

City of Suspects

CRIME IN

MEXICO CITY,

1900-1931

PABLO

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Introduction

This book is about criminals and their victims in Mexico City at the beginning of the twentieth century. Crime was then, as it is now, a central problem for the inhabitants of Mexico's capital. Understanding and preventing it was a key aspect of the interactions between the state and all social groups. Its causes and consequences affected many parts of everyday life. A history of crime is, therefore, a history of the city and its inhabitants.

Since the difficult years that followed independence from Spain in 1821, violence and crime marked the nation's growth. Insurgency and the royalist reaction devastated the economy of the country. There followed years of instability, military uprisings, civil wars (leading to the Reforma War, 1857–1861), foreign invasions (most importantly by the United States, in 1847, and France, 1861–1867), and multiple constitutional experiments oscillating between liberal federalism and conservative centralism. Independence also brought forth uncontrollable banditry around highways and uncertainty regarding the survival of judicial institutions. Things clearly began to change with the 1867 restoration of the 1857 Constitution, the passing of civil and criminal codes in the early 1870s, and Porfirio Díaz's ascension to the presidency in 1876. The Porfirian regime (1876–1911) managed to control banditry and political dissent, guarantee the interests of foreign investors, and enforce liberal legislation on property, with the resulting dispossession of large numbers of peasants and the accumulation of wealth by national elites. Both facts contributed to renewed population growth in the capital and rising crime rates (see appendix, table 1) despite the state's activism vis-à-vis social reform through the strengthening of police, penalties, and prisons.¹

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The 1910 centennial celebration of independence, centered on Mexico City, seemed to demonstrate in the eyes of the world the civilization and stability achieved by the country. But the neat scheme of science and order set forth by the late Porfirian ruling group could not avoid a revolution. In that year, Francisco I. Madero issued a call to arms after Díaz persisted in imposing his own reelection. What began as a democratic rebellion triggered an uprising fueled by Madero's vague promise of justice—interpreted both as the restitution of lands to communities and as a penal and judicial reform. Throughout the country, political conflict turned into social revolution had a high economic cost and meant the loss of nearly a million lives. Although the parties of the civil war did not give Mexico City great strategic significance, beginning in 1913 its population nonetheless suffered the consequences of conflict. In February, President Madero was overthrown by a military coup and the following months were characterized by street battles, military occupation, heightened immigration, hunger, and lawlessness. Collective forms of violence and offenses against property became, it seemed, more frequent than ever. After 1917, a new regime began to reconstitute the mechanisms of political control and rebuild the economy. Political stability, achieved in the 1930s, crystallized into a single-party political system with strong popular support based on corporative organizations and remarkable accomplishments in the spheres of education and public health—at least in comparison with the rest of Latin America—but less concerned about punishment. Despite the widespread violence of the revolutionary decade and continuing population growth, the frequency of crime in Mexico City decreased after 1916, establishing a trend that would last until the 1990s.

The paradox posed by decreasing crime rates and declining state interest in penitentiary repression needs to be observed as a local, multilayered historical phenomenon. Thus the present study is about class and the negotiations and resistance that characterized the relations between social groups and between citizens and the state. Throughout the early decades of the twentieth century, the better-off considered criminality to be the social issue of greatest concern. They perceived crime to be more intense and dangerous after 1900 than in any previous era in the capital's history, and thus a challenge to their project of social order and material progress—two ideals that defined a modern nation. Criminologists, the police, and the judiciary set out to identify criminals and isolate them from decent citizens. In the

process, they made suspects of those who seemed to depart from “modern” customs.

For the majority of the city’s inhabitants, in contrast, crime was an integral part of everyday life. It disrupted the trust and hierarchies that structured interactions in neighborhoods, at home, and at work. Yet victims, their relatives, and neighbors relied on the active participation of their communities to guarantee order rather than the judicial and penal institutions designed for that purpose. They knew that transgressions had their reasons—defense of honor motivated violence, economic need prompted theft—and that the criminal justice system catered mainly to the needs and fears of the upper classes, so they had to keep a mindful eye on everyone around. Thus, the proud capital became a city of suspects, where criminality was explained as a regrettable aspect of urban growth, and the urban poor bore the weight of punishment as well as victimization.

A social construct, crime is a relational category, incarnated in the suspicion of the police, judges, and the law itself toward the urban poor, and the latter’s distrust toward state ideologies and practices with respect to crime. These actors defined crime in divergent ways. What authorities saw as embezzlement, for example, workers might regard as a fair retribution. Likewise, retail practices that merchants and the law deemed legitimate triggered the indignation of consumers. But if considered as merely the product of contested social interactions, “crime” can turn into a vague, all-encompassing category. The following pages stress the singularity of each case and the precise behavior that constituted an offense in the eyes of the public. The analysis will focus on the most common types of predatory offenses, that is, battery and theft. In addition, violence against women, although less frequently reported, will prove to be central to understanding the gendered workings of violence and honor in general.² The goal is not to narrate the famous cases that captured the imagination of the press, but to reconstruct the texture of crime as experienced in everyday life by those who formed the majority of offenders and victims.³ Their view of transgression and punishment was imprinted by institutions and state action, but they also resisted and negotiated crime and punishment, shaping them into a complex reality.

This study places those relations against the dynamic of historical change. Growing crime rates during the Porfiriato resulted from the coincidence of a period of intense economic and social transformation and authoritarian

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methods of punishment that stressed the isolation of offenders from society and the centralization of punishment. After the Revolution, the meaning of crime and the identity of criminals became less of a biological problem and more of an issue of social justice and political legitimacy. Elite ideologies and state penal strategies frame this historical perspective. The question “Who is a criminal?” was at the heart of positivist criminology—the dominating outlook among academics interested in crime in the late nineteenth century. Internationally renowned authors, such as the Italian criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso, the French environmental criminologist Gabriel Tarde, and their Mexican counterparts, believed that physiognomic, psychological, and cultural traits distinguished criminals from the rest of the population. Drawing from this scientific credo, the police and the press treated criminals as a clearly identifiable social group. In doing so, criminology and penology unified “crime,” constructing it as an urban, modern phenomenon. In the past, banditry, drunkenness, and petty urban theft had been understood and dealt with as distinct phenomena. This idea of a “criminal class” lumped together in one scientific net diverse transgressions and suspects. “Crime” became identified with urban criminality, as Mexico City seemed the breeding ground of all modern social pathologies. This suspicion justified the professionalization of the police and judiciary, and the hegemony of penitentiary regulations over other strategies to deal with transgressions. Lawlessness itself confirmed the diagnosis: districts characterized by marginality, squalor, and danger grew around the city’s central spaces while the frequency of crime increased during the first decade of the twentieth century.

Such evidence suggested a weakness in modernization. The colonial regime had combined with some degree of success crime prevention strategies based on traditional communal structures with an array of institutions and codes, most of them legislated from Spain, including the Real Audiencia del Crimen, the Acordada tribunal, and the Inquisition. To this confusing legacy, parts of which remained in effect after Independence, national governments added the liberal tenets of the 1812 Cádiz Constitution and several constitutions after 1824. During most of the nineteenth century, crime was tackled by multiple agents: local authorities, city councils, the army, civic militias, the Tribunal de Vagos. Although some states attempted a codification of penal laws as early as the 1830s (in Veracruz), Mexico City remained a haphazard combination of old policing methods at the local level

and unpredictable national politics that were often at odds with those of the city council. The arrangement persisted thanks largely to stagnated population growth in the capital and a decaying economy nationwide.⁴

In the wake of the triumph against imperialists in 1867, liberals enacted a penal code for the Federal District in 1871 and began to professionalize and unify the police in the capital. The late Porfiriato was marked by the coincidence of growing urban disorder and a federal state strong enough to invoke scientific methods in its fight against crime. This coincidence is best expressed by 1890s reforms to the 1871 Code, new penitentiary legislation, and, most visibly, the 1900 inauguration of the federal penitentiary in San Lázaro. Thus started the most aggressive era of authoritarian punishment in the country's history.

During the years of the Revolution, however, judicial and penal institutions lost the respect they used to inspire. Soldiers harassed policemen, prisoners escaped jail, and judges lost their jobs, leaving behind scores of cases without adjudication. Although some revolutionary factions voiced the need to reform the penal system, continuity along the former ideological and institutional lines began to be reestablished shortly after the end of the conflict. In 1915, revolutionary leader Venustiano Carranza took control of city government and vigorously applied Porfirian methods such as collective arrests of suspects and their transportation to penal colonies. But crime did not disappear. The widespread presence of guns, the threatening multiplication of automobiles, and the appearance of organized gangs of robbers made urban criminality more complex and difficult to control. In the 1920s, under presidents Alvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles, new welfare policies increasingly took the place of overt repression, while theories about "readaptation" began to gain acceptance over positivist strategies of isolation.

In the realm of penal legislation, this translated into an uneasy encounter of positivist criminology, classical penology (represented by the 1871 Penal Code and most of the legal profession), and radical views about the causes of social ills (espoused by many among the new political elite). Such a combination was first reflected by a new penal code for the Federal District decreed in 1929, opposed by many because of its doctrinaire use of positivist criminology, and then by the 1931 Penal Code, which combined old and new penal ideas with the revolutionary impulse of social reform. The new legislation marks the end of the period discussed in this book, as it coincides

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with the political consolidation of the postrevolutionary regime and a new institutional framework for police and penal institutions.

Within a narrow periodization defined by institutional change, this book sets crime against more stable everyday practices of the urban population. Facing rapid social change, urban communities (neighborhoods, tenements, extended families) set out to consolidate the social networks of reciprocity that made possible everyday survival.⁵ They dealt with crime by appealing to the offenders' sense of shame and by negotiating potentially violent conflicts. Crime for them was more than abstract "social pathologies." As a result of the unified idea of crime forged by criminologists, many men and women had been punished out of suspicion rather than actual offenses. For the victims of actual crimes and their communities, however, criminals were simply those who committed crimes—whether they were forced to do so by circumstances or because of their shamelessness. They deserved to be punished, but their singularity could not be denied. Rather than a collective threat against society, criminals were people who looked much like their victims. In order to explore these neglected perspectives, this study deals with the practices and narratives constructed around specific offenses.⁶

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Crime is also what documents preserve. The evasive nature of the brief and tense interactions that we lump together under the word "crime" becomes more puzzling when stored in judicial records. As in Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon*, each participant has a perspective, but the truth does not belong to anyone. Mexican suspects, victims, and witnesses knew that judges were sometimes unfair, and that guilt was often determined by prejudice, rather than by the impact of testimonies. This does not render judicial accounts useless but does turn them into composite statements about individual morality, social relationships, and the meaning of crime and justice.

A critical view of penal institutions and their subjects requires a suitable reading of the documents they generated. The archive of the Federal District Higher Court (Tribunal Superior de Justicia del Distrito Federal) holds court records in individual case files organized by court and the accused's name. Along with published reports on some jury trials, these files provide information about the workings of the judicial system and register the

narratives produced by victims and the accused. In selecting the files to be used in this study (209 of them, out of uncatalogued, dusty, and unmarked bundles stored in the basement of the South Penitentiary court building in San Mateo Xalpa, Distrito Federal), I tried to obtain a sample resembling the information provided by statistics on the most frequent type of crimes and their changing frequency during the period. Thus, 95 cases correspond to the years 1900–1909, 67 to 1910–1920 and 47 to 1921–1930. Of these trials, 121 dealt with battery, homicide, and other offenses against persons, 24 with sexual offenses, 66 with crimes against property, and 12 with offenses against the state (some trials dealt with more than one offense).

Records began with an affidavit written at the police station, in which victim and accused described the events, and sometimes included a statement by the arresting officer and additional witnesses. The officer in charge at the station then sent the case to the public prosecution (Ministerio Público), the suspects to jail, and the wounded to the Juárez Hospital. In the hours or days after the arrest, participants were questioned again by a judge, who directed the investigation thereafter, usually summoning more witnesses. Trial files also contain records of the appointments of defense lawyers and the identity and antecedents of suspects (picture, anatomical description, and list of previous entrances in jail). After all evidence was entered, the prosecution and the defense wrote their conclusions, usually brief. Finally, the judge summarized the case, listed the applicable chapters of the penal code, determined guilt or innocence and, if necessary, the length of the sentence. In serious offenses, such as homicide and rape, a jury decided guilt or innocence. The records also included notices about the accused's appeal of the arrest or sentence or their request to post bond.

Judicial documents hold contentious versions of events, but they also recover voices that are usually silent in historical accounts. These two functions conflict at times because the narratives presented by actors had precise intentions—to which factual truth was often subordinated. Suspects sought to elude responsibility or to place the blame on someone else. Victims wanted to provide a convincing account of the events, to secure punishment for their adversaries, and to avoid becoming suspects themselves. The scholar's reading of these statements inadvertently forces regularities and rationality onto the remnants of exceptional and chaotic moments in the lives of actors. In using them I tried to remain aware of that and to be careful in building a connection between individual cases and social prac-

tices. The problems faced by anthropologists (the false certainties of objectivism and the narrative biases of informants) provide a sobering point of reference for the cultural historian who uses judicial sources.⁷

Yet, I must confess my overarching trust in accused and victims' statements. They can be believed because they wanted their statements to achieve an obvious goal (punishment, freedom). Their claims to truth may be suspect even today, but they referred to socialized norms about veracity and justifications of individual behavior. They addressed, perhaps in an indirect way but with no less soundness, the paradoxes of transgression and justice.

A NOTE ON HISTORIOGRAPHY

In a useful reversal of common sense, the historiography that this book engages has placed punishment before crime. The social history of modern Western societies of the last decades has indeed benefited from new research on the role of institutions of punishment within the process of national states adapting themselves to the demands of industrial capitalism. Punishment, these studies maintain, became central pieces in the construction of productive working classes and a more penetrating state authority.⁸ Historical works on crime itself add important nuances, frequently overlooked, to the model of class and social control: crime follows its own rhythms, independent of punishment and generally within a multisecular decreasing trend in the modern era.⁹ Studies of social control in Latin America have made valuable contributions that complement studies on punishment. Recent works on Brazil, Argentina, Peru, and Mexico stress the specific historical circumstances in which the ruling groups imported European and North American strategies of control during the late nineteenth century. The regional elite's discourse of progress and economic expansion revolved around the racial and cultural "regeneration" of the population and the top-down creation of new citizens through immigration and miscegenation, and included fighting backwardness and lack of discipline with hygiene, criminology, and penology. Criminality became a favorite theme of social reform because the scientific discipline built around it provided plausible explanations of popular vices, and penitentiary institutions gave authorities a suitable instrument to regenerate the people. The distinction between criminal and citizen became, according to Robert Buffington, "the fundamental dichotomy within modern Mexican society."¹⁰

In a parallel path, other scholars have uncovered the contested nature of power and social control and brought attention to multiple actors who challenge the foundations of class, gender, and political rule behind capitalist modernization. As a result, it is no longer possible to assume social compliance to the technologies of power—even in the most industrialized countries—and the “overcalculated” Foucauldian view of punishment.¹¹ In Latin America, the historiographical emphasis on popular agency emerged as a revision of elite-centered interpretations of the region’s history. Studies of peasant resistance to capitalism, for example, have demonstrated that the traditional narratives of national history fail to account for local politics and for the efforts of people and communities to survive the onslaught of conquest and colonial acculturation.¹² The accent on resistance has also increased historians’ interest in groups that appeared marginal in previous accounts. Bandits, slaves, the urban plebes, and women were proved to possess historical agency and now share the place of male salaried workers and politicians in historical accounts.¹³

The present volume visits the common ground of these two seemingly conflicting research agendas. Caution is required, however, to deal with the distortions from both sides. Resistance, first, threatens to become the central theme in the historical experience of the lower classes, and hegemony, however vaguely defined, the defining trait of multifaceted class and political relationships. The result, according to William Taylor, is a dichotomy in which rulers and subjects are neatly divided. Popular resistance comes to the forefront, while state actions and institutions are moved “into the background.” As Gilbert Joseph notes for the study of banditry, the power/rebellion dichotomy poses the danger of neglecting popular practices that were not expressed in clear political terms.¹⁴ To put it in the terms of the present study, criminals not only resisted domination when they broke the law, they also established specific relations with state officials and their own communities.

An artificial division between the study of power and that of disorder is bound to yield partial results. Studies of social control in Latin America tend to analyze strategies and discourses as part of the region’s intellectual history, thus embracing (with retrospective reservations) the narrative of order and progress developed by positivist elites and the alleged impact of state-building policies on the life of the lower classes. According to this argument, for example, everything that happened to the penal system in

Mexico since 1900 was an advance toward modernization and the rationalization of punishment.¹⁵ Yet, even in those countries that received massive numbers of European immigrants, results did not satisfy the expectations of social engineers. Danger in the streets and low productivity at work were common images in contemporary accounts of social change in Latin American cities at the turn of the century. Recent studies of the national and regional impact of social policies suggest instead that social engineering should be judged in the context of the negotiation between the interests of reformers and those of the “reformed” population—in other words, as a political process rather than pure exercise of power.¹⁶

The case of Mexico City shows the limits of a narrow focus on the institutional side of punishment and deviance. In his chapter of *México, su evolución social*, the great synthesis of Porfirian achievements published in 1900, Miguel Macedo spelled out the importance of punishment: “The punitive function of the state . . . is certainly one of the basic elements of social order.”¹⁷ Following this lead, historians have construed crime control as a chapter of the successful Porfirian drive to attract foreign investors. The Mexico City penitentiary, therefore, expressed the entrance of modern technologies of power into Mexico.¹⁸ But crime resulted from a more complex and historically stable set of causes and conditions. Colonial domination in a multiethnic society had already established the contradictions between penal institutions and community reactions to crime. Industrialization and newly emerged class divides had deep effects, beyond the reach of the institutional looking glass, on a city with an already long tradition of artisanal work, commerce, and unemployment.¹⁹

What questions are to be asked in a more comprehensive attempt? The sociology of crime, concerned with explanation and policy making, offers useful reference points for a historical approach. The notion that deviance means the transgression of universal values or an imbalance of the social body is challenged by empirical research. “Criminals,” sociologists argue, undertake a consistent pattern of law-breaking behavior because they are immersed in a social environment that privileges and legitimizes that behavior. Ample evidence is cited to the effect that people associated with criminals are more likely to break the law, and that criminals are often associated with certain cultural traits—such as tattoos, slang, and drinking. Culture, however, poses dangerous temptations. The observations cited above become less useful when reified into the rigid yet popular category of “subcul-

ture”—an isolated and stable set of values that ascribes deviance to an identifiable group.²⁰ Explaining crime thus becomes an ethnographic exercise.

As an alternative, interpretations that focus on the labeling of certain groups as criminal explain the emergence and continuity of deviant behaviors as the product of the decision by society, or rather by its ruling groups, to define petty offenders as criminals and thus pressure them into repeated law breaking. The social practices that stigmatize offenders have the effect of breaking all other connections with the community and perpetuating deviance as a social role. The question, therefore, is no longer “Who is a criminal?” but “Who defines him or her?”²¹ An exclusive stress on labeling, however, might return us to the starting point: since crime is “produced” by the state, all that there is left to study is the penal institutions, while actual criminal practices can be neglected as anecdotal.

This book addresses these questions but weaves them in a wider historical frame. It moves beyond the history of punishment into the cultural history of a city and its inhabitants. In doing so, its ambition is to tie together historiographical strands that have studied elite social engineering and popular resistance as parallel, isolated phenomena. By looking at both crime and punishment as cultural products, this book seeks to restore the political meaning of everyday social interactions and conflicts with the state. The stress on the local level of justice and the individuality of victims and offenders runs counter to the grand generalizations about crime and punishment, yet reveals the centrality of both aspects of Mexico City life. Crossing the revolutionary divide, the study hopes to challenge the fundamental chronological and conceptual axes (*ancien regime*/revolution, elite/popular) of Mexican political historiography. The result describes a city marked by suspicion: criminology and repressive state strategies created suspects out of the urban poor; these in turn resisted and negotiated their status vis-à-vis their communities and authorities, whom they also mistrusted. However tense and complex, these relations defined crime in their place and time.

I

THE CONTEXT

Turn-of-the-century Mexico City contained all the symbols of nationalism and many remarkable examples of colonial architecture. By the end of the first century of national life, it was the locus of progress and the capital of Porfirio Díaz's long-lasting regime. Railroads, tramways, paved and illuminated streets, broad avenues, parks, new residential areas, and high buildings appeared as distinctive signs of material progress. Improvements in the design and use of urban space were based on the understanding that the rich and poor were not to mingle: a rational division between the safe and beautiful areas of the modern city and the dangerous and unhealthy marginal zones. Urban design also meant social reform: the state and the wealthy classes wanted to translate the city's physical evolution into a new culture among its inhabitants.

The elites' idea of renewal faced the challenge of a growing and untamed population. The urban lower classes, so distant from the aspirations of wealth and comfort associated with progress, used the city in their own way, defying the class-structured organization of the capital. As tensions arose around the use of the streets and other public areas, the government relied on the police and penal institutions to instill a sense of appropriate conduct in the people. Criminal behavior (whether a genuine transgression of social norms, or simply a violation of the many laws and regulations gener-

ated during the period) acquired a different meaning in the context of the dispute over the use of the city. Crime, however, was not the only way in which people defied the Utopia of Porfirian rulers. A host of practices in the streets (vending, begging, drinking, or merely walking) also subverted the ideal social map.

The next pages will weave a counterpoint between the elite model of the city and its defiance by the urban poor. Chapters 1 and 2 will describe how the ideal city hoped and failed to impose its strict divisions of urban space, as the connection between the appropriation of urban space and the criminalization of lower-class uses remained a long-lasting feature of the capital. The projects and policies aimed at building a modern capital for the benefit of a minority of its inhabitants will be contrasted with the consequences of late-nineteenth-century growth on the city's physical infrastructure and, more importantly, on the everyday life of the lower class. After an outline of the ideal city designed by Porfirian rulers, chapter 1 will describe the demographic and technological changes that caused the model to fail and the city to expand at an unprecedented rate. This will be followed by a probe into everyday practices and living conditions in the marginal city—the city that grew around and across the Porfirian ideal city. Authorities' attempt to reform behaviors deemed to be a threat to progress, the urban policies that sought to preserve the social geography of the city and the collective reactions to those policies will be the theme of chapter 2. Urban communities, in their various and often coterminous forms, appear in these chapters as central actors in this story of conflict about the rules and spaces of city life.

Criminology was the new science called to account for the negative sides of modernization, but also to provide recipes to improve society. Chapter 3 will examine the scientific discourse that was inspired by and tried to tame urban growth. Mexican criminology directed the fascination of educated males toward the marginal spaces of the ideal city: peripheral neighborhoods, crowded homes, nightly disorder. Explaining crime was one way to dispel that fascination—but one with significant implications for the design of state policies.

In sum, the following section looks at the cultural articulation of demographic and spatial growth under an authoritarian regime. This description of a disputed city questions the Porfirians' contention that their projects of urban renewal went unchallenged and ultimately succeeded. While the urban poor used the city in ways that contradicted those projects, elite per-

ceptions of “dangerous” areas identified poverty with criminality. As a result, officials increasingly relied on punishment to impose their social ideas, while the urban poor identified the police and judicial system with the interests of the wealthy. Crime itself was produced at this juncture of fear and neglect.

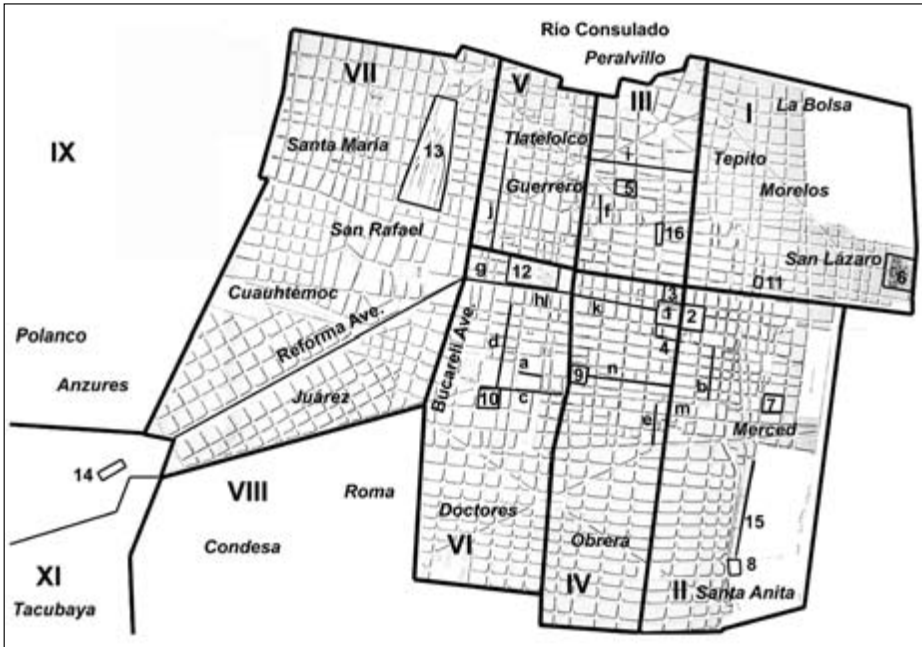
1

The Modern City

Our views of Porfirian Mexico City are heavily influenced by the grandeur of the buildings and avenues and the elegance of *colonias* built during that period. It is easy to share the nostalgia for *los tiempos de don Porfirio*, an era when Mexican society seemed as peaceful and well organized as the walkways under the shady trees of the Paseo de la Reforma. The following pages, however, contend that such images of civilization were only the precarious result of a negotiation between the regime's projects of urban modernization and the everyday practices of the majority of the urban population.

THE IDEAL CITY

The changes that swept early-twentieth-century Mexico City began nearly forty years earlier, during Emperor Maximilian's attempt to turn Mexico into a modern European nation, and accelerated in the late Porfiriato. The ideal city of the 1910 centennial celebration of independence epitomized the unifying myths of progress and nationhood. The colonial center of the city, the Zócalo or *Plaza Mayor*, extended its stately architecture westward along Avenida Juárez to the Alameda park and then southwest along the elegant Paseo de la Reforma to its terminus at Chapultepec Castle, the presidential residence (see fig. 1). The Alameda was part of the colonial design of the city



1. Mexico City: Colonias, Barrios, Police Districts. Sites Mentioned: 1. Zócalo; 2. National Palace; 3. Cathedral; 4. City Council; 5. Lagunilla Market; 6. Federal Penitentiary; 7. La Merced Market; 8. Jamaica Market; 9. Plaza de las Vizcaínas; 10. Belem Jail; 11. Plaza Mixcalco; 12. Alameda; 13. Central Railroad Station; 14. Chapultepec Castle; 15. La Viga Canal; 16. Plaza Santo Domingo. Streets: a. Delicias; b. Las Cruces; c. Arcos de Belén Ave.; d. Revillagigedo; e. Cuahremoctzin; f. Amargura; g. Juárez Ave.; h. Tarasquillo; i. Libertad; j. Héroes; k. Plateros; m. San Antonio Abad; n. Regina.

and became an upper-class place of leisure during the nineteenth century. The Paseo de la Reforma's wide design and execution followed the aesthetic and urbanistic ideas that had transformed Paris and other European capitals since the 1850s. This was the axis of a less visible modification of urban territory that resulted in the displacement of indigenous communities from valuable lands. Of all the cycles of change that Mexico City had experienced after the sixteenth century, the one that peaked during the late Porfiriato was perhaps the most disruptive because it combined population growth, land dispossession, and heightened cultural conflict.¹

Porfirian urban design corresponded with a drive to reorganize society within the city. Around the Paseo de la Reforma, private companies were

licensed by city authorities to develop upper- and middle-class residential areas or colonias, such as Juárez, Cuauhtémoc, Roma, and Condesa. Officials protected the development of these colonias, and often ordered the elimination of undeserving or ill-looking buildings. Designers and builders had a clear idea of the social meaning of modernization: the poor had to be displaced from the elegant quarters, while city services were to be concentrated only in the well-kept districts. This strategy meant a clear departure from the multiclass dwellings in the city center dating back to colonial times. Porfirian investors, often closely associated with city officials, bought and partitioned lands for the wealthiest classes in privileged areas, while reserving other zones for working-class homeowners, thus working together to preserve the spatial separation between classes. Separating customers according to their socioeconomic status would create a stronger real estate market.²

Hygiene and security, both symbolically achieved with the inauguration of great drainage works and the San Lázaro penitentiary in 1900, were requisites for the stability of the colonized city. In order to protect the integrity of new upper-class neighborhoods, municipal and health authorities planned the growth of industries and working-class neighborhoods away from upper-class suburbs. The Consejo Superior de Salubridad (Public Health Council) defined in 1897 a “zone which has the goal of maintaining certain types of industries at a distance from the only avenue of the capital,” that is, the Paseo de la Reforma.³ The residential developments would expand from the axis Zócalo-Alameda-Reforma toward the west and southwest. The east was discarded because of its proximity to the Texcoco lake, its lower ground level, and unfavorable ecological conditions. The designers of the new penitentiary located it on the eastern San Lázaro plains, in order to send the prisoners’ “miasma” away from the center.⁴ On the margins of the central city, authorities and developers had to deal with the existence of popular residential areas: lower-class colonias and old barrios. Although barrios had always existed close to the center, their poverty had preserved what Andrés Lira calls a “social distance” from the modern city. For lower-class developments, urbanization did not mean access to drainage, electricity, and pavement as it did for more affluent colonias and the protected environment of the central area.⁵

Life in the wealthiest colonias followed European bourgeois models of privacy and autonomy. City planners and developers shared the tacit prem-

ise that business, leisure, and work should be clearly separated, and that men and women had unmistakably different roles in public and domestic environments. The new colonias organized the living accommodations of the upper classes in single-house lots equipped with all the amenities of modern life, including electricity, drainage, running water, and telephones. Thanks to these services, the inhabitants of the house did not have to rely on old-fashioned methods of satisfying their daily needs, such as manually bringing water to the household or dumping human waste in the street. The ideal of an autonomous residence drew well-to-do families away from downtown, which had become increasingly oriented toward commercial use. An enhanced, city-wide transportation system sought to facilitate the movement of people from the new residence areas to their workplaces.⁶

The separation of public and private spaces and activities was also the guiding principle for official action regarding people's demeanor. Private behavior in public spaces had always been a concern for authorities in Mexico City. *Policía y buen gobierno* defined the authorities' intervention since colonial times, encompassing not only police issues but also the upkeep of streets and the control of collective meetings. Like its counterparts in the seventeenth century and the Bourbon period, the Porfirian City Council ordered *pulquerías* (stores selling pulque, a fermented beverage made from the sap of the maguey) and *cantinas* to conceal customers from the eye of pedestrians, and withdrew permission from restaurants to place chairs and tables on the sidewalks. The state even regulated the clothes worn by pedestrians: Indians (defined by their use of white trousers and shirts instead of dark suits) were required to wear dark trousers. Repeated publications of this prohibition, in the 1890s and then during Francisco I. Madero's presidency, suggest the futility of the attempt and reveal municipal authorities' belief that indigenous people were not culturally prepared to use the city.⁷

These attempts to divide the use of the city were far from perfect, and the reality of urban life never accommodated itself to the Porfirian ideal. Instead of working as autonomous, suburban households (as their architects conceived them), upper-class mansions reproduced the dynamics of the *casco de hacienda*, where servants and workers were an extension of the patriarchal family. Masters and domestic workers formed an intimate association that was not easily opened to public authority. Isidro Esqueda, for example, escaped a violent and, in his view, unjustified attempt at arrest by

a drunken policeman by seeking refuge inside the home of his boss, Lic. José Raz Guzmán, who later detained the policeman himself.⁸ Lic. Raz Guzmán had good reasons to act: wealthy residences needed the mediation of servants and sellers to obtain access to many basic products and services.

The functional divisions of urban space could not resist the erosion of everyday life precisely because the design of the upper-class, “civilized” city left outside, unplanned, the very factors of its survival. The elegant new colonias around the Paseo de la Reforma, as well as the older aristocratic homes downtown, needed labor and supplies, often from distant places. The Eighth District, for example, lacked a single produce market in 1904.⁹ Conversely, workers had to leave their homes to satisfy many needs of everyday life: to drink, eat, socialize, or simply earn a living through petty commerce in the streets. These needs and a distinctive conception of urban space impelled the urban poor to blur the artificial borders between a modern city, where public and private functions were clearly separated, and another city, where elite models of behavior seemed less important. A tension thus emerged between the hierarchical and rigid map of the capital imagined by the Porfirian elites and the ambiguous, often not articulated, horizontal view of those who spent most of their time on the streets. Before looking into that tension, however, we must ask what prevented Mexico City from becoming the model capital that its rulers imagined.

POPULATION, TRANSPORTATION, AND THE FAILURE OF THE MODEL

The Porfirian regime failed to consolidate its ideal capital because the constant arrival of migrants and the development of new means of transportation, both expected to facilitate progress, instead weakened social divisions and undermined the authorities’ control over public spaces.

Population growth posed an unexpected problem to planners and administrators even before it was clearly expressed by the census.¹⁰ Population counts reveal the unprecedented rate of this growth during the late Porfiriato. Since 1895, date of the first national census, the population of Mexico City had not only grown at a faster pace than the national total, but also faster than other cities in the country. While nineteenth-century estimates placed its population around 200,000, in 1895 Mexico City had 329,774 inhabitants, and by 1921 it had grown to 615,327 (see appendix, table 5). In-

ternal migration was the main cause of urban growth. In 1900, more than half of Mexico City's inhabitants were born in other states. In 1910, more than a quarter of the total number of migrants in the entire country lived in the Federal District.¹¹ Large numbers of migrants reached the capital and established themselves in diverse dwellings and occupations.

Despite the rural origin of most migrants, Mexico City's population was not what we can call a "traditional" society. Literacy figures, for example, show that the capital's population was more educated than the national average at the end of the Porfiriato, and continued to be so during the following decades. While in 1900 the nation's literacy rate was 18 percent, in the Federal District it was 45 percent. In 1930 the percentages were 39 and 75, respectively.¹² Although schooling was more accessible in the capital, many migrants came already educated. In 1895, the largest age group in Mexico City were those between 21 and 30 years old, accounting for 40 percent of the city's total population. Meanwhile, the largest population group in the country as a whole comprised children aged 10 or less, representing 30 percent of the national population.¹³ People came to the capital searching for jobs, but they did not necessarily lack education, a degree of status, or familiarity with urban life.

Migration to Mexico City also distinguished itself from that to other areas of the country in that the sex ratio favored women. In 1895, men were 50 percent of the national population, compared to 46 percent in Mexico City. The disparity grew until men represented less than 45 percent of the capital's population in 1930.¹⁴ This contrasted with the rapidly developing northern regions of the country, where the tendency was the opposite. According to François-Xavier Guerra, the sex imbalance of certain regions during the Porfiriato partly explains revolutionary mobilization: men outnumbered women by up to 10 percent in the mining areas of the north and in parts of the state of Morelos—both foci of the Revolution. Male predominance was a sign, in Guerra's view, of modernization and social change, thus fueling political participation.¹⁵ This view coincides with contemporaneous revolutionary interpretations of Mexico City as a territory of conservatism, decadence, and lack of masculinity. In 1914, veteran opposition writer Heriberto Frías stated that

the Porfirian dictatorship, sanctioned and supported by the rich, the military and the clergy, systematically tried to abolish the virility of the middle class,

particularly in the Federal District, where employees and professionals formed a corrupted Court living in a state of serfdom caused by atavisms and the environment.¹⁶

This view of the capital as a “retrograde” and conservative city seems to be supported by the absence of a massive (and male) popular revolt. Recent scholarship, however, has argued that women’s participation in the Revolution was more important than traditionally acknowledged, and that Mexico City’s lower-class women in particular were visibly active in urban politics in 1915, when the civil war hit the capital in full force and scarcity and inflation triggered food riots.¹⁷

Mexico City offered the conditions for women to explore work opportunities beyond their traditional gender roles. Census data for working women show a sharp contrast between national figures and those for Mexico City: while in 1900 women were only 17 percent of the national employed population, in Mexico City they were almost half. This did not mean, however, that women invaded customarily male areas of work. Certain jobs seemed to attract female labor more than others. According to the 1895 census, the trades favored by women were those of needlework (5,505 women and no men listed by the census), cigar making (1,709 women and no men), domestic work (25,129 women and 8,883 men), laundry (5,673 women and 112 men), and concierge work (1,431 women and 994 men). Taken together, these categories made up 50 percent of the employed female population.¹⁸ For many of these women, living in the capital meant not only leaving behind their hometowns but also a domestic environment.

In sum, turn-of-the-century Mexico City was dominated by young newcomers, more educated than the norm and with a strong presence of women in certain areas of economic activity. By contrast with more developed metropolises, industrial jobs did not employ large numbers of people in Mexico City; only 1 percent of employed men in the city in 1895 worked in industry, while 11 percent were listed as *comerciantes* (employed in commerce) and 7 percent as domestic workers.¹⁹ Moving to the capital did not necessarily translate into better living conditions, although it opened the possibility of access to better-paying jobs.

Along with demographic growth, modernization brought new means of transportation. It became easier for travelers to reach the capital and for its inhabitants to move within it. The development of railroads, cast in a coun-

trywide network whose lines converged in Mexico City, allowed artisans of modest income and poor migrants to make one-day trips from nearby towns. Compared to the traditional canoes and ox carts that in the 1880s still transported much of the foodstuffs needed in the capital, trains brought products from regions beyond the valley. Soon, railroads replaced canals and roads as the principal means of communication between the city and the surrounding towns. In response to the sudden ease of reaching the capital from the interior, crowds who did not behave or dress according to “civilized” foreign models poured onto the city streets. Railroad stations bustled with outsiders, particularly during national holidays or religious occasions, such as the December 12 celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe, which brought many pilgrims of rural appearance. Regardless of origin, visitors crowded the streets, drinking and eating and creating a bonanza for merchants and a headache for the police.²⁰

New means of transportation, particularly tramways, enhanced people’s mobility within the city. In addition to the private and rented coaches, which provided transportation for “people of medium and great wealth,” *tranvías* made commuting faster and affordable, and brought the center of the city closer to the suburbs. In 1903, most tramways were pulled by mules, although there were electric units as well. By 1920, there were 345 kilometers of tramway lines with 370 passenger cars, all owned by the Compañía de Tranvías de México. Tramways were cheap enough to be used by working-class people on a daily basis and occasionally by the poorest residents.²¹ They became an important element of the urban poor’s everyday life. For the characters in Angel de Campo’s novel *La Rumba*, the tramway was much more than the daily means of transportation. Remedios, a seamstress, commuted to work on the tramway and made it the setting for her romantic life. Horse-driven cabs continued to be a common sight at the turn of the century, as well as ox carts, mules, and hand-pulled carts. Starting in the 1910s, automobiles added to the intricacy of transportation, with greater speed and different rules governing their movement.²²

The impact of these new means of transportation on the popular perception of the capital was twofold. First, tramways, trains, and automobiles were commonly identified with the worst, more aggressive aspects of modernization. Walking in the middle of the street became a dangerous “rural” habit in this city. Accidents were common. Echoing public concern, the penny press called tramway drivers *mataristas* (from the verb *matar*—

to kill), instead of *motoristas*. The impunity of car and tramway drivers was a central consequence of urban progress from the point of view of lower-class pedestrians: the street became a threatening environment, where the victims were poor and the guilty were protected by their companies and judicial corruption. Thus, drivers who ran over pedestrians were often surrounded by witnesses and spontaneously brought to the police.²³ Modern transit created a world of movement that was both attractive and dangerous. Beggars wheedled in train stations, boys peddled on tramways, theft was common at both sites, and journalists even described a special kind of professional thief who targeted unaware passengers.²⁴

Danger expressed the conflicts over the use of urban space. Traffic was one of the preferred contexts of the struggle between “traditional” and “modern” behaviors. The use of the street for fast transportation competed with its use as a place for commerce and sociability. The city council sought to teach coach drivers to keep to their right and pedestrians to move along, reminding them “that it is forbidden to stop on the street forming groups that obstruct the circulation of vehicles and animals.” The prohibition was, again, merely a description: vendors set up their booths in the middle of the streets, blocking traffic despite the inspectors’ threats; pedestrians stood in the middle of the sidewalks blocking circulation, particularly at corners and outside theaters, forming groups instead of lines.²⁵

The second consequence of technological change was a transformed understanding of the city. Modern transportation widened the city. Tramway lines reached as far as San Angel and linked different areas of the city with downtown destinations—the Zócalo and Avenida Plateros—but also with the gambling houses in Tacubaya and other “dangerous” quarters of the city. In 1882, poet Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera used the tramway as the vehicle of an imaginary exploration into passengers’ lives. He already saw a different city than that of pre-tramway days: “The wagon takes me to unknown worlds and virgin regions. No, Mexico City does not start at the National Palace, nor does it end at Reforma Avenue. I give you my word that the city is much bigger. It is a great turtle that extends its dislocated legs toward the four cardinal points. Those legs are dirty and hairy. The City Council, with fatherly care, paints them with mud every month.”²⁶ As the city expanded, society became more complex and mobile, and the impression of an ordered, stable cosmopolitan city was broken down by the daily movement of its variegated population.

The last factor for the failure of the ideal city of the Porfiriato was the Revolution. Beginning in 1913, the civil war took its toll on the population of the capital, not only in terms of casualties, but also through scarcity, lawlessness, and increased migration into the city. With the revolutionary armies arrived unruly characters like Manuel González, soldier of a general Gil, who was sent to the penitentiary in 1916 “for hunting doves with a bow and arrow” in the colonia Roma.²⁷ No longer the picturesque innocents portrayed by nineteenth-century chroniclers, the multitude of dangerous *extranjeros* (foreigners) frightened neighbors of the colonia de la Bolsa and often left behind unidentified corpses.²⁸ Threatened by the initial radicalism of revolutionary leaders, those who had benefited from Porfirian modernization left the city and their luxurious homes for exile.

After the civil war, however, the old and the new elite reconciled and continued urban development along the basic lines established during Díaz’s regime. After 1920, the capital slowly began to improve its image again. Elegant colonias near Chapultepec park, such as Polanco and Anzures, became the residence of choice for the new politicians and businessmen. Sanitation and expansion of new developments recovered their fast pace by the end of the decade based, as in prerevolutionary times, on the harmony of developers’ interests and urban policies. The area of the city tripled in ten years. Cars came to dominate traffic, and by 1928 animal-drawn vehicles were prohibited, as officials resumed their attack against the practices of the urban poor.²⁹ Despite the political changes brought about by the Revolution, the majority of the urban population still distrusted authority and challenged the social divides of the city, and life in the streets continued to be a transaction between the old and the new.

THE IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION ON EVERYDAY LIFE

What did the Porfirian redesign of the city mean for the urban poor? This question is at the center of any attempt to explain the relationship between modernization and crime. The urban poor lived in conditions that could not be reconciled with bourgeois models; they had to cope with overcrowding, displacement, and the authoritarian policies of the regime. They also had to meet with the disapproval of observers such as *El Imparcial*, which in 1902 declared that

a sizable part of the population, precisely that which does not have the best personal hygiene, lives in the narrow rooms that the capital's buildings offer to the poorer classes. Those tenement houses . . . show the most surprising spectacle of human overcrowding one could imagine. Only medieval "Ghettos," those typical neighborhoods in which the Jews were confined, could resemble the narrowness, slovenliness and filth of these dwellings.³⁰

The description implied that overcrowding and filth made necessary the lower classes' geographical and even cultural isolation, as they challenged bourgeois notions of civility and undermined the class and gender divides intended to structure urban life.

In the old barrios near the urban center and in many of the newly developed lower class colonias, people lived in *vecindades*—one- or two-story tenements that lacked the clear spatial autonomy of modern homes. Several families lived in single- or double-room apartments with a single door that opened into a narrow hallway. Tenants shared sanitary services and the use of the hallway for cleaning or cooking. There were no strong reasons for owners to improve these arrangements. In the colonia de la Bolsa, where most tenants could not provide a guarantor, rents were established on a short-term basis at relatively high rates. Landlords did not enter *vecindades*, much less maintain them, and carried out their deals with tenants on the street.³¹ According to *Nueva Era*, policemen did not dare enter either, because *vecindades* were not welcoming places: dogs were loose and aggressive, clothes hung in the middle of the hallway, and neighbors saw any government representative as an intruder. On the other hand *vendedores ambulantes* (peddlers) entered *vecindades* at will, contributing to frequent thefts in tenants' apartments. The housing deficit explained these problems. According to the 1902 *El Imparcial* report, nothing decent could be leased for less than fifty pesos a month; houses renting for less than twenty pesos were "troglodyte dwellings."³² For lower-class households, *vecindades* were simply the only option.

Public dormitories or inns, called *mesones*, offered an alternative for individuals. They provided a roof for the night in exchange for a daily, low-cost ticket. This suited the economic conditions of those who lacked a stable income, such as *ambulantes* or beggars. Although ostensibly designed for travelers, *mesones* became the permanent address of many poor *capitalinos* who were ready to endure the crowding. Sleeping space on the floor