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Heraclio Bernal: Bandit Citizen

Amy Robinson

Shortly after Heraclio Bernal's much awaited defeat to federal forces in 1888, the Governor of Sinaloa, Francisco Cañedo, referred to the state's famous outlaw as "el bandido ciudadano" (*El Nacional*, 10 Jan. 1888).¹ The Mexico City newspaper *El Nacional* promptly registered their disapproval:

Para nosotros una de dos: ó es ciudadano, ó es bandido. Son lo primero los que viven dentro de la ley y gozan de los fueros y prerrogativas que la misma otorga. Son lo segundo los que se colocan fuera de ella, como lo indica la etimología misma de la palabra [. . .]. Si en Sinaloa se puede ser ambas cosas á la vez, renunciamos á toda probabilidad de ciudadanía sinaloense. (10 Jan. 1888)

The clear distinction drawn by this news source about the role of Heraclio Bernal (1855–1888) in Sinaloa reflects Robert Buffington's core assertion about the influence of late nineteenth-century criminology theories through which "the opposition of criminal and citizen [. . .] became the fundamental dichotomy within modern Mexican society" (4). Yet, this dichotomy is interpretable in that Porfirian-era understandings of citizenship, although departing from the 1857 Constitution's broad and relatively inclusive guarantee of basic civil rights (for men) (Lomnitz-Adler 71), came to more ambiguously refer to the degree to which Mexicans would "conform" (Buffington 4; Lomnitz-Adler 66). Understandings of criminality could be similarly ambiguous.² On a theoretical level, Eric Hobsbawm explains how banditry could be perceived as criminal by the powerful and as political by the marginalized. Hobsbawm uses the term "social bandits" to describe "peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals," while they "are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported" (20). While Hobsbawm's theory and the historical existence of social bandits in Latin America have been highly debated in academic literature, this article probes the more generally accepted notion that an abstract enthusiasm for banditry as social critique did thrive in Mexico during the late nineteenth century.³

The late nineteenth century is generally seen as a period of “growing ideological consensus” in that the liberal tradition of popular sovereignty that would have supported the notion of local struggles against unjust leadership came to be seen among dominant classes as “the basis for a dangerous democracy, identified with rebellion, anarchy, and revolution” (Hale 248). This burgeoning political attitude reflected a widespread desire to support Porfirio Díaz’s pledge to restore much needed order to the country as well as a widespread fear that crime and rebellion would undermine Díaz’s aims. This support for order was, however, not unanimously embraced among the dominant society (broadly defined as those with the social and political power to publicly weigh in on the issues surrounding social order). The case of Heraclio Bernal exemplifies how, especially as represented in the mainstream press, rebellion and criminality could become united together as a conjoined nemesis to the Díaz regime’s expectations of obedient citizenship. As seen in *El Nacional*’s vehement critique of Bernal, banditry was criminalized as a way to unambiguously condemn those actions that threatened the stability of society. And yet, Bernal’s boldly professed political agenda inspired alternative representations of his criminality as echoing the ideals of freedom and popular autonomy that had been seemingly shunned in the name of Porfirian order.⁴ The difference between those perspectives cannot be reduced to the newspapers in favor or against Díaz, or even those social classes aligned with or opposed to Díaz’s means for fomenting social order. The meaning of Bernal’s banditry, rather, was subject to debate within the newspaper genre (even within a single article) and among those considered to be members of the same social class.

This article explores the shifting dynamics of the constructed bandit-citizen dichotomy by analyzing reports about Bernal in mainstream Mexico City newspapers and a biography of the bandit by Ignacio Gastélum, the secretary to the Sinoloan Governor at the time of Bernal’s death. Also under analysis are three political manifestos associated with Bernal’s revolutionary activities and a poem that he penned shortly before his death, all of which are reproduced in Gastélum’s biography. Buffington has similarly analyzed the words of Porfirian-era criminals found within the text of an elite writer, and he concluded from his case study that this writer succeeded in subsuming the criminal’s “own version of events” into the dominant society’s moralistic interpretation of those events (83). In the case of Gastélum’s biography, however, I argue that the texts associated with Bernal represent a powerful contestation of the biographer’s ideological frame. Moreover, I contend that the interplay of competing discourses about Bernal’s criminalized activities illuminate broader tensions across Mexican society between those who presumed to define the parameters of social and political legitimacy and public challenges to the legitimacy of those parameters.

Previous studies on the political dynamics of criminality have emphasized elite perspectives by primarily examining how the dominant classes excluded bandits and other criminalized individuals from civic participation in order to concentrate power and imagine Mexico’s identity within certain privileged groups.⁵ Or, by contrast, investigators have delved more deeply into how marginalized groups have pushed back against elite mechanisms of exclusion by celebrating the criminalized as a bottom-up political critique.⁶ By highlighting tensions between these opposing forces, such studies generally uphold an uncomplicated image of late nineteenth-century Mexican society as polarized

between dominant and marginalized groups; defending the interests and identity of one usually involved critiquing the interests and identity of the other. Examinations of *corridos* written about Heraclio Bernal, for example, have generally concluded that this renowned outlaw functioned on behalf of marginalized groups as a symbol of protest against the government's unjust criminalization of peasant rebellion.⁷ Yet, insufficient attention has been paid to what Dabove refers to as the potential for literary representations of banditry to serve as “a mediation through which the *letrado* engages in an intra-elite polemics with alternative political positions” (285).

This study accordingly examines how late nineteenth-century writings, such as Gastélum's biography and newspaper articles about Bernal, can be seen as depicting a celebration of Bernal's rebellion. Moreover, such depictions represent a critique of the political establishment that had presumably secured ideological consensus among the upper classes. I argue that these examples of widespread romanticization of Bernal's banditry within dominant society reflect a more complex political dynamic than the push and pull of polarized classes. Instead, they reveal a symbolic backlash against perceptions of citizenship as political obedience from within dominant society at a time when the president is often portrayed as immune from ideological opposition. The bandit's own voice, through his political manifestos, finds a place within those ideological debates by articulating a vision for Mexico's political system and national values that constitutes an alternative model for citizenship through resistance to Porfirian hegemony. I find that these sources collectively illuminate a contestation of the value judgments typically associated with civil society and bandits, demonstrating that broadly disseminated top-down distinctions between citizen and criminal, order and disorder, progress and barbarity, had not been fully internalized by either the lower or the upper classes.

Heraclio Bernal: From Criminal to Celebrity

Bernal was born in the San Ignacio municipality of Sinaloa on June 28, 1855, the fourth child of Jesús Bernal and Jacinta Zazueta (Gastélum 5; Giron 33). He attended school and learned to read and write, but his education was cut short when his family relocated to a mining district (Gastélum 7). Bernal went to work as a “peón” in the mining industry and at that time experienced his first confrontation with the law, accused of theft by local authorities (8). Bernal went into hiding and continued to evade arrest, which eventually led to a life of robbery throughout Sinaloa between 1875 and 1877 (8–10). Over the next two years, he continued to elude government authorities by hiding out in remote regions of the state with his gang of bandits (15–16) and committing armed robbery in towns and at mining operations (Giron 33). He reportedly gained support among local populations, including authority figures (Gastélum 23), although the motives for such support have been contradictorily attributed to Bernal's ability to delude and threaten the locals (Gastélum 12–13, 15, 23; Vanderwood, *Disorder* 93), as well as his interest in maintaining respectful relationships with the people (Katz 66; Giron 53–55) and targeting for his crimes only those connected to the government and other positions of authority (Giron 33, 51, 53, 66).⁸

Punctuating this life of banditry, in 1879, Bernal joined Jesús Ramírez Terrón's ongoing political rebellion, whose objective, then, was to prevent Díaz's re-election in 1880

(Gastélum 16–18, 25–26; Giron 39; Vanderwood, *Disorder* 92). Although there are doubts about his initial dedication to the movement (Gastélum 12), even after Ramírez Terrón's death in 1880, Bernal would continue a political-military path explicitly linked to the national-political tradition of liberalism by signing a manifesto in 1885 as “Comandante de la fuerza proclamadora de las garantías constitucionales” (68–69) and his own constitutionalist political plan in 1887 as “jefe del movimiento restaurador de la Constitución de 1857” (91). He was regarded as a serious threat to national order, and the local, state, and federal governments went to great lengths to subdue his movement, which they generally categorized as pure and simple banditry. At the local levels, and especially intensifying after 1884, governors and other authority figures extensively communicated and conspired to end what would become a decade-long string of robberies and murders associated with Bernal and his followers.⁹ At the national level, Porfirio Díaz specifically referred to Bernal “en el discurso inaugural de la sesión de las Cámaras,” in April of 1886, and made further reference to disorder in Sinaloa in the annual “informe” on September 16 of that same year (Giron 72). This long and comprehensive pursuit of Bernal finally culminated in governor Cañedo's 1887 announcement of a sizeable reward of ten thousand *pesos* for his arrest (Giron 83), which would eventually be paid out to two local Sinaloans credited with killing the bandit on January 5, 1888.

Governor Cañedo's unusual and controversial description of his deceased nemesis as a bandit citizen may have reflected the influence of Bernal's own defense of his criminalized actions as civically necessary and honorable.¹⁰ As seen in his 1887 political manifesto, the Plan de Conitaca, Bernal directly responded to those powerful men who deemed him a bandit by retorting: “Me importan poco las calificaciones que se hacen de mí. Todos los revolucionarios han sido llamados bandidos” (Gastélum 92). He further argued that he had only acted patriotically and in self defense against the unjust forces of government, despite the hardships of living and organizing in the impoverished countryside (91). And, in contrast to what he referred to as the arbitrary violence of his enemies, Bernal sustained that he only fought against those intent on destroying him with a vow to unite all Mexicans against the tyranny of those in power (92). The powerful would eventually succeed in halting Bernal's military ambitions and criminalized activities; yet, his legacy marched on in newspaper coverage and popular culture of the period (especially in *corridos*), and his acclaim has been stoked throughout the twentieth century by numerous novels and films about him.¹¹

Although some newspaper reports about Bernal depicted him as an evil man simply prone to criminality, much newspaper coverage from around the time of Bernal's death would lay the groundwork for romanticized images of this renowned bandit. Often considered mere mouthpieces for the government,¹² many (anonymously published) articles within mainstream Mexico City papers would interpret Bernal's banditry as the product of an unfortunate society in which people can become, on the one hand, “víctimas” and “esclavos,” or, on the other hand, “verdugos” and “tiranos” (*Diario del Hogar*, 15 Jan. 1888). The *Diario del Hogar*, indeed, glorified the actions of Heraclio Bernal by associating the oppressed with the need to fight back as “luchadores” rather than passively accept unjust domination as “resignados”: “Bernal no se resignó, porque en la eterna y [. . .] desigual lucha social hay que combatir ó resignarse, vencer ó ser vencido”

(15 Jan. 1888). Other newspaper articles would similarly depict Bernal's struggle as the laudable counterpoint to a corrupt society. For example, *El Nacional*, while simultaneously condemning Bernal as a menace to society, claimed that he had been imprisoned for a crime even though the authorities could not prove his guilt, concluding that this must have driven him to a "duelo á muerte con la sociedad" (*El Nacional*, 10 Jan. 1888). This association of Bernal's struggle with a duel implicitly confers on it standards of honor that were usually reserved for the upper classes, further distinguishing his banditry from degenerate criminality and instead weaving it into visions of Mexico as a modern, principled nation.¹³

By unhinging Bernal's actions from the simplistic criminal-citizen dichotomy that steadfastly vilified outlaws, these reports allowed for a new kind of assessment of this bandit's character. Now on the opposite side of a vilified dominant society, Bernal was romantically perceived as "robusto, ágil, valiente, arrojado y simpático" and "un bandido generoso" by *El Partido Liberal* over two years before his death (3 Oct. 1886), and *El Monitor Republicano* would later add that he was a contrite religious man with "sentimientos honrados," known to donate money to churches (11 Jan. 1888). Even *El Nacional*, which was generally unsympathetic to the bandit, acknowledged that "jamás cometi6, en medio de las muchas muertes que hizo, un solo asesinato cobarde," and then further touted Bernal being gentlemanly with the women that he robbed (10 Jan. 1888).

Many newspaper articles attempted to discredit the legend that had come to enshroud Bernal by declaring it a romantic fiction or a figment of the popular imagination. For example, the *Diario del Hogar* called the news of his death the "nota más novelesca á la vez que dramática de la cr6nica del día [sic]" (15 Jan. 1888). Similarly, in a heated letter from the Sinaloa Correspondent to the Director of the Mexico City newspaper *El Partido Liberal*, the writer complained that the bandit and his gang had been

rodeados por el vulgo ignorante de una aur6ola novelesca que están muy distantes de merecer. Bernal ha sido comparado con Luigi Vampa, con el guapo Francisco Est6ban, con Fra-Diávol6, con Roque Guinart, con Diego Corrientes y demás bandidos que la leyenda y la tradici6n han hecho célebres en la fantasía popular. (16 Dec. 1887)¹⁴

Ironically, however, it was the many newspaper reports about Bernal (rather than solely popular opinion, as the article claimed) that helped contribute to a widespread construction of Bernal's identity as an honorable bandit. Some newspapers' critiques of such romanticization within their own ranks thus illustrate a debate among members of the dominant classes about the larger meaning of Porfirian-era banditry and citizenship. At a time when many Mexicans across the socioeconomic hierarchy were still undecided about the costs of sacrificing individual liberties in the name of Porfirian order and progress, these public deliberations about Heraclio Bernal attest to the ways in which banditry could serve as a symbol of resistance to the hegemonic project, despite the ultimate failure of Bernal and those who helped romanticize him to significantly transform the political system.

Unlike sensationalistic reports of other kinds of criminality that contributed to the construction of citizenship as criminality's civilized counterpart,¹⁵ the romanticization of banditry can be seen in the case of Bernal as a critique or questioning of the oversimplified dichotomies that would seem to permeate the political thought of the day. Justo Sierra, one of the most prominent members of Porfirio Díaz's intelligentsia, wrote an article for *La Libertad* in 1878 comparing criminality to a disease or a wild animal that stands as society's barbaric other. In his view, even when the criminal's actions are born of necessity, society's only option is to defend itself against the criminal's threat of disorder (358–60).¹⁶ Yet, in contrast to this top-down construction of criminality as the nemesis of decent society, Bernal's actions were interpretable in public discourse and often found to be part of an appropriate and even honorable response to the social and political realities that surrounded him. Expectations of Mexican citizens were thus broadened (or restored) to include fighting back against the kind of oppression that was implicitly associated with the Díaz regime as early as the president's first reelection.

The following section sheds light on the battle between Bernal's banditry and dominant society through the elite perspective of Ignacio Gastélum, a member of Sinaloan leadership at the time of Bernal's arrest, and through an analysis of Gastélum's inclusion of Bernal's own words in his study. This would not have been a widely distributed or read text and, therefore, cannot be seen as directly contributing to the evolving public meaning of Heraclio Bernal. Rather, it provides a glimpse into the governing classes' perceived need to contain the kind of social and political freedom that Bernal had come to represent across the socioeconomic hierarchy. Moreover, by including documents written by Bernal within the frame of his own narrative, the biographer ultimately creates a multilayered text that illustrates how efforts to police Mexicans' behavior through exclusionary categories such as banditry could not erase or easily dismiss resistance efforts by those who refused to accept their place beyond the boundaries of political legitimacy.

Apuntes biográficos de Heraclio Bernal (1888)

Heraclio Bernal's transformation from son of a humble miner to an infamous bandit is the focus of Ignacio Gastélum's *Apuntes biográficos de Heraclio Bernal*. Gastélum was the secretary to the governor of Sinaloa in the late 1880s and published this biographical text in Culiacán, Sinaloa only a few months after Bernal's death in 1888.¹⁷ His repeatedly stated purpose is to expose the true story of Bernal's life and times, but his narrative is evidently motivated by his disgust with popular culture's glorification of a bandit as a legitimate political threat to the Díaz government. The structure of his analysis takes on the appearance of a straightforward and objective account of the major events in Bernal's life, mostly in Sinaloa and Durango between 1877 and 1888. He draws a clear distinction between his "true" version of Bernal and other romanticized (implying fictional) ones by pointing out the lack of literary merit to his own tale (3, 120). He then bolsters the truth-value of his argument by including official documents and letters that seem to communicate indisputable facts. Nevertheless, his intentions to discredit the bandit are never far beneath the surface and, consequently, instead of a biography, Gastélum produces a passionate rebuttal to those he refers to as Bernal's panegyrists.

Gastélum's insistence in responding to these unspecified admirers suggests an anxiety about the possible pro-Bernal leanings of his audience and attempts to warn them about the dangers of giving into passion at a time that calls for reason.¹⁸ To the end of discrediting the pro-bandit perspective, in two separate occasions Gastélum details one petty robbery after another and then segues into a sarcastic critique of Bernal's supporters: "Estas eran las brillantes proezas de Bernal que han inspirado á sus más ardientes panegiristas!" (55). And later: "Estos son los hechos que han inspirado á los panegiristas de Bernal, para llevar su nombre hasta la escena!" (88).¹⁹ Beyond this reference to playwrights, Gastélum later refers to Bernal's supporters as being found among cultured and educated individuals: "¡Es vergonzoso, realmente, que personas de criterio recto y de alguna instrucción, lleven sus extravíos políticos hasta el grado de ligarse con un bandido tan despreciable como Bernal!" (93). Gastélum's perspective clearly upholds the notion that many ruling elites were critical of banditry, and yet, by making references to the support for Bernal that transcended the lower classes, it simultaneously challenges an assumption often conveyed in bandit studies that pro-bandit sentiment was limited to the popular sectors.

Gastélum's overriding strategy of narrating Bernal as someone who became dishonorable rather than being born that way transforms any reader into a possible bandit in that these are people who lose sight of the moral compass, characterized by the "razón ilustrada" that guides a modern society (93). Gastélum interprets Bernal as having honorable parents and a decent early childhood, however, he concludes that a combination of biological and cultural determinism ultimately explains his demise into banditry. Gastélum reports that Bernal attended primary school in 1868 and his teacher, Señor Don Ángel Bonilla, commented that his high intelligence and dedication led him to quickly perform well in reading, writing, and arithmetic (7). However, by the end of 1869, his father's work required the family to move, and Bernal was removed from school, despite his desire to continue his education. Shortly thereafter, the young Bernal inexplicably returned by himself to the town of Guadalupe de los Reyes where, "con una instrucción escasa y desprovista de todo principio de moralidad y de órden, dió rienda suelta á sus pasiones y se precipitó en el tenebroso sendero del crimen" (8).

Gastélum reasons that Bernal was naturally disposed to banditry in that his family lineage includes a dishonorable uncle (Bernal's mother's brother), and this created a "fatal predestinación" for him individually (5). More broadly, Gastélum argues that all of those from Bernal's lower-class culture—"la clase desheredada de nuestra sociedad"—were disposed to "la holgazanería y la vagancia" (7), thus promoting the perception that the poor, however innately barbaric or civilized, are likely to become the natural nemesis of modern society. Gastélum further finds that Bernal was inhibited by incomplete nurturing in that he lacked "una instrucción moral é intelectual bien cimentada" (6), which would eventually lead him astray down the "camino del mal" (8), also described as "el sendero del crimen" (7, 8), the "camino de los desórdenes" (4), and a journey toward the "abismo de su perdición" (10). The repeated use of symbols of roads or paths attempts to fuse Gastélum's contradictory positions on free will that a good person can choose to become bad, and that such decisions in effect determine one's irreversible destiny.

Gastélum harnesses this notion of the poor as likely to become irremediably criminal in order to present the lower classes as the enemies of civil society and the elite as society's best defense against them. On the one hand, Gastélum places the primary responsibility for creating model citizens on the shoulders of the parents to "educar é instruir á sus hijos [. . .] enseñándoles [. . .] las ventajas que resultan de seguir una vida honrada, laboriosa y ajustada á las reglas de moral y de justicia" (5). Yet, on the other hand, he contends that the parents' failure to do so creates the modern government's obligation to assume the role of surrogate parent, employing "la instrucción intelectual, moral y física del pueblo" (4). Gastélum, thus, endorses a widely accepted belief of the Porfirian era that the government's role is to "contener á esos desgraciados séres" (4), who are seen as untamable beasts that threaten the social order and must be stopped by an iron-fisted national leadership.²⁰

Gastélum goes on to narrate the bandit's political life through a presumption of his evil, uncivilized nature, yet under the pretense of a biographer's objectivity. Rather than acknowledge the political rhetoric with which Bernal refers to his targets, Gastélum portrays Bernal as a petty and maniacal rebel whose battle against authority manifests itself through random acts of violence against virtually anyone that comes in his path. Comparing Bernal to the likes of Manuel Lozada (84), inadvertently upholding Bernal's status as a national political figure rather than merely a high profile criminal, Gastélum then blames Mexico's political woes on those "revoluciones" that had plagued the independence era (17). Yet, Gastélum simultaneously scrutinizes Bernal's personal commitment to any political movement by characterizing him and his troops as common thieves (23–25) and painting a recurrent image of Bernal cowardly fleeing from fights (14, 31, 53, 82–83). Gastélum ultimately deduces that the political manifestos of both Ramírez and Bernal included in his biography were disingenuously used as a "manto de una bandera política" with which they could "cobijar sus depredaciones" (93), or "ampararse y amparar también su larga série de delitos" (16). His conclusions thus serve to frame the bandits' political texts as crafty lies meant to deceive the gullible reader.

When the readers are ultimately presented with the texts in full, they may be expected to agree with the biographer that Bernal was a political fraud. Yet, the bandits' political documents, as well as a poem penned by Bernal and found in his possession at the time of his death, leave the ultimate decision about Bernal's credibility up to the individual who, as Gastélum has already implied, may harbor pro-Bernal inclinations. Moreover, many would have been exposed to those documents in other venues. The first document was found by authorities on the corpse of one of Ramírez Terrón's men, and although it is unclear whether they had distributed it publicly, it is described as a "proclama" (19) and directed toward the public at large, calling on ordinary Mexicans to defend their rights against tyrannical governors (20).²¹ Gastélum reports that the next two documents had been publicly posted (68, 89), indicating that their content was accessible beyond the pages of Gastélum's text and available in a setting unmediated by the biographer's narrative frame and ideological slant. Finally, the poem would appear to be a private document, presumably written the day before Bernal's death (119), with a personal reflection rather than a political statement. Aside from its inclusion in Gastélum's biography, Giron reports that it was reproduced for a wider audience in *El Partido Liberal* on February 1, 1888 (5).²²

Can the Bandit Speak?

According to the political writings associated with Bernal, his criminal behavior was not indiscriminate, as many of Gastélum's examples and analyses suggest, but rather directed against agents of authority that denied him a political voice and rights of citizenship as guaranteed under the 1857 Constitution. It is precisely this clash of interpretations, one voiced by an outlaw and one by a member of the governing elite, that transforms the biography into a manifestation of the ambiguity surrounding the constructed categories of banditry and citizenship permeating the case of Heraclio Bernal. Of the three previously mentioned political texts, the first is attributed to Ramírez Terrón at the time that Bernal was fighting in his rebellion, and the following two are attributed directly to Bernal. They are important for their very inclusion, which would seem to replicate the struggle between Bernal and society, as the bandit's own words confront a suffocating narrative frame. Moreover, they are important for their content because they each reveal an identification with the *patria* and an intense effort to participate as a marginalized but not banished citizen, fully aware of historical promises to the nation that he sees as left unfulfilled by an illegitimate government. He refutes the notion that his movement foments disorder, and in turn re-signifies his actions as an alternative form of order by attacking the present government as the true enemy of progress and liberty for all Mexicans.

Each of those three texts is dismissed by Gastélum as the insincere rhetoric of a criminal, but his criticisms cannot fully overshadow Bernal's cultural and political messages. In the first text, attributed to Ramírez Terrón, but associated with Bernal as a participant in the rebellion, Gastélum all but ignores the content of the document and instead uses its inclusion as a means to shift the exciting, manly aura often surrounding bandits onto the authority figures. He comments that Governor Cañeda would use all of his "actividad y energía" to pursue the "revoltosos de Ramírez" until their annihilation (21), which positions this particular rebellion as a standoff between select hunters and their prey, likened to an intolerable vermin. This Manichean construction of the conflict reflects Dabove's analysis of elite representations of banditry as something natural, such as a catastrophic event (287). Dabove argues that this rhetorical strategy "eliminates its agents as humans [. . .] while suppressing the political dimension of peasant resistance that banditry represents" (288). And, in turn, the repressive actions of the government are naturalized in that the problem of banditry is portrayed as a phenomenon to be controlled rather than individuals to be killed. Such insinuations were not, however, left uncontested.

In contrast to Gastélum's interpretation of the government's repression of Ramírez Terrón's rebellion as a social and political necessity, the document itself sounds a call to fellow citizens to rise up against their common antagonists in the government with sharp reminders of the violent measures that have been unjustly wielded against the public. It briefly and directly calls on all men to defend the "patria" against tyrants whose "crueldad" and "tratamiento inquisitorial" should not be tolerated (20). Where it begins with an erudite reference to Victor Hugo and his "grito de la libertad," the proclamation ends with a straightforward call to arms against those who would betray ordinary Mexican citizens: "Señores . . . ¡Mueran los tiranos . . . ! ¡Mueran los asesinos . . . ! ¡Viva la Constitución de 57 . . . ! Y . . . ¡Viva el Pueblo, porque el pueblo es la ley y sabe hacerse

justicia . . . !” (20). Through repeated references to the rights and freedoms of all Mexicans, as well as the criminal and anti-patriotic actions of the government, the document essentially inverts the criminal-citizen dichotomy. It posits that the current administration has violated the laws, while by contrast the so-called bandit authors have embraced the responsibility to honor the nation’s martyred patriot heroes and reclaim the country from its current, unjust leadership.

The second document was discovered well after Ramírez’s death and was accredited solely to Heraclio Bernal, “Comandante de la fuerza proclamadora de las garantías constitucionales” (68–69). It was drafted in Cosalá on July 27, 1885, and, like the previous document, seeks to destabilize the top-down distinction between criminal and citizen by enveloping Bernal’s criminalized movement in images of the law while transforming those authority figures who battle against him into outlaws. It further insinuates that the bandits are more patriotic than their foes by pointing to the government’s cozy relations with foreigners, while charging unspecified government officials with using their authority to line their own pockets instead of protecting the interests, welfare, and rights of Mexican citizens (68). It goes on to list the specific terms of Bernal’s plan that can only be achieved by taking up arms to remove the “malos gobernantes” (69) and reincorporate constitutional guarantees into the political system. Bernal’s five-point proposal succinctly calls for the reestablishment of the 1857 Constitution, endorses Bernal’s leadership in the armed uprising, invites the participation of all citizens to support his movement, promises that the citizens’ wishes will guide the course of the revolution and the future political plans, and invokes the authority to wield “el rigor de la ley” against “todos los que contraríen este plan ó denucien á sus defensores” (69). By taking the reigns of the law in these terms, Bernal’s movement represents an endorsement of the basic structures of Mexican law and order and a rejection solely of the present authorities as legitimate leaders of Mexico’s historically established ideals.

Gastélum’s response to Bernal’s text is to attempt to reestablish the authority to decide in this standoff who are the criminals and who are the patriots. He does so by simply dismissing the sincerity of Bernal’s political remarks and reinvoking Governor Cañedo’s energetic efforts to combat Bernal’s movement (69–70). Those efforts include a counter plan with its own five points explaining that, in collaboration with the Durango authorities, the Sinaloan and Federal governments will concentrate forces in areas known for banditry, organize guerrillas to patrol the roads, increase military salaries, and improve communication between military camps. Finally, they will punish anyone who would aid and abet the bandits or neglect to report their whereabouts (70), an admonition that would later be specifically directed to both typical citizens and authority figures (88). In short, the government’s plan reinforces the image of Bernal and his men as public menaces and the image of the authorities as the saviors of the Mexican people through their enforcement of order.

Bernal’s and Cañedo’s competing political plans demonstrate that each side claims to represent the law, fully empowered to oblige their fellow citizens’ compliance against their common foe (70). This standoff generally upholds a dichotomy between criminal and citizen, but it puts into flux the top-down supposition that government elites necessarily embody civic authority against the dangerous lower classes. The political plan articulated

by so-called bandits signifies that officially criminalized individuals like Bernal had asserted the authority to recast their own identities in terms of their ability to contribute to Mexican society and politics while detaching the upper classes from their own assertions of legal legitimacy. Given that newspaper articles, as well as Gastélum's remarks about the prevalence of pro-bandit attitudes, confirm, and even potentially embolden, widespread interpretations of Bernal as a heroic social bandit, it is apparent that what Bernal frames as the government's misuse of their authority resonated with the Mexican public. In this way, regardless of their ideological intent, as such texts staged the struggle between romantic notions of banditry and top-down explanations of crime and criminality, they challenged the elite's ability to control the meaning of the criminal-citizen dichotomy or to ensure the ideological obedience that would be necessary to sustain Porfirian hegemony.

Bernal's public image and political vision peak in January of 1887, when he posted his lengthy and stirring "Plan de Comitaca" (89–92), to which Gastélum's primary rebuttal is that the document is "curioso" (88), as is the public support for Bernal that would seem incapable of understanding his political message as a façade for purely violent and illegal deeds (92–93). Gastélum further critiques the plan by raising the suspicion that it was probably a corrupt Durango politician that aligned with Bernal to draft it, inadvertently upholding the notion that the politically powerful and the officially criminalized were aligned on the same side of the conflict with Mexico's central administration (93). While Gastélum predictably seeks to situate the corrupt politician with Bernal on the evil side of the criminal-citizen dichotomy, the plan itself refutes the ruling elite's application of that dichotomy by associating Bernal with nationally recognized revolutionaries who had also carried the bandit label while doing the right thing for the country (92).

Bernal's plan is divided into three parts. The first part explains the postulates of the "Ejército restaurador" that justify overthrowing the Díaz government's regime. The penultimate point sums up Bernal's passionate argument:

Que en ese mismo Gobierno se ha entronizado la tiranía con su inevitable cortejo de la inmoralidad, desenfreno, violación de las leyes, atropello de las garantías, atentados asombrosos contra la vida del hombre, impunidad escandalosa y falta absoluta de respetos á la patria y de interés por su progreso y bienestar. (89)

This harsh moral rebuke of the current government sets the stage for Bernal to reveal his detailed plans for reform. The plan's second section then delineates the rebel army's resolutions in ten points, the last of which is divided into eleven sub-points. Collectively, this compilation of proposals dramatically calls for the removal of Porfirio Díaz, the reestablishment of the 1857 Constitution, and the selection of an interim President by Bernal's faction (89). The federal army and other insurrectionists are invited to help sustain an occupation of the capital and enforce the mandate of the proposed provisional president. Furthermore, Bernal issues a series of specific demands that would refortify and reorganize the nation by decentralizing the power of the federal government. These demands include creating more states, preserving the autonomy of local elections, elevating the importance of municipalities in the national power hierarchy, abolishing the

death penalty, redistributing land, and more (90). By capitalizing on anxieties about how a more centralized authority might estrange Mexicans from their basic rights to live autonomously and have a voice in the political process, these proposals constitute a direct assault on the dictatorial foundations under construction by the Porfirian-era leadership.

The third section of this plan vividly defies the government's pretenses of controlling the meaning of criminality through its personalized version of Bernal as a solitary and persecuted rebel who has come to embrace his dual identity as a bandit and a revolutionary. He first recalls the loss of Ramírez and the long period afterwards in which he did not know how to proceed "porque la revolución no tomaba forma decisiva: el país se manifestaba dispuesto; pero faltaban caudillos y centro de unión para todos los partidarios." Next, he turns the tables on the authorities by accusing the soldiers of causing disorder and suffering: "roban, incendian, talan por donde quiera que pasan, sacrificando vidas y burlándose del pudor y la honra de las familias" (91). In contrast, Bernal declares that he treats his troops and the public well, boasting that the only communities he has "tocado" are the ones that have betrayed him. This personal proclamation asserts that Bernal was forced into politics as a patriotic and misunderstood individual who bears the bandit label while struggling to save "la honra y progreso de mi patria" (92). At the conclusion of this final section of the plan, Gastélum follows up only briefly to chastise readers who might be persuaded by Bernal's claims, and then he proceeds with his narration of events leading to Bernal's capture. With his lack of commentary signaling a relaxation of control over the interpretation of this lengthy and complex document, Gastélum exposes his readers to the palpable lack of consensus about the government's pursuit of public order and civic obedience through the criminalization of rebellion.

Bernal's (narrative and historical) struggle comes to an end when, as the bandit groups tended to divide and lose power, the Government troops headed by Cañeda and Bernardo Reyes learned that their campaign had achieved its goal. Gastélum exploits official documentation to announce all factual aspects of the infamous bandit's death, and the reader is guided to the end of the biography with only a few further interjections by the narrator. These documents reveal that the authorities had offered 10,000 *pesos* for Bernal's capture, a sum which a General Juan Manuel Flores increased by 5,000 *pesos* (97–98). *El Nacional* described this attention as a badge of dignity for the bandit (10 Jan. 1888), but Gastélum takes information about the reward as an opportunity to underscore the government's honesty and integrity in their peacekeeping efforts. By painstakingly reproducing a series of official letters, Gastélum confirms that Bernal's assassins, Crispín García and his uncle Jorge Ayon, received the reward (115–18).²³ Finally, Gastélum reproduces numerous eye-witness accounts verifying that the dead bandit is indeed Heraclio Bernal, including detailed reports of the many identifying scars and injuries on his body as well as the complete copy of his death certificate (105–14).

In sharp contrast to Gastélum's reduction of Bernal's identity to the morbidly corporal, this exceptionally well-documented and somewhat tedious denouement to Heraclio Bernal's life is followed by a space for the bandit to speak once more. On the penultimate page of the biography, Gastélum reproduces a poem that was apparently found on Bernal's person and written the day before his death:

Enfado de este mundo, voy á buscar un rincón; todo lo tengo
pagado ni le debo ni me debe.

Gracias por haberme creado este mundo fanfarrón.

Nocsivo, sin conocerla
Le he sido á la sociedad;
Pero yo siempre he querido
Pertenerle en verdad,
Pero no lo he conseguido.

Cuando jóven calavera,
Salvé la ley orgulloso
Creyéndome poderoso,
Absoluto como un Rey.

Eraclio Bernal (119)²⁴

In the poem, Bernal presents himself as an eternal outsider, futilely struggling to simply belong. The bandit would seem to have internalized the government's framing of the national problem as a stark battle between those who foment disorder and those who are morally equipped to eradicate that disorder. By referring here to his failure to ultimately reconcile his political vision with that of dominant society, as well as his tacit acceptance of the outsider status that the government had conferred on him as a criminal, his words may signal a reinforcement of the top-down distinction between legitimate citizenship and criminalized banditry. And yet, Bernal's lamentation of being an honorable man rejected by his own society reasserts his movement's essential critique of Mexico's political conundrum in which citizenship was falsely framed as a choice between conforming to an unjust system and banishment for attempting to reform that system.

Conclusions

Gastélum concludes his biography with the assertion that Bernal's absence now affords the state of Sinaloa, under the direction of Governor Cañeda, the opportunity to achieve "una era de paz y de progreso positivo" (120). By providing Bernal's perspective, however, Gastélum has offered his readers the opportunity to comprehend the evolution of Mexican society in more complex terms than the symbolism of direct roads to either progress or ruin. Bernal's criminal and rebellious responses to Mexico's political, economic, and social realities suggest that challenges to Díaz's vision for order did not signify a toppling of order altogether. Rather, Bernal promoted an alternative form of order, one that would repeal the centralization and prevent the abuses of power that would come to be increasingly lamented over the course of the Porfiriato. Indications of support for such an alternative order can be found in Gastélum's biography and in newspaper articles around the time of Bernal's death wherein Bernal's so-called banditry was equated with honor, bravery, generosity, and even citizenship. This support for Bernal, however romanticized, signifies a rejection of the top-down indictment of bandits like Bernal and signals a desire for values associated with his criminalized actions to become (or remain) an integral component of the national political identity and cultural spirit.

This merging of banditry and citizenship through the case of Heraclio Bernal was clearly resisted by Gastélum and others, who were intent on preserving dominant society's control over the behavior and obedience of Mexican subjects. However, when that control depended on criminalizing what was perceived as civic involvement in debatable political and legal decisions, we can also find an evident backlash against notions of citizenship that would necessarily exclude such criminality. While Governor Cañedo did not necessarily refer to Bernal as a "bandit citizen" to help fuel criticism about the rigid dichotomies being imposed on the nation by Mexico's political and intellectual elite, his publicized comment does indicate that the citizen-criminal opposition was being interpreted and critiqued even as it was being propagated and internalized. The discursive repercussions of Heraclio Bernal's banditry, despite ultimately failing to alter the political direction of the country, help to understand how Mexicans across the socioeconomic spectrum found ways to negotiate their own critical understanding of national identity and civic participation at a time of increasing ideological and political control by the central government. Widespread portrayals of banditry as a component of citizenship under attack by authoritarian rulers thus functioned as a symbolic liberation from unjust applications of citizenship as a tool to criminalize or dishonor dissent.

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Notes

- ¹ I am grateful for support from a Fulbright-García Robles Fellowship in 2002–2003, which provided the opportunity to conduct extensive archival research on Heraclio Bernal at the Hemeroteca Nacional, and to work with Nicole Giron, the foremost expert on Bernal. A very preliminary version of this analysis was presented at the XXV International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association in 2004, and I benefited from comments from discussant John Lear. I am also indebted to numerous colleagues for commenting on drafts of this article, especially those in writing groups hosted by Bowling Green State University’s Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology. To clarify the limited bibliographical information about the newspapers referenced throughout this article, the newspaper articles did not appear with headlines or authors, and the newspapers themselves were typically only four pages long. The citations here report only the newspaper title and the article’s publication date with the assurance that this information is sufficient to readily locate the cited articles. All original spelling, accentuation and punctuation have been retained.
- ² For discussions on the interpretable nature of criminality in the Mexican context, see, for example, Speckman Guerra (15–16) and Piccato (10–15).
- ³ For excellent reviews of the social bandit debate, see Joseph (10–18) and Dabove (17–25). For examples of investigators who have argued in favor of “the idea of banditry” as political critique, see Vanderwood (*Disorder* xxxv–xxxviii). For literary representations of outlaws as political critique, see Slatta (56, 58–59, 63).
- ⁴ Friedrich Katz illustrates this conflation of dissimilar identities with a reference to Francisco “Pancho” Villa’s robbery of an *hacienda* in Chihuahua that could be interpreted either as “mere acts of banditry” or “already part of Villa’s revolutionary activity” (73) to suggest that certain crimes, such as theft or even murder, could be decriminalized in the hearts and minds of Mexican people if they were deemed justified by a political agenda.
- ⁵ See, for example, Buffington, Speckman Guerra, and Piccato. While each study includes discussions about resistance to dominant perceptions of crime, Piccato most notably strives to balance elite and popular perspectives.
- ⁶ Aside from Hobsbawm’s social bandit model (19–33), see, for example, Frazer’s chapter on “Bandits and Corridos” (131–68) and Vanderwood’s discussion of the veneration of Juan Soldado in the chapter “Witness to Execution” (*Soldado* 173–200).
- ⁷ Nicole Giron’s landmark study of Bernal concludes that a common denominator for the multiple variants of *corridos* about him is that they express empathy and esteem for Bernal as a hero, and that his death is perceived as a loss or even a tragedy (112). Chris Frazer’s analysis similarly finds that *corridos* about Bernal emphasize his masculinity, honor, and solidarity with the poor (161). Frazer’s study exclusively links the popularity of Bernal to the lower classes (160), whereas Giron more thoroughly considers the upper class venues for his popularization (22–28).
- ⁸ Giron’s exhaustive study of Bernal finds little documentation about his life and crimes prior to 1879. While she extensively consults Gastélum’s invaluable biography to recreate the bandit’s experiences, her archival research allowed her to both confirm and question many of Gastélum’s conclusions. For further inquiries into Bernal’s

history of crime and military exploits, Giron's analysis undoubtedly persists as the most comprehensive and reliable.

- ⁹ Giron provides extensive documentation and commentary about local and state efforts to capture Bernal and his gang (55–78, 81–87), including maps showing the locations of his robberies (62) and murders (75). See also Gastélum (70–98).
- ¹⁰ In contrast to Gastélum's assurance that Cañedo was highly dedicated to capturing Bernal (98), Giron posits that Cañedo's attitude toward Bernal's crimes was curiously apathetic by pointing out that unlike other state governors, Cañedo never directly took charge of attempts to capture Bernal, and even the reward he eventually offered for Bernal's arrest was an "iniciativa [. . .] de comerciantes de Mazatlán y de las autoridades de Durango, no de Cañedo" (57).
- ¹¹ For a list of posthumous literary works about Bernal, including *corridos*, novels, and films, see Giron (19–20).
- ¹² Katz points to 1884 as the onset of Díaz's repressive influence on Mexico's press in that "previously combative opposition press," or otherwise critical journalistic perspectives, became "largely muzzled and brought under control" (81). He argues that this represents a turning point in Díaz's "ability to tame Mexico's traditionally rebellious and mutinous middle classes" (107).
- ¹³ See especially discussions about duels and honor (prior to the Revolution) in Piccato (80–84) and Speckman Guerra (40–41).
- ¹⁴ Luigi Vampa was an Italian bandit that appears in *The Count of Monte Cristo*; Francisco Estéban was praised in folk ballads from the Sierra Morena; Fra-Diavolo was notorious during the Bourbon dynasty and is the subject of a famous opera titled with his name; Roque Guinart fought on behalf of Catalanian peasants and appears in the second half of *Don Quixote*; and Diego Corrientes was an Andalusian bandit novelized as generous in 1894 in Madrid.
- ¹⁵ For a specific example, see Speckman Guerra's discussion of representations of "El Tigre de Santa Julia" (177–83). For more general references to newspapers' condemnation of criminality as related to the lower, uncivilized class, see also Buffington (33, 64–65) and Piccato (37, 66–67, 163).
- ¹⁶ Sierra's text was published in *La Libertad* on October 12, 1878 with the title "Contestación a la carta del Doctor Fenelón: La criminalidad en México" (358–61).
- ¹⁷ Gastélum's dedication page is dated May 10, 1888, and Bernal died in January of that year.
- ¹⁸ See Buffington (12–21) for a discussion about the influence of Enlightenment thought in late nineteenth-century criminology's contrast between reason and passion.
- ¹⁹ There are reportedly two plays about Bernal, but neither appears to have been preserved. The first one was presented on February 5, 1888 in the Teatro del Príncipe in Mexico City where it ran for six weeks, despite reports of poor acting (Giron 20). It was entitled "Heraclio Bernal" and was written by José Monroy y Francisco Gutiérrez Solórzano (20, 23). According to Olavarría y Ferrari, "los autores [. . .] fueron muy aplaudidos, pero las entradas no pasaron de muy mínimas y la compañía dramática hubo de ceder su puesto á la Empresa de Títeres Roseta Arenda" (53). Giron explains that the second play can be traced to the first years of the twentieth century and was political in nature: "el historiador sinaloense Héctor R. Olea afirma que el periodista Brígido Caro [. . .] escribió una obra de teatro de encendido antiporfirismo, cuyo

héroe era Heraclio Bernal. Fue editada clandestinamente con el título *El rey de los bandidos: Heraclio Bernal*” (20–21).

- ²⁰ See Buffington’s discussion of the influences of positivism and Social Darwinism in Porfirian-era penology, contributing to the belief that maintaining social order took precedence over instituting liberal legal reforms (118–19).
- ²¹ Giron surmises that it was meant to be read aloud at the successful conclusion of a battle (41).
- ²² These four texts can also be consulted in Giron (41, 64, 78–80, 5, respectively).
- ²³ This parallels Gastélum’s pointed explanation of how, after Ramírez Terrón’s death in 1880, the government troops returned all of the money found on his person to its rightful owners (45).
- ²⁴ Giron includes this poem from *El Partido Liberal* (1 Feb. 1888) in a slightly different form. She shows the entire poem structured in short lines, where the first stanza has eleven lines and the second stanza has four. Furthermore, the spelling errors are corrected, Bernal’s first name is spelled “Heraclio,” and the fourth line states, “Ni me debe ni le debo” (5).

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