Mexico’s “Fallen Women”:
Vice and Degeneracy as Barriers to Post-Revolutionary Modernity
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A note on the author: Rachel Delle Palme is a fourth year History major at the University of Guelph. She is interested in thematic history especially the categories of gender and sexuality, the environment, and race. Recently, she has worked in the field of public history including performing historical interpretation at a living history museum and assistant curating an exhibit for the MacDonald Institute. This has awakened within her a passion for local history which she hopes to explore in future projects. In her spare time, Rachel likes to play heated games of Monopoly, walk her siblings’ dogs, and read fantasy novels.

The Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920 was a cultural upheaval that left post-Revolutionary governments the task uniting the people under a new national identity. This new national identity was modelled on ideas of modernity to counteract the corruption of Porfirio Díaz’s regime. The Porfiriato era became synonymous with authoritarian and undemocratic policies which undermined the foundations of the government and Mexican society. This made foreign and local authorities question the viability of democracy in Mexico and put the country’s future at risk. Public policy between 1916-1940 focused on the state’s role in the redemption of the population to re-establish stability and faith in the state. The idea of “degeneration” became a major element in the formation of a modern Mexican national identity. A project that worked to promote “order, legitimacy, and morality” was established to counteract the corruption of society. This paper argues that women’s involvement in the vice industry was a barrier to nation-building in post-Revolutionary Mexico as it politicized the female in opposition to fundamental reform ideas through the perpetuation of degeneration. This will be examined by looking at how these “fallen women” influenced foreign relations, societal constructs of gender, and public health. Prostitution and drug trafficking are the sub-industries of vice that will be the focus of this paper. Historian

Elaine Carey is the leading scholar in women’s role in drug trafficking in post-Revolutionary Mexico. Her profiles of the famous female drug lords Lola La Chata and La Nacha serve as a major contribution to scholarship surrounding gender and narcotics.\(^81\) Meanwhile, Katherine Elaine Bliss has written extensively on the role of prostitution and sexual health in the formation of Mexican national identity.\(^82\) While there has been considerable research in both sub-industries individually, there is little scholarship comparing the two. This paper will recognize the similar nationalist roles that women played in both prostitution and narcotics to help fill this gap in scholarship.

The Porfiriato sought to modernize Mexico through liberal positivism to eliminate vice. The state hoped that this would create a dedicated workforce that would bolster the economy. New feminine idealism was established to support this framework. Díez created a model of the modern female that emphasized purity and honour. However, this model did not effectively extend to the lower-classes as the costs of modernization had left many Mexicans impoverished and reliant on the vice industries.\(^83\) The middle-class used this relationship between gender, class and morality to define their status against the “otherness” of the lower-class.\(^84\) This helped to create a societal divide which prevented the formation of a unified national identity. The Revolution was a response to the Porfiriato’s lack of initiative in implementing total social reform.\(^85\) After the Revolution, female prostitutes, drug addicts and drug mules became symbols of failed Porfirian “false modesty” in the eyes of reformers.\(^86\) Degeneracy was perceived as a sign of the political and economic failures of past administrations.\(^87\) Reformers sought to separate themselves from this corruption by moving towards modernity in a way that included the lower classes in nation-building. In 1930, Dr. Arturo Oviedo Mota wrote the Mexican President, Pascual Ortíz Rubio, to declare that

the Revolution, in its program to redeem the popular classes, is obligated to combat this ‘necessary evil’ left over from the Dictatorship. For the Porfirians, the popular


\(^{82}\) Bliss, *Compromised Positions.*


\(^{86}\) Ibid, 25.

\(^{87}\) Campos, "Degeneration and the Origins of Mexico's War on Drugs,” 381.
classes were despised by Society, and it mattered little or not at all that their children, fodder for the cannon or the brothel, suffered.\textsuperscript{88}

The state sought to portray itself as honourably working towards eradicating degeneracy through the creation of new national policy.\textsuperscript{89} While this was the image they wished to portray, women in the vice industries presented the harsh realities of this national policy.

Creating distance from the Porfiriato corruption was especially important for international relations. Reformers sought to create a nation independent of interference by other countries.\textsuperscript{90} There was a pattern in Mexican history of foreign powers controlling the country, particularly with the French occupation from 1863-1867 and the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848. The corruption that emulated that of the Porfiriato had the potential to instigate interference from the United States government to “civilize” their southern neighbours to prevent degeneracy from spreading across the border.\textsuperscript{91}

The 1930s expansion of the Mexican narcotics industry had been a concern of the United States. In the United States, the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) was formed on June 14\textsuperscript{th}, 1930 with Harry J. Anslinger at its head. The FBN had a particular interest in Mexico’s drug industry as they believed it played a significant role in corrupting their nation.\textsuperscript{92} On April 27\textsuperscript{th}, 1945, the Mexican President Manuel Ávila Camacho decided to crack down on the narcotics industry by removing constitutional guarantees, including a trial, in the cases of drug peddlers and smugglers. In this same speech, he declared Lola La Chata “public enemy number one” and assigned all police agencies to arrest her quickly.\textsuperscript{93} La Chata was a prominent drug trafficker whose empire spanned from Mexico to Canada. She was of special interest to the United States as well, with Anslinger relaying information about her to the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), J. Edgar Hoover.\textsuperscript{94} Anslinger had deemed that she was more dangerous than any man in the drug industry.\textsuperscript{95} Similarly, in 1942 Anslinger called for La Nacha, another female Mexican drug trafficker, to stand trial for her crimes against the nation in US court. Later, some of her workers were arrested in San Antonio for smuggling fifty-five ounces of morphine across the border. This caused Missouri congressman John J. Cochran to “denounce her on the floor of the house of representatives.”\textsuperscript{96} La Nacha vastly expanded upon her husband’s drug business after his death, representing the power of Mexican women on an international scale.

\textsuperscript{88} Bliss, \textit{Compromised Positions}, 6.

\textsuperscript{89} Carey, \textit{Women Drug Traffickers}, 17.

\textsuperscript{90} Campos, "Degeneration and the Origins of Mexico's War on Drugs,” 384.

\textsuperscript{91} Christensen, 216.

\textsuperscript{92} Carey, \textit{Women Drug Traffickers}, 25.

\textsuperscript{93} Carey, "‘Selling is More of a Habit than Using,’” 62.

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid, 71.

Both La Chata and La Nacha had played prominent roles in the drug business during the 1930s and 1940s, a time when both Mexico and the US realized the impact narcotics would have on national goals.\(^97\) La Chata was arrested seven times between 1934-1945 but only experienced limited periods of incarceration and luxury in prison due in part to the corruption of police and the court system.\(^98\) This corruption was exemplified in the fact that she arranged for hair stylists to visit her in jail to keep up her appearance.\(^99\) In prison, she would use her wealth to perform favours for the guards to ensure their future cooperation.\(^100\) Part of her success in the narcotic industry was due to her marriage to Enrique Jaramillo, a former police officer. This connected her to police and politicians who she paid for information and protection.\(^101\)

Her manipulation of the criminal system was evident in the turnout to her funeral. Five hundred people were present at her funeral. One-third of that was reportedly police and government officials who wanted to pay respects to a woman that had assisted them, regardless of her deviancy.\(^102\) The corruption of the judicial system that La Chata exemplified during her lifetime left Mexico exposed to ridicule from the United States. Mexican officials were mocked at their failed attempts to imprison her, and it was deemed that the state could not control the degeneracy of the country.\(^103\) The FBN violated Mexican national sovereignty by demanding the immediate arrest of La Chata and placing federal agents into the country to ensure her capture.\(^104\) Mexican officials felt that this interference directly attacked their independence on an international scale, creating further tension between the two countries.

This international gendered deviancy was further complicated by prostitution. After the Revolution, venues of sexual permissiveness, including cabarets, dance halls, and brothels, rapidly expanded in urban centres in Mexico to celebrate the end of the violence.\(^105\) The increase in vice tourism made border towns prominent locations for degenerate international interactions.\(^106\) In 1920, Alfonso Pesqueira, Mexican consul in

\(^{97}\) Ibid, 69.
\(^{98}\) Carey and Guzman, 32.
\(^{100}\) Carey and Guzman, 31.
\(^{101}\) Carey, “‘Selling is More of a Habit than Using,’” 67.
\(^{102}\) García-Robles, 65.
\(^{103}\) Carey, Women Drug Traffickers, 16.
\(^{104}\) Carey, “‘Selling is More of a Habit than Using,’” 62.
Douglas, stated that “[o]ur border cities […] look like red-light districts.” In 1910, prostitution in the United States was criminalized in an attempt to stop “white slavery.” This caused many American prostitutes to move to Mexican border cities for legitimate work. In these towns, such as Mexicali and Tijuana, the women found not only promising job prospects but also “institutional recognition and regulation through a system of regulated prostitution.” Internationally, Mexico’s regulation of the industry was viewed as promoting “white slavery” which had reached the status of a global epidemic. During the 1920s, multiple sources found that men in Mexico City were active participants in the trade of women into the sex industry. As a result, many reformers in Mexico wanted to abolish state regulation of prostitution to promote an active image in eradicating “white slavery.” Some Mexican legislators attended international conferences and worked with representatives from the League of Nations Campaign to Suppress the Traffic in Women and Children.

Despite the prominent image of women as victims of the sex trade, many actively chose to take part in the industry. An American prostitute named “Ida” said she moved to Mexicali “by her own arrangements” because it gave her the opportunity to earn more money. Another American prostitute working in Mexicali said, “no one was holding her there but that she preferred to earn her living there rather than over a washboard.” These American prostitutes manipulated the duality of life on the border by gaining privilege through their “whiteness” but also expecting protection in the Mexican courts. These women often moved fluidly across the border representing the weaknesses of border security much to the dismay of American officials. This created tension with Mexican prostitutes who believed that they were losing work to these women. In the late 1920s, six Mexico City prostitutes by the names of Ami Aguallo, Julia Andrade, Margarita Martínez, Eufrasia Páramo, Dolores Analla, and Manuela Domensáin, wrote a letter to President Plutarco Elías Calles under the collective name “daughters of disgrace.” In this letter, they argued that foreign prostitutes were at an economic advantage by avoiding negative elements of the prostitution regulation by virtue of their nationality. The American prostitutes were able to perform all “indecent” acts and were able to avoid the humiliation of regulated public health treatments for Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STIs), thus retaining clientele. The “daughters of

108 Christensen, 216.
109 Ibid.
110 Bliss, Compromised Positions, 14.
111 Ibid, 139.
112 Ibid, 15.
113 Christensen, 214.
114 Ibid., 217.
115 Schantz, 554.
116 Bliss, Compromised Positions, 1.
disgrace” argued that the regulations on prostitution profited the American prostitutes who would then take their money out of the country. The “daughters of disgrace” went so far to ask the President whether the regulation “was nationalism or betrayal?” This question represented the popular negative opinion of interference by Americans.

The concept of sexuality acting contrary to nationalism was explicitly represented in the cabarets of Panama City. In 1940, a troop of Mexican “cabaretistas” performed for a crowd primarily made up of American soldiers and sailors in a cabaret called the Alamo. The name of the establishment placed the show in the history of tension between the US and Mexico by evoking images of the Texas War (1836-1838). The dancers wore scandalous costumes in the colours of the Mexican flag and performed a racy dance to the Mexican national anthem. When Mexico’s minister to Panama, José Maximiliano Alfonso de Rosenzweig Diez, heard of this performance he was outraged. This was considered a “scandal” that worked to undermine the national image of the moral Mexican woman that the government worked to portray. The minister was worried this would tarnish the country’s honour in the eyes of foreign nations and undermine Mexico’s leadership position in Latin America.

The vice industries complicated the social construction of gender at the local level which was crucial to defining class and national identity. Many women and girls moved to urban centres, such as Mexico City, after the Revolution to look for work. They were often left economically unsupported due to the deaths of their husbands and fathers during the war. The vice industries offered a sense of economic autonomy for many of these women and allowed them to support their families. This worried the state as it disrupted the patriarchal economy with this influx of women into positions of power or independence. The government was also worried that women’s role of rearing the next generation would be undermined by the corruption of vice. As women “served the social reproduction of the nation” this led to the concept that involvement in the drug industry would pass through the generations. Mexican textbooks in the 1920s reinforced that “women’s public service was based on mothering.” It was accepted

117 Ibid, 2.
119 Ibid, 288.
120 French and Bliss, 6.
122 Carey and Guzman, 23.
123 Carey, "‘Selling is More of a Habit than Using,’” 70.
fact that “degenerative beings produce other degenerates.”

The drug trade entered women’s lives at a young age. Women and children were often seen as assets to drug traffickers as they seemed inconspicuous making it unlikely they would be pursued by police. After being exposed to the drug industry, the state believed that children would be susceptible to corruption by other subsections of vice and criminality. La Chata began as a drug mule for her mother at age thirteen, representing this corruption of youth. La Chata had two daughters who, under her influence, both had careers in the drug industry. From her mother to her daughters, La Chata was the centre of “three generations of peddling women.” Similarly, La Nacha built a family-based narcotics business by giving work to her grandchildren, nieces, and nephews. This matriarchal corruption had the potential to lead future generations further into criminality which would create a society that was more difficult to control.

The public image of feminine involvement in the drug industry was a “Latina firecracker” who “with a swish of the hip and packet of heroin could intoxicate any good […] man.” La Chata complicated this image by being short, overweight, and conventionally unattractive. One report emphasized her unattractiveness by saying she was “not born under the sign of Venus,” who was the Roman goddess of love and beauty. In a report describing her escape to Canada, La Chata was described as “Negroid.” This “blackness” was removed from the “white Mexican” peddler stereotype, further emphasizing her deviancy. Her appearance also did not coincide with the traditional image of the young, underweight female drug addict. This fixation on her appearance speaks to the national model of femininity, which was based on beauty and an adherence to a model of respectable motherhood. La Chata’s success was a threat to the state as it may encourage more women to follow this unconventional path of femininity. Her deviance from the stereotypes threatened the state as they could no longer promote a homogenous identity of women in the drug industry. This deviation from easily recognizable characteristics of criminality created public fear as they could

125 Campos, "Degeneration and the Origins of Mexico's War on Drugs,” 34.
127 Carey, “Selling is More of a Habit than Using,” 70.
128 Ibid, 64.
129 Carey, "Women with Golden Arms,” 780.
132 Ibid, 70.
133 Ibid, 75.
134 Carey, “Selling is More of a Habit than Using,” 70.
135 Carey and Guzman, 30.
not define themselves against the “otherness” criminals, making the risk of corruption seem more threatening.\textsuperscript{136}

Like female drug traffickers, prostitutes were also viewed as a threat to the morality of future generations. A feminine binary of “guardian angel and prostitute” limited the role of women in society.\textsuperscript{137} After the Revolution, mass migration into urban centres emphasized the importance of public entertainment venues in reinforcing “new models of femininity and masculinity.”\textsuperscript{138} A census showed that the population of youth aged ten to nineteen grew by 51 percent in Mexico City between 1910-1921.\textsuperscript{139} This meant that a large population of Mexican youth were exposed to the urban sex industry during their formative years. The state worried that this would normalize prostitution in the minds of youth. Parents expressed concern that their sons would spend their money in sexual entertainment venues which would create a pattern of adultery in later life.

Meanwhile, girls who visited dance halls were portrayed as destined to a life as a prostitute. Women’s magazines again emphasized the role of the mother to safeguard her children by warning “be vigilant with [your] daughters.”\textsuperscript{140} Parents complained of not being able to control their unruly children and asked the state to intervene. The state adopted reformist ideas to prevent youth “from being involved in vice and re-educate them to be productive members of society.”\textsuperscript{141}

Contrary to this image, Mexican prostitutes portrayed themselves as “nationalists” who took part in the industry out of necessity to support their families.\textsuperscript{142} The post-war economy was extremely fragile and offered little honourable work for women.\textsuperscript{143} The “daughters of disgrace” wrote “Mr. President: do not blame us for this kind of life, we were labourers [and] workers, but they have closed the factories [and] workshops, [and] the work in the countryside has been suspended. What can we do? We think that 70 percent of us lead this life out of necessity and only 30 percent because of vice.”\textsuperscript{144} Even adolescent girls were expected to take on the economic responsibility of supporting their families by becoming domestic servants. This lessened the financial burden they caused to their family as boarding and feeding the girl would become the responsibility of her employer. However, many of these girls fell prey to the sexual advances of the men of the household. Some ran away from their employers but were not accepted back into their parent’s household because the purity of their femininity had been tarnished. With little education nor employable skills, they turned to prostitution to support themselves.\textsuperscript{145}

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\item\textsuperscript{136} Garcia-Robles, 59.
\item\textsuperscript{137} French, “Prostitutes and Guardian Angels,” 547.
\item\textsuperscript{138} French and Bliss, \textit{Gender, Sexuality and Power}, 164.
\item\textsuperscript{139} Ibid, 165.
\item\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{141} Ibid, 168.
\item\textsuperscript{142} Bliss, \textit{Compromised Positions}, 1.
\item\textsuperscript{143} Bliss, “A Right to Live as Gente Decente,” 165.
\item\textsuperscript{144} Bliss, \textit{Compromised Positions}, 4.
\item\textsuperscript{145} Bliss, “A Right to Live as Gente Decente,” 168-169.
\end{thebibliography}
strict societal gender code thus forced many women into this profession in an attempt to support their families. This duality of gendered nationalism proved difficult for the state to balance as they wanted to move towards a moral society but did not provide the social supports that would allow women to avoid the vice industries.

The responsibility of public health was given to the state with its development directly correlating with social progress. This was a byproduct of liberal positivism that wanted to measure progress scientifically. The state would fail if they allowed the health of the population to be threatened by harmful drugs and disease that were linked to degeneration.\textsuperscript{146} New policy and programs were established to improve public health. The importance of public health to national identity was highlighted when José Alvarez stated that, “if the laws of Moses were written on two stones, the Mexican Constitution should be written on two bars of soap.”\textsuperscript{147}

On January 18\textsuperscript{th}, 1917, the head of the Federal District’s Superior Sanitary Council pleaded to the delegates at Querétaro to include certain “tyranny” in the constitution for the new sanitation council for the “sake of Mexico’s national survival.”\textsuperscript{148} The Constitution of 1917 created the Department of Public Sanitation to lead a nationwide campaign against drug abuse. They passed legislation entitled, “Dispositions on the Cultivation and Commerce of Products that Degenerate the Race” in 1920 that restricted the distribution of “dangerous drugs.”\textsuperscript{149} This was meant to improve “collective health” which would “correct this sickness of the race-degeneration.”\textsuperscript{150}

Many deviant women outwardly rejected these new laws by continuing to take part in abusing and trafficking drugs. Marijuana was seen as especially dangerous to the race as it was associated with madness which often resulted in violence and crime. Women played a role in smuggling marijuana around the country by manipulating certain symbols of their gender. They braided the drug into their hair, hid it in baskets of fruit or stuffed it in the heels of their shoes.\textsuperscript{151} By linking defiance of the government directly to feminine symbols, these women posed a danger to public health. Moreover, high-class women were associated with opium addiction which allowed them to maintain their beauty.\textsuperscript{152} They promoted a dignified model of addiction that underscored the dangerous narrative the state attempted to portray. Female drug traffickers, such as La Chata, continued to distribute these “dangerous drugs” even after the new legislation. When La Chata was arrested for the last time for having opium in her house, she said, “I am the only one responsible for the narcotics traffic and business I have established.”\textsuperscript{153}

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\bibitem{Campos} Campos, “Degeneration and the Origins of Mexico’s War on Drugs,” 379.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid, 390.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid, 383.
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\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid, 385.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid, 383.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid, 385.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid, 385.
\bibitem{Carey} Carey, \textit{Women Drug Traffickers}, 22.
\bibitem{Carey} Carey, “‘Selling is More of a Habit than Using,’” 72.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid, 74.
\end{thebibliography}
declaration, she took sole responsibility for undermining Mexican public health with one of the state’s “top three” most dangerous drugs in her house further emphasizing her defiance.

The link between degeneracy and public health also influenced the sex industry. Dr. Bernardo Gastélum called syphilis the “number one health problem confronting the revolutionary government” and claimed that two-thirds of the nation were infected. In Mexico City, the number infected was even greater with 50 percent showing signs of symptoms. The blame for the spread of the disease was placed solely on prostitutes, making degenerate women prominent in the state’s public health rhetoric. The state wanted to modernize by “reframing sexuality as [a] scientific rather than moral issue.” The Reglamento para el ejercicio de la prostitución was established in 1926 as a defence against the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STI). This law forced prostitutes to undergo weekly medical inspections for symptoms of STIs with no similar action for their male clientele. This law fits within the framework that tolerated male promiscuity and placed the responsibility of the nation’s health on females. The law stated that those infected were to be prescribed medicine and sent the hospital further emphasizing the desired progress into scientific modernity. The “daughters of disgrace” called the recovery hospitals prostitutes were sent to “corrupt and unhealthy” arguing that they compromised the ideals of the Mexican Revolution. Furthermore, in 1928 forty-seven prostitutes in Mexicali petitioned the federal government about a service tax associated with STI inspection process. The Department of Health investigated the case and found the local tax unconstitutional, forcing them to revoke it. These women were unduly discriminated against due to their occupation and gender, however through civic participation, namely penning letters and petitions to the central government, they were able to shed light on unconstitutional actions which promoted disillusionment surrounding the state.

STIs once more placed prostitutes in opposition to the betterment of future generations. In the 1920s, a blood test to test for syphilis was done in an elementary school in Mexico City with 80% of the children reacting positively for the disease. It was assumed that most acquired the disease congenitally. This represented the promiscuity of the nation as STIs were a signal of multiple sexual partners, presumably including prostitutes. The disease caused premature death, preventing these children from reaching the age to the workforce and thus not making contributions to society. Mexicans feared that this

155 Olcott, Vaughan, and Cano, 115.
156 Kelly, 35.
157 Bliss, Compromised Positions, 3.
158 Ibid, 1.
159 Christensen, 217.
“foreshadowed the nation’s economic ruin.”\textsuperscript{161} To combat this, new sexual health education was established in schools around the country.

New textbooks and curriculum were introduced to reinforce sexual restraint and promote the use of contraception to the youth. The thought was that a well-educated, healthier society would be able to modernize society and create a strong economy.\textsuperscript{162} This spawned controversy as the public believed that sex education would empower women and allow them to seek lives outside of domesticity. The “birth control scandal” of Mexico City in the summer of 1922 showcased the tension this new education system created. There were rumours that birth control pamphlets were being distributed in elementary schools, causing some teachers to lose their jobs. This was viewed as a direct attack on the public’s preferred moral education which taught “scientific household management.”\textsuperscript{163} This event represented the state’s need for carefully balance the maintenance of two opposing elements of modernization; morality and public health.

The influence of women in the vice industry transcended all levels of social policy in post-Revolutionary Mexico. The direct impact of women from the narcotics and sex industries can be seen in foreign relations, social constructs of gender, and public health. Their “degeneracy” politized them as barriers to the creation of a modern Mexican national identity that supported morality. This framework acts against traditionally masculine representations of the creation of national identity by establishing women as active political members in the post-Revolutionary society. The lack of female civic participation created in the Constitution of 1917 caused them to influence the state in unconventional, but undeniably impactful ways.

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid, 6.
\textsuperscript{162} French and Bliss, 168.
\textsuperscript{163} Patience Schell, “Gender, Class, and Anxiety at the Gabriel Mistral Vocational School, Revolutionary Mexico City,” in \textit{Sex in Revolution Gender, Politics, and Power in Modern Mexico} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).
Bibliography


