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CHAPTER ##

LOS DE ABAJO:
AN EARLY NOVEL OF THE LAND?

PASCALE BAKER

Mariano Azuela’s *Los de abajo* (1915) is almost universally considered to be the classic Novel of the Mexican Revolution and as such has been much discussed. This special status was conferred upon the novel as a result of it being resurrected as an example of “virile” writing in Mexico in response to the Mexican intellectual Julio Jiménez Rueda’s 1924 article “El afeminamiento de la literatura Mexicana” (McKee Irwin 2003, 118). In the mid-1920s this brought the text to the attention of the post-revolutionary government and subsequent governments of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), who, over the following decades, would enthusiastically appropriate the novel as a national epic and the most fitting representation of the revolution that they wanted to promote (Dabove 2007, 243). Whilst this official endorsement of *Los de abajo* undoubtedly contributed to its growing status as a classic in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, the novel’s popular and critical appeal stretched far beyond Mexico itself, and the rather limited readings that the PRI had attached to it. *Los de abajo* found fame in Latin America, North America and Europe, particularly from the 1960s onwards. It was from this time that distinguished critics, such as Seymour Menton, noted how *Los de abajo* captured the essence not just of the revolution but of Mexicanness itself (244). This has, though, by no means been the only or even the dominant critical assessment of *Los de abajo*. Debates around the novel’s meanings, style, structure and characterization have continued to jostle with one another into the twenty-first century, with the 2010 centenary of the Mexican Revolution once more focusing renewed interest on the text.

This chapter will add to those debates to formulate another, complementary interpretation to that which sees *Los de abajo* as simply the quintessential Novel of the Revolution. *Los de abajo*, though ostensibly an innovative novel for its time stylistically, celebrating the chaotic modernity unleashed by the revolution through its rapid-fire immediacy and relative lack of third-person narrative contemplation, actually approximates to later novels of the land, such as *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926) by Ricardo
Güiraldes and *Doña Bárbara* (1929) by Rómulo Gallegos. These novels in many ways, and perhaps unwittingly, rejected modernity in Argentina and Venezuela by elevating past national myths of rural heroes such as the gaucho and cacique. I will argue that *Los de abajo*, despite its stylistic innovations and apparent keenness to engage with modernity and revolution, actually yearns for a hallowed, nostalgic past and thus anticipates these novels of the land in their adoration of the tierra and their elegiac projection of long-held national myths. Azuela’s novel is undoubtedly a text of Mexico’s revolution, but through its elevation of the figure of the rural outcast or bandit, as exemplified by Demetrio Macías, also reaches back to a romanticized narrative of Mexico’s peasant past. In common with *Don Segundo Sombra*, *Doña Bárbara* and with the earlier foundational text by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Facundo: civilización y barbarie* (1845), *Los de abajo*, perhaps unknowingly, also re-engages with the civilization versus barbarism polemic. Furthermore, drawing on the work of Carlos J. Alonso, this chapter will argue that *Los de abajo*, like the novels mentioned above, betrays Azuela’s unwitting admiration for the barbaric or primitive, despite his apparent distaste for it and desire for progress and order.

As Sarmiento wrote in *Facundo*, the grand natural landscapes of Latin America demand our admiration and, despite their inherent barbarism (as he perceived it), they also have “su costado poético, y faces dignas de la pluma del romancista” ([1845] 1990, 75). In the character of guerrilla chief and outlaw Demetrio Macías, Azuela creates a worthy hero. Macías represents a locus of decency, in spite of the chaos and violence that characterize the latter two parts of the novel. In this reading, through his very primitivism he embodies a kind of originary authenticity that is threatened by the coming of the revolution and the changes that it will inevitably bring. Alonso, in relation to the telluric novel of the 1920s and 1930s, outlines what he describes as “an autochthonous cultural order”, explained as a return to roots, “to a state of cultural plenitude that is associated with an unspecified moment in the past” (1990, 11). This longed for primordial state has apparently been forsaken, but it retains an “irresistible appeal as a trope of cultural affirmation” in the troubled present of early twentieth-century Latin America, beset by political upheaval, modernization and anxiety over national identity (10). Thus my contention here is that Macías, the noble if barbarous peasant, embodies this intangible “cultural essence” (9) and that *Los de abajo*, in its evocation of languid ruralism, constitutes an early version of the novel of the land and the autochthonous cultural order that Alonso describes. The proposed link between *Los de abajo* and later novels of the land is a conceptual one. Azuela, Güiraldes
and Gallegos were writing at different times and in different parts of Latin America, and it is not the intention here to suggest that the stylistic and thematic similarities were the result of conscious copying on the part of the later authors, or that Azuela was a direct influence on them. The perceived connection between the novels discussed here most probably occurred incidentally.

The civilization versus barbarism debate is central to Sarmiento’s work, particularly in *Facundo*. As Gerald Martin has observed, Sarmiento himself never quite resolved his own ambivalent position in the debate: despite the fact that Sarmiento ostensibly championed the cause of Latin American progress and civilization, in *Facundo* he nonetheless betrays an admiration for “the self-reliance, individualism and, when necessary, the savage violence of the gaucho” (1989, 20). This attraction to the barbarism element of the debate has, in Latin America, often gone hand in hand with a fascination with the autochthonous and the return to origins that barbarism connotes. For example, even when attempting to distance himself from the barbarous heartlands of the pampa, Sarmiento returns to them time and again, as being at the core of Argentine identity. In his own words, “la naturaleza salvaje dará la ley por mucho tiempo, y la acción de la civilización permanecerá débil e ineficaz” ([1845] 1990, 61). Sarmiento was not the only notable Latin American author to cleave to the barbarous and its symbols, whether gaucho, bandit or rebel. As Alonso notes, this was a common theme in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Latin American literature. He attributes this trend to the continual cultural crises occurring on the continent, occasioned by the impact of modernity, which fed into an unwitting attraction to the barbaric (1990, 25). Alonso, like Martin, develops his theory with regard to well known telluric novels, such as *Don Segundo Sombra* and *Doña Bárbara*.

This hypothesis can also be applied to *Los de abajo*. The radical new style of the text, which broke with previous literary trends in its re-creation of the immediacy of the revolution, has often led to *Los de abajo* being hailed as a modern novel for its time (Leal 1971, 111; Pellón 2006, 100; Griffin 1993, 41, 89). ¹ Paradoxically, however, in its attraction to the tradi-

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¹ Griffin points out that although Azuela was keen to introduce new forms and ideas to his work, he was, nonetheless, still heavily influenced by the French realist and naturalist schools of the nineteenth century (1993, 41). However, Leal in particular stresses the originality of *Los de abajo*’s style, claiming that it marked a move away from European forms and that “Azuela, either consciously or uncon-
tional peasant hero figure of Macías and the lifestyle and community that he represents, combined with a distaste for the apparatus of so-called progress—machine guns, aeroplanes and railways—, *Los de abajo* appears to reject the modernity being brought about by the very same revolution. In its tone of disillusionment at the course of the events during the conflict, the novel reveals the same “rhetorical predicament” (Alonso 1990, 26) evident in later novels of the land. This is a desire for progress twinned with a nostalgic need to look back, given the uncertainty and violence of the present. The crisis of the Mexican Revolution confirms that the abuses of the Porfiriato it sought to overturn continue into the present in other guises. This is perhaps most memorably voiced by Villista soldier Alberto Solís, sometimes seen as the mouthpiece of Azuela in the novel (Rutherford 1971, 91; Brushwood 1966, 18). Solís laments:

¡Qué chasco, amigo mío, si los que venimos a ofrecer todo nuestro entusiasmo, nuestra misma vida por derribar a un miserable asesino, resultásemos los obreros de un enorme pedestal donde pudieran levantarse cien o doscientos mil monstruos de la misma especie! (Azuela [1915] 1999, 143)

Meanwhile, the accoutrements of modernity, from machine guns, which shortly after this speech kill Solís, to the railways, on which the troops are seen travelling repeatedly, seem as far as ever from bringing a more united and equitable society. This is underlined by the final scenes of degradation and death caused by the techniques of modern warfare, as Álvaro Obregón, the master tactician, uses machine guns and what historian Alan Knight describes as a “scientifically generalled army” (1980, 40) to defeat Francisco “Pancho” Villa and his more traditional cavalry forces at the Battle of Celaya of 1915. This battle in reality brought a decisive downturn in the Villistas’ fortunes and in *Los de abajo* also marks the beginning of the end of Macías’s fighting force. His comrade Anastasio Montañés outlines the hopelessness of their situation, exclaiming “¡Nosotros arruinados!” (*Los de abajo*, 198). Yet it is not just Macías and his men who are

scienciously, created a new form for the Latin American novel, a form that for the first time reflects the nature of the world where it was born” (1971, 111).

2 John S. Brushwood comments that “Solís probably comes closer than any other character to expressing the author’s view of the Revolution. But I am not sure that Azuela intended to use him as a mouthpiece” (1966, 18). Azuela does not enlighten us either as to his intent with Solís, but he does admit some parallels with the character, explaining that “mi situación fue entonces la de Solís en mi novela” ([1958] 1974, 128).

3 All page references to *Los de abajo* refer to this edition.
ruined, but entire communities that the band encounter a few chapters later. Here, the full impact of modern warfare can be seen in the scorched earth it leaves behind, as the men witness villages reduced to ashes and the narrator describes how “La huella negra de los incendios se veía en las casas desechadas, en los pretiles ardidos” (205).

The tumult of the revolution elicited from Azuela a desire to observe the involvement of the lower classes in part of the fighting, primarily in the states of Zacatecas, Aguascalientes and Jalisco, from 1913 to 1915. The author commented that “Desde que se inició el movimiento con Madero, sentí un gran deseo de convivir con auténticos revolucionarios —no de discursos, sino de rifles” (Azuela [1958] 1974, 126). As a doctor, Azuela himself travelled a similar route to the troops of Villista general Julián Medina during the period in which the novel is set. Whilst he has rejected the suggestion of mimesis, there is an obvious symmetry between Azuela’s experiences and those he describes. Azuela reminds us that his initial enthusiasm for the Villista cause was soon replaced by “sombrío desencanto y pesar”, as he entered a world composed mainly of “amistades fingidas, envidias, adulación, espionaje, intrigas, chismes y perfidia” (127). This sense of despair transfers into the novel as the narrator’s sometimes thinly veiled disgust towards some of the characters in Macías’s bandit gang. A clear example of this narratorial attitude occurs towards the end of Part One, when Macías’s band have just defeated a group of federal soldiers and have mercilessly killed the brother of a peasant who helped them, despite this man’s desperate pleas to spare his brother. The narrator suggests that the men resemble butchers in their heartlessness, commenting drily that “se distinguen en la carnicería Pancracio y el Manteca, rematando a los heridos” (Los de abajo, 131). A few lines later the narration relates the sordid glee with which Macías’s band strip the corpses of their victims: “y con los despojos, se visten, y bromean y ríen muy divertidos” (132). The following chapter sees the band united with the Villistas led by Pánfilo Natera, and the celebrations of this meeting are followed by death and destruction. By this time, the relentlessness of the violence appears to

4 Azuela himself said of the literary construction of Los de abajo that “Podría decir que este libro se hizo solo y que mi labor consistió en coleccionar tipos, gestos, paisajes y sucedidos, si mi imaginación no me hubiese ayudado a ordenarlos y presentarlos con los relieves y el colorido mayor que me fue dable” (Azuela [1958] 1974, 123). However, so closely do the events of the novel correspond with Azuela’s own trajectory during the revolution and with the historical individuals that he encountered and fought alongside, that it is hard to believe that the author is not being somewhat disingenuous when he credits the novel largely as being a work of the imagination.
have desensitized even the narrator, who relates with a distanced matter-of-factness the previous night’s roster of casualties:

a la mañaña siguiente amanecieron algunos muertos: una vieja prostituta
con un balazo en el ombligo y dos reclutas del coronel Macías con el cra-neo agujereado. (135–36)

From this point on it is a downward spiral for the revolutionaries into ever more senseless violence.

Mónica Mansour has observed that in his description of the lower-class gang members, Azuela resorts to animal imagery, sometimes endowing these characters with an unattractive coarseness (1988, 264). Whilst Azuela’s animal of choice to portray the revolutionaries is the dog, some of the most overtly bestial descriptions are of Pancracio and Manteca when the horrified medical student and journalist Luis Cervantes, the band’s newest recruit, observes them:

Uno, Pancracio, agüerado, pecoso, su cara lampiña, su barba saltona, la frente roma y oblicua, untadas las orejas del craneo y todo de un aspecto bestial. Y el otro, el Manteca, una piltrafa humana: ojos escondidos, mirada torva, cabellos muy lacios cayéndole a la nuca, sobre la frente de las orejas: sus labios de escrofuloso entreabiertos eternamente. (Los de abajo, 97)

Such animalistic descriptions of the revolutionaries and the mounting scorn in the narration for their brutality characterize the viewpoint of Cervantes, a middle-class curro. Though an unlikeable character and one who will be discredited in the narration, Cervantes is perhaps the only character who articulates at any length and with any frequency the value of the revolution. Cervantes’s angelic appearance, “una piel blanca y delicada que asombra abajo del cuello, y más arriba de las mangas de una tosca camisa de lana, el rubio tierno de sus cabellos, rizados ligeramente” (110), captivates the peasant girl Camila, but belies his self-serving intentions. The urbane handsomeness of the curro is the very opposite of Macías’s more rugged, chiselled, man-of-the-earth appeal. But of the two men it is Cervantes who survives and indeed prospers, perhaps an indicator of the successful, orderly, progressive citizen that the post-revolutionary state would favour, even as it promoted a discourse of indigenism and valorized the rural in its project of cultural nationalism.

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5 Curro, a Mexican colloquialism, was a term given to the middle and upper classes by the peasants; sometimes the word could be applied in a way that was “ligeramente despectivo” to the person it was describing (Los de abajo, 91, note).
Azuela’s representations of middle-class characters are particularly scathing, even more so than those of Macías’s band. Solís, the articulate Villista who predicts the anarchy into which the revolution will slide, is killed shortly after being introduced into the narration. Meanwhile, Cervantes is progressively revealed to be irredeemable, characterized by “la adulación servil, la codicia y la cobardía” (Mansour 1988, 257). He makes frequent speeches on the righteous justice of fighting for the revolutionaries, spouting “eso es lo que se llama luchar por principios, tener ideales. Por ellos luchan Villa, Natera, Carranza; por ellos estamos luchando nosotros” (Los de abajo, 99; see also 116–17). However, Cervantes reveals himself to be devoid of the ideals he professes to support, and once he realizes that the band are no longer in the ascendant, makes off with the spoils gained during the fighting to desert the revolution. Nonetheless, with his silken demagoguery, Cervantes appears to win the admiration of the revolutionaries, even persuading their leader Macías to join Natera’s forces, without him really knowing who General Natera is or to which side he belongs. Incidents such as these lead most critics to view Cervantes as the representative of the corrupt middle classes who insinuated themselves into the hopes of the lower classes for real social change, but then betrayed those hopes, looking to profit only themselves (Griffin 1993, 46; Mansour 1988, 273; Martin 1989, 40).

Juan Pablo Dabove, in what approximates to a subaltern reading, argues otherwise. Taking an incident from chapter nineteen, towards the end of Part One, he states that in their gleeful destruction of a wealthy home furnished with the luxuries of letrado existence, such as a library and a typewriter, the gang reveal their “hatred of the written word” and the “political boss[es]” it represents, rather than faithfully following the orders of curros such as Cervantes (Dabove 2007, 258–59). Other incidents contradict this interpretation. The following scene with Macías and his compadre Anastasio Montañés, reveal the gang’s sense of sadness regarding their illiteracy, which makes them vulnerable to the charms of Cervantes, whom they consider their social and intellectual better. Anastasio sighs, “La verdad, es gente que, como sabe leer y escribir, entiende bien las cosas”. The two friends continue on the theme: “¡Lo que es eso de saber leer y escribir!… Los dos suspiraron con tristeza” (Los de abajo, 117).

Azuela’s primary targets are the likes of Cervantes, who with their education, learning and understanding of the wider political landscape, could benefit the cause of the revolution, but who choose ultimately to benefit themselves. The revolutionaries, while brutal and at times merciless, are shown to be following the orders of superiors. Again, Dabove argues to
the contrary, claiming that in their endless orgy of destruction, the gang chart their own path, away from orders of bosses and faithful only to the laws of the *bola,* or “nomadic war machine” (2007, 255). This *bola,* according to Dabove, marks the band out from traditional armies, following orders, and produces its own momentum that is completely independent of any state project (257). Max Parra goes further, stating that in their roaming of “the regional terrain, free of fixed paths or prohibitive barriers,” the band are casting off the hated yoke of the Porfirián era, when “land ownership was virtually impossible for the majority of the population,” and thus reversing the class order, wherein “they are the masters of the land” (2005, 45).

At first sight the passages chosen by Dabove and Parra to underline these points appear convincing. In the first, in Part One when the band’s morale is high, having recently entered the revolution, we are told:

> Y hacían galopar sus caballos, como si en aquel correr desenfrenado pretendieron posesionarse de toda la tierra. ¿Quién se acordaba ya del severo comandante de la policía, del gendarme gruñón y del cacique enfatulado? *(Los de abajo, 122)*

On the second occasion the band is about to become involved in what will prove a final fatal skirmish. The odds are against them, but they continue in high spirits:

> En su alma rebulle el alma de las viejas tribus nómadas. Nada importa saber adónde yan y de dónde vienen; lo necesario es caminar, caminar siempre, no estacionarse jamás; ser dueños del valle, de las planicies, de la sierra y de todo lo que la vista abarca. (208)

This passage closely resembles the freedom-loving discourse of *Don Segundo Sombra,* a novel that *Los de abajo* pre-figures in its adoration of the land and elevation of the rustic hero. The following lines from Güiraldes’s novel underline the stylistic symmetry between the two works: “Y fue el compás conocido de los cascos trillando distancia: galopar es reducir lejanía. Llegar no es, para un resero, más que un pretexto de partir” *(Güiraldes [1926] 1977, 245).* The life of limitless wandering that Macías’s men appear to lead was the life of many bandits and the freedom it offered held a certain romantic attachment for Fabio, the protagonist of *Don Segundo Sombra.* Upon becoming a wealthy landowner he yearns for

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6 The freedom apparently enjoyed by the original Robin Hood and his Merrie Men forged the myth, in Western culture, of the carefree bandit. In Robin Hood’s case
his former life as a gaucho, losing himself on the pampa “a lo matrero” (235).

Just as unadulterated freedom on the pampa becomes a thing of the past for Fabio, so in Los de abajo this freedom, insisted upon by Dabove and Parra, is actually an illusion. What these two critics do not reveal is that, in the first instance, Macías’s band are en route to join Natera’s Villista forces, on the apparent advice of Cervantes. In the second passage, far from being free-wheeling bandits, they are actually following orders to return to the Cañón de Juchipila where they first fought, orders that will now place them in mortal danger. As Macías explains, “he recibido órdenes de regresar a detener una partida que viene por Cuquío” (Los de abajo, 204). While the band may not be as liberated by the revolution as these examples suggest, the passages are interesting in that they divulge some of Azuela’s admiration for the exploits and bravery of los de abajo, in the face of certain disaster. In naming the band “viejas tribus nómadeas” (208), who roam freely about their ancestral land and here at least appear at one with that land, Azuela appears to hark back longingly to a time past, long before the revolution and the abuses of the Porfiriato. All too often in the novel the majestic natural scenery of rocks, cliffs and mountains is scarred by death and destruction, ranging from “las siluetas de los ahorcados” (87) to the “grandes llamaradas” burning Macías’s home (79). By contrast, in the almost pastoral scenes cited above, a brief period of peace seems to descend on the band and they can be seen to represent the essential peasant mexicanidad that would be resurrected in the cultural nationalism espoused by the post-revolutionary Mexican state.

Leading on from the notion of a hallowed past with its myths of national foundation and identity, Mansour has remarked that Azuela presents

La presencia constante de la ‘raza indígena’ y los aztecas, como un punto de referencia idealizado, [que] se da en el paisaje y en los personajes masculinos que pertenecen a ‘los de abajo’. (1988, 263)

The most striking figure to be presented in this way is of course the protagonist Demetrio Macías, but Mansour also highlights numerous points throughout the narrative which make admiring reference to the Aztec heritage of the underdogs. An example is in chapter two of Part One, with the introduction to Macías’s band whose members appear “unos tras otros, muchos hombres de pechos y piernas desnudos, oscuros y

this discourse of freedom had him roaming the Greenwood at will and showing “contempt for the dreaded forest laws” (Hanawalt 1999, 283).
repulidos como viejos bronces” (Los de abajo, 81). Once again in Part Two, chapter nine, the rebels’ status as imposing men-of-action is mentioned with reference to their Aztec origins, as they are described as “los hombres, de rostro de bronce y dientes de marfil, ojos flameantes, [quienes] blandían los rifles o los cruzaban sobre las cabezas de las monturas” (172). In scenes such as these, it could be argued that Azuela is inscribing the underdogs as representatives of the aforementioned “autochthonous cultural order” (Alonso 1990, 10–11), an order which is threatened by the violent historical changes being wrought by the revolution.

One of the ways this order is being threatened is by the influx of recruits to the band from diverse areas of the country and from opposing political camps. This threatens the integrity of the original close-knit group from Macías’s tierra chica of Moyahua, Zacatecas. As previously discussed, Cervantes is one urbanite who impresses ranchero Macías, influencing him to join the national struggle and fight in support of the northern caudillos, Venustiano Carranza and Pancho Villa, against Victoriano Huerta. However, Clive Griffin notes that the hero is also “out of his depth in the city, with city-dwellers, and with the wild northern Mexicans who enter his band” (1993, 53). He is referring here to the characters la Pintada and güero Margarito, who join at the start of Part Two and who contribute to the band’s degeneration with their insidious violence and manipulation. The process continues however, even after they have departed the band, which in Part Three becomes populated with outsiders such as “advenedizos de banqueta” (Los de abajo, 203), upstarts who have never even fired a rifle, yet wear officers’ insignia. Even upper-class dandies join the group, and are described from the indignant viewpoint of the original band members as “señoritines de capital, perfumados y peripuestos” (203). This invasion of outsiders disrupts the band’s indigenous flavour and its peasant structure and threatens the fragile notion of an autochthonous cultural order, suggested earlier by Macías and the rebels. Worse is to come when deserting enemy soldiers join Macías’s forces, much to the dismay of one of the original members, Venancio. He complains that “nos estamos llenando de ex-federales” (203). The power of Macías’s now scattered band has been diluted, as he turns against his own people, the serranos, who supported him in Part One. The itinerant poet Valderrama protests against this, stating that “los serranos están hechos de nuestra madera… De esta madera firme con la que se fabrican los héroes” (196). This is perhaps another textual affirmation of Macías and his kin representing some sort of primordial cultural essence, which is valuable even in its barbarism. The example is all the more relevant as it occurs at the point when the hero Macías seems through his involvement in the revolution, to have
severed his links with those *serrano* peasant roots that Azuela considers to be so important (Griffin 1993, 53).

It would appear that Azuela’s somewhat dismissive attitude to the rebels belies an underlying admiration for their stoicism, camaraderie and courage, all of which filter through in *Los de abajo*, both in the narration and in the depiction of the characters and their world. His attitude to the underdogs can best be described therefore as ambivalent. This is a stance with which some critics agree (Griffin 1993, 38–39; Mansour 1988, 273; Gyrko 1996, 247), while others persist in viewing Azuela as a middle-class moralist, a position which they believe prevented him from offering a balanced perspective on the revolutionaries (Ruffinelli 1982, 7). For Jorge Ruffinelli, this moralism dominates the tone of *Los de abajo*. He writes of the rebels that Azuela “narraba su oscura barbarie” and that the behaviour of Macías’s band “no es la conducta de revolucionarios, sino de bandidos, de acuerdo con el código burgués” (1982, 67, 80). Whilst it is true that Azuela belonged to the burgeoning Mexican middle class, and may well have exemplified some of its supposed characteristics—“su esquema moral rigido, su respeto del orden, del trabajo, de la precisión” (Rama 1983, 151)—the author himself argues the opposite to Ruffinelli, claiming that his attraction had always been to “las clases más humildes de la sociedad” (quoted in Rama 1983, 152). Furthermore, the events he describes in *Los de abajo* were, as has been noted, based on what Azuela himself witnessed, not as an outsider, but as a bona fide revolutionary, living and working amongst *los de abajo* and fighting for their cause (Leal 1971, 97). This lends the novel a blistering realism, in which it is difficult to discern an obvious class bias.

That said, Azuela made no claim to offering a dispassionate stance in *Los de abajo*. He famously asserted that, so embittered was he about the results of the revolution he fought in and sacrificed himself for, that in *Los de abajo*,

> ora como testigo, ora como actor en los sucesos que sucesivamente me servirían de base para mis escritos, tuve que ser y lo fui de hecho, un narrador parcial y apasionado. (Quoted in Ruffinelli 1982, 63)

However, Azuela did not write in support of his class. On the contrary, as has been stressed previously, he felt betrayed by opportunist members of the middle classes. Azuela’s abiding pessimism concerns the fate of Mexicans overall, not one section in isolation. Though the revolutionaries often behave savagely, “robbing, killing, pillaging and destroying everything that crosses their path” (Leal 1971, 63), Azuela’s contempt is not reserved solely for them but for the entire Mexican people, which he had hoped to
see redeemed by the revolution, but which appears damned to an eternal purgatory of conflict. The words of Solís perhaps sum up Azuela’s disillusionment when he sighs, “Yo pensé una florida pradera al remate de un camino... Y me encontré un pantano” (Los de abajo, 134). Shortly after this speech comes Solís’s final condemnation of the Mexican people, “la psicología de nuestra raza, condensada en dos palabras: ¡robar, matar!” (143). The word raza conjures up Gallegos’s idea of the alma de la raza and appears to rebuke the Mexican indigenous core as being intrinsically barbaric, and damned to continue to be so unless redeemed by an influx of new civilized souls. This once again highlights Azuela’s conflicting viewpoint on the rebels which veers between admiration and rejection. The same is true of Gallegos’s viewpoint of that incarnation of barbarism, the character Doña Bárbara, who in the eponymous novel embodies “algo de salvaje, bello y terrible a la vez” ([1929] 1991, 96). Like Doña Bárbara, the rebels represent an authentic national essence, an essence synonymous with their indigenous peasant origins, but it is in that very essence that their barbarism lies.

This tension between the valorization of and distancing from the peasant subject would continue in the post-revolutionary project of cultural nationalism, espoused by the Mexican state. The tension arose between successive governments’ propaganda and their actions. While the hard-working peasant, loyal to the revolution, was enshrined as a sacred image and fully exploited in the service of the state, post-revolutionary governments were simultaneously attempting to civilize their indigenous subjects in a Mexico that was rapidly changing due to the forces of “urbanisation, industrialisation, massification and foreign influences” (Tierney 2007, 58). The image of a purely indigenous rural Mexico that they were exploiting had by then, in many cases, ceased to exist.

As condemnatory as Solís’s words undoubtedly are, they are also ambiguous. While raza connotes the violent natives and Mexico’s indigenous core, it could equally be said to apply to the population at large. In this reading, the underdogs could just be seen to be following the general disorder and carnage that has enveloped the revolution, and are not a barbarous mainstay, dragging the country into an inferno of violence. If the rebels are bandits then so is everyone else, from the desperate serranas stripping corpses “como famélicos coyotes esculcando y despojando” (Los de abajo, 143), to the general acceptance of, and even pride in, the cult of theft that comes to dominate the conflict, “el tema del ‘yo robé’” (189). This theme is elaborated upon at the end of Part Two, when a lone woman on a packed train wails of her misfortune at being robbed by “un señor decente”, though the narration makes clear that this is more than likely a
cynical attempt to extract money from other passengers (189). Her protests- 
tations spark sympathy, but then precipitate a flurry of admissions, includ-
ing from high-ranking officers, of involvement in robberies. This soon 
spirals into a contest to outdo everyone else in the field of criminal 
activity. In this, güero Margarito excels, boasting, “¡Bueno! ¡A qué negar- 
lo, pues! Yo también he robado […]; pero aquí están mis compañeros que 
digan cuánto he hecho de capital” (189).

In such a world, where the “original maderista ideals of the Revolution 
have been lost” (Griffin 1993, 87), it could be argued that banditry and 
desertion are the only viable options left to the rebels. As the bandida la 
Pintada comments about this topsy turvy reality, “¿pa quién jue la revolu-
ción? ¿Pa los catrines? Si nosotros vamos a ser los meros catrines” (Los de 
abajo, 150). This underlines the fact that the underdogs are now briefly the 
catrines and the catrines are down in the dirt like everyone else, doing 
whatever is necessary to survive. Subalternists, such as Parra and Dabove, 
believe that this turnabut empowers the underdogs (Parra 2005, 42–43; 
Dabove 2007, 260), but in reality it does so only temporarily, as the revo-
lution leads them to their deaths. In such circumstances, banditry becomes 
just one of a number of vices, alongside “drunkenness, lust, gluttony and 
sadism” (Griffin 1993, 41), and the term loses meaning the further the 
band, and the revolution as a whole, degenerates. Indeed, despite Ruffi-
nelli’s willingness to ascribe the word bandidos to Azuela’s depiction of 
the underdogs, it is telling that the narrator never uses that term to describe 
them. Meanwhile, middle-class characters, such as Cervantes, Solís and 
the leaders of the federal forces, do refer to the underdogs as “bandidos”, 
using also other derogatory words, such as “ladrones nixtamaleros” (Los 
de abajo, 84) and “canallas” (128).

What Azuela does intimate is that all classes and creeds are reduced to 
lawlessness by the business of the revolution. A fervent follower of 
Francisco I. Madero, Azuela had passionately believed in the original 
Maderista ideals of the revolution: to dislodge the dictator Porfirio Díaz 
from power and begin a fairer re-structuring of Mexican society. However, 
Azuela, no doubt like Madero, was appalled by the torrent of violence and 
bloodshed unleashed by the revolution, and after the murder of his politi-
cal mentor in 1913, he was horrified by what he saw as the betrayal of 
those Maderista ideals by opportunist members of his own class. As Presi-
dent Díaz had predicted in 1908, it was to the growing middle classes that 
Mexico’s future belonged (Rama 1983, 153), not to the underdogs, 
“revolucionarios, bandidos o como quiera llamárselos”, as Cervantes states 
(Los de abajo, 101). While Azuela manages to provide the reader with an 
inside perspective on life with the underdogs during the revolution, he also
reveals the extent to which they were manipulated and led by middle-class leaders, from Cervantes to Natera. As Macías says, mystified by the vagaries of the recent Convention of Aguascalientes in 1914:

Mire, a mí no me haga preguntas, que no soy escuelante... La aguilita que trago en el sombrero, usté me la dio... Bueno, pos ya sabe que no más me dice: “Demetrio, haces esto y esto... ¡y se acabó el cuento!” (192)

The underdogs may be brutal but they are not the architects of the struggle which sends them to their deaths. As John S. Brushwood articulates, “individuals participate not because they know what they are doing, but because they cannot resist the force that puts them in motion” (1966, 180). Many historians (Katz 1988, 14; Hart 1987, 2; Javier García-Diego in Meza 2008, 161) now concur that the role of the Mexican middle classes in the revolution was far greater than was acknowledged by the post-conflict “master narrative” (Benjamin 2000, 19). This is what Thomas Benjamin describes as the version of the revolution that was constructed by successive post-revolutionary Mexican governments, which emphasized the role of the peasant in the conflict in an attempt to appeal to the masses, and to legitimize their own power base (20). Government-commissioned muralists such as Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco bolstered this cultural nationalism with idealized visions of the revolutionary peasantry (Pellón 2006, 101). Despite the fact that Azuela’s novel was sometimes labelled a reactionary work, and one which the Mexican state was quite happy to use to its own advantage, Azuela’s version is quite distinct from this official version (Dabow 2007, 242, 244; Parra 2005, 24, 28; Mansour 1988, 274). His underdogs are more realistically sketched, not “mere types” as one critic has suggested (Sommers 1968, 12). Despite his sometimes unflattering depiction, in their willingness to fight to the bitter end, the underdogs, headed by Macías, are revealed by Azuela to be “more authentic revolutionaries than the ones who could spell out an ideology” (Brushwood 1966, 180). Their ill-defined struggle, to release themselves from the dominion of caciques such as Don Mónico, whose dispute with Macías propels them into the revolution, is a noble one, which they are diverted from when they are cast into a cycle of endless violence.

The rebels may be “unconscious” or “unwitting revolutionaries” and they may even at times be bandits, but it is their revolution that Azuela narrates (Parra 2005, 26; Griffin 1993, 32). Using what was at the time considered a pioneering narrative style, involving rapid-fire scene changes as well as the carefully observed colloquialisms of the rebels, Azuela brings the revolution to life in all its violent technicolour (Martin 1989, 43). Before his final condemnation of the Mexican character, Solís is
moved to proclaim, “¡Qué hermosa es la Revolución, aun en su misma barbarie!” (Los de abajo, 143). Here again, despite his misgivings, Solís lets slip his admiration for the underdogs, the barbarous cultural essence of the nation, and the life-blood of the revolution. This was a motif so powerful that it would be repackaged and reused in the novels of the land of the 1920s and 1930s. These texts, exemplified here by Don Segundo Sombra and Doña Bárbara, succeed, despite their apparent aversion to the barbaric in Latin America, in nonetheless valorizing its symbols, be they outlaws or caciques, and the imagined rural past that they represent. Such an ambivalent relationship to modernity, a longed-for past and its entanglements with notions of civilization and barbarism in Latin America lie at the heart of Los de abajo. This was the text that pioneered not just the Novel of the Revolution but also the novel of the land.

WORKS CITED


