence to a particular political program, drives his actions.

In the first and longest section of the novel, the protagonist is the victim of political boss don Mónico, an abusive and unjust authority. Macías has to flee to the sierra in order to save his own life. He wages a guerrilla war against the federal army, which is pursuing him and his followers and fellow fugitives from justice—his compadre Anastasio Montañés, La Codorniz (Quail), Pancracio, El Manteca, Venancio, and others.<sup>17</sup>

A festive atmosphere reigns among Macías's troops in this first moment of regional conflict. Despite the risks, armed struggle has a liberating effect on them: it allows them to leave behind the misery of their everyday existence and to open the doors to adventure; it gives them the opportunity to reaffirm their worth and dignity as men, to act with great independence.

The pastoral, almost idyllic, existence of the *serrano* rebels is interrupted and transformed by the arrival of the upstart "Curro" (Tenderfoot), Luis Cervantes. Under his influence, Macías and his guerrillas join the Constitutionalist Army, distinguishing themselves on the field of battle. Macías is made a colonel and then quickly ascends to the rank of general. But military promotion carries a price: from the moment that the *serrano* rebels leave their home territory and enter into a revolutionary dynamic that is beyond their control, they lose their freedom of action. Spatial displacement takes a psychological toll, and the meaning of the struggle, which previously was so clear to them, becomes hazy and uncertain.

In the second section of the novel the peasant revolution undergoes a process of moral degeneration. The early skirmishes are relatively benign compared with the later abuses of popular power, a change that is registered in the behavior of the armed masses. With the defeat of the federal army, the underdogs' rise to power leads to looting, unruliness, promiscuity, and a thirst for collective revenge. Two new characters come to the fore, *güero* (blondie) Margarito and La Pintada (War Paint), each of whom personifies different aspects of the degradation and corruption brought on by the triumph of the popular revolution. Margarito symbolizes the barbarity and cruelty that are unleashed by war. Typical of his actions are his abusive and brutal behavior toward civilians and the sadistic way in which he kills a captive federal soldier.

La Pintada, on the other hand, represents a different phenomenon: the massive and brutal incorporation of women into the country's public life under the extraordinary circumstances of a popular, revolutionary uprising. In order to get ahead, to survive and to gain respect in a male-

dominated world, La Pintada resorts to masculine behaviors typical of a war culture—bravery, arrogance, and self-sufficiency. Macías's troops, however, continue to see her as nothing more than a sex object.

Lascivious, impetuous, and violent, La Pintada is a complex figure. On the one hand, she is dependent on her "man," *güero* Margarito, although he is not her man all the time. On the other hand, she does exactly as she pleases, with little regard for the men around her, and leads a dissolute life. As a character, she stands halfway between the *soldadera* (the female soldier who accompanied men on the campaign but who also performed traditional tasks such as cooking and washing) and the independent woman, as Carlos Monsiváis, has noted.<sup>18</sup>

Using these two emblematic characters, La Pintada and *güero* Margarito, Azuela seeks to depict the popular rebellion's slide into moral degeneracy. Anarchy, chaos, and lack of conscience reign among the troops. Both characters disappear from the plot once their didactic function has been fulfilled.

The final and shortest section of the novel opens with an improbable letter that Venancio receives in the midst of the campaign. The reader learns that *güero* Margarito has committed suicide and that Pancraccio and Manteca ended a dispute over a game of cards by stabbing each other. The message is clear: the revolutionary forces have entered a self-destructive phase as a natural consequence of the degenerative process that marks the peasant movement. After a looting incident, people from Macías's own region repudiate his troops. Macías and his men return to Juchipila Canyon transformed; they are wealthier but disoriented, and more estranged than ever from their land. Despite these setbacks, they maintain themselves as a combat-ready unit until they are all killed in an ambush.

The thesis of the novel, expressed in the demise of Macías and his men, is unmistakable: the peasants are the genuine revolutionaries, but their overwhelming ignorance, lack of formal education, and dearth of clear political goals precludes the possibility of a felicitous end to the armed struggle. The implication is that without educated leaders to formulate a political program from above that represents the will of the masses, the success of the revolution is doomed. Thus, the paternalistic populism of Mexico's postrevolutionary governments found in Azuela a convincing, if involuntary, spokesperson. Interestingly enough, despite Azuela's belief that the revolution would surely fail without educated leaders, the intellectuals portrayed in the novel are ineffectual; Azuela's deep-seated pessimism belies his convictions regarding their historical mission.

*Intellectuals*

A second group of more cultured characters from a different social class fulfills the ideological function that the rustic characters from the Juchipila Canyon region appear to be unable to realize. This second group provides a critical perspective on the revolutionary war that gives political, historical, moral, and aesthetic meaning to the armed uprising. The three characters who perform this task are Curro (Luis Cervantes), who uses his cultural capital for personal ends; Alberto Solís, who represents the Liberal tendencies of the middle-class revolutionary intelligentsia; and Loco Valderrama, who infuses that same Liberal thought with his own peculiar poetry and melodrama.

Cervantes is a former medical student and journalist who represents a different type of revolutionary. He belongs to the urban middle class and in many ways is the antithesis of Macías, the *serrano* leader. Curro deserts the federal troops and joins Macías and his men when he realizes that the balance of power is shifting in favor of the rebels. Ambition leads him to see in the revolution a unique opportunity for quick enrichment. Cervantes is central to the plot as the character that links Macías's regional rebellion with the national revolutionary war. But it is his own ambitious self-interest that dictates that he convince Macías and his men to join forces with the Constitutionalist Army. In a long speech, he explains to the peasant leader the meaning of his own military actions:

You do not yet realize your lofty noble function. You are a modest man without ambitions, you do not wish to realize the exceedingly important role you are destined to play in the revolution. It is not true that you took up arms simply because of Señor Mónico. You are under arms to protest against the evils of all the caciques who are overrunning the whole nation. We are the elements of a social movement which will not rest until it has enlarged the destinies of our motherland. We are the tools Destiny makes use of to reclaim the sacred rights of the people. We are not fighting to dethrone a miserable murderer, we are fighting against tyranny itself. What moves us is what men call ideals; our action is what men call fighting for a principle. A principle! That's why Villa and Natera and Carranza are fighting; that's why we, every man of us, are fighting. (55–56)

Cervantes articulates the principles of the revolutionary movement for the guerrillas, providing Macías and his troop the national vision and consciousness they lack. In order to convince them to abandon their na-

tive soil and become part of a larger movement in which they will no longer be in control, Cervantes uses high-sounding rhetoric, weaving a verbal web around his audience. Cervantes begins his speech as an external onlooker ("you") and concludes by speaking from within the guerrilla group ("we"). On a discursive level, he identifies himself as an underdog rebel, even though he is not one of them and will abandon the peasant rebels when the time comes. Macías's reply to Curro's speech attests to the intoxicating effect that the latter's words have had on the popular leader's consciousness: "Hey, there, Pancracio . . . pull down two more beers" (56).

Macías decides to leave Juchipila and join forces with the Constitutionals, and thus begins a successful military career that will eventually see him promoted to the rank of general following the key battle of Zacatecas. But as a result of his conversation with Cervantes, the protagonist also begins to express a sense of cultural inferiority: "Ain't it wonderful to be able to read and write!" (57), he exclaims, reflecting on Curro's words. These feelings of inferiority lead him to accept a division of labor within the revolution. Because of their lack of formal education and high culture, he and his men assume a strictly instrumental role that precludes genuine revolutionary agency. Thus begins his military subordination to other forces and other leaders.

Cervantes's motive in urging Macías to join the Constitutionalist Army is simply greed. He correctly anticipates the triumph of the revolutionaries and the spoils of war that will be theirs to pick and choose: "revolutionists or bandits, call them what you will, were going to depose the Government. Tomorrow would therefore belong wholly to them. A man must consequently be on their side, only on their side" (40). No other character comes close to Cervantes's exploits as a calculating thief. He leaves the country as planned, having reaped all possible economic benefit from the war.<sup>19</sup> Significantly, he will also be the only survivor from Macías's troops.

In addition to Cervantes, the upwardly mobile demagogue, another key figure in the novel is that of the idealistic revolutionary intellectual, a figure who stands for Mariano Azuela himself. The author, nonetheless, is present neither "as a character, nor as an axis of action but, rather, as an eye that sees through the lens of his ideal conceptions."<sup>20</sup> In order to express these "ideal conceptions," Azuela employs a literary technique typical of the nineteenth-century realist novel, whereby an incidental and passing figure becomes a central prophetic character. This transitory presence in the first part of the novel is Alberto Solís, the disillusioned



intellectual. To a lesser degree, Loco Valderrama plays a similar role in the third section.

Solís plays the part of the prescient character, the one who is able to anticipate the course the guerrilla war will take and to diagnose the causes of its eventual demise, which he attributes to a lack of “ideals” (81). Before dying, Solís condenses into two words what he calls “the psychology of our race”: “*Robbery! Murder!*” (81; original emphasis). Solís considers the Mexican peasant to be flawed for reasons of racial heritage. The underdogs’ innate propensity for violence is symptomatic of the problem. Lacking the ideals that might mitigate what is presumed to be a congenital defect, the peasant is condemned to thwart the positive labors of the revolution. His self-destructive instincts are what condemn him to a subaltern position in society.<sup>21</sup> As events unfold, Solís’s judgment about the masses’ propensity to steal and murder is explicitly played out in the second and third parts of the novel. This is an unmistakable sign that this character’s point of view is Azuela’s own.<sup>22</sup>

The jester poet Loco Valderrama also makes a very brief but significant appearance in the novel. His allegiance to the revolution is due to its sublimity—for him it is an aesthetic rather than a historical experience. He likens the revolution to a “volcano in eruption” (136) and remarks: “What do I care about the stones left above or below after the cataclysm?” (136). His poetic image is echoed later by Macías when the leader’s wife asks why they continue to fight. Macías throws a stone into a ravine and tells her: “Look at that stone; how it keeps on going . . .” (147). The rebel leader’s identification with the stone suggests that he has become Valderrama’s naturalistic image.

Solís’s cynical disillusionment and Valderrama’s political nihilism converge in a pessimistic view of the revolution characteristic of the intellectual middle class to which Azuela belonged.<sup>23</sup>

The centrality of Solís’s opinions makes it clear that the prerogative to decide the meaning of the events narrated is assigned to the class that he represents, and that its version of history is to be seen as History itself. In this sense, the technique of postulating an image or behavioral norm for the revolutionary peasant and then having it unfold in the plot reveals that for Azuela subaltern characters are little more than stock figures, despite their apparent free will. The underdogs’ *raison d’être* as a novelistic presence is to validate and personify the cultural expectations that the revolutionary middle class has of them. In this regard, it is useful to remember what Stanley Robe has to say about the novel’s protagonist, Demetrio Macías. Reconstructing step by step Azuela’s stint as a Villista

from 1914 to 1915, Robe points out that Macías is less sophisticated than either Col. Manuel Caloca or Gen. Julián Medina, the two historical figures that Azuela used as models to create his character. "The political awareness of Caloca and Medina, the latter in particular, has escaped Demetrio completely."<sup>24</sup> The real historical characters' astuteness and political qualifications were inconsistent with the author's ideological plan.<sup>25</sup>

### *The Condensation and Negation of History*

Through the personal story of Demetrio Macías, Azuela relates a condensed version of the history of the rise and fall of the popular revolution.<sup>26</sup> In fact, developments in the novel are historically situated by key events that symbolize stages of the revolution in each of the novel's three sections.

The first section of the book registers the initial, isolated outbreaks of popular rebellion. As these coalesce and are transformed into a single revolutionary force, they successfully confront the regime of the usurper Victoriano Huerta, who assassinated Pres. Francisco I. Madero. The uprising culminates with the defeat of the federal army in the decisive battle of Zacatecas (June 1914). Both historically and in the novel, this triumph marks the high point of the popular revolution.

The second section describes both the excesses of the revolutionaries once they attain power and the spectacle of the revolutionary forces split by internal divisions. Vying for power are the Villistas on one side and the Carrancistas on the other. Macías and his staff attend the Convention of Aguascalientes (October 1914), which is an unsuccessful attempt to resolve the differences between the revolutionary armies.

The third part of the novel marks the definitive decline of the popular movement and the gradual dispersion of the rebellious peasant armies. The historical referent in this case is Villa's military defeat at the hands of the Carrancistas in the battle of Celaya (April 1915).

Thus, the novel's social and historical framework captures the rise and fall of the popular revolution between 1913 and 1915. Another set of internal referents, however, contradicts the novel's own presentation of social and historical events. The failure of the struggle is attributed not to splits and divisions within the revolutionary forces but to deeper natural forces. This is a world in which everything is predetermined: "Beneath the appearance of historicity, Azuela's ideas are actually based on a naturalistic vision."<sup>27</sup> Violent images of the revolution that depict it as a tor-

nado or a volcanic eruption render useless the efforts of the men fighting for social change.<sup>28</sup> Solís declares that the revolution is a “hurricane: if you’re in it, you’re no man . . . you’re a miserable leaf, a dead leaf, blown by the wind” (73). With this image of a “dead leaf” the fighter is reduced to someone who does not govern his own actions. The poetic image nullifies the revolutionary’s significance as a historical agent.

The circular movement of the plot is another element that reduces the popular uprising to a natural process. The novel begins and ends in Juchipila Canyon with almost the same cast of characters. In the end, however, the underdogs do not rise from the earth, “their legs and chests naked, lambent and dark as old bronzes” (19), but are reabsorbed into it, victims of enemy bullets. The lives of the characters are governed by cycles, like nature, like the seasons. The novel’s naturalistic images obliterate any potential for transcendent human actions.

#### IDEOLOGICAL STRUCTURE AND THE HEGEMONIC CULTURE OF THE REVOLUTION

Jean Franco has observed that meaning in *Los de abajo* is constructed through the roles or functions assigned to the characters within the narrative. The actions of the taciturn Demetrio Macías are in sharp contrast to the verbosity of Cervantes. Curro speechifies and preaches, he names Macías colonel, he articulates the ideals of the revolution, he invents. Franco points to the existence of a dichotomy between action and discourse that is borne out by the text’s linguistic characteristics. Discourse is particularly susceptible to distortion and manipulation to the extent to which it can be abstracted from real situations.

According to Franco, the attributes of the other characters can also be reduced to binary oppositions: nature/culture; sincerity/corruption; spontaneity/calculation. Macías is spontaneous, sincere, and natural; Cervantes is calculating, corrupt, and learned; Margarito is corrupt and boorish; and so on. This system of oppositions and contradictions suggests that Azuela’s novel is structured around the absence of an ideal synthesis: there is no character capable of combining the spontaneity and natural virtues of the peasant world with the prudence and rationality of the intellectual. These structural limitations rest on what for Azuela is an irreducible dichotomy: body-peasant/mind-intellectual. The novel, Franco concludes, precludes the Gramscian notion of the peasant as the organic intellectual of the revolutionary struggle.<sup>29</sup>

The idea that there is a fundamental contradiction between the very

nature of peasant existence and the rationality of intellectuals was until recently an implicit axiom in historical studies of the Mexican Revolution. This idea, an outgrowth of modern ideological prejudices toward traditional societies, has shaped interpretations of the nature, motivations, and results of military actions that were not organically linked to the world of urban political culture. One of the foundational texts of modern Mexican historiography, Frank Tannenbaum's *Peace by Revolution* (1933), underlines this antithesis in its presentation of rural uprisings during the revolution: "The uprising itself . . . was not responsive to any plan. It was incidental. It was pragmatic. . . . It was essentially the work of the common people. . . . No organized party presided at its birth. No great intellectuals prescribed its program, formulated its doctrine, outlined its objectives. . . . There was not a Rousseau, a Voltaire, a Montesquieu, a Diderot in Mexico. . . . There is no Lenin in Mexico."<sup>30</sup>

Tannenbaum's analysis presents a Eurocentric perspective. Modern European history, with its political parties, intellectual leaders, doctrines, and objectives, becomes the norm for locating the peculiarities of Mexico's revolutionary phenomenon. This method affords Tannenbaum a closer understanding of his object of study and at the same time distances him from it. To the extent that he recognizes the relative unimportance of intellectuals (understood to be urban figures) as historical actors, Tannenbaum is obliged to focus his analysis on the reality of the peasant world. But insofar as the logic of this argument disregards the potential for peasant thought, there is no possibility of comprehending popular rebellions on their own terms. Within this interpretative framework, the U.S. historian ends up in agreement with Azuela. The armed rebellion is viewed as a natural force ("[u]nheralded and unguided . . . like a cyclone") and "spontaneous" in character (i.e., not premeditated).<sup>31</sup> Tannenbaum's vision, however, differs from Azuela's in that it offers an unequivocally positive evaluation of popular "spontaneity," finding in it the originality of the revolutionary forces that long to destroy the feudal and capitalist structures of the country. Despite this distinction, both authors share the same intellectual prejudice toward the peasantry, whereby their military actions are seen as unplanned, improvised.

A few years later, in 1939, Alfonso Reyes, member of the prestigious Ateneo de la Juventud and a prominent figure in the intellectual life of Mexico during the first half of the twentieth century, repeated Tannenbaum's thesis in an interpretive essay on Mexico's modern culture: "The Mexican Revolution sprang from impulse rather than from an idea. It was not planned by encyclopedists or philosophers, more or less conscious of

the consequences of their doctrine, as was the French Revolution. It was not organized by the dialecticians of social warfare, as was the Russian Revolution.”<sup>32</sup>

With Reyes it becomes clear that Tannenbaum’s exegesis of the revolution was fully accepted and integrated into the intellectual discourse of Mexico’s cultural elite. Years later, this hermeneutics would be strengthened and radicalized in another classic text on Mexican national culture, Octavio Paz’s *El laberinto de la soledad* (The Labyrinth of Solitude, 1950). Paz’s ideas have a similar slant, but his style is far more dramatic. He asserts that the difficulty of formulating “the confusing aspirations of the people in a coherent system become obvious as soon as the Revolution ceased to be an instinctive event and was established as a regime.”<sup>33</sup> Paz elaborates: “The Zapatista and the Villista movements—twin factions, one in the north and one in the south—were popular explosions that proved almost wholly incapable of incorporating their truths, more felt than thought out, in an organic plan. They were a point of departure, an obscure and stammering expression of the revolutionary will.”<sup>34</sup>

The antithesis between popular revolution and intellectual rationalism (or nature versus culture) in this canonical text once again establishes structural limits on how the revolutionary phenomenon may be interpreted. Paz refines the commonplaces implied in this contradiction: the campesino masses are an invigorating force, but they are not nor can they be the brains of the revolution. As a result, the deeper meaning of their military actions must be interpreted for them. Implicit in Paz’s description is the following political program: Mexico needs a paternalistic political structure because the masses—Villistas and Zapatistas—are immature (their aspirations are “confused” and “stammering”).

Paz’s text, like those of Azuela, Tannenbaum, and Reyes, each covering a genre representative of high culture (essay, novel, and historical study, respectively), reveals a discursive practice that, with varying inflections, is part of the process of shaping a hegemonic culture. The view these intellectuals have of the popular revolution is akin to what Eric J. Hobsbawm calls archaic, “pre-political” movements. According to Hobsbawm, the lack of an explicit ideology, organization, or program reveals that these mass movements are composed of individuals or groups with little or no political consciousness, who have not yet found a suitable language to articulate their aspirations in the world.<sup>35</sup> This approach to rural uprisings has resulted in their being interpreted as spontaneous mass actions whose leadership, by definition, must depend on protagonists from outside of the peasant world (urban intellectuals, political parties, etc.).

Antonio Gramsci provides a useful counterpoint to Hobsbawm. Gramsci notes that pure spontaneity has no historical reality; that is, there are always traces of consciousness in unstructured mass movements.<sup>36</sup> Decades later, Ranajit Guha reexamined Gramsci's proposition. Guha affirms that the error of seeing peasant movements only in terms of spontaneity derives from two closely related ideas about organization and politics. The conscious character of a movement is associated with that which is "organized" in the sense of (1) "conscious leadership," and (2) well-defined objectives, with a program that specifies its particular components and the means for achieving them. The same equation holds if the term "politics" is substituted for "organization." Those who make that substitution, Guha argues, have the additional advantage of identifying consciousness with their own norms and political ideals. Activities of the masses that do not conform to those ideals can then be characterized as unconscious or, by the same token, as prepolitical.<sup>37</sup>

Gramsci's and Guha's writings can be productively applied in a revisionist approach to the Mexican Revolution, for they belie a steadfast cultural tradition that insists on the spontaneity of popular rebellions. In his assessment of intellectuals and the Mexican Revolution, Alan Knight, though not aligned with Gramsci and Guha's subalternist views, writes: "It is no longer possible to deny peasants intellectual and ideological attributes. . . . Numerous studies on peasants demonstrate that peasant consciousness is more complex, and contains more intellectual elements than was previously supposed. . . . In spite of what some observers of the period and later historians have said about popular leaders supposedly being manipulated like puppets by their scheming secretaries, evidence points to the contrary."<sup>38</sup>

Knight's commentary implies skepticism about the ways that "observers of the period and later historians" have represented peasant subjectivity. These representations, as I have already noted, are bounded by a structural dichotomy in which the space occupied by the peasant subaltern is determined by factors that contradict intellectual rationality: spontaneity, instinct, lack of political consciousness, naïveté, and therefore ease of manipulation. Azuela's text and the writings of Tannenbaum, Reyes, and Paz are different instances of an ambivalent cultural process that, at the very moment of representing the revolutionary agency of the subaltern peasant, proceeds to simultaneously and, to varying degrees, suppress it.

Given this context, the task of recuperating the political culture of the subaltern in a work such as *Los de abajo* is absolutely necessary for a

critical reevaluation of postrevolutionary Mexican culture, but also an extremely complex undertaking. An entire intellectual tradition linked to the dominant ideology produced by the revolution itself and embodied in the logic of the plot works against such an act of recovery. As Knight suggests, however, it is no longer possible to adhere to the old interpretive schemes. It is necessary to break with them and develop new historical reference points as well as new reading strategies, both of which should aid in understanding Azuela's operative categories. The text is obviously a representation of the will of the author. As Guha writes in another context, referring to the various kinds of documentation available on peasant insurgencies, "these documents do not get their content from that will alone, for the latter is predicated on another will—that of the insurgent. It should be possible therefore to read the presence of a rebel consciousness as a necessary and pervasive element within that body of evidence."<sup>39</sup> Guha proposes new methods of reading that permit the reader to perceive within the text itself that Other will that the author would prefer to suppress. Reading against the grain implies a process of deconstruction that leads to questioning the "lines of power and hierarchy" of the documents.<sup>40</sup> In order to recover the cultural and political specificity of the peasant rebellions, it is necessary, first, to identify how subaltern culture, as represented by the official and elite culture, is distorted, and, second, to discover the social semiotics of the peasant insurgents' strategies and cultural practices.<sup>41</sup> Put another way, it is a matter of establishing which are the inherent alternative discourses that might be available to the reader in these hegemonic accounts of the rebellious peasants, despite the will of the author. This way of reading is especially useful for analyzing a realist, testimonial novel like *Los de abajo*. While not an official document, the novel is a canonical text within modern Mexican culture, sanctioned by the state, semiofficial and even didactic (in that it is required reading in the public schools).<sup>42</sup>

### *Los de abajo*: TRACES OF A SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVE

Most interpretations of the popular revolution that began to be written in the 1920s were based on controlling and suppressing peasant subjectivity. I have already outlined the basic elements of this operation as they appear in Azuela's novel and in the writings of other postrevolutionary intellectuals. It is important to note, however, that this process of hegemonic formation does not consist of the simple, top-down imposition of a single point of view. In order to have the power of persuasion, the hege-

monic process must also incorporate, co-opt, and rearticulate a number of potentially contradictory discourses. Therefore, we must be able to see through these discourses to find those instances that contradict the dominant ideology of the text. We begin from the general premise that, in spite of authorial intention, dominant versions of the revolution inherently contain remnants of alternative discourses. By locating these fragments, it should be possible to recognize the different types of subaltern agency that are at work in the text and use them to reveal the political forms and subaltern cultures that have been distorted or silenced.

In order to recover the subaltern perspective in *Los de abajo*, we have to identify and give new meanings to the traces of autonomous initiative of subaltern groups in the text. This is no simple matter, since Azuela's world view induces him to emphasize situations in which blind impulse prevails, especially scenes of looting and abuse, although these made up only a small portion of the popular armed actions during the revolution. Our assumption, nonetheless, is that these traces, even if occurring in a negative context, express the popular consciousness of revolutionary phenomena. That is to say, these fragments reveal politicized forms of understanding and identity that are not accessible through conventional political language (which belongs to the educated social sectors). They can be perceived in oral histories and in the body language of the characters, precisely the kind of details that Azuela the novelist knew how to capture so well. These scattered traces, however, because of their very fragmentary nature, do not coalesce into a coherent subaltern discourse. In 1915, when the novel was written, that clarity of vision had not yet been achieved either by popular movements or by the more educated sectors of the revolution. The most we can hope for is to reinterpret Azuela's portrait of the armed peasant movement and to point out a systematic process of suppression that has obscured a fuller and more evenhanded understanding of the popular revolutionary struggle and its motivations.

An indispensable strategy for this kind of analysis is to remain skeptical, to not regard the ideologies present in the text as natural and inevitable. Rather, they should be understood as artificial and motivated constructions.<sup>43</sup> Decentering ourselves as readers opens the door to the possibility of a reading that, up to a certain point, goes against the logic of the text. This also requires that we distance ourselves from conventional understandings of history as well as from received notions about the nature of politics and of intellectuals, as Florencia Mallon suggests in her study of the political and cultural practices of the subaltern.<sup>44</sup>



In terms of the plot, it is useful to recall the two functions that Roland Barthes proposes—*nuclei* (cardinal functions) and *catalyzers* (complementary functions)—in his discussion of narrative events and the logic connecting them.<sup>45</sup> Important events, or nuclei, form part of the hermeneutic code. They advance the plot and resolve doubts; they cannot be removed or substituted without disrupting the logic of the narrative, because “the action[s] to which [they refer] open (or continue or close) an alternative that is of direct consequence for the subsequent development of the story.”<sup>46</sup> Minor events, or catalyzers, are not crucial in this sense. They can be deleted without altering the logic of the plot, although the omission will clearly impoverish the narrative aesthetically. They are what might be called necessary fillers, ancillary or circumstantial elements, or factors of verisimilitude responsible for the milieu, and so on.

The nuclei are narrative moments that produce critical junctures for the way events develop; they are the plot’s hinges. In *Los de abajo* the most important narrative nucleus postulates the following problem: Demetrio Macías can continue to fight in his home region or choose to leave it and, along with his men, join forces with the Constitutionalist Army. The solution to the disjunction between the regional and the national struggle in the first part of the novel is crucial to the plot and to the novel’s ideological message. It is therefore necessary to pause and consider closely how the author addresses it.

The framework in which this dilemma is introduced and resolved is a conversation between Macías and Cervantes (53–56), the most extensive dialogue in the novel. Cervantes urges Macías to join Gen. Pánfilo Natera’s troops. The guerrilla leader’s personal pride and his spirit of independence keep him from abandoning his home territory: “I don’t like the idea of accepting orders from anybody very much. . . . Well that’s all I want, to be let alone so I can go home” (54). Cervantes, however, finally persuades Macías to join the rebel army: “It is not true that you took up arms simply because of Señor Mónico. You are under arms to protest against the evils of all the *caciques* who are overrunning the whole nation. We are the elements of a social movement which will not rest until it has enlarged the destinies of our motherland” (55).

Cervantes’s speech convinces the protagonist to leave the regional struggle and join the national revolutionary movement. It therefore marks a key moment of transition. José Joaquín Blanco, one of the most lucid interpreters of the novel, writes: “Luis Cervantes pushes him [Macías] to join the Villistas. . . . Cervantes is the channel that leads Macías to Villa.”<sup>47</sup>

Other events of lesser importance, catalyzers, which are not part of the hermeneutic code and, consequently, are not meant to influence the course of events, contain information that complicates or contradicts rather than complements the preceding nuclei. Before his dialogue with Cervantes, the narrator explains that, while recovering from a bullet wound to his foot, Macías “was busy thinking of the best route by which to proceed to Durango” (43). The existence of an itinerary suggests that Macías was already entertaining the idea of leaving Zacatecas and entering Villista territory (the state of Durango, between Zacatecas and Chihuahua, the stronghold of Villismo). The existence of this plan is confirmed when the protagonist recovers completely from his wound and rejoins his men: “They began to discuss various projects to go northward where, according to rumor, the rebels had beaten the Federal Troops all along the line” (49). This suggests that even before hearing Cervantes’s patriotic exaltations, and independent of them, the guerrillas were considering leaving their home region and taking up the struggle in the national theater.

What remained to be determined were the specific conditions of this participation, not the reasons for its undertaking. According to this narrative logic, the military isolationism Macías defends in his dialogue with Cervantes is either a contradiction in the novel’s plot or signals a lack of confidence regarding the terms of participation. But this concern is very different from the limiting regionalist vision of the struggle that Curro seeks to attack in his speech. As catalyzers, however, the meaning of these passages—a plan of action collectively discussed, signaling subaltern political agency—is quickly lost from view as it is subordinated to a textual logic oriented toward the negation of autonomous initiative.

These passages raise the following question: What motivated Macías and his men to seek out the revolutionaries in the north? The answer can be deduced only from the subsequent behavior of the guerrilla fighters. But Villismo, both as a popular military movement and as a subjective phenomenon, clearly establishes the implicit ideological and emotional horizon for the rebels’ actions. In this regard, Azuela maintains a curious duality. On the one hand, he insists on presenting Macías as a minor leader lost in the struggles between the political factions of the revolution. When he has to vote for a provisional president in the Convention of Aguascalientes, he does not know if he should take the side of Villa or Carranza: “President, what? Who in the devil, then, is this man Carranza? I’ll be damned if I know what it’s all about” (123).

On the other hand, the entire course of action of Macías and his men

reveals an affinity—albeit one that is not altogether uncritical—with the Villista struggle. In fact, throughout the text, the actions, language, and psychology of Macías and his men indicate that the mythical persona of Villa is their main ideological referent for questions of cultural and class identity and forms of popular political knowledge.

The adherence to Villismo is shaken in the last part of the novel but not broken by the news of Villa's defeat at the battle of Celaya. At first, the guerrilla fighters receive the news with incredulity, and only Demetrio wrinkles his brow “as though a black shadow had passed over his eyes” (135). The confirmation of the defeat has a definitive impact on the consciousness of the characters. With the myth of the invincible Villa shattered, the promise of power and popular justice fades, and the morale of the troops begins to diminish. Codorniz pragmatically summarizes the new situation: “What the hell, boys! Every spider's got to spin his own web now!” (136). The Villista army begins to disband. The struggle continues, but with the fall of Villa, “they marched forward through the canyon, uncertain, unsteady, as blind men walking without a hand to guide them” (141). Macías's forces, however, remain loyal and die as Villistas on the road to Cuquío to fight the Carrancistas.

The profile of the revolutionaries in the novel cannot be dissociated from the populism of Villa's movement. It is therefore important to specify what Villa represents in the text and what social and political project he validates. During his first period of brilliant triumphs on the battlefield, Villa, the charismatic leader who attracted thousands of country people like him to his cause, acquired the attributes of an invincible warrior in the eyes of the disinherited masses. He came to symbolize a series of diffuse forces that converged in the revolution to put the people into power. In the first section of *Los de abajo*, the force of this myth is such that it even attracts some enemy soldiers serving under Gen. Victoriano Huerta. They are attracted by the possibility of exacting revenge against the federal army, which drafted them against their will (the hated “*leva*”), or by the chance to acquire “shiny new silver coins” (34). Villa not only represents the prospect of righting injustice and poverty, he also becomes a canvas onto which the heterogeneous and contradictory desires of the combatants are projected.

The search for social recognition, the class hatreds, the desire for revenge, the hunger for authority, all converge on and become exaggerated in the popular construction of this patriarchal figure. Güero Margarito, the novel's worst example of the atrocities someone can commit in the wake of newly acquired power, appeals to the Villa myth while destroy-

ing bottles and windows in a cantina: "Send the bill to General Villa, understand?" (125), he tells the waiter.

Legendary stories that captivate and excite the popular imagination are woven around Villa. As one of Natera's soldiers says to Anastasio Montañés, "You ought to see Villa's troops! They're all northerners and dressed like lords! You ought to see their wide-brimmed Texas hats and their brand-new outfits and their four-dollar shoes, imported from the U.S.A. . . . They've got cars full of clothing, trains full of guns, ammunition, food enough to make a man burst!" (78). Among Macías's ragged soldiers, this exemplary tale of abundance, where all of the endemic needs of the lower classes disappear, responds point by point to what Macías's compadre demands at the beginning of the novel: "By God, if I don't own a Mauser and a lot of cartridges, if I can't get a pair of trousers and shoes, then my name's not Anastasio Montañez!" (20). In Villismo, what one is meets what one wants to become; it is the point where reality and the desires of Macías's tattered troops meet.

Moreover, Villa and his movement lent social legitimacy to actions severely censored by a long tradition of respect for social ranking. Villa sanctioned the rancor and hatred accumulated during a lifetime of oppression and privation and their attendant contortions, excesses, and desperation; Villismo validated the joyous transgressions of privileged social spaces and hierarchies. La Pintada states: "Soldiers don't sleep in hotels and inns any more. . . . Where do you come from? You just go anywhere you like and pick a house that pleases you, see. When you go there, make yourself at home and don't ask anyone for anything. What the hell is the use of the revolution? Who's it for? For the folks who live in towns? *We're the fancy folk now, see?* Come on, Pancraccio, hand me your bayonet. Damn these rich people, they lock up everything they've got!" (89; emphasis added). For Azuela, this statement (and many others like it) exemplifies the abuse of power and the arbitrariness unleashed by the triumph of the peasantry. His message is that the excesses of the revolutionaries are antagonistic to the revolution. Moral degeneration is inevitable. As Ruffinelli correctly observes, "This is not the way revolutionaries should act; this is how bandits act, according to the bourgeois code."<sup>48</sup>

At a remove from the bourgeois code, however, La Pintada's impetuosity hints at other glimmerings and shades of meaning that are profoundly motivated by race, class, and culture. Having grasped that authority is for once in the hands of "los de abajo," La Pintada launches a frontal attack on the sacred principle of private property. She embodies the drive to overturn the usual social hierarchies, the immediate, unstoppable, and

abrupt desire for the redistribution of wealth. Her actions are consonant with the struggle for power. This political goal is made manifest in the violent transgression of privileged social spheres through actions that denote the negation and inversion of the established order; it is precisely this project which the narrator tries to discredit with the image of La Pintada. The crude, rudimentary way in which La Pintada articulates her hunger for power, however, does not invalidate it politically. Her actions and her declaration that “we’re the fancy folk now, see?” (89) are a literal enactment of the collective aspirations incarnated in the myth of Villa. The narrator comments directly on this myth: “Villa the reincarnation of the old legend; Villa as Providence, the bandit, that passes through the world armed with the blazing torch of an ideal: *to rob the rich and give to the poor*. It was the poor who built up and imposed a legend about him which Time itself was to increase and embellish as a shining example from generation to generation” (77; emphasis added).

Characters such as Montañés and La Pintada make it possible to perceive how the Villista mission to redeem with pride the rights of the people was internalized. Also revealed are the contradictions that derive from personal temperament and the intoxicating effect that power has on the people, as in the case of *guëro* Margarito.<sup>49</sup> Note, however, that unlike La Pintada, the narrator does not share the point of view of the revolutionary masses. The elaboration of popular myths that exaggerate and end up distorting the real facts about Villa are to be deplored. The narrator offers an ironic assessment: “Events as they were seen and lived were worth nothing. You had to hear them narrating their prodigious deeds, where, immediately after an act of surprising magnanimity, came an extraordinarily bestial exploit” (77).

This critical view of the oral accounts, because of their propensity to distort the reality of events, marks the cultural and class limits of the narrator in his social representation of the underdogs. The narrator associates oral culture with illiteracy, ignorance, and social chaos. As a result, orality is rejected as a source of knowledge about the popular revolution. With this scathing, rationalist dismissal of the oral transmission of the events of the war and their impact on the collective psychology, the narrator misses an element crucial to a profound understanding of the mentality and cultural symbolism of the peasant revolution. On the one hand, the intellectual Solís, whose perspective complements that of the narrator, sees the soldier as a “miserable leaf,” thus minimizing his importance as historical actor. For the soldiers, however, the myths forged by oral tradition, with their distortions and embellishments, fulfill a radically dif-

ferent purpose: they serve to invigorate revolutionary morale during the war. Oral tradition celebrates armed rebellion as a popular exploit. In this sense, it incites and mobilizes the masses; it encourages them to continue fighting and to feel that their actions are worthy of respect. An alternative revolutionary discourse emerges from these folk stories, a discourse that the narrator, located on "the other side of the division of classes, with the ideological measure of the bourgeoisie,"<sup>50</sup> is sensitive enough to reproduce, albeit in a fragmentary manner. He proves incapable of fairly evaluating it, however. Compare the narrator's dismissive commentary regarding the soldiers' stories of Villa's "prodigious deeds" with the animated account by one of Natera's soldiers, who celebrates his leader's unpredictability with surprise and admiration: "If General Villa takes a fancy to you, he'll give you a ranch on the spot. But if he doesn't, he'll shoot you down like a dog!" (78).

This account, of course, is inaccurate; it belongs to the realm of Villa's legend.<sup>51</sup> But it is of a piece with the instantaneous code of virtues and weaknesses established by the revolution, a code that differs from that of the narrator and is, to a certain extent, incomprehensible to him. Hence, it can only be partially stated in the novel. The soldier's anecdote foregrounds Villa's absolute power over his men's lives: by turns he is as generous or as terrible as a Greek god, subject to unfathomable passions. In the popular imagination, Villa personifies the extreme situations brought on by the convulsive context of the revolutionary war, where chance encounters become destiny, both good and bad. The meaning of the anecdote is simple and magnificently unsettling: with Villa we are thrust into the revolution as the realm of the unexpected. It is a vision of an unpredictable world of unknown reversals, strange bedfellows, unexplored social formations, vital social promiscuity, a world full of seductions and dangers that feeds on the masses' appetite for life. The unsettled narrator resorts to irony to undermine these war stories.

Again it is useful to call to mind the interpretation put forth by Solís, the intellectual who is able to prophesy the coming failure of the revolution and who portrays the revolution with metaphors that suggest a naturalistic vision. Villa's popular myth, on the contrary, suggests that nothing is "natural" or predictable in war. Everything is subject to the intensity of the moment, to tempestuous changes; the world becomes relative and life becomes precarious and volatile, full of capriciousness and fatal upsets, but also full of fortunate situations and unexpected possibilities, of great hopes and promises of social justice. This is a dual, carnivalesque world that enthrones and dethrones historical actors, freeing

them or eliminating them. This popular version of revolution literally reveals an unscripted world, a world of that-which-is-not-written.

An alternative form of revolutionary consciousness emerges if we transfer this popular version of the armed rebellion—the unscripted world, with all its potentialities and contradictions—to the field of geography, the incessant movement of Macías’s troops, their “nomadic existence: life beyond the civilizing institutions that oppressed them”: “The unforeseen provides man with his greatest joy. The soldiers sang, laughed, and chattered away. The spirit of nomadic tribes stirred their souls. What matters it whither you go and whence you come? All that matters is to walk, to walk endlessly, without ever stopping; to possess the valley, the heights of the sierra, far as the eye can read” (148).<sup>52</sup>

The spatial displacements or movements of the troops embody a sense of freedom that does not correspond to an abstract conceptualization in Liberal political discourse but, rather, to a passion rooted in the daily lived experiences of the rural world: the ownership of the land. The dizzying growth of large estates during the reign of dictator Porfirio Díaz made landownership virtually impossible for the majority of the population. In this context, the soldiers yearn to possess the valley, the plains, etc., to roam the regional terrain, free of fixed paths or prohibitive barriers. This very movement corresponds to the founding of a long-yearned-for social order, one in which *los de abajo* are the masters of the land and of their own movements, physically and psychologically free from all oppression. This popular politics of space is explicitly stated in the only passage that alludes to a collective consciousness of the causes of the armed uprising: “They spurred their horses to a gallop as if in that mad race they laid claims of possession to the earth. What man among them now remembered the stern chief of police, the growling policeman, or the conceited *cacique*? What man remembered his pitiful hut where he slaved away, always under the eyes of the owner or the ruthless and sullen foremen, always forced to rise before dawn, and to take up his shovel, basket, or goad, wearing himself out to earn a mere pitcher of *atole* and a handful of beans?” (61).

By characterizing the masses as a “pueblo sin ideales” (people without ideals), Solís dismisses the prospect that they are capable of justice, liberty, and respect for human dignity. These ideals are nonetheless inscribed in the bodily movements of the characters. It follows that Macías and his men do not act according to the modern dichotomy of sense and intellect, which privileges analytical reason and the tendency to dissociate reflection from experience. Rather, the revolutionary behavior of these

characters demonstrates an undivided sensory unity, where experience contains, expresses, and *is* a form of reflection. For this reason, the intellectual activity (and political consciousness) of *Los de abajo* is not expressed as a program or a slogan but as a way of acting whose vital dynamic breaks with the unjust social order, a rupture that longs to become permanent. This kind of thought in action is subversive, contradictory, and liberating, and it finds its greatest point of expression in the Villista movement. For this same reason, Villismo comes to embody a modality of political action and a popular epistemology with which the peasant characters in Azuela's novel can tacitly identify.

In *Los de abajo*, Azuela represents the unscripted world—the popular revolution—and subordinates it to the order of rational discourse. In the process, he controls and suppresses peasant subjectivity. But the traces of an alternative subjectivity that revolves around a historical experience of Villismo can be perceived in the characters' actions, their wanderings, their direct and colloquial language, or in the narrator's commentaries. The elements of the novel that guarantee its credibility and longevity reside in the revolutionary vitality of this “other” world, even when in the act of representing peasant subjectivity the author simultaneously tries to suppress it.

Azuela's greatest literary distinction, despite his lack of clarity and his moralizing, is to have captured the equalizing force of the masses, armed and on the move, tumultuous, disorderly, and destructive. The text reveals a world of intense passions, naked violence, looting and hatreds, the longing for recognition and for revenge, and deadly diversions and friendship spurred by alcohol, promiscuity, and libertine desires. And this despite the narrator's somewhat incongruent longing for moderation and order in the midst of the chaos of war. In this sense, the novel represents “a major step forward in [Mexico's] Liberal literature.”<sup>53</sup> In effect, Azuela's novel, at times in spite of itself, confers on the anonymous masses of the revolution an epic face. This is the reason for José Joaquín Blanco's assertion that, notwithstanding the limitations of a writer loyal to the narrow national project of liberalism, *Los de abajo* constitutes an admirable attempt to break down class barriers within Mexican literature.<sup>54</sup>

*Los de abajo* served a fundamental role in the development of Mexico's modern narrative literature: it incorporated a complex and convincing version of peasant subjectivity into the national culture, a version acceptable primarily to the middle classes and the new intellectual elite.<sup>55</sup> This novel marks the rise of a new revolutionary narrative that identifies the



interests of a modern, national society in the making with the subjectivity of the Liberal middle class. In the process, popular political subjectivity is reduced to a series of appealing archetypes that are repeated and imitated from 1925 on by the “novelists of the revolution.” The actions of the rural masses are depicted as instinctive, spontaneous, naïve, and so on, through these stereotypes, and have predominated in Mexican culture with few changes until the present day.<sup>56</sup>

The objective of this chapter has been to question this cultural construct and reinterpret the political consciousness of the popular revolution in *Los de abajo*. With this in mind, I have attempted in the third section of this chapter to give a reading of the novel that runs counter to most accepted readings. The difficulty of this task resides in the fragmentary nature of the novel’s representations of the motivations of the peasants. It affords us no more than glimpses of this popular political subjectivity. For the same reason, it is impossible to reach definitive or far-reaching conclusions. We know that Azuela’s depiction of how the peasant fighters were manipulated by urban intellectuals is unsatisfactory; a subalternist, against the grain, reading helps reveal this by demonstrating the tensions between the internal logic of the novel and the disparate elements of popular revolutionary thought included in it. Such a reading signals the need, both cultural and political, to reevaluate the representation of the agency of subaltern groups in works that, as a genre, follow the paradigm of *Los de abajo*.

Azuela’s ideological views cut off and constrain the political subjectivity of the popular rebels to fit the political and social philosophy of progressive middle-class intellectuals. Only with a new generation of writers, whose intellectual upbringing was affected—among other things—by the Villista movement itself, and who did not reproduce the narrative perspective of the middle-class intelligentsia, did an alternative and less-restricted construction of the fighters’ subjectivity begin to be elaborated.