

Jose Vasconcelos, "The Tragedy of California"

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The population of New Mexico, more compactly settled and located on a plain, yielded to the conqueror. And since their lands were not that extraordinarily desirable, there was no real struggle to expropriate them. So the original race remains there, an industrious people who, to the extent that it is possible after a conquest, have preserved not only a certain amount of their property but also a fraction of political power. And it is curious to observe the New Mexican villages and certain barrios of the old cities like Santa Fe. In these we can see what Mexico could have been without the factionalism which has been destroying it since independence. There were not in New Mexico destructive rebellions, nor the expulsion of the Spaniards, nor generals as presidents, and it is there that the Mexicans showed more resistance to foreign penetration, more mettle in the defense of their rights. In more recent years, the waves of Anglo-Saxon immigration have submerged our people, but nevertheless, it is in that region that the Mexican has maintained himself with the greatest dignity.

But where the tragedy reached the proportions of the sublime was in the beautiful land of California. That province was sparsely populated but with a select race of Spanish and Mexican blood. A small landholding aristocracy had jealously developed its Hispanic tradition. Such was this jealousy that even today nobody remembers those sad thirty years in which that territory belonged to our nation, but everyone locates his ancestry and pride in the constructive period [of the Spanish empire] that saw the rise of the missions and the baroque churches, the groves of olive trees, and the haciendas in which the pressing of the grape is still practiced. There were no mercenaries, and perhaps for that reason California was the one territory that defended itself against the Yankee conquest with positive gallantry. For none of the conquerors was the task more difficult than it was for Fremont, the conqueror of Stockton and San Francisco. And all this because in California the ranchers, organized into guerrilla groups, defended their own homes. They were not fighting for any Santa Anna; they fought for their country. And a dangerous guerrilla

tactic, invented by the Californians, even became famous. They would allow themselves to be pursued, feigning flight, by the Yankee forces. Then suddenly, when the number of pursuers had diminished, they would turn around with fury and in a sweep eliminate whole bodies of the Yankee troops.

Nobody has sung the military glory of these veritable heroes whose "saga" should be taught in our public schools. And their conduct points up a manifest truth: where government corruption had not yet reached, where Spanish tradition was still maintained, there the resistance was such that it deserved the honor of being celebrated in an epic. A veritable literature exists in English about the conduct of those valiant men with whom the Yankee finally had to come to terms, granting recognition to some of them of their rights to their own lands, even though other lands were incorporated into the new order of things.

Unfortunately, the best of these warriors perished in the fight; so a truce had to be accepted. Also, most unfortunately, in that clash of combat the Spanish/Mexican, who was like a delicate flower of humanity, faced extinction, crushed by the brutal advances of a young race with uncontrollable appetites.

Not only in literature but also in the cinema there has been celebrated the epic of that California which was ours by blood and which, in part, saved our honor in the year forty-seven, so ill-fated for the rest of the nation, not only for what we lost but the more so for the way in which we lost it. There has appeared a motion picture entitled "The Robin Hood of El Dorado," based on the life of Joaquín Murrieta. It tells a story of extraordinary significance. The period is not that of the war of conquest itself but of the time when gold was discovered, and the picture deals with the effects this event had upon the conquest, with the irremediable displacement of the conquered race in favor of the conquering one. With the pretext of the default of mining funds, both the small and the large Mexican mine owners are dispossessed by the use of savage methods. One of these victims is Joaquín Murrieta, a historical person somewhat modified in the screen version, but eminently representative. Murrieta is robbed of his land, and the woman whom he has recently married is violated. A generous Yankee friend offers to support him in his complaints. Instead of justice, Murrieta suffers new outrages. On the way to his brother's property, Murrieta comes across a bandit who has been robbing and murdering in the region for

both pleasure and vengeance. Murrieta refuses to make common cause with him. Murrieta seeks a personal vengeance. In a sort of grotto, he encounters one of the men who had attacked his house and violated his woman. Murrieta challenges this man and kills him. The bandit, who had witnessed this scene, is left with the money of the dead Yankee. A short time later, Murrieta is publicly whipped by a group of vigilantes. The bandit revives him and finally makes him the chief of the small band that is terrorizing the countryside. But even with Murrieta, the band goes along without any real program. They are like the Mexican revolutionary leaders who shout phrases in support of this or that cause but do not understand what they are saying nor have the capacity to bring anything to completion except when the accidents of war might bring them a victory. One night Murrieta assaults and begins to rob, not North Americans, but a group of Mexican hacienda owners who have gotten together to devise a method of defending their lands from the Yankee manipulators who are usurping them. Just as in the Mexico of today, the Yankee agents act out their version of the Mexican scenario in which the great wealth of the hacienda owners incites the Mexican lower classes to dispossess them and then to massacre them.

After the despoiling of the haciendas in Mexico, in the manner of Villa or Zapata, Morrow and his bank arrive to buy up the lands, that is, unless some other foreigner, who has succeeded in getting some guarantees, does not get there first. Murrieta and his bandits are equally deceived. After Murrieta takes a ring away from one of the aristocratic young ladies, all done up in mantilla and ornamental comb, he recognizes her as the daughter of an old *patron* and returns the ring to her. The young woman then says to him that if he does not return the jewelry to all the others, she will not accept her ring because she does not accept favors. Murrieta hesitates, and the woman explains to him: "All these hacienda owners are victims of the new situation in the same way that you are. We are all Mexicans; so do not attack Mexicans on the pretext that they are rich. Unity will make us strong." Murrieta understands. The young woman, who has suffered deception in her personal life and has also been dispossessed of her lands, joins Murrieta's group and finally convinces him to retire to Mexico and to buy lands with the money that they have robbed from stagecoaches. The beautiful dream of

returning to Mexico gives a romantic tone to many of the scenes. But those of us who know what Mexico was and what Mexico is now sense the deception that lies in store, while at the same time recognizing the gallantry displayed by the actor in the film. But who can ignore the fate that befell the Mexican proprietors in California? The most beautiful part of the film is the bravura, the passion with which the small group of Mexicans, dispossessed of their country, mount their horses, dance with their long-legged and narrow-waisted women, while in due course one after the other falls in the fight. When the aristocratic woman, who has come to be the soul of the group, also falls, one comes to understand the efficacy of the method used in all conquests, which succeed in destroying the top leaders, the select individuals. Immediately, the mass submits. In the general confusion, some few of the conquered race managed to hold on to some of their possessions, dreamed of being property owners, but soon enough the best of everything passed on to the new conquerors, and the defeated nation sank down to the level of the proletariat. Yet the valiant *Californianos*, with all the verve of their singing and dancing, died defending their lands inch by inch, and they continued decorating their saddles Spanish style, and their women wore their laces and shawls, and they all prayed before the altars where their ancestors had prayed, in the open air, unaffected by any laws that forbade outside worship. At least the Mexicans of California remained free of Juarez. Not only that, the shame of Santa Anna never touched them.

In the defeat of California the pride of being Mexican survives. Honor was there. And it is not so bad to lose, as long as one does not lose in the style of Santa Anna. Years have passed, and as the conquest liquidated the aristocrats in all the area it took over, the survivors are left at a loss. Of all those beautiful people who have given noble characters to the literature of California none are left. There remains only the *pochó*. And it has even come to pass that he has imitators in the interior of our country and in its politics.