

# Imagining la Chica Moderna

WOMEN, NATION, AND VISUAL CULTURE

IN MEXICO, 1917-1936



JOANNE HERSHFIELD

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*Joanne Hershfield*

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*For my parents,*

**SYD & SALLY HERSHFIELD**



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Imagining la Chica Moderna





1. "What's changed between yesterday and today," *Ilustrado*,  
3 October 1929, unpaginated.

## Introduction

History decomposes into images, not stories.

WALTER BENJAMIN, *The Arcades Project*, 476

The cartoon in figure 1 visualizes public attitudes about changes in gender and gender relations in Mexico between 1917 and 1929. It demands neither specialized knowledge of Mexican history nor the ability to speak Spanish to decipher the dominant import of its message. The gun—a potent, universal symbol of power and violence—has been transferred from the hands of a man to those of a woman. In addition, there are other clearly identifiable meanings available to the general reader. Most of us, for example, will recognize that the 1929 woman’s overall appearance—her bobbed hair, ready-to-wear dress, and stiletto shoes—signifies that she is a “modern woman,” especially compared to the woman pictured in the 1917 panel. And it is not only her clothes that make her modern. We read modernity in her bold stance, her confident expression, her assured command of the gun, and her willingness to exercise her power. Most significant, the expression on the face of the man in the lower panel indicates his profound concern with the chang-

ing social landscape of gender and the apparent shift in gendered power relations.

*Imagining la Chica Moderna: Women, Nation, and Visual Culture in Mexico, 1917–1936* considers the appearance of modern femininity in the everyday life of postrevolutionary culture. The book's focus on popular images of embodied gender is intended to emphasize the place and importance of the visual in the project of modernization in Mexico during the first three decades of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> The dispersion of various forms of visual culture that crossed social, cultural, and economic borders reveals the diverse range of meanings in regards to *la chica moderna*, or the modern Mexican woman, that were available to many different audiences in Mexico, not just those who lived in the sprawling neighborhoods of Mexico City. By the 1920s, the material culture of the global marketplace was spreading across the nation, addressing women in Guadalajara, Mérida, and Veracruz. Moreover, the images that Mexican women confronted were transnational and unfamiliar, as well as national, local, and familiar.

Images of the nation were bound up in a two-decade-long political and cultural effort to fashion a national citizen and promote national solidarity among diverse elements of the Mexican population. At the same time that governmental agents and intellectual elites made use of visual images to promote their version of a political modernity, an equally forceful campaign to advance a modern identity was forged in the sphere of a popular “transnational” culture situated in the marketplace. The images I look at were public and popular, reproduced mechanically and widely circulated to a heterogeneous public. In general, the production and use of these images were governed by institutional parameters—those of mass publishing, for example—and by popular aesthetic practices and genres. Some were addressed directly to women through advertisements and as illustrations accompanying articles in women's magazines and on the “woman's pages” in a variety of daily newspapers. Others illustrated domestic and international news stories, promoted tourism, or publicized the latest Mexican and Hollywood films. They were, for the most part, photographs and reprinted lithographs, the two most widely used mechanical means of image reproduction in the first decades of the twentieth century.

2. *La chica moderna*,  
*Ilustrado*, 7 March 1929, 26.



La chica moderna pictured in the cartoon in figure 2 shares a number of qualities with modern women in Europe and in the United States. She is “up-to-date” in her appearance, her dress, and her attitudes. At home she wears a mass-produced housedress covered by an apron. In the evenings, she favors slinky black evening dresses, New York and Paris fashions that barely cover her knees, and French berets that snugly fit her short new bob. She is middle class, tall, and slender; she smokes cigarettes and wears makeup. She is the personification of feminine elegance and Parisian chic. This resemblance can be linked to the transnational distribution of the ideologies and commodities of style and fashion. While images of la chica moderna were produced and consumed within the complex context of powerful and strongly voiced nationalistic discourses, their presentational iconography was specifically that of global modernity. At the same time, the modern Mexican woman was not merely a carbon copy of her U.S., British, and German sisters, a “flapper” who spoke Spanish. An intriguing blend of traditionalism — “the

china poblana” (rural woman) and the *rebozo*-wrapped Indian — and cosmopolitanism — French berets and Spanish mantillas — distinguished her from those other modern, Western women.

The book is not a social history of Mexican women; my study of popular images is not intended to show how people actually lived their lives. Instead, I offer an analysis of the production of ideas about the new, postrevolutionary Mexican woman as she was envisioned in popular culture and consider how these images contributed to an understanding of Mexican modernity. As the subsequent chapters make clear, *la chica moderna* was, to a large extent, white — as opposed to mestizo or Indian — and middle to upper class. In Mexico, the idea of “middle class” needs to be situated within the sociopolitical context of Mexico’s postrevolutionary project, which saw as its goal the transformation of Mexico from an agriculturally dependent, rural-based economy — distinguished by linguistic, class, racial, and historical divisions, and vaguely connected through regional and ancestral ties — into a modern nation populated by national citizens. The project was marked by a profound tension between the impetus to develop a homogeneous “Mexican” national identity and an equally compelling impulse to be “modern” within the transnational sense of modernity.

I use the term *transnational* here to refer to a set of economic, sociopolitical, cultural, and interpersonal forces that link states, institutions, and people across geographic and political boundaries. Of course, Mexico’s encounter with the transnational did not begin in the twentieth century: the geographic region that came to be known as “Mexico” was modernized in the fifteenth century with arrival of the Spanish, who brought with them Western religious beliefs and practices, political, economic, and familial structures, as well as modern fashion. From the time of the Spanish colonization, Mexico looked to Europe as the model of modern life and modern identity, a model that was presented and interpreted initially by the envoys of the Spanish monarchy and the Catholic Church and later by French, Italian, and U.S. arbiters of modernity. Despite centuries of foreign rule and political and economic imperialism, however, the “heart and mind” of Mexico was never wholly subjugated. From the sixteenth century until the present moment, Mexican women and men have fashioned themselves national and individual

identities from an assemblage of images and ideas that were and are foreign and indigenous, modern and traditional. In the words of Serge Gruzinski, Mexico has always been “a land of all syncretisms” (5).

As we will see, *la chica moderna* was, herself, a hybrid creature. Broadly speaking, she can be understood to encompass a set of discourses employed to describe a gendered social subject that was construed to be fundamentally different from previous categories of women by virtue of being “modern.” These particular discourses were bound up with those of nationalism as promoted by the state, and by private market interests whose projects sometimes coincided with national concerns and sometimes did not. Domesticity and its attendant structures of marriage and motherhood, as well as the topics of fashion and beauty, formed the primary contexts of this new image of the Mexican woman. She was first of all middle or upper class; she married for love, took care of the house and the children, and was the family’s primary consumer in the marketplace; she attended church regularly and, once married, remained faithful to her husband; rarely did she work outside the home yet she participated in public-policy making, especially in the area of education and moral reform.<sup>2</sup>

Various histories have been written about Mexico’s postrevolutionary political, cultural, and social transformations. Most of these histories are concerned with the creation of the modern Mexican state and the institutionalization of a particular “postrevolutionary” brand of nationalism represented by a set of formal symbols and discourses of *lo mexicano*, a profoundly “Mexican” national identity. They rely on written historical evidence housed in official state and private archives: presidential papers; official edicts and proclamations; letters from one political official to another; records of licenses, marriages, divorces, and death. As feminist historians have noted, however, the understanding of history as primarily *political* history has ignored histories of gender and the role of everyday practice in the formation of new national and social identities.<sup>3</sup>

Theorists of nationalism have for the most part been “gender blind” in their analyses. Nira Yuval-Davis insists, however, that women are central to imagining the nation and nationalism in five ways: as agents of biological reproduction, as reproducers of ethnic and national boundaries, as transmitters of national culture, as symbols of national ideologies, and