

The Start of the 20th Century: Mexico as Metaphor of Latin America

Areli González¹
California State University-Fullerton

Resumen: Este artículo explora la identidad utópica de México en 1920, por medio de la reproducción de arte, de dos escritores mexicanos, Octavio Paz y Juan Rulfo. Se argumenta en este ensayo que México es el vocero de América Latina en términos políticos, movimientos sociales, y económicos. Lo que sucedería en México durante los años de 1920 es la creación de una nación utópica que más adelante se transformaría en la experiencia de América Latina; y por medio de esta creación ilusoria de un lugar perfecto se refleja en el arte las discrepancias de esta creación. Muestra al lector una visión de México y su utopía.

Palabras Clave: México; utopía; arte; Juan Rulfo; Octavio Paz.

Abstract: This article explores the utopian identity of Mexico in the 1920s through the reproduction of the arts by Octavio Paz and Juan Rulfo. It is argued that Mexico is the spokesperson of Latin America in terms of politics, social movements, and economy. What happened in Mexico during the 1920s as the creation of a utopic nation was later experienced in other Latin American countries in years to come. Through this creation of a fanciful, perfect place, the artwork reflects the discrepancies of the same, and shows to the viewer that Mexico was and still is a utopia.

Keywords: Mexico, Utopia, Art, Juan Rulfo, Octavio Paz.

*Yo vengo a hablar por vuestra boca muerta.
A través de la tierra juntad todos
los silenciosos labios derramados
y desde el fondo habladme toda esta larga noche
como si yo estuviera con vosotros anclado,
contadme todo, cadena a cadena,
eslabón a eslabón, y paso a paso*
-Pablo Neruda

As has been happening since the conquest of pre-Columbian civilizations and during the independence movements, the creation of utopia in Latin America followed the pattern of seeking, creating, dismantling, and seeking again the idea of utopia, and in every single case, this ideology failed to come to fruition. Since the conquest, the idea of utopia in Latin America has been seen as an “attainable dream” of the perfect place coming true. Until the 20th century this idea has passed through different stages, social movements and ideologies, but the idea of creating this “perfect”, fanciful place has always been the essence of any social movement in Latin America. One such social movement at the beginning of the century was the Mexican Revolution.

In understanding the Mexican Revolution and how it failed to be fulfilled, once again, the creation of the illusion of a perfect society was presented as an attainable goal through an armed rebellion. However Latin America’s present day

¹ Este trabajo es una reelaboración del ensayo final que entregué como requisito parcial para el programa de Honores en California State University-Fullerton, USA (Spring 2014). La idea de hacer este trabajo me la proporcionó, la Dr. Sandra Pérez-Linggi. Gracias a su recomendación, a la vez que por su inestimable, generosa e incansable ayuda desde la misma confección del abstract, pasando por la supervisión, coordinación, corrección y edición que de todas las versiones anteriores que de este trabajo ha realizado, tuve la inestimable oportunidad de presentarlo como parte de la tesis de mi licenciatura y en el congreso de la California State University-San Bernardino 2014 (USA). Aprovecho este espacio, por tanto, para mostrarle a la Dr. Pérez-Linggi mi más y profundo agradecimiento. Sin embargo, cualquier error que permanezca es de mi única y exclusiva responsabilidad. Dedico este artículo a mi hermano Tomás González.

condition reflects that even armed confrontations have failed to transform daily life. Latin American people keep seeking utopia, with an urgency of finally attaining a perfect society. This dream reflects back on the social movements that in one way or another shaped Latin American's present. Therefore it is safe to say that the Mexican Revolution is emblematic of the failures and discrepancies happening in present day Mexico, and in a bigger perspective, present day Latin America. To further understand this concept of the utopian failure, both in the years after the revolution and in present day Mexico, I will present the work of two Mexican writers; both of them influenced greatly Latin American intellectual thought, not just of the Mexican people, but even beyond the Americas: Octavio Paz and Juan Rulfo.

Octavio Paz was a Mexican intellectual and diplomat. Paz had a very particular point of view about the Mexican Revolution, and the building of the nation after the revolution. His views are filtered by his upbringing and privileged education. Paz' family was involved in the Mexican government. Paz' grandfather participated in the Mexican Revolution, and his education was one of a privileged child. These two main factors gave Paz, later on in his writings such as *El laberinto de la soledad* and *Posdata*, a different perspective from the one of Juan Rulfo whose perspective is more of a humble peasant that experienced first-hand, the marginalization of the federal government and the poverty created by the Mexican Revolution and the Cristero War.

Octavio Paz was part of the government most of his career. He served for several years as Mexican diplomat; therefore his ideals shared the perspective of the elite. This can be noticed in the first book used in this project, *El laberinto de la soledad*, in which he projects a very elitist and academic point of view of the revolution, its ideals, and the way it affected the creation of the *mexicano*. Paz gives the reader a perspective of a privileged man who sees the problems of the nation as distant from him. This book was published almost thirty years after the Mexican Revolution, making the point of view of the Mexican, a very faithful, fanciful book just like the ideals of the revolution. Therefore, the book is used to understand his point of view as one of the elite members of society during the time Mexico was still going through a period of re-creation in all aspects.

Then, *Posdata* is used as the awakening of this elitist man to the failure of the revolutionary ideals. Octavio Paz writes this book as a protest against the response of the government to the student movement of 1968. When Paz publishes this book, he had resigned from his job as diplomat in India, and showed disgust for the government's brutality that silenced the voices of young student protestors. Paz was exposed to the failure of the utopia created by the after effects of the revolution, in this case the creation of the political party PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), or Institutional Revolutionary Party.

The head of the party, and president of Mexico at that time was Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. Octavio Paz mentions in this book the failure of the institutionalization of the ideals of the revolution through the party, as it repressed and condemned freedom of speech of students demanding a change in the system. When, Díaz Ordaz gave the order to send the army to a meeting the students held in the Plaza of Tlatelolco, murder happened. To this date, the number of students killed that day has not been clear. Paz, and many other members of the elite felt the failure of utopia, and saw that this time official ideology had gone too far and killed innocent people. Therefore, this book is used as an example of the failure of the ideals of the Mexican Revolution and the consequences the marginalized live because the elite impose their own ideology as national priorities.

On the other hand, as mentioned above, there is the perspective of Juan Rulfo. Rulfo is one of the most influential and recognized Mexican authors in the 20th

century; the mastery of his literary work showcases the real problems of Mexico after the revolution. Rulfo's upbringing was different from the one of Octavio Paz, first because Rulfo lived in the rural area of Mexico and during his childhood he experienced the failures of the Mexican Revolution and another armed struggle: the Cristero War. Due to this war, especially his familiarity with the after-effects of the armed struggle, Rulfo could perceive and capture with an unbelievable mastery, and put into words the abuses, misery and broken dreams of the rural people in Mexico of the 1940s, in his book *El llano en llamas* and his photography collection of rural Mexico.

Juan Rulfo was not part of the elite, and his experiences in the rural areas of Mexico, gave him the sensitivity to understand the problems of marginalized Mexicans and portray them in his work. This is noticed in the collected of short stories titled *El llano en llamas*; these stories focus on the failure of the Mexican Revolution. It also presents how the revolution did not help the poor people in rural areas. These forgotten people fought, and killed each other on the battlefield to achieve what was promised to them: land and civil rights. After the revolution, the rural and poor people were forgotten and what they received was nothing but the abuse of the elite and the new government.

Then, Rulfo travels through different rural areas in Mexico and takes photographs of these marginalized, forgotten people. This time, instead of showing us with written words the failure of the revolution; he presents us with real images of people who experienced the struggle of being forgotten. These photographs in black and white show a different Mexico; a Mexico that is poor, living in misery, where there is no hope other than to see the daylight of the next day. This time, Rulfo does not use fiction to present the exclusion from utopia but rather captures faces where misery and sadness are palpable in their sight.

Therefore, with these two authors, the ideas of the Mexican Revolution through their literary work and Rulfo's photography allow us to analyze the creation of an elitist utopia and the dysfunction of including the marginalized people, and perhaps the hope of these same people nowadays to keep looking for their own utopia. It is also important to notice that these two authors produced their literary works at least 30 years after the Mexican Revolution; therefore it is evident that during the 50s and 60s, Mexico was suffering from the breakdowns, caused by the failed ideologies of the revolution.

The Years after the Revolution: The 40s and 50s

It is well known that the Mexican Revolution brought to the hopes of the Mexican people, the idea that a change in society could happen and that finally the "perfect" place would be real and palpable for all people in all social classes. And it was. The Mexican Revolution brought change, hope and new ideals for the Mexican people and even for the rest of Latin America; but if we take a closer look at these ideals, the Revolution was a total failure for both the Mexican people and for the rest of Latin America.

In part, the Revolution facilitated a fabrication of a Mexican identity that has failed to truly represent the essence of the Mexican people, resulting in the big problems the country has in present day Mexico. "La enseñanza de la Revolución mexicana se puede cifrar en esta frase: nos buscábamos a nosotros mismos y encontramos a los otros" (Paz 9). As this quote from Octavio Paz explains, the lesson to be learned from the Mexican Revolution is this: we (the Mexican people) were looking for ourselves, but we ended up finding the others. And who are the others?

This question has been asked since the conquest of America. At one point in time, the others were the native peoples living in this territory, native people that according to the greediness of the conquistadores did not belong in their own land, but in the context of the 20th century and the Mexican Revolution “we” became ourselves, the mestizo people. In the name of the new Mexican, the mestizos are the ones keeping this tradition of creating utopias and destroying them at the same time; we the mestizos are the ones sucking the blood of our own people to get the benefits that are supposed to be for the masses, whether it is land, education or social benefits, but unfortunately these benefits are only distributed among a selected group of rich people.

The conquistadores only wanted fame and wealth, they invented the idea that utopia was attainable for them in the New World, and then this idea was transferred to the people living in America. Since the conquest, both the European and the mestizos have fought among themselves to access the utopia of the privileged, and the result of this ideological struggle has only brought suffering and oppression to most people, the people born in the Americas. Consequently, it is not a surprise that the Mexican Revolution was a failure for most of the parties involved.

The Mexican Revolution failed to provide and spread the ideals of the Revolution in an equal fashion. The utopian promise of land for everyone and civil rights that benefited the citizens, failed to give assurance and insurance to the Mexican people, or at least to the poor people living in rural areas, their civil rights were never protected by the federal and state government. A clear example is portrayed in the book *El llano en llamas* by Juan Rulfo. This book composed of short stories, portrays the failure of the Revolution and the effects it had in rural areas in Mexico. One of the short stories caught my attention because of the optimistic title but at the same time its desolated content: “Nos han dado la tierra” (They Have Given Us the Land).

This short story is presented from the point of view of rural people. These people saw no benefit from the Revolutionary ideas. It gives a clear example of how these ideals of the Revolution were never concrete and palpable for the poor. Once again, through art, and in this case through literature, the utopic idea of an approved livelihood - which in this case meant a beautiful, fertile land, accessible to everyone - is presented in the history of Latin America, or in this specific case, of Mexico.

Que queríamos lo que estaba junto al río... no este duro pellejo de vaca que se llama el Llano. Pero no nos dejaron decir nuestras cosas. El delegado no venía a conversar con nosotros.
-Eso manifiésteno por escrito. Y ahora váyanse. Es al latifundio al que tienen que atacar, no al Gobierno que les da la tierra. (16)

This passage taken from the short story mentioned above defines how despite the armed struggle, the poor will always be under the abuses of the government, and how even if they protest they will never get what they demand. The government gave them useless land without access to water in which they could not harvest anything, and they could not afford to buy any fertilizers because their economic situation did not allow them to invest in these materials, and if they could buy the material to harvest, the products would be overpriced, making the peasants be in debt. This is the case of the Mexican Revolution, the people demanded land, their land, but like in the passage, the only thing they could get was an unfertile piece of land that would prevent them from having a decent life. As the story shows, their illiteracy prevents them from being able to complain in writing to the government, because in the end, the government is the one giving them at least a piece of land.

The utopic ideal of land redistribution as a result of the Mexican Revolution is no more than just a lie that many wanted to believe and that many still believe. It is true that in central Mexico, where the capital is, a different world is perceived from the one in the rural areas, because in the capital the people and the government do not care about the rest of the nation, they just care about their own benefits. Then, it is fair to ask, did the Mexican Revolution unify the country through the redistribution of the national wealth? Did it show to the rest of Latin American that at last the Mexican people found the formula to dismantle the colonial legacy? The answer is no.

The failure of this utopic idea of the Mexican Revolution was not only presented in literature, but also in photography. Juan Rulfo not only changed and presented the perspective of the issues the Mexican people lived after the Revolution, he also exposed this reality through his photographs taken when he traveled around the Mexican Republic; he captured the real side of Mexico in 1940s, twenty years after the Revolution.

In these series of pictures, Rulfo captures the misery lived by rural people. With a peaceful mastery he showed us these people lived in a forgotten world inside Mexico. His photographs in black and white represent the desolation, misery, and hard work the rural, working class, marginalized, poor people go through every day of their lives, and how the Mexican Revolution failed to serve the necessities of the poor; a total catastrophe with a legacy still alive nowadays.



Campesina en Oaxaca y niño/ Farmer woman in Oaxaca and child²

The picture seen above is significant because it not only shows the struggle of a young indigenous mother in Mexico; it also shows the reality of indigenous groups in the rest of Latin America. This picture was taken during the decades of the 1940s and 1950s, but still reflects the situation that was lived as far south as Guatemala in the 80s, when Nobel Peace Prize winner, Rigoberta Menchú and other indigenous women from the ethnic Mayan group Quiché had similar struggles. Menchú denounced the abuses the indigenous people in Guatemala suffered when they worked in the fields. Menchú talked for the first time of these abuses in the book *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú, y así me nació la conciencia*. She mentions that many mothers needed to work long hours with their children next to them or on their backs. It did not

² This photograph, as well as the other displayed along the content of this essay are all credited to Juan Rulfo and were extracted from the following book: *Juan Rulfo's Mexico: Essays*. Credits can be found at the works cited section of the essay.

matter if the child was sick, they still needed to get the job done or they would get fired. As is well known, the struggles of these indigenous groups continue until today.

Therefore, it is impressive how Juan Rulfo, in his photographs could project and capture the past, present and future of Latin America and its people. Even today, in “modern” Latin America, there still are communities forgotten by the government and by their own people. One of the ideals of the revolution was to give land to the farm workers so they could survive and create a living out of the produce from the worked land. When we see the picture above in black and white, with the mother carrying the child while she does hard labor on the field, we are able to see the total failure of the system. Farm labor is difficult even for men, when women have to work and have their children on their back while they fulfill this duty, we can only imagine how hard and how challenging their life is.

The equal distribution of the land was a failure, but what also was a failure is the inequality in which these lands and labor were distributed. The land was unfertile and the children and women still needed to work on the field, just like it was before the revolution. These revolutionary ideals only served the elite, despite the celebration of its triumph in national official discourse and public school classrooms. In reality, it failed to provide for the poor and the working class. There is no progress in a country if child labor is still used on the fields; there is no change if the majority of the population still lives in poverty.

This poverty it is not only found in economic figures, but also in the lack of appreciation for indigenous cultures. Since the conquest and colonial period, the indigenous people have been part of the background of almost all Latin American countries. One of the goals of the revolution was to embrace and acknowledge the indigenous heritage in Mexico. This objective also was a failure as it romanticized the indigenous people rather than present them as real people instead of myths from the past. Juan Rulfo shows the opposite in the following photographs. He allows us to see the real expression of the indigenous in present day Mexico, and not the romanticized image created by the nationalist muralists after the revolution.



*Madre e hijo/Mother and Child*³

The cosmology of the indigenous people and the way they view life is beautiful. Many, if not all, of them were forgotten when the ideologies of the Mexican Revolution were instilled prioritizing mestizo culture and imagery. Not just the poor people suffered from this invisibility, but also the indigenous. Unfortunately, the

³ *Íbid.*

creation of a new nationalism also failed to really project the mixture of cultures in Mexico. The indigenous people were seen as myths from the past; they were seen as the people and cultures that existed before the Europeans came and conquered their land. These indigenous groups, even today are seen as myths, their artifacts and crafts are considered an attraction for tourists rather than an important part of our own culture. Many of us even today do not understand the challenges faced by modern tribes; they are merely considered attractive commodities for the tourist industry. The people living in rural areas also deserve to have an opinion on how their land could or should be used; they should have the autonomy to decide if they want to be integrated in a society that takes away their value, or stay enclosed in their communities. As is shown in Rulfo's images, their lack of autonomy was palpable mid-twentieth century and remains today.

The beauty, but also reality of the picture above, gives us just an idea of how these indigenous people have always been forgotten. Rulfo had the mastery to capture this beauty without romanticizing the reality of the indigenous groups. The picture is without doubt beautiful, but is also real. This was the mastery of Juan Rulfo even in his literary work; he created aesthetically beautiful pieces while allowing us to see the real struggle they went through. Very few artists have this ability and Rulfo perfected it. Therefore, Juan Rulfo unveiled the utopia that the ideals of the Mexican Revolution created in the 1920s. He is showing us with these pictures that the poor, marginalized people will never achieve utopia.



*Escena de un mercado*⁴

The picture “Escena de un mercado” also shows the struggle of the indigenous people in their daily life. Many of the indigenous people affected by the revolution were peasants who worked their land to maintain a decent living. The products they harvested in these pieces of land were in many cases exchanged or sold among their own communities. When the government did not give them their land back or it was taken away from them, the rural people could not provide for their families, and were forced into extreme poverty. As the photograph above shows, the indigenous people/peasants went to the marketplace to sell their produce, or whatever they could sell to at least buy the essential necessities to live. This situation has not changed from the one the indigenous people live today in different rural areas in Mexico and Latin America.

The black and white element of this picture, and in all of the series shown in this section, gives an emphasis to the situation of the people featured in the photographs. The women at the market are not interested in being shown to the world,

⁴ *Íbid.*

they are interested in surviving. Their expressions are real, and Rulfo had the ability to capture real parts of life into an artistic medium like the camera in order to prove that utopia is nonexistent for the poor.

In the last two photographs of the series, Juan Rulfo captured with his lens the illusion of the hope these indigenous people still have. These two photographs have been selected to show the reader how, even in misery and times of struggle, the poor still have a dream, to find their own utopia. The elite found it, and they have it at the grasp of their fingers, but the poor, the working class, and the indigenous people, still dream of one day in the future having a life in which struggles and misery is not their daily bread.



*Nada de esto es sueño/ None of this is a dream*⁵

As the title of the photograph suggests, “None of this is a dream”, none of their struggle, their abuses, their poverty and misery are dreams. The central government has failed to address the necessities of the poor, and it has also forgotten that in the deepest part of their country, beautiful cultures and peoples are still alive and ready to be taken into consideration. The utopian ideologies of the Mexican Revolution created false illusions of change. Through the 20th century, in many Latin American countries people believed that armed struggles were and are the solution to bring change to Latin America, just as in the case of Mexico and its revolution.

In the picture “Nada de esto es un sueño”, Juan Rulfo, captures the end of a day for farm workers in rural areas. He also captures the sunset, the end of a day and the beginning of a new hope for the day to come. “None of this is a dream” is a beautiful reality check for the viewer, because we can see that even in the hardest of days, and with no hope other than to see the daylight of the next day, these people still have hope. This idea is also seen in the picture below where an indigenous, poor man looks straight ahead trying to find hope.



*Quedará alguna esperanza/ Is there any hope left*⁶

⁵ *Íbid.*

⁶ *Íbid.*

The photograph “Quedar  alguna esperanza” concludes the series of pictures by Juan Rulfo. This photograph in particular is one of the most beautiful from the selection, one, because in one small canvas, Rulfo shows us a list of things: an indigenous, poor man who is sitting down maybe after a long day of labor, and who also is probably dreaming of a better future for himself and his family. Second, the vibe of the picture is of disenchantment, this man was not part of high class society and was not pretending to seem poor, but rather this was his reality and Rulfo captured it. It also gives us a lesson of how the poor, the indigenous, the working class, and the marginalized still have hope for the future, they still dream to one day have their own utopia, in which they could be seen as human beings and not as objects of the past or profit machines. They dream of a utopia where they can have a decent life and not worry about the abuses of the ones in power, and being able to provide a better life for their families.

In these series of photographs the reality of the rural people in Mexico can be seen and it can be perceived in the rest of Latin America through its indigenous forgotten groups. These poor people are still fighting to survive, rather than live. This surviving mode can be seen from the first picture “Patio de vecindad” to the last one “Quedar  alguna esperanza”. In the first photograph we see the daily illusion these people live in, although their faces are not shown, somehow Rulfo could capture in a shot a moment in their lives which presents to the viewer the daily routine that perhaps they did not chose, the one that was imposed on them.

They work a land that is not theirs because that is how the government stipulated it, and if they try to complain then their voices will never be heard, and their struggles will become invisible. The photographs “Nada de esto es sue o (None of this is a dream)” and “Campesina en Oaxaca y ni o (Farmer woman in Oaxaca and child)” showcase the poverty of the indigenous and poor people, their struggles, and how their desolation is not a dream, but rather a daily reality they have to accept. It is a reality that many, especially the government, do not want to see. And in the end, like in the photograph “Quedar  alguna esperanza (Is there any hope left)” shows that even in their misery, the Mexican and the Latin American people still have hope. Hope for a better future; hope that their utopia will finally come true.

The Mexican people, the Latin American people with access to power and prestige have looked away, and it is safe to say that we have failed our own people:

... llegamos tarde a todas partes, nacimos cuando ya era tarde en la historia, tampoco tenemos un pasado o, si lo tenemos, hemos escupido sobre sus restos, nuestros pueblos se echaron a dormir durante un siglo y mientras dormían los robaron y ahora andan en andrajos, no logramos conservar ni siquiera lo que los espa oles dejaron al irse, nos hemos apu alado entre nosotros... (Paz 13-14).

Like this quote from Octavio Paz, we (the Mexican and the Latin American people) have come to our own history too late, and we have stolen our own land and our own people. We have threatened and betrayed our roots, we have killed each other to find our own benefits and the red petroleum that our people have spilled is our fuel to keep creating fanciful utopias that will fail as soon as we realize that our dream is only a nightmare.

Therefore, these two authors have shown in their writings, and in the case of Juan Rulfo, through photographs, the reality of the people who were and still are forgotten by the central government. As has been demonstrated the stories and

photographs shown above are not exclusive of Mexico, although Mexico is a clear example of failure, corruption and disaster, these characteristics also can be seen in many other countries of Latin America.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict R. O'G. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London; New York: Verso, 2006.
- Bolívar, Simón. *Carta De Jamaica*. Caracas: Ediciones de la Presidencia de la República, 1972.
- Costa, Marithelma. "1492: La utopía invisible o el desencuentro de dos mundos: textos y contextos." *La Torre: Revista De La Universidad De Puerto Rico*, 7.27-28. 1 (1993): 371-78.
- Menchú, Rigoberta, and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*. México: Siglo Veintiuno, 1985.
- America: Imaginary of Twentieth-Century." *Revista FAMECOS*, 20.3 (2013): 634.
- López, A. Rick. "La noche Mexicana and the Exhibitions of Popular Arts: Two Ways of Exalting Indianness". *Mexican Studies / Estudios Mexicanos*, 25.2 (2009): 247-270.
- More, Sir Thomas. *Utopía*. Simon & Brown. 2007.
- Neruda, Pablo, and Nathaniel Tarn. *Alturas De Macchu Picchu: The Heights of Macchu Picchu*. [Poem]. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967.
- O'Gorman, Edmundo. *La invención de América*. Fondo de Cultura Económica. 2006.
- Paz, Octavio. *El laberinto de la soledad*. New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1997.
- Paz, Octavio. *Posdata*. Siglo veintiuno editores. Cuernavaca, México. November, 1970.
- Rulfo, Juan, Carlos Fuentes, and Margaret Sayers Peden. *Juan Rulfo's Mexico: Essays*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution P, 2002.
- Rulfo, Juan. *El llano en llamas*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1973.
- Vasconcelos, José, and Didier Tisdell Jaén. *The Cosmic Race = La raza cósmica*. Los Angeles: Centro de Publicaciones, Dept. of Chicano Studies, California State University, Los Angeles, 1979.

Recebido para publicação em 19-08-14; aceito em 25-09-14