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Imperialism, Modernity, and Literature: Why Detective Fiction Did Not Become Popular in Early 20th Century Mexico

By ROMERO Isami*

Introduction

Detective fiction was consolidated in Great Britain in the mid-19th century, when the British government completed the modernization of the police force. In the same years, and as a way to compete their British rivals, a couple of French novelists carried out a similar narrative style, whose central topic was the resolution of a crime by a brilliant detective. By the 1860s, many European publishing houses published translations of the most important British and French detective fiction, and 20 years later, these novels arrived in Asia.

Particularly in Japan, a country whose modernization process had been “late”, detective fiction became one of its most important genres, and its popularity is still maintained to this day. It is interesting that despite Japan having the lowest crime rate in developed countries, nowadays many murderers killed thousands of people each year in the Japanese detective novels.

Therefore, detective fiction transcends borders and in the beginning of the 20th century, we can find in Japan, China and Dutch Indies local versions of Sherlock Holmes, Monsieur Lecoq or Arsène Lupin.

In Mexico, we cannot observe the existence of detective fiction in the same period, such as Asia. This was not a unique situation of Mexico; it was a phenomenon of all Latin America. While the first novels of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1829-1930) entered Latin America in the 1890s (Yates 1956: 229), it was in the 1920s, thanks to massive translations of British and French detective fiction made in Argentina, when Latin American readers started to read this type of novel (Torres 2003: 10). And it was after the publication of the work of the Argentine novelist Sauli Lostal (?) *The Enigma of the Arcos Street* (1932), when Latin Americans began

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to produce a distinctly detective fiction.

In the case of Mexico, although some scholars have argued that Alfonso Quiroga (?) wrote the first Latin American detective novel, *Life and Miracles of Pancho Reyes, Mexican Detective* (probably in the 1920s), nobody has conclusively proved. In this sense, *A Crime Essay*, a novel written in 1944 by the dramatist Rodolfo Usigli (1905-1979), is the “first Mexican detective novel”.

Two years after the publication of *A Crime Essay* appeared the magazine *Selections of Police and Mystery Stories*, whose goal was to promote the translation of foreign novels and also the publication of stories of Mexican authors. Some prominent writers that participated in this project were Antonio Helú (1900-1972), José Martínez De la Vega (1908-1954), Rafael Bernal (1915-1972) and María Elvira Bermúdez (1916-1988). They emulated the American crime novel, mainly the works of Dashiell Hammett (1894-1965) and Raymond Chandler (1888-1959).

Why did detective fiction did not become popular in the dawn of 20th century Mexico? This article seeks to explain the causes of this unique situation. To achieve this goal, it first undertakes a reflection on the relationship between modernity and detective fiction. Later, it analyzes how positivism, the dominant ideology of Mexican ruling power during the beginning of the 20th century, inhibited the development of this type of narrative in Mexico. Then, it will argue that the contempt of Mexican literati toward British literature was one of the possible causes of the absence of detective fiction. Finally, this article will highlight that during 19th century Mexico, the “bandit” and not the “detective” was the protagonist who monopolized the core of crime stories. This situation did not permit the existence of modern detective fiction.

Detective Fiction and Modernity

In 1841, Edgar Allan Poe (1808-1849) published in Philadelphia the first modern detective fiction in the world, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, in *Graham's Magazine*. Its setting was Paris of the first half of the 19th century. Before the publication of this work, criminals, not detectives, were the characters who dominated crime stories. Poe changed this logic and put in the detective as the central character, most likely influenced by Eugène François Vidocq (1775-1857), a famous French thief, who became the first true private detective in history. This also explains why Paris and not New York or London was used for *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*.

However, despite its American origin, modern detective fiction achieved an important position in Great Britain. Many novelists transformed London into the main city where the smartest and extroverted detectives fought against the most terrible criminals. Why was Great Britain where the detective fiction achieved its niche? The reason is simple. In this country there were the necessary conditions to

develop the future detective fiction. Home Secretary Robert Peel (1788-1850) established in 1829 the first professional organization dedicated to monitoring and investigate crimes: the Metropolitan Police Service (the future New Scotland Yard).

Thus, for the second half of the 19th century, many writers published novels whose central topic were detectives. The most important detective in novels were obviously British, Conan Doyle being the most prominent writer, but also standing out more French writers such as Émile Gaboriau (1832-1873) and Maurice Leblanc (1864-1941), although Leblanc's character, Arsène Lupin, was a thief.

But, what is detective fiction? First, it is a narrative, which combines two types of stories in the same novel: the daily life of the detective and the narrative of the crime itself. Second, most of the stories occur in big urban and modern cities. Third, they are easy to read. Fourth, the central theme is the mystery; consequently there is no intention to quickly reveal its solution. Fifth, they use the legal and medical factors derived from positivist philosophy and scientific method to create the characteristics of the crime. In this manner, the detective fiction explains the behavior people from a logical and rational perspective (Buffington & Piccato 2009: 8). Finally, the protagonist, the detective, uses the deductive method to solve the crimes.

In sum, detective fiction is a narrative that considers necessary the existence of a modern society, and its main attractive point is to entertain all types of readers.

It should be noted that some scholars believe that the existence of democratic rules are a necessary condition for any detective fiction. If there is no sense of justice and fair play, as exists in many democratic nations, it will be difficult for any detective to practice their profession. This point is debatable. For example, in Asia during the late 19th century a democratic structure did not exist there, but this situation did not block the development of detective fiction. In this sense, rather than democratic rules, probably one necessary condition to establish a detective fiction is probably the existence of a legal structure to ensure minimum standards of rule of law.

However, why did the British model become popular outside of Great Britain? The expansion of this type of narrative was understandable, since Britain exported much of its culture to many places. But there was another factor that explains the expansion of the British model to Asia and other latitudes; it is British Imperialism and British colonial rule. At the time that Conan Doyle wrote his famous Sherlock Holmes series, Asia and Latin America were controlled directly or partially by Great Britain and the other European great powers.

Consequently, it might be said that British colonialist policy determined the future of detective fiction in Asia. London sought to modernize its colonies and regions dominated by the Colonial Office, increasing the number of police officers and prisons. This organization became the largest criminal justice system ever organized in the history of the world (Knepper 2009: 41). This modernization also

established the future base of detective fiction of India and British Malaya.

For other Asian regions that were outside of the sphere of British rule, the arrival of detective fiction was different. In one of the meetings of the *Politics of Detective Fiction*, a project financed by Keio University, Elizabeth Chandra explained that in the case of the Dutch Indies, the constant translation of Dutch to any written work from Great Britain and France, combined with the interest of Indonesians to know what Dutch published in Netherlands, permitted the circulation of the works of Conan Doyle and Leblanc.

The case of Japan was different too. This country has never been a European colony, but in the end of 19th century, the authorities of the Meiji government adapted or introduced many European institutions to modernize Japan. One of them was the European police apparatus. The Meiji government established the first modern police institution in 1871. And in their search to establish their own organization, Japanese rulers discovered British detective fiction. Megumi Tsutsumibayashi in another meeting of the *Politics of Detective Fiction* explained that Japanese ruling power were very interested in understanding the British novels, particularly the works of Conan Doyle. They were easy to read and at the same time presented the key points in how to undertake an investigation. By the 1880s, the journalist Ruikō Kuroiwa (1862-1920) translated the first Sherlock Holmes stories and the works of Eugène Gaboriau, and in 1889, he published *Cruelty*, the first Japanese detective novel. From this point, the genre became one of the most popular in Japanese literature.

In sum, the development of detective fiction in Asia and Meiji Japan was intrinsically linked to European Imperialism and the process of modernization. What happened with Mexico? It had also begun modernization of its state structure in the same years as Japan, particularly in its police apparatus.

The first police organization emerged in Mexico in the late 18th century (Stavans 1997: 61), but all this structure disappeared with the outbreak of the independence war, and after independence the Mexican authorities could not rebuild a central organization. The only forces that could be established were small bodies of volunteers, who protected towns from potential bandits. By 1848, Mexican authorities established the first professional body of police officers, the Police Force of Mexico City, but it lacked real strength. A big change occurred during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1830-1915), commonly know as Porfiriato. Díaz regime considered as one of its priorities the professionalization of the police forces, and established in 1879 the Gendarmerie of the Federal District (Mexico City). For the first time, police were able to use guns and were organized into a command structure.

However, Porfirian police forces were less modern than their counterparts in Europe and Japan. Mexican police became a repressive apparatus of the Díaz dictatorship's opponents. Also, the police sought to respond only to the demands of

the ruling elite, who were afraid that the poor people became a threat toward their economical interest (Garza 2007: 97).

Despite this situation, Porfiriato established the minimum condition of modern State. This situation permitted, in theory, the existence of a detective fiction, even if it was a cheaper version. But, in reality during the Porfiriato was no such genre.

While there were works that directly addressed the police structure as such the novel of Manuel Payno (1810-1894) *The Bandits from Río Frío* (1895), none followed the pattern of the British model (Sánchez 2010: 10). No matter that they had professionalized some of the structure of the police forces; in Porfirian Mexico (and probably in any Latin American country of this period) it was difficult to create a story that considered the existence of an honest policeman. Anyone attempting to adapt the British or French model was at risk of writing a parody.

Why did this situation occur? It will sound tautological, but it was the lack of real modernization of the Mexican State that inhibited the development of detective fiction. Without modernity, there are no detectives and vice versa. For this reason, Mexican readers had to wait until the 1930s, when another authoritarian regimen, the one party system of the Party of Revolution, established a more modern police apparatus.

We cannot reject the hypothesis of the causal relation between modernization and detective fiction, but it is noteworthy that in those same years Mexico has established (though not massively) another genre, which usually commonly identified with modernization. I am talking about science fiction. Rachel Haywood-Ferreira (2011) has shown how Mexico and other Latin American countries developed a singular science fiction. Some examples are *Mexico 1970* (1884) of Fósforo Cerillos (1820-1915), *A Celestial Trip* (1872) and *Querens* (1890) of Pedro Castera (1846-1906), and *The Donor of Souls* (1899) of Amado Nervo (1870-1919).

Hence, if it was not the lack of modernity that explained of the absence of Mexican detective fiction, what led to this situation? In the rest of this article, I consider three possible explanations: 1) the incompatibility of the positivist philosophy of Porfiriato with the British detective fiction model, 2) the contempt of Mexican literati toward all novels written in Great Britain, and 3) the attraction of the “bandit” and not the “detective”, as the protagonist of crime stories in Mexican national culture.

Mexican Positivism and Detective Fiction

As noted by the historian Friedrich Katz and the anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz (2011: 10-12), since independence Mexico was characterized as an anarchic State, in the sense that no central government was able to finish its term. There were several causes. The first one was that Mexico was not a well-integrated State. A second cause was the great power that Catholic Church had. Liberals saw the Church

as an obstacle to the modernization of the country; this situation generated conflicts among conservatives who supported the interests of the Church. The third cause was the social inequality inherited by the Spanish colonial order, which became more problematic in the early years of the independence. The final cause was foreign intervention, which prevented the formation of a strong State.

Porfirio Díaz sought to reverse this situation (Katz and Lomnitz 2011: 12-13). When he took power in 1876, many factors that caused the anarchic State had weakened, particularly the strength of the Catholic Church. Consequently, Díaz took advantage of this situation. One of the most important changes was the removal of problematic local chiefs (*caciques*) and warlord and their replacement by his own people. Meanwhile, Díaz made a tacit agreement with the non-problematic *caciques* to let him govern. He allowed them to enrich themselves, but forbade them to be involved with any political issue.

Another important change was the unification of the country through the development of railways. With the development of railways, the Mexican government could transport to the ports products such as copper and sisal (henequen). In this new situation, many foreign investors began to invest in Mexico. Railroads also allowed the army and police to respond faster to quell uprisings. Porfirio Díaz also thought that the best way to prevent a new invasion of the United States and enrich the country was allowing the Americans to invest (Katz and Lomnitz 2011: 16). But to avoid a monopolistic American presence he also allowed European investors to invest in Mexico.

Finally, as a philosophical basis for his modernization project, the Díaz dictatorship adopted positivism, and based on it, he tried to address many educational and social policies, including the handling of crime.

Positivism entered México during the Restored Republic (1867-1876) thanks to Gabino Barreda (1818-1881), who had studied in France and had the opportunity to know directly the ideas of August Comte (1798-1857). Barreda adapted positivism in the actual situation of Mexican society and created the National Preparatory, a new system of senior high school, and one year later, Barreda established a ban on religious education. However, critics to his vision of limited freedom and the attacks of many government officers toward his educational policies weakened Barreda's position in society and his positivism lost strength.

Despite this situation, many Mexican positivists defended his thesis and some aspects of his idea of social order, for example, Justo Sierra (1848-1921), José Ives Limantour (1854-1935), and Francisco Bulnes (1847-1924). They sought to promote the thinking based on a rigorous scientific method. Finally, after Barreda's death in 1881, his positivism completely lost its influence, and the new group, *Científicos* (Scientists), led by Sierra, dictated the philosophical bases of the Díaz dictatorship.

Científicos prioritized the promotion of economic growth of individuals and considered that the government could sacrifice their political freedom, if this

permitted to promote economic growth. Under this policy only free people were those who could have land and goods. And to justify this injustice, they used the positivism of British philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903).

Spencer outlined a social evolutionism based on the ability of living species to adapt to circumstances when they were placed in different conditions to their origins. Thus, any society was governed by these laws and can be analyzed as other living organism. Its transformation was governed by vital cycles, as any living organism (González Ascencio 2010: 705-706).

Spencer's theory became an excellent idea to justify political position and policies of the ruling class during the Porfiriato. *Científicos* and government officers found a secular explanation of the poverty conditions of the majority of the population, particularly the living conditions of many *indígenas* (indigenous people). They justified using "scientific argument" that heredity, biological deficiencies or cultural atavism were the reasons that impeded these groups to take advantage of the social progress promoted by the government.

In sum, the Porfiriato changed many aspects of the anarchy that had prevailed during the first 50 years after independence. It established a modernization project based on the strengthening of the national infrastructure. Furthermore, with the adoption of positivism as the philosophical base to design social and educational policies, the ruling elite found the justification to their development model, but the cost of this modernization was the elimination of political freedom and the segregation of the majority of population.

How did this situation affect the development of detective fiction in Mexico? As noted, one the most important elements of any narrative whose protagonist is a detective is that the novel needs to stress the existence of medical and legal aspects derived from positivism. The author needs to provide social typologies that permit readers to understand the crime from logical and rational perspectives. These types of elements existed, at least within the theories that *Científicos* used to defend themselves.

Therefore, it remains an enigma why in Mexico there did not exist any detective fiction based on a British or French model. One possible explanation is that despite authorizing the scientific method in their social explanation for their own personal interest, *Científicos* denied "fair play", an essential element of any modern detective fiction.

Científicos and the Porfiriato ruling class that supported positivism as the regime official philosophy had never accepted that an *indígena* or poor people were equal before any law and that the police organization had to protect their integrity. In fact, *Científicos* considered that social inequality was inevitable (González Ascencio 2010: 711). As a result, it is hard to imagine that under these conditions it was possible for modern detective fiction to emerge. This type of novel, in its fictional world, considered that even the poor could be save by the deductive method of a

brilliant detective.

Moreover, we cannot forget that *Científicos* defined that the poor people were potential criminals. If the criminals were the poor sector, any Sherlock Holmes of the Porfiriato was destined to fight against the lower class. No editor in his right mind would publish this type of crime fiction.

If we look at it from another aspect, we will find that the existence of Mexican detective fiction based on the British model was also impossible. If any Mexican writer had sought to emulate the works of Conan Doyle, probably the ruling class would have repudiated him or her. In the stories of the most famous detective in the world, the enemies of Holmes were usually outsiders of British society but they were not member of the lower class. They represented the new rich and the aristocrats. In this context, any novel in which a Mexican Holmes imprisoned a member of the Porfirian aristocracy probably would sell many copies to alienated readers, but it would not escape the censorship of the elite.

Mexican Literati and Detective Fiction

The independence of Mexico did not cut cultural ties with Europe, but the big change was that Spanish influence lost its strength. We can see this situation in science. Nevertheless, Spain continued as one of the central bases of Mexican literature. Two important Spanish movements were important in the first years of Mexico's independence: neoclassicism and romanticism. However, the latter came relatively late, so the neoclassical model dominated, at least in poetry (Vogt 1990: 105). In the case of the narrative, there was clearly an influence of Spanish novels as shown by the work of José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi (1776-1927) *The Mangy Parrot* (1816), which took up the Spanish picaresque tradition. However, later, romanticism would become the most important influence.

In the mid-19th century, Mexican writers became interested in the particularities of national life. It established the *costumbrismo*, a literary movement that focused on the interpretation of local everyday life, mannerisms and customs. *Costumbrismo* maintained its influence until the early 20th century. For many writers of this movement, it was necessary to describe in detail everything. This situation made it difficult to differentiate in which part of the novel the writer was writing fiction and when describing only a village (González Echevarría 2012: 35-36).

Most novels of this period were popular stories that wanted to win over not only the readers of Mexico City, but also the vast majority of rural readers, including housewives and servants. For that reason, their themes were not complicated and stories never criticized the national situation. Also, although it was not a general rule, many of these novels had a strong moral content. In France, this type of popular novel lasted 14 years, in Spain about 50 years, but in Mexico almost a whole century (Villegas Cedillo 1984: 10). Some examples were *The Devil's Tiepin* (1845-1846) of

Manuel Payno (1810-1894) and *The Calandra Lark* (1890) of Rafael Delgado (1853-1914).

Despite their moralistic content, the popular novel covered many types of topics, from love triangle relationships to adventures and even to crime stories. However, in the case of crimes stories, they were completely different from modern detective fiction. Many of them made highly detailed description of places, making the reading boring (something that we cannot see in the works of Conan Doyle), as shown in *The Bandits from Río Frío*. Similarly, although there is a marked touch of suspense, the main character is the criminal (Cedillo Villegas 1984: 20-21). In this sense, it seemed more a kin to the British Newgate novels of the 1820s.

In addition, neither were novels that sought to clarify the mystery using the deductive method. Therefore, characters were not necessarily created by the imagination of the author; they were based on real life characters, making them look in some cases like the works of journalists. Finally, the places that stories described were places where the “rule of law” did not exist as in *Wits* (1865) of Luis G. Inclán (1816-1875) or *Zarco* (1901) of Ignacio Manuel Altamirano (1834-1893).

Why the Mexican literati not show any interest in the British model of detective fiction? There are two ways to analyze this. First, the diplomatic relations with Britain in this period were cut off, so this situation did not allow the entry of the works of Doyle and other authors. Second, the Mexican literati disdained all literary production made in Britain and other English speaking countries. Let’s consider each point.

During the 19th century, Great Britain was the dominant external economic power in former Spanish America and one of the most important investors, but since Latin America was not under British colonial rule, this situation impeded control of the domestic political process in the Western Hemisphere.

In the case of Mexico, the British presence was less evident than South America. As noted by Mexican historian Lorenzo Meyer (1991:11), judging by the books of travelers, journalist or memories, as well as certain works of British writers, it can be said that Mexico was not a country that was in the first place of the British public interest of the 19th century.

This rift with Great Britain became more noticeable after the triumph of Mexican liberals against the Maximilian Empire. In 1867, President Benito Juárez (1806-1872), the leader of Mexican liberals, protested the British support toward the Second Empire (1863-1867) and announced that Mexico would not normalize diplomatic relations with London or any country that had recognized the Maximilian Empire as the true Mexican government. The relations would be established when the European powers accepted the rules and the political bases of the new republic (Pi-Suñer, Riguzzi & Ruano 2011: 161).

Obviously, for pride, but also for their little interest toward Mexico, the British refused to negotiate with Juárez. Thus, the Restored Republic got only the

diplomatic recognition of the United States and some Latin American countries. Subsequently, in 1869, the North German Confederation and the Kingdom of Italy, two countries formed in the 1860s, sought to establish diplomatic relations with the Juárez administration, and two years later, Spain decided to reestablish their relations with Mexico. Finally, Juárez never agreed to normalize the relations with Paris and London, and it was in the 1880s during the Díaz dictatorship when Mexico normalized their relations with France and Great Britain.

These almost 20 years of estrangement with Great Britain explain why many British novels, including detective fiction, were unable to enter Mexico. This situation did not change during Porfiriato. There was not an overriding interest of the British government to establish better relations with Mexico. During these years, Mexico was in the American political sphere. London tacitly recognized this situation and decided to concentrate on Argentina and Brazil than Mexico (Pi-Suñer, Riguzzi & Ruano 2011: 164). In fact, the only European country that did achieve a rapprochement with Mexico was France, but that never managed to move the United States. Even the intellectual and cultural exchanges with France were limited. The only exchange that both countries achieved, as we shall see later, was the literature.

Another element that explains the little influence of British culture in Mexico was the limited presence of British and European citizens in Mexico. From 1895 to 1910, Spanish citizens occupied 60% of the population of the Europeans in Mexico (Pi-Suñer, Riguzzi and Ruano 2011: 216), and the British citizens did not exceed 15%. Also, the presence of Mexicans in Europe was insignificant. Mexican general consulates were located in a port cities (Hamburg, Barcelona, and Liverpool), with the only exception being Paris.

Furthermore, the social contacts between Mexicans and Europeans were small and almost always occurred in a particular social sector, the upper class. The ruling elite had a clear interest in France. Many Mexicans imported aesthetics, philosophy and literature from France. In this period, Great Britain was not attractive because it was a monarchy. Finally, in the publishing market, during the Porfiriato only two transatlantic cultural mediators existed: the Bouret Library of France and the Catalan editor Santiago Ballescá (Pi-Suñer, Riguzzi and Ruano 2011: 232).

As noted, the diplomatic rupture with Great Britain and the reluctance of London toward Mexico, combined with the non-existence of any British publisher, explained why the British model of detective fiction could emerge only in the Mexico of Porfirio Díaz.

But there was also another explanation and probably more crucial, it was the disinterest toward British detective fiction and other types of novels written in Great Britain in Mexican literati. This does not imply that there was an interest in the novels written outside of Mexico. For example, in Mexico many novels of non-Spanish writers circulated. The vast majority was French authors such as Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870), Eugène Sué (1804-1857),

Victor Hugo (1802-1885), Paul Féval (1816-1887) and Émile Zola (1840-1902) (Villegas Cedillo 1984: 14). In this sense, there was an important presence of foreign authors.

In the 19th century Mexico and Latin America were hard-pressed to find a strong influence of the literature written in English. Since the 19th century Latin America was fragmented under a huge territory, the elites needed a political capital to unify their territories. Madrid was an impossible choice, so they sought another metropolis and decided on Paris. The French capital allowed them to separate from traditional Spain and permitted a link with a cosmopolitan city (González Echevarría 2012: 5). In this sense, Mexican and Latin American literature from their beginnings achieved separation from their Nemesis, the Anglo-Saxon literature.

Another problem was the language itself. As Wolfgang Vogt (1990:108) points out, although some writers could read French, many could not read English or German. Thus French (and Spanish) culture influenced Mexico before the Mexican Revolution of 1910. The influence of Great Britain and Germany was short-lived. Therefore, American literature had no presence.

The only movement that showed a clear interest toward another culture was *modernismo*. This was a literary movement that sought to be more cosmopolitan and used many foreign elements. But, even this movement maintained a critical posture toward English language culture. This became stronger after the Spanish-American War of 1898, which clearly showed the threat of American imperialism in the Western Hemisphere. This explains why Edgar Allan Poe and *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* did not have any presence. In fact, it was not until the 1930s when American literature impacted the Mexican literati.

Now, there is something that I have not been able to ascertain. It is that despite a clear influence of French literature, why Mexican literati did not show any interest in translating or emulating French detective fiction. Some works that entered Mexico, for instance, *The Mysteries for Paris* (1842-1843) of Eugène Sue and *Les Misérables* (1862) of Victor Hugo were inspired by the memories of Eugène François Vidocq, who influenced modern detective fiction. There are two possible explanations (both without much support). One is that Mexican literati did not see the French detective novel as “art” and refused to emulate it. The second one is that Mexican readers were not interested in reading this type of novel, in which the protagonist was a detective. As we shall see in the next section, the Mexicans were more interested in criminal protagonist.

Bandits and Detective Fiction

As noted, in late 19th century Mexico, we cannot find a novel that can be considered as modern detective fiction. But this does not mean that crime was not an important topic in Mexican literature. Many popular novels developed stories about

bandits and thieves. Nowadays, crime is presented in the new genre pejoratively called “Narco-novel”. Not only that, from the works of eminent Carlos Fuentes (1928-2012) until Juan Villoro (1956) very few have achieved to escape from the crime themes, although this note means that these novels are detective fiction.

Crime has been an inseparable topic of Mexican national life. As noted by Chris Frazer (2006: 2), bandits were the elements that defined the Mexican nation-state. Since its formation as a modern nation, the Mexican elite tried to eliminate the presence of bandits and achieve social control of the country. However, the lawlessness that pervaded the young Mexican nation did not allow this goal to succeed.

The Mexican government established in 1848 the first attempt to modernize the old penitentiary inherited by the Spanish colonial order. The authorities created new prisons and gave power to police officers. However, the Reform War (1857-1861) and the subsequent formation of the Second Empire inhibited this modernization. Thus, when Juárez and the liberal forces come to the power, the country was full of bandits and murderers.

The Restored Republic sought to eradicate the problem of the affluence of the bandits, but without much success. It was under the Díaz dictatorship, when Mexican authorities “controlled” crime. Díaz, *Científicos* and the Porfirian aristocracy considered that the only way to eradicate crime was to establish a modern apparatus.

As noted above, in 1879 Porfirio Díaz modernized the police, organizing officers in troops and gave them the opportunity to carry guns. This led to the creation of the Municipal Gendarmerie. Similarly, for the first time in Mexican history, the government incorporated in the police force the figure of the criminologist, who sought to establish the patterns of criminal behavior, although they did so under many adverse conditions (Picatto 2001: 212). In these years, there was no way to educate new criminologists, and they imported many techniques from European books, without making any effort to adapt them to Mexican social conditions. The definition of the criminal, as a specific social group, the poor people, was the clear proof.

Regardless of this problem, in 1871 the Díaz dictatorship amended the Criminal Law. This stipulated the modernization of the old penitentiary and the construction of modern prisons, like the Black Palace of Lecumberri located in Mexico City (Salvatore & Aguirre 1996: 12). Before this reform, the Mexican penitentiary provided socialization and entertainment rather than the correction of criminals. The new law removed this pathetic situation, established a strict code and sought to civilize criminals (Buffington 1996: 176). By 1900, the Mexican government finished the construction of the Black Palace of Lecumberri and two years later completed modernization of the Belem Prison. Finally, in the aftermath of the Porfiriato, the government began to operate Islas Marías Prison (one of the most

terrible prisons in the world) and Women Prison.

This modernization of the penitentiary system and the strengthening of the police force, as agents to maintain order, brought a relative peace. Although there is no credible data for these years, during Porfiriato the crime rate declined, at least, if we compare with the Restored Republic or the anarchical situation of the first years of independence.

However, in Mexican society, policemen never inspired respect. Many gendarmeries were concentrated in rich neighborhoods. For this reason poor people saw the officers as henchmen of these social groups and considered the police force as corrupt organization. In the case of criminologists, they maintained a clear racial prejudice since Spanish colonial rule. This situation impeded undertaking an impartial investigation based on the scientific method. Under these conditions, it was difficult for any Mexican reader to conceive of British detective fiction.

Another important characteristic of Porfiriato was that despite the decrease in crime rate, many Mexicans still maintained the image of their country as a “bandit nation” (Garza 2007: 45). Newspapers took up some criminal cases and created the idea that everywhere was terrible criminals, even if it was not true. One clear example was *El Imparcial*, the newspaper close to the dictatorship regime. This media used the new technology of photography imported from Europe and could capture the activities of poor people, arguing that they were the potential criminals.

In this sense, they established the idea of the “imaginary bandit”. This criminal lived in the cities and towns, in any bar of Mexico, anywhere. They appeared in newspapers, in popular songs, in the houses of rich people, and obviously in novels.

However, depending on the social class, this idea of the “imaginary bandit” was different. In the case of poor rural groups (the majority of the population), the bandits were some kind of heroes. There were many fantastic stories of heroic thieves and bandits, but some stories were true, as the case of Jesús Arriaga (1858-1894), popularly know as Chucho el Roto. This thief challenged the new police system created by Porfirio Díaz, and became an idol, because he robbed the rich to distribute the loot among the poor people. Another similar Mexican Robin Hood was José de Jesús Negrete Medina (1793-1910), the Tiger of Santa Julia.

In the case of the upper classes and the intellectuals, they did not see bandits with romantic eyes like the poor sectors did (Garza 2007: 7). The rich people considered that any poor person was a potential bandit and it was necessary to implement extreme measures, while the intellectual, particularly the criminologist, regarded the poor sectors as corrupted human beings that could infect the middle classes and good people with their vices. These two groups created a narrative of crime that reinforced the view of idea of the rise of the crime in México (Garza 2007: 6).

Finally, there was another group that created their own “imaginary bandit”: foreigners who visited Mexico, particularly Americans and British citizens. They

considered the existence of bandits as a problem of the Mexican state, arguing that this was a product Spanish heritage, a culture too complicated for them. In fact, foreigners were the people that popularized the worldwide image of Mexico as “criminal nation”, the stereotype that is still maintained today.

In the case of the “imagined bandit” created by foreigners, the Díaz regime denied several times this image of Mexico as a second-rate State. Thus, the government launched an international campaign to portray itself to countries as a modern State. This propaganda stressed bandits as the main problem, not the government structure (Fraser 2006: 56).

Two groups contributed to establish a positive image of the country: *Científicos* and the literati. The first group defined bandits using Spencer’s positivism and the incipient criminology exported from Europe. Given this logic, the upper class was excluded because the environment where they lived could not reproduce the criminal behavior of bandits. Then those who were potential criminals were only *indígenas* and lower class. They also saw women as potential criminal if they went out from their homes (their natural environment) as prostitutes.

Newspapers linked to the dictatorship also helped in the definition of who was a criminal. In many articles, newspapers showed poor people as subhuman and full of vices. The *indígenas*, particularly, were the main victims. Porfirian newspapers considered their presence as a threat to good people.

In the case of the second group, the literati, in some cases they portrayed the bandits as relatively good people, as was the case in the novel of Inclán *Wits*, in which the boss of bandits is taking the justice in his own hand, killing the bad bandits. However, most of the novels put the bandits as a social problem, and used this character to legitimize the policies of Porfiriato. The clearest cases were *Zarco* and *The Bandits from Río Frío*. In the former, the main character was the leader of a group that robbed and killed many people while the latter was the story of a group who attacked all the people who passed through Puebla to reach Mexico City.

It is interesting, how this type of novel survived the censorship of the Díaz regime. Considering the need of the dictatorship to maintain the image of a civilized country, these works in which main protagonists were the bandits, could be a problem. Two factors explain why the regime needed the bandit novels (Fraser 2006: 97-98). One reason was that this kind of narrative exalted the feelings of their authors and readers who were influenced by the aesthetic elements of romanticism. The other reason was that this narrative was consistent with the national project of the regime. The authors criticized the barbarity of bandits and exalted the needs of a modern state. In other words, they used the bandits as negative cases but never criticized the weakness of the Porfirian State.

For example, for writers like Manuel Payno (one of the members of the liberal group), criminals were a product of moral order of the Spanish colonial rule (Fraser 2006: 106). His first work *The Devil’s Tiepin* showed this ideology. Here, the

environment (the poor living condition), was the reason for their criminal attitude and it was necessary to change this situation. The narrative of Payno in these times was an expression of a frustrated liberal to the conservative domination of the early years of independence. In this book, Payno does not condemn bandits, but later works attacked them without mercy. This is the case of *The Bandits from Río Frío*.

While it was understandable that writers sought to help the Díaz regime, showing barbaric Mexico dominated by these fictional bandits, it was noteworthy that they never used a policeman or a detective in their novels. Both were the symbols of progress and modernization. Modern detective fiction would have been a better way to educate the masses and impose the idea of order, like many Japanese novelists tried to do.

The reason why this did not occur is simple. If a novelist had done this, he or she would have been in a big trouble. Bandits finally were characters that could criticize or caricature their existence. But the police officer of Porfiriato was different. Nobody could imagine in this time a heroic Mexican policeman. If one author decided to copy British detective fiction and created a super Mexican detective, that story would have had to be a satire or a bad joke, which would end up being a social critique of the dictatorship. Probably, no Mexican writer in those years sought to confront Porfirio Díaz.

In fact, as John Brushwood (1958:395) said, the majority of Porfirian novels suppressed any attempt of social criticism. Many writers were members of the ruling power, and they were not in favor of promoting any revolutionary change. This does not mean that the critical voices never existed. During the early years, such voices were more evident. Some examples were the novel of Pedro Castera (1846-1906) *Ripe* (1877) and the work of José Rivera y Río (? -1891) *The Rich and Poor People of Mexico* (1876). Other, who sought to criticize the regime were Mariano Azuela (1873-1952) with his novel *Weeds* (1909) and Heriberto Frías (1870-1925) with *Last Duel* (1896). However, despite the existence of these critical voices, these types of work were read after the collapse of the dictatorship.

In short, the idea of an “imaginary bandit” explains why it was difficult to promote crime fiction with protagonist as a modern detective. The bandit (heroic or terrible) was more attractive than a corrupt policeman. Moreover, the self-censorship of the novelist and the lack of social criticism determined the impossibility publishing any modern detective fiction.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the absence of modern detective fiction in the Mexico of Porfirio Díaz. Although there were minimal conditions to develop this genre as in Europe or Asia, this did not happen. There were not even any “cheap copies” of the British model. One of the reasons was the incipient modernization of

México, but this does not explain everything. I presented here three possible new explanations: 1) The incompatibility of Mexican positivism with the modern detective fiction model, 2) the contempt of Mexican literati for British literature, and 3) the existence of an “imaginary bandit” as the only possible protagonist of any crime fiction.

Mexican readers would have to wait until the 1940s to read detective fiction produced in their own country. Explaining this would be another topic of new research work, but using the arguments of this article, one possible explanation could be the real modernization of the police force, but also the acceptance in Mexican society of the detectives as important actors (good or bad) in crime fiction.

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