Mexico’s First Lynching: Sovereignty, Criminality, Moral Panic
Claudio Lomnitz, Columbia University

ABSTRACT
This article offers a detailed study of a media event—Arnulfo Arroyo’s attempt on the person of Porfirio Díaz, on September 16, 1897. It shows how the modernization of journalism and its subtle connections to the Díaz dictatorship came together in such a way to inflect and infect the whole of Mexican political society with a hermeneutics of suspicion. Crime and criminality, recognized in the period as key elements of positivist interpretations of progress, could no longer be contained either in marginal groups or even in the lower classes as a whole. The Arroyo Affair is an event that serves as an analytically poignant point of departure for understanding the problem of crime and public culture at the dawn of Mexico’s modern era.

The representation of political opponents as bandits was a salient practice of the Mexican Revolution, so much so that in the United States the image of the Mexican came to be inextricably caught up with that of the bandido. After the long-time president (and de facto dictator) General Porfirio Díaz stole the presidential election of 1910, the defeated candidate Francisco I. Madero took up arms. Díaz called Madero’s revolutionaries bandits. Once the rebels triumphed, prominent revolutionary leaders such as Pascual Orozco, Emiliano Zapata, and Ricardo Flores Magón refused to lay them down their guns because there was no ensuing land reform; they now became bandits in Madero’s eyes. After his 1913 military coup and assassination of Madero, General Victoriano Huerta labeled all Madero loyalists as bandits. And once the rebel “Constitutionalist” armies toppled “the usurper” Huerta, they then split into rival factions—with each turning “bandit” to the other. The distinction between a bandit and an upright Constitutionalist was mainly a matter of loyalty—not necessarily to the gov-
ernment (when there was a government) but rather to legitimate sovereign power that was meant to reside in the people and in the person of their chosen representative.

Jacobinism—Mexico’s ingrained hope for an unmediated relationship between a sovereign people and its leader—was deployed to project an image of lawlessness onto whatever stood in the way of that sacred connection. It was not, in other words, a simple case of what Eric Hobsbawm once called “social bandits.” It is true that archetypal social bandits such as Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa were indeed called outlaws—except when they weren’t, in which case they were called “patriots” and “honest revolutionaries.” And the politicization of the term bandit was not reserved for these Robin Hoods. In that same period, the neologism carrancear (literally, “to Carranza”) appeared as a synonym for “to steal.” Venustiano Carranza had been the elected governor of Coahuila state at the time when Francisco Madero was toppled; he then became head of the revolution’s Constitutionalist faction and also president of Mexico.

This article is a study of the immanence of the figure of the bandit in Mexican political society. It focuses on a pivotal media event, known as the Arroyo Affair, that was triggered by an 1897 assault on President Porfirio Díaz. The scandal occurred at the height of the golden age of Díaz’s progressive dictatorship: Mexico’s economy had been growing at a fast clip for many years. Foreign capital kept gushing in, and Díaz had been reelected for a fifth term. There was no organized opposition. Order and progress appeared to have edged out Mexico’s once proverbial lawlessness.

Arnulfo Arroyo’s attack on President Díaz was materially inconsequential: the unarmed man managed only to topple Díaz’s bicorn hat. And yet the events that ensued were eerily troubling. In an eloquent expression of the Arroyo Affair’s tempestuous effect on public opinion, chronicler Jesús Rábago accused a disorderly media of feeding the public’s morbid fascination to the point of sickening society as a whole: “The leaflet—which is written-up with no time for reflection or analysis, and that reproduces only dislocated rumors and incomplete and reticent reporting—has fueled the public’s voracity for this original and novesque crime, terrible and exotic, that has sickened an entire society that had until now been sleeping like Cleopatra, with a nest of vipers in its bosom.” And indeed, the Arroyo Affair was the first media event to make a deep distur-

2. Jesús Rábago, Historia del gran crimen (Mexico City: Tipografía de El Partido Liberal, 1897), 1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
bance in the tranquil conscience of Mexico’s new progressive society. Not coincidentally, it was also the first major public scandal to rely on the new economy of yellow journalism.

The sensational events that followed Arroyo’s attack on Díaz led the public to express and shape alternative images of the criminal; images that were deeply unsettling because they touched Mexico’s popular classes, its political class, and the president of the republic. Indeed, what was historically consequential about this event was that it brought forth suspicions of criminality that tainted the whole of Mexican political society.

The image of a modern institutional order was routinely touted as the key accomplishment of Porfirio Díaz, Mexico’s Príncipe de la Paz. Now all of that progress was suspected to rely on a kind of photographic negative—a hidden but critically consequential underside—in which each of the component elements of political society had criminal tendencies against the others. The Jacobin ideal of unmediated sovereignty, of identity between the leader and the people, was deeply disturbed.

Despite the deliberate intervention of numerous authorities and the judicial resolution of the case, there was never consensus on the identity of the culprits or on their motivations. Frenzied feedback loops between the media and rumor spiraled as the facts of the case became ever more contrived and difficult to contain within a single coherent explanation. Indeed, the semiotic instability of the Arroyo Affair produced detailed, but contrary and alternative, depictions of crime and criminality in the new, modern, and optimistic Mexico, depictions that were unsettling because they cast a pall of suspicion on the people (el pueblo) of Mexico, on the president of the republic, and on the political class. The specter of criminality that burst onto the public stage during the Arroyo Affair is a key element of what might be labeled the “cultural origins” of the Mexican Revolution, for in the course of the affair, the government, the nation’s heroic leader, and the people were each in turn the criminal and the victim of the other.

FACTS OF THE CASE
On September 16, 1897, shortly after ten o’clock in the morning, during the national independence celebration in Mexico City’s Zócalo, President Porfirio Díaz suffered an attack.3 While parading down a central boulevard in full mili-

3. The Arroyo Affair is one of the most famous scandals of Porfirian Mexico. The foundational work on the event is still Rábago’s Historia del gran crimen; careful contemporary works on the matter
tary regalia, Díaz, who was flanked on one side by his communications minister, General Mena, and on the other by his minister of war, General Berriozábal, was attacked from behind by the well-known drunkard and good-for-nothing Arnulfo Arroyo. Arroyo was captured and detained, and his life was in imminent danger: “From the moment when Arroyo was arrested . . . the people kept clamoring for his life. They taunted Lieut. La Croix, who had the prisoner in charge, with not using his pistol on the prisoner.” The president, however, responded with poise, reassured everyone of his own well-being, and ordered that the prisoner be taken into safe custody and that he not be harmed.

Once in the police station, Arroyo was found to be unarmed. His intentions would later become the object of speculation: interpreted either as assassination, as a staged mock-assassination attempt, or as the swaggering bravado of a pitiful drunkard in the final stages of alcoholism. The sense that this was a bona fide assassination attempt was as plausible as an assault on Díaz was inconceivable. Just one day before Arroyo’s feat, the New York Times had echoed notes from Mexican papers, warning that Spanish anarchist Joseph Ventre had arrived in Mexico and was expected to attempt crossing the border into the United States—the implication being that he might be planning an anarchist attentat. The (mild) opposition paper El Popular explained these fears more fully: “Undoubtedly this event has been influenced by the rise of anarchism in Europe and America, a trend that translates into barbarous assassinations such as those that have lately been carried out on the person of Mr. Sadi Carnot, President of France, on Mr. Cañovas del Castillo, President of Spain’s Council of Ministers, and on the President of Uruguay. It has also been affected by our press’s publication of the doings, the secrets, the oaths, pacts, etc. of anarchists all over the world.”

But if this was a serious attempt, why was Arroyo unarmed? Why was he not carrying anarchist propaganda or a manifesto? There would not be enough
time to settle these doubts. On the eve of September 17, 1897, while in custody at the Mexico City police headquarters, Arnulfo Arroyo was stabbed to death, “lynched,” according to the government subsidized *El Imparcial*, by a mob of angry citizens who stormed the police station in the wee hours of the night. The following day, Díaz “lamented the sad fate of his aggressor, because now he could no longer claim that there was no lynching in Mexico.” Minister of War General Berriozábal was reported to have expressed a similar concern for Mexico’s reputation for justice: “It pains me deeply, for the honor of Mexico.” And the foreign press echoed the same sentiments: “A sensational sequel to yesterday’s attack on President Díaz occurred this morning, when Arnulfo Arroyo was lynched by a band of the common people, determined on revenge. It was an act unprecedented in the history of the country.” According to Díaz and the press then, the murder of Arnulfo Arroyo was Mexico’s first lynching, and this was its only distressing element for, as *El Popular* put it, “Society has not lost a thing with the death of that corrupted member, but social justice has lost its immaculate majesty, with the brutal assassination perpetrated by Arroyo’s masked sacrificers.”

The news of Arroyo’s alleged lynching was published by the government subsidized *El Imparcial* in its early morning edition of September 18. By the afternoon of that day, there was widespread incredulity regarding that story. The police had rounded up 21 suspects outside the station, accused them of participating in the lynching, and sent them to Belén Prison. However, inconsistencies in the official account, the improbability of a lynch mob successfully violating police security at the station, and a growing scandal over arbitrary arrests cast immediate doubt on this version. Thus, *El Popular* recalled, when *El Imparcial* had first announced Arroyo’s lynching: “a bitter smile of incredulity turned in every mouth, while somber words were pronounced in hushed tones.” According to the paper *La Patria*, popular indignation regarding the lynching story, and the arrest of innocent bystanders led a mob of about 15,000 to protest in front of the offices of *El Imparcial*, and to burn copies of that paper.

---


for unfairly charging el pueblo with a murder that had surely been perpetrated by
the police.\footnote{Barrera Bassols, El caso Villavicencio, 96.}

*El Imparcial* denied the veracity of this story, as we shall see, but public
scandal was such that congress took the unprecedented step of calling Minister
of the Interior Manuel González Cosío to a formal hearing. On that same day,
September 21, police chief and congressman Eduardo Velázquez was stripped
of his congressional immunity and asked to resign. He and a dozen of his men,
including two prominent police officers, Miguel Cabrera and Antonio Villavi-
cencio, were escorted to Belén prison, where they would be held until trial.
There the policemen confessed that they had themselves killed Arroyo, in a
charade that was orchestrated to look like the spontaneous act of an enraged
mob. On September 24, however, after a deposition that was cut short before
his promised full confession, Velázquez (allegedly) shot himself with a handgun
that he smuggled into prison.

After Velázquez’s “suicide,” the 11 policemen who had perpetrated the Ar-
royo murder and Velázquez’s second and third officers in command were tried.
On the way to the trial, the escorted prisoners were met by an angry mob bent
on revenge against the abusive police. The officers and most of the policemen
were found guilty, and 10 of them, including Cabrera and Villavicencio, were sen-
tenced to death. The harshness of the penalty was meant to underscore that
the people and the state shared the same indignation. The death sentences would later
be commuted, however. The prisoners ended up spending about six years in
jail, after which time Villavicencio and Cabrera returned to do high-profile police
work.\footnote{El caso Villavicencio (ibid.) provides the details of Villavicencio’s sinister and high-flying career in
the Porfirián police; Cabrera was police chief of Puebla on the eve of the Mexican Revolution, and he
became one of its first victims.}

**DEMOCRACY NOIR**

Most historians’ commentaries on the Arroyo Affair have emphasized its politi-
cal novelty: the attack on Díaz, argued Daniel Cosío Villegas, was a shocking
transgression. Until then, the dictator had never been shown anything less than
courtesy, and usually so much more than that. Arroyo’s assault suggested that
Díaz’s prestige might be vulnerable.\footnote{Daniel Cosío Villegas, ed., *Historia moderna de México: El Porfiriato, la vida política interior, segunda
parte* (Mexico City: Hermes, 1952), 683–84.} But this reading does not go far enough.
The Arroyo Affair was a watershed event because it conjoined a (symbolically rich but practically inconsequential) political crisis, with a hardening both of the dictatorship and of social inequality, and deep innovations in the technology of opinion management. The three factors together—political, social, and communicative—make this a singular event, with far more significance than has been recognized.

The change in opinion management techniques, which is a key element of the story, had several dimensions, one of which is formal and requires some theorization to be properly understood. The Arroyo Affair unfolded using the narrative strategies of the mystery novel, capturing opinion in the speculative pleasures and anxieties of that form. Newspapers—rife with rumors—were the media in which the affair transpired, used the narrative techniques invented by Poe, and even toyed with the bourgeois conceits of Sherlock Holmes. Indeed, the Arroyo Affair was a drama of suspicion, where each of the players was suspected of harboring dark schemes.

It might seem contrived to claim that a sensational murder unfolded like a murder mystery—a bit like discovering that an original is very like its picture. This, however, is not my claim. It is true that there was an uncanny sense among Mexico’s reading public that, when it came to the Arroyo Affair, life was imitating art, that Mexico’s modernization had spawned not only the delights of progress but also the most sensational and alien modalities of urban crime.

The pervasive suspicion that something entirely new and unknown (such as an anarchist attentat) was also already somehow deeply known stemmed from two sources. Mexico’s small but influential and rapidly growing reading public was tuned to world events, and it had read about anarchists and terrorism. In this sense anarchism was familiar. But the feeling of the uncanny stemmed from the notion that Mexico was catching up with and joining the chorus of the world’s civilized nations. This made the crimes of the civilized nations immanent in Mexico. Their actual flesh-and-blood appearance was thus both a surprise and a confirmation.

Indeed, this aspect of the Arroyo Affair was shared with other crime stories of the time—Mexico now had its version of Jack the Ripper (El Chalequero); of passion crimes of an honest woman turned prostitute (María Villa, known as La Chiquita), who was reminiscent of an Emile Zola character and would inspire the most popular Mexican novel of the era, Federico Gamboa’s Santa; and now a shocking attempt on the president’s life that conjured the previously exotic figure of the plotting anarchist. In the following decade or so, Mexico would have its first homosexual scandal, involving “los cuarenta y uno” (the forty-one), its
first great car robbery (La pandilla del automóvil gris), and a sensational American-style bank heist at the Banco Minero de Chihuahua.  

Literature provided a framework for comprehending and even for scripting these novelties (“life imitating art”), but the press also relied specifically on the conventions of the murder mystery to give form, direction, and political effect to the Arroyo story. Indeed, the influence of the mystery novel went beyond the press, and at least one of the key actors, Police Chief Velázquez, imitated its contrived forms in order to carry out his poorly staged “popular lynching” of Arroyo. The mystery form that the drama took subsequently dominated the writing of the novelists and the historians who have engaged the topic.

This was recognized by at least one contemporary, Jesús Rábago, who wrote a book detailing the facts of the case a few months after it transpired, as an effort to reclaim the reasoned objectivity that was so treasured at the time and that seemed to have been exiled from the pages of the daily press. Rábago thus portrayed the mystery mania that he sought to transcend with his book: “The latent memory of the assassinations of Cánovas and of Uruguay’s president, the reminiscence of Caserio Santos and Ravachos . . . together with news of Ventre . . . all of this condensed in a single idea, filtered into the brains of so many people, and they in turn produced the most incredible stories [las historias más inverosímiles] like episodes from the works of Edgar Poe.”

The Arroyo Affair was perfectly suited to this newly popularized narrative form: it involved three real, imputed, or intended interconnected murders (Díaz, Arroyo, and Velázquez); the connections between these were open to contending interpretations regarding the identity of the author of each of the crimes; and, finally, the sensational concatenation of events was told not only by a variety of actors (the rumor mill of artisans, policemen, passers-by, reporters, people with access to privileged sources of information, etc.) but also, and primarily, by a group of rival newspapers that had contending interests and different kinds of connections to the dictator.

Jorge Luis Borges, in appreciation of Edgar Alan Poe, once wrote that Poe had invented a new kind of reader: a reader bent on questioning the author’s
hidden intentions at the turn of every sentence. The Arroyo Affair had a similar effect: it created a new kind of (newspaper) reader who sought clues but questioned the intentions of the editor. The papers, for their part, used the literary strategies of the mystery writers to plant clues and decoys and, especially, to take control over the rhythm and direction of the events.

Scholars of nationalism in Latin America have focused on the role of the romantic novel in the emplotment of national ideas in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; they have also followed Hayden White’s ideas regarding the role of the realistic and the naturalistic novel in the writing of national histories. The role of the mystery, however, has gone largely unattended, probably because there appear to have been few mystery novels written in Latin America during the period and because the literature on the connection between nationalism and narration has tended to privilege the novel over close analyses of the interplay between newspapers around a single event, a reading that produces comparable sorts of polyphonic effects as the novel, but without firm authorial or editorial guidance.

The deployment of the narrative structure of the mystery in the narration of national drama—inherited with the Arroyo Affair—produced more unsettled effects than either the nationalist romance or even the denunciatory naturalistic or realistic genres. It produced stories that were loaded with fantasies of masked power, of primal movers with dark and secret motives, and it suggested an unspeakable congruence between the calm world of bourgeois appearances and the sinister ploys of its Professor Moriartys.


THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING IMPARTIAL

The Arroyo Affair was the first real trial of Mexico’s newly established “American style” yellow newspaper, El Imparcial. Established barely a year before the Arroyo Affair, El Imparcial was “American” in its format (easier to read, including illustrations), its content—use of reporters, rather than poets and statesmen—its prominent display of sensational news, including crime pages, and especially in its printing technology, the rotary press, which allowed for exponentially greater print runs than its competitors. Salvador Quevedo y Zubieta, a champion of the older style, described El Imparcial’s new journalism in the following terms: “Those people had no journalistic ideals other than sensationalism [noticierismo efectista], a lot of criminology illustrated with horrible engravings, and no bibliographical pieces, or literary criticism, scientific review or other sections of the kind that they viewed as useless distractions [faramallas]. . . . It is because of these people that the French journalistic style that had been the model of early Mexican journalism was substituted by the lowest kind of Yankee journalism” (fig. 1).

Alongside its Americanism, El Imparcial did have at least one typically Mexican feature: it enjoyed a hefty government subsidy. But even in this there was some novelty. Up until the establishment of El Imparcial in 1896, Porfirio Díaz’s press strategy had been to give modest subsidies to each of the Mexico City papers; after the 1896 reelection, and in the face of some dissonance with that press, the federal government concentrated its subsidy on a single paper. This advantage and the economies of scale afforded by the rotary press allowed El Imparcial to undersell its competition. Its editor, Rafael Reyes Spínola, became a kind of informal press secretary to Díaz. Described by journalist Carlo de Fornaro as “cynical, abject, malicious, sneakish and shameless,” he was “given this enormous power, on condition that he should kill all competition, that is to say, all the anti-administration papers.”

Venerable liberal papers like El Monitor Republicano and El Siglo Diecinueve immediately went under. Others subsisted thanks to moneys from competing

politicians or political groups. Cabinet members with presidential aspirations, such as Joaquín Baranda and Bernardo Reyes, subsidized papers, as did state governors, labor associations, and the Catholic Church. These papers, which were now alternative voices to *El Imparcial*, had relatively small runs, and hated, envied, and came to fear its power.

One of these, *El Universal*, was associated with a Positivist technocratic clique of high-ranking officials known as los científicos, but its editor had fallen out of favor with the government since 1893. The paper published a cartoon during the Arroyo Affair that implied that the true author of the crime against Arroyo was not Vela’s but rather someone who remained invisible to the public eye. Although the identity of this personage was left masked, suspicion naturally led to Vela’s superiors: the governor of the Federal District, the Interior Minister, and even President Díaz himself (see fig. 2).

Signaling the beginning of a new era in government-newspaper relations, the still new *El Imparcial* denounced *El Universal*’s cartoon, and challenged its editor to make a public and open accusation against whoever he believed was actually behind the Arroyo murder: “Today’s *El Universal* includes a most perfidious cartoon and a hypocritical article. We feel obligated to reject them because they are masked attacks and accusations that any man of honor should
“¿Quién es el asesino?” El Imparcial, September 23, 1897.
new in this attack. Pablo Piccato, who has studied honor and journalism during the Restored Republic and the early Porfiriato, shows that up until the 1890s, provocations in the press led to dueling between journalists or between editors seeking to uphold the honor of their papers. The emblematic case was the 1880 duel between Santiago Sierra and Ireneo Paz, prompted by an unsigned editorial in *La Libertad* accusing Paz, editor of the rival paper *La Patria*, of ingratitude to Porfirio Díaz. Paz used the provocation to challenge the editors of *La Libertad* to a duel. Santiago Sierra responded in the name of his paper (though he had not written the editorial) and was killed in the field of honor. By the 1890s, however, the state had changed libel laws, undermined the autonomy of courts with regard to press injuries, and blocked and prosecuted dueling. The state was now the guardian of the citizens’ honor.

As a result, rather than producing an aired confrontation between journalists, *El Imparcial*’s accusations forced a groveling “Open letter to President Díaz” from *El Universal* that began by clarifying: “We have been told that someone might suppose that our cartoon alluded to the President of the Republic, to the Minister of the Interior or to the Governor of the Federal District. We categorically declare that we have not even remotely thought of alluding to any of these personalities. Indeed the idea that any of them might have had the least complicity in these criminal events had not even crossed our minds.” The “retraction” was triumphantly reproduced verbatim in *El Imparcial*, flexing its muscle as the watchdog of the president’s honor. The event underscored the vulnerability and fear that enveloped the editors of *El Universal*, who faced a severe crisis in their relation to Díaz at least since the 1896 reelection, manifested not only in the government’s exclusive support for *El Imparcial* but also in direct persecution of its editors. Thus Ramón Prida recalled that “the persecution against *El Universal* was terrible. Its editors were indicted more than ten times between October 1896 and the end of 1897. One of them was imprisoned on three occasions, and in the end had to leave his post and flee the country. The new editors were also jailed, together with the head of the printing shop, the paper’s administrator and its employees.”

But there was more to *El Imparcial*’s new role than bullying the press to suppress any hint of Díaz as a suspect in the Arroyo murder. Because of its sta-

24. Ramón Prida, ¡De la dictadura a la anarquía! Apuntes para la historia política de México de los últimos cuarenta y tres años (El Paso, TX: Imprenta El Paso del Norte, 1914), 139.
tus as a quasi-official paper, *El Imparcial* involuntarily provided clues that suggested that Díaz might in fact have been involved. The most important of these clues were (1) the fact that *El Imparcial* published the breaking story of the lynching, which suggested that this was a line that Díaz himself sought to peddle, (2) the fact that the paper’s editor, Rafael Reyes Spíndola, was in a cabinet-level meeting with Díaz after Arroyo’s *attentat* and before his assassination, (3) the very fact that the paper took such a forceful stance against *El Universal’s* cartoon suggested that *El Imparcial* was doing Díaz’s dirty work for him. Thus, *La Patria* complained, “The poor impression produced by the official paper’s [i.e., *El Imparcial’s*] claim that the Mexican people were responsible for the cowardly murder of Arroyo is today compounded by that paper’s transformation into the police of the independent press.”

There were, in addition, other suspicious details in the paper’s coverage for the real Arroyo buffs, like the fact that *El Imparcial*’s reporter was at the police station immediately after the false lynching, and that the paper had reported the police’s lynching story regardless. In his well-documented novel on the affair, Salvador Quevedo y Zubieta cast the *El Imparcial* reporter as a former scribe and flunky of Police Chief Velázquez.

In short, the paper’s close connection to the dictator simultaneously produced and kept a lid on suspicions on Díaz. There was, moreover, a more subtle job carried out by *El Imparcial* in this affair: taking the lead in the narration. Its privileged access to official information, and the fact that its information could also be read against the grain in order to elucidate unprintable official designs, helped *El Imparcial* to keep the lead. Indeed, *El Imparcial*’s resources—inexpensive prices, image reproduction, use of beat reporters, and its unabashed interest in the sensational—allowed the paper to transform the Arroyo events into addictive consumable products; its management of the affair, parsed out in morning and afternoon editions, led to truly unprecedented print runs, which were then touted as proof of the paper’s credibility.

Contrary to Mexican journalistic practice then and, to some degree, even now—where print runs are a newspaper’s best-kept secret—*El Imparcial* began to publish the figure of the paper’s run proudly on its masthead, as a sign of that paper’s meteoric triumph over the opinion-oriented press. On September 17, 1897, the combined run of *El Imparcial* and its afternoon edition, *El Mundo*, reached 127,000 copies (82,000 for *El Imparcial*). On September 19, 20, and 21, the morn-
ing edition was still selling between 40,000 and 50,000 copies. According to Pablo Piccato, *El Monitor Republicano*, which had been Mexico’s greatest Liberal paper until it closed in 1896, reached runs of around 10,000 on Sundays, at the height of its influence. No paper had ever broken the 20,000-copy benchmark before the creation of *El Imparcial*.27

The size of these runs was used by *El Imparcial* to defend itself against the attacks it faced due to its initial endorsement/fabrication of the lynching story and, no doubt, to the way that it took to bullying other papers. So, for example, *El Imparcial*, under a headline declaring that “It Is Laughable,” discounted the “rumors” published in *La Patria* of an anti-*Imparcial* rally where the day’s issues of the paper had been burned: “It is only with that intention that we share one of the many calumnies that have been hurled against our papers these past days. They claim that the public in a mob burned the entire edition of *El Imparcial*. But the day that they choose to perpetrate this lie is none other than a day like yesterday, when the paper sold at 5¢ a piece. Multiplied by 44,000 copies, that’s a pretty expensive auto de fe!”28

How were these runs achieved? It is fair to say that *El Imparcial* controlled the rhythm of public discussion in the Arroyo Affair. It did so, first, because its morning edition of September 17 was the first to publish news both of the attempt on Díaz’s life and the story of Arroyo’s lynching. Other papers, like *El Popular*, refrained from coming out early with the news of Arroyo’s death, because they feared unknown political ramifications. Here is how that paper justified printing the news three days late: “*El Popular* did not wish to disseminate such grave reports immediately, because it considered that the news were of such magnitude that they could have affected the public peace, which is, after national independence, the most precious good that our nation enjoys.”29

In the face of the other papers’ uncertainties regarding governmental interests in Arroyo’s murder, *El Imparcial* alone had the scoop. From that point forward, it maintained its lead by offering numerous interest stories, publishing illustrations, and even by becoming the target of its competitors in the press. *El Imparcial* kept the beat of the affair by managing readers’ engagement in the story—massaging it, engaging critics, distracting its readers with clues and de-

tails, and stringing out the drama. Moreover, the distance between the various papers with regard to El Imparcial provided Mexico City society with the multiple perspectives that are required to build conspiracy theories to match the story of a conspiracy. With its generous attention to intriguing details, El Imparcial came to play a role akin to a narrator’s voice in a mystery. It was the voice that needed to be heard by all in the hunt for clues and ulterior motives.

All of this was an historical novelty in Mexico. The narrative treatment of the Arroyo drama stands apart from those of the earlier political crimes of the Porfiriato—the assassination of nine of deposed President Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada’s followers in Veracruz in 1879, the assassination of Díaz’s would-be competitors, such as Generals Trinidad García de la Cadena, Ramón Corona, and Angel Martínez, or the occasional murder of journalists, for instance. None of these produced extended discussions in the press (discussions were repressed), nor did they enhance news as a commodity in the way that the Arroyo Affair did. All lacked the reflexive relationship between a commercially oriented and officially sanctioned medium and the minor key voices of the “alternative” press.

Certainly Arroyo sold copies because of the significance of the event itself, stoking as it did both the fantasy of murdering Porfirio Díaz and the fantasy of the people being sacrificed by the government. But El Imparcial’s coverage of the event proved the efficacy of the new journalism, based on the new figure, el repórter (a term so new that it was still anglicized at the time), who generated stories on Arroyo’s mother, on the individuals who were falsely accused as lynchers, and on their families when they were released from prison; interviews with police officers; images of the key players of the drama; a photo of the Arroyo attentat, taken by an American tourist from his hotel; and several intriguing though often meaningless clues, like a drawing of the gun that Velázquez allegedly used to kill himself, or the floor plan of the Belén cell where he was held (fig. 3).

Although El Imparcial’s competitors were silent regarding the success of this new modality, the paper made sure to tout it most explicitly: “What a great occasion this has been to confound those who clamor against the informational press [prensa de información]! What opportune moments to prove to the nemesis of the news business [noticierismo] that all of its work can be useful to the needs and the aspirations of a society! After the murder of Arnulfo Arroyo we must loudly proclaim: Make way for the reporters! Onward their battalion! They are the rulers of the day.”30 And it went on to sound the death knell of the earlier

30. “Los reporters y la justicia,” El Imparcial, September 22, 1897.
form of journalism that had offered such loud criticism: “The news business [noticierismo] can be beneficial to society, as we have said. Others argue that it can be pernicious. This is true. Much in the same way that a rifle can be useful or harmful, depending on whether it is used to kill a rabbit or a man. The same is true of the new journalism as of all of the innovations of modern society: alongside the good, they also bring some bad things. There were no train wrecks before the invention of railroads.”

With the Arroyo Affair, the old press was pronounced obsolete. And so it was. By 1913, two years after Díaz’s demise (see fig. 4), Quevedo y Zubieta, like other nostalgic newspapermen, complained that the whole of the Mexican press, including the new Maderista press, followed the style that was first introduced by El Imparcial: “Anything that might be tend either to pure thought or to the highest perceptions of the soul is excluded from its mold. The new journalism only admits sensorial elements that speak of a perverted imagination: theft, brawls, killings, all of the evildoing of the city or the village, presented with overblown importance and never told with a realism that might help point to social ills that need to be addressed, but told rather in a cloud of poetic pretension and cinematographic hallucination.”

31. Quevedo y Zubieta, Campañas de prensa, 16.
THE SUSPECTS

The Arroyo Affair did not conclude with a single uncontested explanation that satisfied everyone: its historical significance lay precisely in its ability to disturb societal representations of the period. For this reason, the historian’s work in this case is not to choose between available explanations of the motives and execution of the murders but to study the destabilizing effects of competing interpretations.

The media of circulation during the Arroyo Affair was an alloy of the press and of rumor. Thus, *El Imparcial* complained that “there have been innumerable rumors circulating these days, each more absurd than the next. It seems that there are people devoted specially to this foolish pastime that can on occasion have actual consequences.” And indeed each of the principal papers had moments when it took pains to dispel one rumor or another. Nevertheless, rumor and reportage in fact fed on each other. So, for instance, one of the suspects circulating in rumor—Porfirio Díaz—could never be identified as a suspect in the press, but much journalistic writing was implicitly aimed against that rumor. On the other hand, rumor responded to information from the press: consensus between papers tended to eliminate some rumors (e.g., the rumors that flew claiming that Porfirio Díaz had been stabbed, or that Arroyo had exploded a bomb), while contrasting views between the various papers or holes in a

paper’s story facilitated the survival of other rumors (e.g., that Díaz was the author of the Arroyo and Velázquez murders and that Velázquez never really committed suicide but had escaped and was living in the United States). Although we cannot study rumor directly—we can reconstruct only an incomplete catalogue of rumors and have little information regarding their timing and intensity—there are sufficient reports and acts that are explained as responses to rumors to make the role of rumor identifiable.33 Rumor was what politicians were playing to. Using the sort of photographic metaphor that was appealing at the time, public political acts and newspaper reportage can often be read as a positive imprint of the negative provided by rumor.

There are three categories of suspects in this drama: the state (represented by Porfirio Díaz), society (represented by el pueblo and at times also by Arnulfo Arroyo), and the political class (represented by Velázquez, the police, and members of the Díaz cabinet and government). The most remarkable feature of the Arroyo Affair is that each of these categories appears in one moment of the affair as perpetrator and in another as victim. Thus, Arroyo was first a perpetrator, then a victim; Díaz was first a victim, then a perpetrator; Velázquez was first a perpetrator, then a victim. Twin readings of the role and nature of the state, society, and the political class as criminal and as victim simply could not be reconciled. From the Arroyo Affair forward, the criminal/victim alternative haunted a society that until that time had been “sleeping like Cleopatra, with a nest of vipers in its bosom,” to recall Rábago’s compelling image.

The blurring of the line between victim and perpetrator, between dignified official and hidden assassin, and between an honest and a degenerate pueblo was deeply disturbing. Thus, Federico Gamboa, a diplomat, writer, and diarist who had gone to school with Arroyo and Velázquez, cast about in his sleep after Velázquez’s “suicide”: “And as I toss in my sleep, prey to an insomnia riddled with memories and with forebodings, I mourn, I truly mourn, the fate of both Arroyo and Velázquez, and at moments I congratulate myself for taking a different path, while at other moments I tremble at the thought that I might

33. A partial catalog of rumors: incredulity vis-à-vis the lynching story; that an anarchist had perpetrated an attentat against Díaz; that Díaz’s minister of the interior, Manuel González Cosío, was behind Arroyo’s attempt against Díaz and that he ordered the deaths of Arroyo and Velázquez to cover his tracks; that the cientificos were behind Velázquez’s plot; that Velázquez did not die, but was living instead in the United States; that Díaz had been killed by a bomb; that Arroyo was a popular hero; that Velázquez left his goods to the poor; that Villavicencio killed Velázquez; that before murdering Arroyo, Velázquez had murdered a priest in order to have free reign and seduce a lover; that Arnulfo was Velázquez’s man; that Velázquez wanted anarchism in Mexico in order to rise within the government.
accidentally find myself on the wrong path, or trip up while on the path that I think is good. We are so insignificant (tan poquita cosa) and so exposed to falling!”34 The vulnerability that Gamboa felt as a member of Mexico’s political class had its counterpart in growing popular anxieties, and in the hardening of Porfirio Díaz’s dictatorial stance.

FIRST READING: DÍAZ AS PERPETRATOR AND AS VICTIM

One reading of the Arroyo and Velázquez murders is that they were carried out on Porfirio Díaz’s orders. This theory remains plausible today. So, for instance, historian Alejandro Barrera Bassols suggests that Arroyo’s murder, perpetrated by Police Chief Velázquez, was carried out in consultation with the president, his private secretary Alfonso Chousal, Minister of the Interior González Cosío, and the owner of El Imparcial, Rafael Reyes Spíndola.35 Díaz would have had Arroyo murdered with the triple and sinister aim of meting out exemplary punishment, creating a “red scare” as a pretext to clamp down on the opposition, and bolstering the dictator’s sovereignty over the apparatus of government, by casting the Arroyo assassination as an irrepressible expression of popular identification with the president.

Certainly President Díaz’s alleged concern with the way that Arroyo’s murder tarnished Mexico’s immaculate record with regard to lynching was transparently self-serving. It boiled down to claiming that this was the first time that the Mexican people had ever taken the law into their own hands in order to effectuate an extralegal justice killing, and that they were only led to this extreme by their indignation over an attempt on his life. Indeed, Arroyo’s murder was initially represented as an overzealous outburst provoked by the deep identification between the president and the people. The killing could even be interpreted as an instinctive act of popular self-defense, for as El Imparcial put it: “The attempt against General Díaz has been more meaningful than any similar attack, because it sought to harm a person who is justly esteemed to be the foundation of the current state of things, of the only state that has succeeded in bringing prosperity to this country.”36

The assault on Díaz was portrayed as an attack on the nation, and as an act of betrayal against its savior. It even called forth the rhetorical invention of a

34. Federico Gamboa, Mi diario II (1897–1900): Mucho de mi vida y algo de la de otros (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional Para la Cultura y las Artes, 1995), 33.
36. “Capitán, estamos listos!,” El Imparcial, November 18, 1897.
new kind of felony, characterized as “a crime of lesa patriñismo and an act of the blackest ingratitude.” For their part, governors and mayors carried out rallies in support of Díaz painting his reign as the opposite of the reign of criminality, with mottos such as “Viva el Sr. General Porfirio Díaz! Viva la nación mexicana sin criminales!” (Long live General Porfirio Díaz! Long live the Mexican nation with no criminals!). The financial community made its own contribution to the identification of Díaz as Mexico’s savior, congratulating him on his survival and declaring that, had he come to harm, this “would have had a painful effect on the country as a whole, precisely at a time when the value of its bonds is in crisis due to the decline of the value of silver—a crisis that is in part being averted thanks to President Díaz’s prestige abroad.” The whole of the Mexican press joined in the chorus. To kill Díaz would have been tantamount to killing peace, progress, Mexico’s international prestige, and the value of Mexican bonds. The sacrifice of Arroyo at the hands of an irrepressible popular lynch mob was thus a rather unsubtle way of representing identity between Díaz and Mexican national sovereignty. Díaz’s person rose above the investiture of president of the republic; he was nothing less than the savior of the nation. It was only natural that the sovereign people would respond spontaneously and ferociously, and it was even possible to imagine that such a response might have been pleasing to Díaz. So, for instance, journalist Jesús Rábago speculated about Díaz’s feelings in the face of the support that he received after Arroyo’s attack: “I don’t know whether the President privately celebrated the attack that had given him such immense satisfaction, but I can say that the shower of popular support that he received raised his spirit to the voluptuousness that comes when one feels loved.”

However, no matter how reassuring the lynching might have been to Díaz’s sense of legitimacy, the murder of Arnulfo Arroyo was an act that he had to regret in public; not only because it was illegal but also because one of Díaz’s signal achievements, supposedly, was that Mexico’s government now had the instruments and institutions to punish the likes of an Arnulfo Arroyo. The impetuous pueblo had risen to his defense, true, but it had taken matters too far, beyond the limits of the law, casting unnecessary doubts on the maturity of Mexico’s institutions and staining the white panache of national honor that had so

37. Ibid.
38. “Plácemes de las colonias extranjeras. Doscientos millones de pesos,” El Imparcial, September 18, 1897.
shined against the dark backdrop of mob rule that was the emblematic vice of its powerful northern neighbor. As a result, Díaz reassured a legation of foreigners stating that “once the facts are clear, justice will reach the guilty with all its rigor, in order to satisfy the elevated moral ideals of the nation and of all enlightened nations [los pueblos cultos].”\(^{40}\)

Caught between a kind of noblesse oblige to have an inquiry and popular outrage over a politically orchestrated assassination that had been blamed on 20 innocent bystanders, Díaz had inquiries made that concluded what everyone in Mexico City already knew: that Arroyo had been killed by the police. The details of the mock lynching, however, were grotesque and stirred indignation beyond the fact of the killing itself. For, following their superiors orders, the policemen had dressed up as commoners, sombrero and all, and brandishing the Mexican flag; staged a break-in at police headquarters, yelling “Viva México!” and “Muera el anarquismo!”; killed Arroyo in the crudest and most cowardly manner, while he was tied up, with multiple stabs in order to make the lynching credible; and then captured and jailed a few dozen innocent bystanders who were expected to take the rap.

The sham lynching simultaneously made a mockery of the idea of popular sovereignty, and of the sovereignty of the law. But because criticism of Díaz was not an option in Mexican political society of the time, the outrage of those who could voice their opinion in public focused (predictably) on the slighted honor of “the people.” So, for instance, Porfirista congressman, panegyrist and writer of historical novels Juan A. Mateos ardently declared that “I, the last of you to assume the legitimate representation of the people, protest in the name of History, and in the name of the nature and habits of our People, against the vile calumny that presents it as a lynch
er of a defenseless man. I protest against those who are leading the investigation based on the insult of such a lie!”\(^{41}\) Predictably, Mateos’s speech ended with a call for congress to offer President Díaz and his cabinet a vote of confidence in the Arroyo murder, since it was Díaz who had first defended the honor of the Mexican people by declaring that “Mexicans do not lynch”: “A few months ago the government of the United States returned a prisoner to this government, asking for guarantees that he not be killed. General Porfirio Díaz answered from his heights that in Mexico there were

\(^{40}\) “Plácemus de las colonias extranjeras. Doscientos millones de pesos,” El Imparcial, September 18, 1897.

\(^{41}\) “Interesante sesión de la Cámara de Diputados,” El Imparcial, September 22, 1897.
no lynchers [prolonged applause]. I propose a vote of confidence for General Díaz and for his cabinet and I call for the upright vote (voto justiciero) of our sovereignty!42

If it was the people’s honor that was at stake in the Arroyo Affair, then Díaz had a history of defending that honor, and he would defend it now against the corrupt police chief who had besmirched it. Díaz and his cabinet—including the minister of the interior, who had been called to account in congress—thus deserved a vote of confidence, with no need to inquire whether the police had acted on its own initiative or on someone else’s orders.

There was, in other words, a double bind for Díaz’s many supporters: if he was the “indispensable man” of the Mexican Republic, an assault on his person was the worst sort of treason. As the self-sacrificing guarantor of Mexico’s sovereignty—he had to be placed above suspicion. At the same time, the possibility of Díaz’s authorship of the criminal assassination of Arroyo (and, worse, a mock lynching) opened the door to an image of the president as someone who used the law as a screen for his private passions and greedy interests.

This image would become highly developed in the anti-Díaz movements that proliferated just a few years after the Arroyo Affair. So, for instance, anarchist leader Enrique Flores Magon tells in his memoirs of his meeting in Belén prison with former police officer Antonio Villavicencio, then serving his term for his role in orchestrating the Arroyo killing. Villavicencio bragged to Flores Magon of having carried out more than 300 extrajudicial killings of prisoners at Belén, at the behest of Díaz.43

The Arroyo Affair was a pivotal moment in the consolidation of a twin image for Díaz: savior and cynic, martyr and murderer. Indeed, this titillating ambiguity between criminality and the law sheds light on mainstream theories of criminality that emerged in this period, such as those of Julio Guerrero, published barely three years after the Arroyo affair. Criminality, for Guerrero, was the result of an individual or group’s lack of adaptability to progress: “But . . . victories of science also have their victims. There are many who fail in the struggle, many who cannot overcome nature’s obstacles because of their lack of vigor, intelligence or character.”44

42. Ibid.
44. Julio Guerrero, La genesis del crimen en México: Estudio de psiquiatría social (Mexico City: Librería de Ch. Bouret, 1901), vii.
The criminal, in other words, was the person who was unable to jump on the train of progress. In a country wracked by anxieties regarding the popular classes’ racial adaptability to progress, this meant that the entire pueblo was at risk or that it might have a propensity to crime. Because Mexican society as a whole was backward, criminality could only be reigned in with an excess of violence. And who knew more about violence than criminals? Crime, in such a context, could only be regulated by managing one criminal against another. So, for instance, in Belén prison, the most violent prisoners were charged with maintaining order.45 In anticipation of Charles Tilly’s ideas about crime and state formation, Julio Guerrero pointed out that this was part and parcel of the history of Mexico, tout court, and that law enforcement in Mexico was actually built out of the criminal element.46 Thus, he reminded his readers that

Don Manuel Doblado first introduced the system of turning bandits into soldiers when he was governor of Guanajuato; our army today is formed in part out of groups of criminals that are periodically provided by the states; the Federal Highway Police was at first composed of a group of highway men who were pardoned and recruited for this purpose; the brigade that for twenty years had the custody of the roads and towns between Santa Fe and Toluca had the same origin; and lately the capital has witnessed cases of atavism of this system of social organization based on the conversion of bandits to gendarmes.47

The policemen who stabbed Arroyo to death were examples of criminals turned policemen. Guerrero did not dare suggest or even hint that Díaz himself fit the model, but the specter of criminality haunted representations of Díaz from that point forward.

THE PUEBLO AS PERPETRATOR AND AS CRIMINAL
(ARROYO’S TWO BODIES)
Díaz’s claim that Mexico had never had lynchings, compounded by the murderous charade played by the police, prompted a range of political actors to make aired defenses of the good name of the pueblo. So, for instance, *El Popular* blasted

47. Guerrero, *La genesis del crimen en México*, 121.
its competitor, *El Imparcial*, calling it to account for its “calumnies against [el pueblo], whom it wants to present as murderous and cowardly.” And it went on to add that “whoever knows the nature of our people—and all Mexicans do—knows that it is docile, simple, timid before authority.” But lest this portrayal be mistaken as an accusation of popular cowardice, the paper clarified that: “That is the way of our people, timid before authority, but brave and heroic before the enemy, for we have seen bands of ragged, hungry and tired soldiers fight and beat foreign troops that were more numerous and better equipped.” *El Popular* then repeated the mantra that circulated left and right: “Our [pueblo] is completely unfamiliar with the practice of lynching and this is so true that in the entire Republic there has never been a single registered case.” 48

Novelist and former senator Salvador Quevedo y Zubieta went a step further in his nationalist inflammation over the people’s honor and claimed that the official paper’s use of the verb to lynch, on the day after Arroyo’s murder, was a double violation, first, because there was no lynching in Mexico, and second because it was the first time that a Mexican newspaper sullied the Spanish language by importing English grammar: “It was the first time that Mexico’s newspapers had seriously and on their own account made an attempt against Spanish spelling, with the transposition of that ‘y’ made to function as a vowel between two consonants: ARNULFO ARROYO LYNCHADO, proclaimed El Justiciero.” 49

In sum, the attempt to frame the Arroyo murder as a lynching prompted an exalted nationalist defense of the pueblo—but from whom? What was the objective of this show of national pride that spewed from various would-be representatives of political society? The answer touches the most delicate fibers of the legitimacy of the dictatorship.

Regardless of his popular approval, which was probably still high, by 1897 Porfirio Díaz was universally understood to be a dictator. The antireelection law that had legitimated his 1876 coup, and that had led him to step down for a term in 1880, had been struck down in 1888. Indeed, *El Imparcial* used the occasion of the atentat against Díaz to repeat the rationale for the 1888 congressional decision with much emphasis and approval: “‘We cannot make an elected official immortal, but we can prolong his government for as long as the popular will desires.’ Ten years have passed since these words were pronounced, and

49. Quevedo y Zubieta, La Camada, 413–14. *El Justiciero* is a pseudonym for *El Imparcial*.
each day the need to keep General Díaz in his present post has become more patent.”

Díaz had been reelected three times since then: in 1888, 1892, and 1896. The 1892 reelection had been launched by the liberal political faction—eventually known as los científicos—that had tried but failed to temper the powers of the emerging dictator by promoting the formation of a Liberal Party (the Unión Liberal) and by a constitutional amendment that would have secured the independence of the judiciary and created a vice presidency. These measures—formation of a liberal party, independent judiciary, and vice presidency—would check the president’s power and provide a mechanism for eventual succession. Díaz, however, rejected all three initiatives.

By the 1896 election there was no longer any proposal to temper dictatorship from within the reigning factions, the framers of the Unión Liberal had stepped aside from the reelection effort, and the task of launching reelection fell to the Sociedad de Amigos de Porfirio Díaz, an organization that offered the dictator only unrefrained adulation. The dictatorship was absolute. However, for this very reason, calibrating popular sentiment regarding Díaz was increasingly difficult, as was managing popular indignation. And it was in the area of legitimation of the dictatorship that the Arroyo Affair struck the deepest chords.

The Arroyo Affair unsettled the imagined relationship between the people, the president, and government. The public reactions to the events of September 16 were the vilification of Arroyo, and the full identification of President Díaz with the honor of the nation. Arroyo was identified as an isolated and pathological individual. El Imparcial characterized him in the following terms:

This revolting man does not emerge from the dark cavern of an anarchist Sabbath, he is not inspired by a political a social or an economic ideal; he is not backed by any illusory theory that dreams of improvement or that aspires to reform. He is only impelled by low envy of a greatness that he does not know how to conquer for himself, he is impelled by the desire to annihilate all that is worthy and that shines, because he himself has not shone or been worthy. He is not a man, he is a crime; he is not an idea, he is a miasma; he is not an aspiration, he is vice.51

50. “Capitán, estamos listos!” El Imparcial, September 18, 1897.
Although Arroyo came from honest parents, he had squandered their support on alcohol and women. There were two kinds of popular characteristics that were associated with the criminal class: degeneration and atavism. Arroyo could be seen as an example of both. He was a degenerate in the sense that rather than enhance the achievements that had been so laboriously cultivated by his father, a modest tailor who had paid for his top-quality education, Arroyo misused his opportunities and sank to the lowly position of the rake. And there was atavism, too, because Arroyo came from the lower classes, and returned to them, despite his father’s efforts.

The portrayal of Arroyo as degenerate was countered by some of his defenders with that of Arroyo as madman. El Popular, for instance, argued that “the death of the hapless Arroyo is worthy of commiseration, he has unanimously been judged to have been mad.” In order to add credence to that theory, El Popular added that it had in its possession “Incontrovertible information that a brother of Arroyo still has in his possession an order for Arnulfo to be locked up in the Insane Asylum at San Hipolito.” The representation of Arroyo as madman allowed his supporters to cast his assassination in the language of sacrifice: “The sentiment of mercy that welled up because of the way in which he was sacrificed by the error of another man who was even crazier, and possibly even more unfortunate than he, has not yet subsided.”

Vela´zquez’s suicide, then, might be cast as the act of a penitent Judas, while Arroyo had the innocence of the madman (or, as we shall see, of the saint). This, however, was not El Popular’s inclination. Vela´zquez’s suicide set him, too, as a victim, so the paper suggested that an unnamed member of the police (presumably Villavicencio), put the idea of murder into Vela´zquez’s head, “like Satan when he tempted Christ, promising him empire over the world.” Arroyo’s slain body, for its part, was portrayed much like the broken body of Jesus, down from the cross (fig. 5; supplemental figures are presented in the online appendix).

The role of the state in the sacrificial act of Arroyo also called forth Aztec imagery of sacrifice. This, for instance, is how Quevedo y Zubieta explained Vela´zquez’s motives in killing Arroyo: “The desire to offer victims is an ailment that is typical of certain groups that surround a dictator. . . . The Aztecs, who

52. “Los horrores que se entreven tras el cien de la Inspeccio ´n General de Policı ´a,” El Popular, September 26, 1897.
Figure 5. José Guadalupe Posada, “El cadaver de Arnulfo Arroyo.” Presentation suggesting the body of a martyr. Like many Posada images of this period, this is printed in Daniel Cabrera’s El Ahuizote. Posada produced a number of images on Arroyo and the Arroyo affair, often printed as broadsheets, chronicling the events and at times using the image of the assassination of Arroyo to advertise the papers. Reprinted in Mello and Cué, Posada y la prensa ilustrada, 113.
eviscerated men on their rickety altars when their tyrant came forth, had their heirs in the group of Inspector Velázquez.”

There are two other details in the case that bring the sacrificial idiom that was deployed into relief. The first pertains to the sacrificers—Arroyo’s assassins—who were dressed like the pueblo, took the additional step of borrowing a Mexican flag and yelling “Viva México!” loudly as they finished off their victim. The abuse of national symbols in the lynching masquerade was not lost on a press that found this detail peculiarly grotesque. Thus, La Patria complained that “the invention is diabolical: Arroyo’s killers cheered for Mexico after committing the crime. Not even Zulus or savages (cafres) do such a thing.” Written in a cooler tone, a couple of months after the event, Jesús Rábago explained the detail in the following terms:

The killers had a moment of decorative coquetry, raising the national flag and waving it in the chamber, as if they wanted Arroyo’s spirit—that had just escaped in a final sigh—to be caught in the folds of the flag like a stunned little butterfly. They also cheered for the authorities that indispensible “Viva México!” which the popular masses cry out as readily when it rains as when they kill. I have been unable to ascertain whether this detail was a result of the artistic spontaneity of the assassins, or whether it was scripted by Velázquez who wanted the complicity of the fatherland [de la madre patria].

Murdered for private benefit, in the name of the people and of the nation—this was Arroyo’s sacrifice.

A second, less conspicuous, but very Mexican detail was the rise to local fame of El Gendarme, a dog who lived in the police station where Arroyo was killed. El Gendarme was said to have witnessed Arroyo’s murder and to have licked that man’s wounds as he lay dying on the station floor. In a classic example of symbolic inversion, the dog recognized the divine sacrifice of Jesus, sharing in his love and in his blood, while the police incarnated Judas’s betrayal. The dog was the true gendarme, while the gendarmes who killed Arroyo were the true dogs. El Gendarme’s fame was such that his death, three years after the Arroyo Affair, was noted by El Diario del Hogar.

53. Quevedo y Zubieta, La Camada, 362.
54. “Un lynchamiento. ¿Es luchador el pueblo mexicano?,” La Patria, September 21, 1897.
55. Rábago, Historia del gran crimen, 45.
56. “Caída de un célebre ‘Gendarme.’” El Diario del Hogar, April 12, 1900.
Arroyo’s two bodies, the body of the innocent victim and the body that was societal refuse, haunted the imagination of the people. The pueblo was certainly not conflated in any simple way with Arroyo, even if Arroyo came to be a popular martyr. Rather he represented the most haunting image of the possibilities that were immanent in the pueblo, for Arroyo was the son of the prototypical honest man of the people. His father, a tailor with a shop that bore the memorable name La corta utilidad (the meager profit), had supported his education with personal sacrifice; his mother had pampered him. Arnulfo went to Mexico City’s best schools, but lack of honest work led him down the path of vice. In his days at the Preparatoria Nacional, and at the Escuela Nacional de Jurisprudencia, “he was often seen strolling; he alternated in good society, dressed elegantly, donned jewels, and no one, upon seeing him, supposed that he was a future criminal, but rather a young man supported by the work of a loving father who sought to provide his children with an honorable future.” But soon “this would-be dandy, dishonoring his frock and his silk hat, began to patronize inns and taverns, and to cause scandals that landed his name on the books of the police department.”57 The case underlined the vulnerability of progress despite the hard and honest work of the toiling pueblo. Arroyo’s fall was an example of the risks that could mire the progressive aspirations of the people. This was Arroyo as degenerate criminal.

But then there was the opposite representation, Arroyo as disoriented victim, flailing out against oppression, ineffective and misinformed. Used by others, even in death. The image of Arroyo as victim haunted the Porfirián pueblo much more than Arroyo as criminal. The pueblo stood accused of killing Arroyo, when in fact he had been killed in its name, but for the private benefit of an unidentifiable mastermind.

And indeed there was a long list of social actors who might have used Arroyo and the pueblo for their private benefit. By killing Arroyo in the name of the people, the police provided a stump for every kind of politician: from Porfirio Díaz, to members of congress, to the city’s lawyers, to El Popular, La Patria, El Universal, and all the other papers, who used the Arroyo affair for their own purposes. So, for instance, one of El Popular’s editorialists entertained the theory that Velázquez and Arroyo were in cahoots with los científicos, thus using Arroyo’s murder to further the interests of its own political faction within the Díaz government:

“There are suspicious facts that lead us to suppose that there was a plot against the President behind Arroyo’s attack, and they are: that Arroyo and Velázquez had been close friends, to such an extent that they spoke to one another with the familiar ‘tu’; that Arroyo in his final days led a disorderly life; and that both of them were friends of los científicos, who were interested in forming a political party.”58 On the other hand, the pueblo’s honor was being defended by self-appointed paladins who, in strengthening their own position as representatives of the people’s honor, were perhaps not so very different from Velázquez, who had disguised his people as plain folks, and raised the Mexican flag while stabbing Arroyo to death.

The wily use of the name of the people for private benefit contrasted with the reaction of the Mexico City plebs. Their fury was vented directly against the police in a riot that broke out as Arroyo’s killers were being taken out to trial. Contrary to the haughty claims of the press and politicians who had taken it upon themselves to defend the honor of the people by claiming insistently that “the Mexican people do not lynch,” the angry crowd pelted the prisoners with rocks, called for their death, and might have killed the former policemen right then and there had they not been escorted by the military: “The pueblo churned on Cordobanes Street, and when the indicted policemen left the Palacio de Justicia, they were met with cries calling for their death. Many people threw stones as if they wanted to do justice by their own hand.”59

Police violence against the people of Mexico City was routine, as was the use of the police round-up against wandering or defenseless people—as with the citizens who were falsely accused of lynching Arroyo—who were then subjected to deportation to the death fields of Valle Nacional, incarceration in Belén prison, or conscription. These injuries were the pueblo’s cause for fury, that were recast by the bourgeois press in the milder register of insulted honor.

And then there was Arroyo, who was a haunting figure for the pueblo not because he represented its honor, but rather because he stood for its most dreaded propensities, either because he was an alcoholic, or because he was an innocent madman. Incapable of governing himself, he had been governed by others, and then killed like a dog with rabies.

Arroyo as criminal was disturbing to the pueblo because he was an example of how easily the people could be criminalized. Arroyo as atavism who defeated

58. “Lo que le falta que hacer a la Justicia,” El Popular, November 27, 1897.
the hard work and sacrifice of his parents and devolved into antisocial criminality demonstrated that criminality was immanent in the pueblo. And this, indeed, was the dominant position of the Porfirian criminological establishment. ⁶⁰

Arroyo as victim, on the other hand, was no less of a threat to the new urban working man. The most dreaded fears of Mexico’s urban poor in the 1890s were forced conscription, being sold into bondage to distant plantations with the pretext of controlling crime waves set off by the new migrations, and being falsely accused and made to stand for another by the police.

The aired defense of “the people” by intellectuals and members of the political class, in some respects sought to tame the most immediate popular reaction to it—violence against the police. El Imparcial, which was the paper that least identified itself with the pueblo’s honor, expressly called on its readers to tone down vitriol against the police: “Swept up by the events of these days, some newspapers have ratcheted up their attacks on the police. . . . The conduct of these papers can mislead the public, sowing hatred against the police, a feeling that unfortunately is already widespread in certain classes of society.”⁶¹

Even the opposition papers that fueled popular indignation against the police were concerned with tempering popular rage: in their insistence that “the Mexican people do not lynch,” they defended the people, while preempting their violent reactions invoking a supposedly essential truth: “We must say this with satisfaction: even though we have been represented as being barbarians, Mexico has never witnessed a lynching.”⁶²

THE POLITICAL CLASS AS CRIMINALS

Accusing Díaz directly of murdering Arnulfo Arroyo was not an option for the Mexican press—even insinuations were politically risky. Since the pueblo had not lynched Arroyo, the criminal element necessarily came from that body of intermediaries that leeched off the people in the name of the state. The police, then, were the principal criminals, but rumors of culpability spread into the political class, threatening prominent members of government. Indeed, the Arroyo affair had deeply unsettling implications for Mexico’s political class.


⁶¹ “No hay que sembrar el odio a la policía,” El Imparcial, September 22, 1897.

⁶² “Un lynchamiento. ¿Es lynchador el pueblo mexicano?,” La Patria, September 21, 1897.
Its unsettling qualities became public with Police Chief Velázquez’s suicide (or murder), a development that left the whole affair unresolved and that had an effect that was as haunting to the political class as Arroyo’s mutilated corpse was haunting to the pueblo. To begin with, the suicide story was open to considerable doubt. So, for example, lawyer Ramón Prida was present at Belén prison in a cell next to that of the apprehended police chief when Velázquez allegedly committed suicide, and Prida viewed his body immediately after it was found. Prida did not believe the suicide theory.63

But Velázquez’s death was disturbing even for those politicians who believed that he had indeed taken his own life. Velázquez had been a political maverick and, very ambitious, had taken it upon himself to collect funds to build a monument to Benito Juárez. Before that he had allegedly found, and restored to public life, Miguel Hidalgo’s pendant of Guadalupe, brandished at independence, and had helped build bridges between the government and the church around the coronation of Guadalupe as “Queen of the Americas.”

Velázquez had acquired powerful patrons. He had been the editor of General Sóstenes Rocha’s, newspaper, El Combate, and was a protégé of Minister of the Interior González Cosío, who had raised him to the office of police commissioner. In addition, Velázquez was a member of Díaz’s knighted class of congressmen and so, theoretically, was immune from prosecution.

Several aspects of Velázquez’s tragedy were disturbing to higher members of Mexico’s political class. First there was the matter of his fervent allegiance to the president. There were only three possible interpretations of Velázquez’s motives for killing Arroyo: either he followed Díaz’s orders, or he anticipated Díaz’s desires and acted under the assumption that the killing would be well received, or he was plotting against Díaz’s life, in cahoots with Arroyo, and had the latter killed when he bungled the attempt.

The latter explanation was popular among those who sought to use the Arroyo Affair against El Imparcial and against the political group that ran it, the científicos. But the científicos, and those who knew Velázquez best probably moved between the first two possibilities, both of which were deeply disturbing, while neither could be publicly aired.64

63. Prida, ¡De la dictadura a la anarquía!, 144–46.
64. El Popular, Jesús Rábago, and novelist Salvador Quevedo y Zubieta were among those who claimed that Velázquez had anticipated what he believed were Díaz’s wishes. Writing after Díaz’s death, the major científico ideologue Francisco Bulnes attributed the assassination of Arroyo to Díaz
There was a fourth interpretation circulating in popular rumor, though it was never taken seriously by members of the political class. This was that Velázquez had killed Arroyo, botched his attempt to pin the murder on the pueblo, and was then secretly protected by his superiors and allowed to escape to New York—shaving off his beard for cover. According to this version, the body that was buried at Velázquez’s funeral was made of wax.

This rumor was, of course, a story that stabilized the identity of the culprit and the moral of the Arroyo story for the lower classes, by identifying the police with the higher echelons of government, and portraying the elites as protecting their own, while leaving the lower-class policemen to bear the brunt of punishment in Belén prison. The press, however, vouched for the reality of Velázquez’s corpse and of his suicide. The rumor was denied even by anti-científico sources like El Popular and journalist Jesús Rábago. As a result the affair remained deeply unsettling in its implications.

Let us return then to the three viable interpretations. The first, that Velázquez was following Díaz’s orders, was troubling to members of the political class because it underscored their vulnerability with respect to the dictator. Velázquez might have followed Díaz’s orders, botched them or hesitated at the wrong moment (he might, for instance, have signaled a temptation to clear his name during his trial), and paid for this with his life. This was a risk for any upright man in the iron grip of the dictator.

The second possibility was at least as disturbing. In that scenario, which was the scenario that was embraced by the press, including El Imparcial, Velázquez had his own form of psychic excess, an idolater’s devotion to Díaz. In this version, Velázquez would have decided to kill Arroyo and to stage the event as a popular lynching with the double intent of taking revenge on Díaz’s would-be assassin, and of pleasing Díaz with an expression of extreme popular devotion (namely, the lynching). What was troubling about this scenario was that psychopathic devotion to Díaz was practically a national characteristic, and excelling in it was deemed to be more an art than a vice. Indeed, Díaz’s 1896 reelection had been launched by the “Sociedad de Amigos de Porfirio Díaz,” which was possibly the most unctuous political association in the whole of Mexican history.

65. Rábago (Historia del gran crimen, 79) called this story “Una fantasía insistente del vulgo”; El Popular also took pains to discount it, “No ha muerto Don Eduardo Velázquez. Se fugó, rasurado, para Nueva York” (September 29, 1897).
So too was the press, including much of the oppositional press. Congress, as we have seen, rushed to give Díaz a vote of confidence before any formal inquiry into Arroyo’s murder had been made. In this context of flattery and adulation, ambitious politicians made their careers by anticipating the dictator’s unformulated wishes.

Thus, while one explanation of Velázquez’s downfall underscored the danger of staying the course of the dictator’s commands, the other laid bare the problem of independent initiative within dictatorship. In either case, the honor of the political class was seriously compromised. In one interpretation, Velázquez had been dragged through the mud of public vilification, stripped even of his congressional immunity, packed off to Belén prison and a probable death sentence, all for following an order that was, in fact, impossible to execute (a credible false lynching).

In the second interpretation, the honor of the political class was compromised because Velázquez had only sought to please Díaz and to further his own career in the way that was available to his class, by anticipating the dictator’s desires, and he was reviled as the basest kind of villain, as an insult to the people, to national honor, and to the dictator himself.

The compounded effect of these two alternative readings generated consternation and fear in the sectors of the political class that knew or identified with Velázquez. Indeed, unease was palpable at Velázquez’s funeral, an affair that was attended by several prominent members of the científico group, such as Rosendo Pineda and Joaquín Casasús. At the funeral, orator Emilio García briefly and bitterly stated that in time, Velázquez would be vindicated.66 Certainly this was a moment that increased the breach between the president and the political class.

As in the case of Arroyo’s murder, the slight to the honor of a class of people—in this case to the political class, represented by Velázquez—led to efforts of public redress. The story of Velázquez’s suicide provided such an opportunity. A suicide, with a letter protesting his faithfulness to Díaz, proved that Velázquez was a man of honor. The papers therefore picked it up, as did the judge, who made no inquest on the loose strings left by the suicide story. (How did Velázquez smuggle a gun into jail? Was there truly no possibility of murder? Wasn’t it suspicious that he committed suicide shortly after hinting that he would provide a no-holds-barred account of the lynching?)

66. Rábago, Historia del gran crimen, 129.
But there were those who sought a different interpretation, one that did not restore honor to Velázquez, but sought instead to condemn the police, and in some cases the entire regime. One of these was the story that claimed that Velázquez had been allowed to escape and that he lived in the lap of luxury in New York. Another version had Velázquez murdered in jail by Villavicencio, at the command of the true authors of the plot—either Minister of the Interior González Cosío (which was journalist Carlo de Fornaro’s version) or Díaz himself (this seems to have been Francisco Bulnes’s interpretation, and is the dominant interpretation of the events today).

Finally, there were those who believed that Velázquez had indeed taken his own life but who still sought to make a villain of him. They did this by stripping his suicide of its honorable implications, and seeing it as yet another manifestation of the “criminal type” of which Velázquez was now said to be a token. Thus, Jesús Rabago wrote, “I have before me a work of modern criminology of the Italian School, advanced and experimentalist, and I find in it an illustration of a man with the exact same symptoms as those that I referred to, and who according to the author represents the physiognomy of suicidal tendencies induced by fear of death.” In this version, Velázquez’s honor was not preserved, but his crime was biologized and so made peculiar to him and thus not representative of the whole of the political class.

The final source of unease for the political class was the fate of detective Antonio Villavicencio. This character, liked by no one and feared by all, was troubling, first, because he had survived Velázquez while he was probably the assassin of both Arroyo and Velázquez, and second, because Villavicencio made a career of moving between the worlds of crime and officialdom. If Velázquez’s fate proved that a politician’s honor was deeply vulnerable, Villavicencio’s persistence demonstrated that for the successful politician, the line between crime and the state had been blurred.

**MEXICO’S FIRST LYNCHING**

Why then did the Arroyo Affair generate such a clamor around national honor? It was because the attempts on Díaz, Arroyo, and Velázquez cast the pall of criminality on the whole of Mexican society. Díaz could not be savior and criminal at once; Arroyo could not be criminal and martyr; Velázquez could not be local

---

public servant and deeply abusive to the public. And each of their conundrums touched a general category of Mexican society: the state, the people, and the political class.

It is useful, at this point, to return to the question of lynching. The Arroyo murder was initially portrayed by El Imparcial and by Porfirio Díaz as Mexico’s first lynching. The alternative press denied that it was a lynching, but joined in the chorus of voices that claimed that lynching was alien to Mexican character. Thus Díaz was the first defender of the honor of the pueblo, followed by the political class, that held Díaz above any suspicion (vote of confidence) and turned inward, against itself and against elements of “the people.” In the process, however, great efforts were needed to keep criminalization discrete, to keep it from tainting an entire category of political society.

Thus, El Imparcial worked to criminalize Arroyo, but not the people as a whole; to criminalize Velázquez and his men, but not the police or the political class as a whole. Others worked to absolve the pueblo and to blame the police, while absolving other sectors of the political class. No one could publicly blame Díaz or accuse the state itself of using the law as a cover for criminal practices, but this was the specter that haunted practically every speech and article on the affair.

In such a context, it was useful to rally national pride, and national pride in Mexico was constructed as an epic of defense against imperial ambitions. Given Mexico’s humiliating history with the United States, favorable contrasts with that country were treasured. Foremost among these in the nineteenth century was Mexican pride in early abolition of slavery, and, indeed, Mexico’s relative racial openness, expressed in the fact that “there was no lynching.” Even as early as 1841, before the US War (but after Texas’s independence), traveler Charles Barinetti commented on how Mexicans prided themselves that lynching and mob violence had not spread to Mexico from the United States.69

Whether or not there were in fact cases of lynching—understood as the execution of a member of a subordinate group in order to preserve the social hierarchy—has yet not been documented. Certainly there was no Mexican parallel to Jim Crow laws, or to the lynching of the Reconstruction, which was designed to keep a racialized sector of local society within a clearly demarcated

---

place and rank. Indian killers in Mexico’s Apache Wars, and in campaigns against the Maya, the Totonacs, and the Yaqui were not thought of as posses or lynch mobs, and their victims were usually killed in military incursions. The harassment and murder of Chinese immigrants, which came closest to US-style lynching, would begin more than 10 years after the Arroyo Affair, during the Mexican Revolution.70

The complex picture that emerges, instead, is that racial violence during the Porfiriato was either directed by the government (and so technically was not a form of popular justice) or by villagers against abusive elites, or else it targeted outsiders to local communities, as was the case of Indian fighters in Chihuahuan pueblos of the 1870s and 1880s. And yet making a point of calling lynching an alien act totally unknown on Mexico’s shores seems a bit haughty.

Indeed, at the trial that judged Arroyo’s assassins, one of the accused, policeman Genovevo Uribe, declared that he had earlier served in the Yaqui campaigns as a conscripted soldier, where in the course of five years he had “witnessed in that time the execution—with a variety of methods—of more than 400 Indians with no legal cause.”71 And yet this confession prompted no public outcry, nor did Díaz claim that it was a blemish in the nation’s honor.

Moreover, though the Arroyo assassination was claimed as a false lynching, it seems to have spawned a veritable fashion of lynching in public discourse: Villavicencio and his associates were henceforth referred to as Lynchers; Arroyo was said to have been lynched by them; but also the pueblo called for the lynching of the guilty policemen;72 news coverage in the aftermath of the event called one of the jailed policemen a “natural lyncher” when he attacked another prisoner; and conscripts like Genovevo Uribe had participated in the lynching of more than four hundred Yaqui Indians. Uncanny: lynching was said to be entirely alien to Mexico, but during the Arroyo affair, seemingly everybody was either lynching or being lynched.

The nation’s dignity was at stake in the Arroyo Affair because the principal sectors of the political society—the people, the political class, and the state—each had its honor compromised: the dictator could be cast as a cold-blooded tyrant and egomaniac, rather than as the stern and benevolent father of the

71. Rábago, Historia del gran crimen, 57.
72. Ibid., 31.
nation; the political class might be the weak and unctuous pawns of a capri-
cious dictator, rather than the vanguard of society’s progressive movement, and
the people might be doomed forever to reproduce the limitations of their par-
ents, or to be helpless victims of the caprice of the political class.

Dictatorship had been justified by Mexico’s political class as a necessary cost
of modernization, stability, and peace. The Arroyo Affair did not slow modern-
ization, or affect regime stability, but it did disturb the peace. It did so because it
placed political society in the grip of an unsolvable puzzle that made reconciling
progress with dignity as difficult as squaring the circle. The gesture of national
pride with regard to the United States looked backward, to moments of national
glory, when slavery was abolished, or when liberal ideals were cherished, in
order to face a haunting sense of moral crisis.

Indeed, it seems that policeman Villavicencio knew instinctively what he
was doing when he ordered his police assassins to wield the flag and shout
“Viva México!” as they stabbed Arroyo to death. By 1897 the national flag had
been planted firmly on the criminal body.