Contenido

Artículos

Reseñas

Directorio

Revista de Literatura Mexicana Contemporánea
Enero-abril 2021, año XXVII, número 82, vol. 27 ISSN 14052687

The University of Texas at El Paso
Department of Languages
and Linguistics

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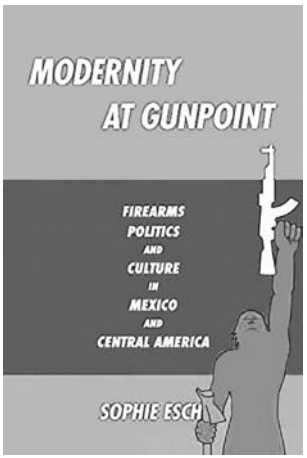
Sophie Esch. *Modernity at Gunpoint: Firearms, Politics, and Culture in Mexico and Central America**

Tamara L. Mitchell
University of British Columbia



In a study on armed conflict and the legacy of violence in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Mexico and Central America, Sophie Esch offers a rigorous analysis of the ways in which new technologies of warfare have led not only to new forms of insurgency and revolution, but also to a new type of politics. Esch undertakes a reading of firearms and their accoutrements as tools of both political citizenship and cultural expression. The text focuses most closely on the Mexican and Nicaraguan contexts, but it also offers insightful analyses about the role of weapons in the Central American Northern Triangle, the Mexico-U.S. borderlands, and other Latin American countries (Cuba in particular). Esch conceives of the epoch of modernity with reference to the work of Paul Virilio and Max Weber, while Jean Baudrillard's object-value system underpins her reading of the multifaceted political and cultural significance of weapons. Drawing on Baudrillard allows Esch to account for the symbolic value of weaponry, and she considers the firearm as one or more of three categories: the artifact, trope, and prop (6). Esch returns to these classifications in her analysis of a richly varied cultural corpus, including photographs, murals, statues, novels, songs, clothing, and short stories.

The first two chapters form a unit that considers novels and cultural objects of the Mexican Revolution. Chapter One reads Nellie Campobello's *Cartucho* alongside *corridos* and photos of the Revolution.

* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018, 284 pages.

Esch underscores how the rifle became a proxy for political agency for landless and dispossessed peasants who, otherwise, were not recognized by the lettered elite. Principally focusing on *la bola*, or the "mobile collective of insurgents" (15), she shows that forming part of an armed collective became a means of asserting political subjectivity (50). Chapter One also teases out how women did not benefit equally from revolutionary demands for political recognition. Contrasting photos of armed men donning cartridge belts across their chests with similarly posed women—unarmed, but emulating the men's cartridge belts with the *rebozo*, or shawl, in the iconographic crisscross (60-62)—she proffers a nuanced reading of participation by women in the Revolution, who often served as *soldaderas*, or camp followers, that principally performed domestic and nursing duties without joining combat. In this way, women were denied that "prothesis of citizenship"—the rifle—but gained agency as caretakers and storytellers (70).

Shifting to a sustained examination of the man of letters encountering the man of arms, Chapter Two reads Martín Luis Guzmán's autobiographical novel, *El águila y la serpiente*, as a work that captures the "intense affect" and "performative aspects of rule" that revolutionary leaders summoned through weaponry (73). This chapter supports a premise posited in Chapter One: that the pistol and the insurgent violence it represents are valid means of political participation when one's rights are denied from above. Focusing on representations of Pancho Villa's homosocial friendship with the narrator Guzmán, Esch traces how the latter's derisive skepticism toward the General shifts to respect of Villa's political legitimacy. Rejecting earlier readings that attribute this shift to repressed homosexual desire, she shows that Guzmán's transformation from skeptical elite to sympathetic companion occurs as a result of Villa's intense affection, which "disarms" the narrator (78). Finally, in a reading of firing squad (*paredón*) executions as a form of revolutionary justice, Esch convincingly argues that the long-held dichotomy between civilization and barbarism in the Latin American context breaks down in the face of this extremely modern (Weberian) yet savage violence (89).

The subsequent three chapters turn to the Central American context. Chapter Three examines the early success of Nicaragua's Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) at leveraging representations of disproportionate force to gain support against the Somoza regime. Through the triumph of the Revolution in 1979, Sandinistas successfully fostered a collective imaginary of insurgents as *muchachos*, a sort of "out-gunned David" facing the excessively forceful Goliath of Somoza's National Guard (97). Esch zeroes in on mass-mediated footage, photos, and *testimonios* that highlight the frail but fearless masculinity of Sandinista revolutionaries in the face of heavily armed military forces. She connects this vulnerable masculinity to the concept of "the New Man" and underscores how Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution

were important antecedents to the FSLN (102). This success turns to failure, however, when the triumphant Sandinista leaders turn militant and lose the support of *el pueblo* during the Contra War of the 1980s. Appeals for Indigenous and peasant support by a paternalistic transitional government are unsuccessful, a failure that Esch frames as political and intellectual elites struggling to recognize the subaltern masses as "citizens, political subjects of their own right" (110). Relatedly, the chapter problematizes the ways in which images of armed women were used by the Sandinistas as mere props, without truly opening a space for women's political participation.

Observing that the "Nicaraguan Revolution did not have a song… it had an entire soundtrack" (121), Chapter Four analyzes albums by Carlos and Luis Enrique Mejía Godoy. The chapter meditates on lyrics—"[la] carabina disparando auroras" (142)—that become a trope during the Revolution, and Esch returns to this imagery to trace the rise and fall of the utopian promise of Sandinismo. She undertakes close readings of a number of Mejía Godoy songs that, going beyond mere entertainment, accomplish myriad functions, including commemorating important events, uniting people across disparate social spheres, garnering international solidarity, justifying the Revolution, consolidating a new national identity, and even providing instructions for how to use and clean rifles. Throughout these analyses, Esch effectively demonstrates the central role of the rifle in popular culture which contributes to later disenchantment with the Revolution when the FSLN adopts a militancy reminiscent of the Somoza regime it had fought to overthrow.

In an examination of postwar narrative fiction, Chapter Five considers novels and short stories of Nicaragua and El Salvador that feature demobilized combatant protagonists and thematize the legacy of armed conflict in the present. A key takeaway of this analysis is that weapons no longer confer political agency. Instead, firearms are wielded by "violence workers" using skills gained during civil conflict to make a living in the neoliberal present (158). Esch reads novels by Horacio Castellanos Moya and Franz Galich, each of which boasts a protagonist named for an action hero (Robocop and Rambo) who deploys excessive, *machista* violence. The chapter closes on a particularly strong note in its analysis of short story compilations by Salvadoran writers Jacinta Escudos and Claudia Hernández, whose more experimental works offer a counterpoint to the sensationalist violence that often plagues postwar narrative. Esch identifies a space for female agency (in Escudos) and the possibility for restorative justice and healing after trauma (in Hernández).

Venturing into the twenty-first century, the final chapter turns to the Mexican drug war to underscore the multivalent symbolic value of the *cuerno de chivo*, the infamous AK-47 of the cartels. Refreshingly, Esch's analysis focuses not on these weapons in the hands of narcos, but rather the ways in which the rifles are used performatively as props and

tropes by the Mexican government to justify militarism and violence (192). The chapter also attends to cultural manifestations of narcoviolence, and Esch examines the *narcocorrido*, tracking how the ballads range from idyllic meditations on the "rural life of the narco" (200) to violent battle hymns that glorify brutality (202). The chapter closes with an analysis of the gold-plated AK-47, a symbol of excess—excessive violence and excessive wealth—that permeates state discourse, the media, and the cultural sphere. This spectacular artifact signals a shift toward a new epoch marked by neoliberal consumption, which fittingly closes Esch's study of the firearm as a transformative symbol of modernity.

Esch persuasively shows that each studied conflict is symbolically tied to an iconographic firearm: Pancho Villa's pistol alongside the cartridge belts common to insurgents during the Mexican Revolution, the Belgian Fusil Automatique Léger (FAL) wielded by the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and the AK-47 emblematic of the Mexican drug war. However, *Modernity at Gunpoint* goes beyond an examination of weaponry by also accounting for related practices and effects, such as firing squads, wounds, scars, and psychological trauma. This wide-ranging study offers insights on gender relations, class disparity, and the possibility for transformative, albeit violent, political agency.

Modernity at Gunpoint advances the innovative and convincing thesis that "the firearm appears as a prosthesis for citizenship, a means for people to affirm themselves as political and social subjects" (21). This study is an important contribution to Mexican, Central American, and borderlands studies, as well as the burgeoning field of Greater Mexico studies, and will be an invaluable resource for scholars of visual, sound, literary, and cultural studies.

Un amor de cocodrilo. Significación del tema del amor en la obra poética de Efraín Huerta de 1956 a 1980

Jesús Alberto Leyva Ortiz

La presente publicación es un análisis de la obra de Efraín Huerta en su faceta menos estudiada: como un poeta para quien el amor es un tema constante sin el cual no puede concebirse su poesía.

(184 pp.)

Benemérita y Centenaria Escuela Normal del Estado de San Luis Potosí

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