

# **POWER RELATIONS AND SOCIAL PROTEST IN MEXICAN HUELGA CORRIDOS:**

## **A FOUCAULDIAN ANALYSIS**

A principle motive of torture  
[of the political kind]  
is control, the domination of  
an unpalatable truth. That  
truth may be communism,  
nationalism, democracy, any  
number of threatening political  
beliefs that disrupt the unity,  
the unblemished purity and  
wholeness of the state, or of  
any entity analogous to the  
unitary philosophical subject  
(Page du Bois, 1991:149)

My present book-length study on corridos or Mexican ballads seeks to explore contemporary critical theories and their applicability or none applicability to Mexican/Chicano culture and literature. Oftentimes, I am finding that European oriented critical theories diverge and converge at various points within a particular text or cultural entity. In the case of the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, for example, I challenge his negative conceptualizations of folklore and expose his elitist views on culture since he categorizes folk culture within the parameters of Aristotelian binary oppositions of high and low culture. He disappointingly privileges "high" culture while proposing an eradication of low culture. He explicitly views folk culture as a negative influence on the masses characterizing it as being permeated with superstitions and ignorance.

Equally disappointing is Leon Trotsky's views on popular culture since he negates the masses possess culture. Obviously, he too is conceptualizing culture within the very limited parameters of "high" culture.

In today's presentation, I focus on Michel Foucault's work regarding the function of medieval torture and the spectacle. While acknowledging Foucault's Eurocentrism, I harvest those ideas that are helpful in illuminating the form and function of huelga or workers' strike corridos. I specifically utilize Foucault's theories in the elucidation of the use of self-torture, pain and the spectacle by the masses as a political form of protest.

Michel Foucault has written extensively regarding the ruling class's use of power and domination through direct and indirect forms of control. In opposition to the elites, sources of empowerment can also emanate from the working class through various forms of internal cooperation and solidarity. An analysis delineating various forms of power relations between

oppositional groups can be examined in the Mexican ballad or corrido. In this study, I center my attention on one huelga or workers' strike corrido. I examine "El corrido de los mineros (huelga de Nueva Rosita)" "The Ballad of the Miners: (The Strike at Nueva Rosita)" written in the early 1950s.

The "Ballad of the Miners" narrates a march to Mexico City undertaken by a group of striking miners. The miners were striking against the American Smelting and Refining Company, ASARCO, because of the low salaries received. These miners marched in protest from Nueva Rosita, Coahuila, a mining town in Northern Mexico, to Mexico City. As the miners walked through the various states on their journey to Mexico City, they gained support for their cause. The song narrates in detail the miners' trials and tribulations as well as the moral victories they were gaining as they humbly walked the hundreds of miles to the nation's center of political power.

After arriving in Mexico City the striking miners extracted many promises and assurances from the politicians. However, to their dismay, the miners found upon returning to their hometown that they had been betrayed by government officials and the accords agreed upon while in the Mexican capital had been declared null and void.

The corrido was published in Armando de María y Campos' La revolución mexicana a través de los corridos populares Tomo II (1962) although the corrido is not about the Mexican Revolution and the events took place in 1950-1951. The song, nevertheless, affords us an interesting case study regarding the articulation of grievances and the various forms of power expressed through its lyrics. It is a particularly long corrido consisting of 190 four-line stanzas! Thus the song offers a detailed account of events surrounding the mining strike and march to the capital. Various personages appear within the verses: a number of state governors, the president of Mexico, as well as North Americans, women, priests, newspapermen, poor townfolk, representatives of the middle class, and various politicians. Of particular interest is a feminist group of women who took up the miners' cause and spoke on their behalf.

In Foucault's seminal study Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, the French critic posits that the "spectacle of torture" i.e. hangings, burning at the stake, quartering, etc. was designed to redress the injury done to a sovereign. He asserts:

Torture forms part of a ritual. It is an element in the liturgy of punishment and meets two demands. It must mark the victim: it is intended, either by the scar it leaves on the body, or by the spectacle that accompanies it, to brand the victim with infamy; even if its function is to 'purge' the crime, torture does not reconcile; it traces around or, rather, on the very body of the condemned signs that must not be effaced; in any case, men will remember public exhibition, the pillory, torture pain duly observed. And, from the point of view of the law that imposes it, public torture and execution must be spectacular, it must be seen by all almost as its triumph. (p. 34)

Foucault further states that:

The public execution, then, has a juridico-political function. It is a ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted. It restores that sovereignty by manifesting it as its most spectacular. The public execution, however, ... belongs to a whole series of great rituals in which power is eclipsed and restored (coronation, entry of the king into a conquered city the submission of rebellion subjects) etc... Its aim is not so much to

reestablish a balance as to bring into play, as its extreme point, the dissimetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength. (*Ibid.*)

I must admit Foucault's theories regarding the spectacle of torture are problematic because of their Eurocentric optic. As Page du Bois has pointed out, Foucault posits three evolutionary stages in European institutions of control: medieval torture, punishment and discipline. Contemporary instances of torture have not disappeared as Foucault avers. Du Bois underscores how torture in modern society has meaning as "social display" (aside from purposes of control and intimidation) (p. 153). Furthermore, this critic points out:

Foucault's description of the transition from specular torture and execution to internalized discipline remains a local analysis. At the same time that the English cease to indulge in public execution, they continue to deport criminals to distant lands, to displace the violence of spectacle elsewhere in the world without relinquishing it. Foucault's account of the processes he describes must be faulted for its limited validity; it loses its imperative quality when considered in light of colonialism, the exportation of control through violence, the global economy (p. 154).

Du Bois rightly points out that the exportation of torture from First World countries to Third World countries makes the former accomplices in this sordid crimes against humanity. She emphatically underscores how "If torture is no longer systematically carried out in the metropolis, if the FBI does not indulge in torture, surely the displacement of torture into the third world, the training and funding of torturers by North Americans, must be taken into account in any history of torture." Nevertheless, du Bois admits that "the function of torture today, rather than the production of truth, is still one of spectacle, of the production of broken bodies and psyches, both for local and international consumption (p. 155).

An article by U.S. and World Report agrees:

Torture has been practiced in 98 countries during this decade, by Amnesty International's count. Contrary to popular imagination, its primary use today is not to gain information. It is a tool for political repression, used to mentally destroy people in captivity, then release them to strike terror into the community. The more extreme the pain and torment, the more horrifying the message and the easier it becomes to intimidate a dissenting population. (Quoted in du Bois p. 155).

In this study I contend that the spectacle of an organized march of strikers is analogous to the spectacle of torture but in an inverted form. That is to say, it is an inversion of the demonstration of power by a sovereign since it is a spectacle of and for the people. It, therefore, encapsulates the potential for the seizing of power by the people. The march by strikers threatens the stability of the sovereign who is placed in the position of ambivalence in the taking of control. For if caution is not used in the control of the masses a chaotic, violent situation may ensue where there is a distinct possibility of overthrowing the ruling sovereign in power.

The people involved in a mass demonstration become cognizant of their power for the duration of the march. As their numbers increase a sense of solidarity begins to empower them. And just as the suffering and pain of the rebellious individual being punished or tortured reflect and reassert the power of the sovereign and "reconstitute" him/her, in a similar manner the suffering and pain of those involved in the demonstration or march solidifies the resolve and solidarity of the group.

Likewise, when the excess of torture inflicted on an individual leads to a response from the spectators inimical to the cause of the sovereign so does the suffering and pain inflicted on the marchers elicit sympathy for the demonstrators and rage against the ruling power. Thus ruling elites have to be extremely cautious in their exercise of power lest it be turned against them.

### **KNOWLEDGE OF POWER**

The miners in "The Ballad of the Miners" are cognizant of their newly acquired power as is evident in the lyrics of the song. The miners' power is derived from various sources not the least through verbal articulation in the folk song. The narrator in the ballad informs the audience of the miners' plight and invites them to join them in their struggle. He "invites" them to gain firsthand knowledge of the injustices committed by the mining companies by working for them.

Señores, yo los invito	Gentlemen, I invite you
que los lleven en lista;	to join the ranks of workers
le sonaron al obrero	they beat up the industrial workers
y tambien al agrarista	and also the agricultural workers.

And other lyrics warn:

Alerta, pues, mexicano,	Be alert all you Mexicans
mira lo que está pasando.	See what is happening
Si te descuidas, de plano,	If you are not vigilant
te seguirán traicionando.	They will keep n betraying you.

Mi intención no es provocar	My intention is not to provoke
sino decir la verdad	but to tell the truth
si me puse a criticar	if I am criticizing
es porque es la verdad.	It is because it's the truth.

El sentir del pueblo es claro	The feeling of the people are evident
yo se los voy a decir,	I will tell you so
no se vayan a asustar	do not be scared
por lo que voy a escribir.	by what I will write.

En estas humildes letras	In these humble verses
voy a decir la verdad,	I will tell the truth
pónganse todos alerta	All of you be alert
pa' que vean la realidad.	so you can see the real world.

(Armando María y Campos, 1962 )

The bard is self-reflexive in his self appointed role as scribe for the people. He is conscious of his role as spokesperson for the miners and realizes the power of the word the aggressivity of the written word since he states:

"My intention is not to provoke,

but to tell the truth."

But the truth as articulated through the written and spoken word is powerful. He warns:

No se vayan a asustar por lo que voy a escribir.	Do not be frightened about what I will write.
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The troubador realizes the powerful effect of the word and seeks to neutralize it by assuming a humbler stance: "In these humble letters / I shall tell the truth."

Through the spoken (sung) and written word, reality will be better apprehended. Once the terms related to the singing of the song are stated the ballad proceeds to recount the events that led to the strike and the march to the capital of the nation, Mexico City. The narrative passes from the first person singular to the third person singular. Thus conferring on the events a distance that in turn imbues it with a repertorial, journalistic objective tone. The ballad will fluctuate between reporting the factual events and providing subjective commentary in an editorializing tone.

The call for solidarity among the miners is also evident of the people's realization that their power lies, not in individual action but in a collective action. Unity and strength in numbers is advocated in the third stanza:

En este tiempo presente todos deben agruparse para hacer un solo frente y no dejar engañarse.	In the present time All should come together And show one solid front So as not to be deceived.
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And strong invectives are hurled against the scab workers.

Alerta bola de traidores, sus hijos, ¡que les dirán! cuando peleen sus derechos, Cómo lo demostrarán?	Be alert you bunch of traitors Your children what will they say When they fight for their rights How will they learn to do it?
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Nunca sirva de esquito! Mexicano, ten cuidado; ya lo dijo Angel Bassols; es papel desprestigiado.	Never be a scab! Mexicans be careful Angel Bassols has said it It is a dishonorable role.
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(María y Campos, 1962)

The government, on the other hand, perceives the power in the solidarity of the people. The march to Mexico City begins to exert political pressure on the Mexican government. The fear that a sovereign deploys through the mechanism of the "spectacle of torture," as Foucault underscores is inverted. Through the sufferings of the people, as they march onward, it is the government who begins to fear the spectacle of the marching demonstrators. The Federal troops become immobilized and are helpless in the face of the marching strikers.

It is interesting to note that the Federal troops become helpless in the face of such solidarity as was mustered by the miners. In particular they were powerless against the subversive activities of women.

Las fuerzas federales que a todo esto se opusieron con la Alianza Femenil	The Federal troops Who were opposed to the strike Were powerless against
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del mineral no pudieron.

The Feminist Mineral's Alliance group.

This is not to imply that the Federal troops and government's power were totally eclipsed. As a matter of fact, the American Smelting and Refining Company took several measures to break the strike. For example the Company closed the medical clinic servicing the Miners, the Local Union headquarters, and the Cooperative store. They also froze the money in the Miner's Bank and began advertising and hiring scab labor. The miners are aware of U.S. economic interests in the matter and chastize those who sell out to foreign interests.

Esta patria está repleta  
de tanto tipo holgazán  
que venden hasta su prieta  
por centavos que les dan.

This country is packed  
With lazy individuals  
Who sell their own girlfriends  
For the pennies they get.

Dicen que el Americano  
está como en su casa;

They say Americans  
Behave as if they were in their  
own country

Ten cuidado, mexicano  
ya ves lo que nos pasa.

Be careful, Mexicans  
Remember what happened to us.

Mexico debe dinero  
a la unión Americana,  
No te olvides compañero  
de lo que hizo Santa Ana

Mexico owes money  
To the United States  
Do not forget my friends  
What Santa Anna did in the past.

(Armando María y Campos, 1962)

As the caravan marches toward Mexico City each governor in the states the marchers' traverse behave in a humane manner. They provide food and some even offer medical support for the marchers. The only dignitaries not stepping forth to aid the marchers were the mayor from Mexico City and the President of Mexico. Both were absent during the Miner's stay in the Capital. Again these actions underscore the fear produced in the ruling elites who could not or would not face the miners.

The press is likewise portrayed as fearful of the miners. The power invested in the miners through the solidarity and support of the Mexican population made the press fearful of this group's power. The press as a whole, nevertheless sided with the mining companies.

## **PAIN AND SUFFERING**

As Foucault points out every penalty of a certain seriousness had to involve an element of torture, of supplice. He further describes supplice as "corporal punishment, painful to a more or less horrible degree" (p. 33) Pain and suffering inflicted on the individual, according to this French critic was the mechanism through which the sovereign could reassert his power.

The performance of the ritual which involved pain and suffering in the body of the individual made "the public execution more than a mere act of justice; it was a manifestation of force; or rather,

it was justice as the physical, material and awesome force of the sovereign deployed there. The ceremony of the public torture and execution displayed for all to see the power relation that gave his force to the law." (p. 50)

The suffering of the people during the miners' strike and march on to Mexico City, however, produces the opposite effect. Although the suffering and pain is the direct result of government policies, just as the "spectacle of torture" is the result of government policies, the effect on the people is to produce a sense of solidarity and support thus grant power, to the marching mine strikers. This of course can happen during public ceremonies of punishment as Foucault points out:

A whole military machine surrounded the scaffold:  
cavalry of the watch, archers, guardsmen, soldiers. This  
was intended, of course, to prevent any escape or show of  
force; it was also to prevent any outburst of sympathy or  
anger on the part of the people...(p.50).

Although the miners were successful in eliciting the sympathy of the people and gained self empowerment through presenting a united front to the opposition -- i.e. the mining companies, in the short term the miners were not successful in accomplishing their ends. The Mining companies and the Mexican government, fearful of the power the miners garnered assured them in Mexico City that their demands had been granted.

The miners returned home by train in a joyful mood thinking their problems had been solved. Two events transpired which jarred them from their happy mood: the train they were traveling in was derailed (supposedly by the American Smelting and Refining Company) and upon their arrival in Nueva Rosita their relatives greeted them with the bad news: the mining company had betrayed them and had refused to honor the terms of the contract. The miners felt a deep sense of anger at the treachery of the Mexican government and Mining Officials and refused to work. However, the mining companies continued to hire scab labors and their production did not cease. In the long run, nevertheless, the miners were successful for the American Smelting and Refining company became nationalized.

Many miners left the mining town and sought work elsewhere. The bard, however, is not sorry about the events that transpired and explicitly states this toward the end of the song:

Yo no estoy arrepentido  
de lo que a mí me ha pasado,  
pues apenas he cumplido  
con mi deber más sagrado.

(Armando María y Campos, 1962)

I am not sorry  
For what has happened to me  
For I have only carried out  
My most sacred duty.

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