

INTRODUCTION

FIREARMS AS SYMBOLS OF INSURGENCY AND MODERNITY

Weapons come into focus as easily as they slip out of it. Weapons are often at the center of history, yet the stories we tell of war and revolution tend to focus on people, dates, and events—not objects. Many times, it is the weapons, especially firearms, that bring particular significance to images, songs, and novels of war, yet rarely do we discuss their symbolic meaning. What could we learn if we examined violent conflict through a cultural analysis of its objects? Firearms are widely available, controversial, and iconic tools of violence, and analyzing them means confronting violence in its most concrete but also most symbolic terms. Tools for killing, firearms are also crucial artifacts and tropes for understanding narratives of insurgency and modernity. By analyzing novels, songs, and photographs through the lens of the firearm, *Modernity at Gunpoint* provides new angles for understanding different armed conflicts and their cultural expressions in Mexico and Central America.

The first and second chapter of the book discuss the Mexican Revolution (1910–1940), both vilified and glorified. Since it involved large segments of armed peasants, elites and media outlets responded to the revolution with fear and contempt. Yet later on, as the elites converted it into a moderate project for a postrevolutionary mestizo state, the revolution was exalted as a source of national pride. The third and fourth chapter of the book discuss the Sandinista Revolution (1970s–1980s), often idealized as a utopian project, in which different strata converged to create a new society built on egalitarianism, religion, and arts. However, the project collapsed under its unacknowledged militarist authoritarianism and a US-financed counterrevolution. The fifth and sixth chapters of the book examine the diffuse current postwar and drug-related conflicts in Central America and Mexico. All of these conflicts have been fought and debated through the use of specific weapons.

On Firearms

Human development and war technology are intrinsically linked. In *Speed and Politics*, Paul Virilio has argued that “history progresses at the speed of its

weapons systems” (90). Progress, he writes, has been made possible largely due to advances in weapons technology, which have become increasingly fast and dynamic: from weapons of obstruction to weapons of destruction and communication (*Desert Screen* 6–7; *Speed and Politics* 62, 149). This describes the development from walls and forts to cannons, firearms, and satellites—and most recently to drones, a combined weapon of destruction and communication.

The firearm is a prime artifact of modernity.¹ Modernity understood in Weberian and Virilian terms is a process of rationalization in the context of the development of the nation-state and a market economy—oftentimes through the organization of war and concurrent technological innovation (Virilio *Speed and Politics*; Weber “Wissenschaft als Beruf”). Robert Kurz goes so far as to call the discovery of gunpowder in Europe in the fourteenth century the “big bang of modernity” and the firearm the “fundamental innovation of modernity.” He argues that in Europe these inventions led to the development of an early military industry that resulted in an increased urbanization followed by the imperialist expansionism of Europe.² European colonialism led to divergent experiences of modernity across the globe. In the Latin American context, in particular, modernity was mediated through the experience of the violence of colonialism and intrinsically tied to lettered culture as an influential practice of power (Mignolo; Quijano; Rama; Ramos).³

When addressing Europe’s military evolution, it is quite common to overstate the importance of firearms in the early conquest of the American continent. In the narrative of the conquest, the firearm becomes the symbol of technological superiority, a simplistic and misleading way of explaining the defeat of the Aztec and Inca Empires. Most readers probably learned at some point that the Spaniards were able to conquer the American peoples and territories because they had firearms. Yet this myth of the conquest has been largely debunked (Restall 139–41). Other factors played a comparatively larger role, including germs and the inner conflicts between and within the different indigenous societies. Technology was a factor too, but not firearms. Steel weaponry and armor (against obsidian and bronze weaponry and light armor), crossbows, riding and shipping equipment, and the printing press were the key technologies, as explained by Restall (142–43) and Camilla Townsend (661, 677).

These factors gave the Spaniards a crucial advantage in the conquest; not their few, error-prone harquebuses, which according to Jared Diamond functioned poorly when wet, took a long time to reload, and probably required tripods to fire (76). Cannons played a role in the ambush Francisco Pizarro prepared for Inca ruler Atahualpa in 1532, but the defeat of the empire hap-

pened because of the Inca internal war, differences in war tactics and ethics, and the Spaniards' long, pointed steel weapons (77). This does not mean that the firearm was not crucial for *later* wars and conquests—in particular, in the nineteenth century, when rifles began to be more efficient and mass-produced. Rifles were key in the nineteenth-century imperialist-colonialist expansion of the United States. The 1873 Winchester rifle, for example, is mythicized from an Anglo perspective as “the gun that won the West.” Yet in the conquest that took place three hundred years earlier, the firearm was not yet an important factor.

The ingrained myth of the importance of firearms for the Spanish conquest illustrates that the firearm's functional value is often superseded by its symbolic value. In societies shaped by war, a weapon is never just a tool to kill. A weapon, and the firearm in particular, wields enormous symbolic power. In further elaboration of Jean Baudrillard's object value-system, I distinguish between different values of an object: its functional value as a tool, its economic value as a commodity, its spectral value as an echo in the wounds it leaves behind, and its symbolic value as an artifact, trope, or prop. In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Baudrillard discusses the different values of objects in the context of consumption. He distinguishes between the use, exchange, symbolic exchange, and sign value of objects. Following his logic, weapons can be a mere instrument to kill (“functional logic of use value”); a commodity (“economic logic of exchange value”); a symbol in an exchange where the other values of the object are of little importance, such as the rendering of arms (“symbolic exchange”); or a sign that is directed toward other subjects in order to differentiate oneself, such as the AK-47 as a status symbol (“sign value”) (67). Baudrillard's conception of the sign value was an important step beyond the Marxist fixation on the use and exchange value of objects, but his main concerns were, as Tim Dant has highlighted, “function and ostentation” (508), which are not sufficient to grasp the full scope of an object's *symbolic* values.

Nor is the terminology of fetishism. Many readers may expect a book on weaponry to be in part about fetishism, since the association of firearms with gun lore and the phallus are so immediate. Fetishism is the attribution of power or value to an object, which seems to operate by itself isolated from its context. However, I purposely avoid this terminology and focus instead on the symbolic values of such objects. Fetishism originates from a colonial gaze, in which, as William Pietz has pointed out, it stood for the “pure condition of unenlightenment” (136). In later theoretical developments by Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, “fetish” never completely loses the connotation of being a *mistaken* attribution to an object. Even more current anthropological takes

on fetishism by Michael Taussig (xviii) and Matthew Carlin (508) are still very much focused on drawing a line between a supposed material or empirical essence of an object versus its cultural or decontextualized meaning. Although I am interested in the tension that arises between the functional and the symbolic values of the firearm, the potential falsity of a value attribution is not my concern.

Never merely tools to kill, what makes firearms such symbolically complex objects is precisely their functional value, creating an important interplay between function and symbolic meaning. The object's only function is to harm or kill, and as such firearms are tools for attack; they are also tools of deterrence, yet the deterrence comes from the fact that they are lethal tools, built with only one purpose in mind. Cars can kill, but this is not their main function; primarily they are tools of transportation, whereas firearms are tools of death and harm. This is where the spectral value of weaponry comes into play. Often, the weapon is no longer physically present, but it manifests itself in the physical and psychological trauma it leaves behind—an echo of its main function: harm. The firearm's functional value creates a particular tension and significance when it appears as a symbol. I distinguish between three symbolic dimensions of firearms: the object as artifact, trope, and prop. While all three refer to the symbolic level, they have a different relation to the principal function of the object (table I.1). With "artifact" I describe the sociocultural value of an object in relation to its function and to the subject using it. With "trope" I refer to the allegorical value of an object, a metaphorical, generally more abstract or broad meaning, that is still related to the object's function. With "prop" I refer to the performative value of an object, when the object is used for theatrical purposes—like a stage prop—and furthest removed from its original function.

The aforementioned harquebuses were the lethal yet fickle tools of the conquistadors as well as commodities produced and traded in Europe; as cultural artifacts, they were not overly important at the time, since for the Spaniards they were an unreliable piece of armament that provided a short-lived moment of surprise; as tropes, they are still used today to narrate the conquest as a story of technological superiority. I am unaware of concrete examples of firearms being used as props during the conquest, but one possible deployment would have been the simulation of firepower with dysfunctional cannons or harquebuses—that is, posing with firearms that have lost their lethal quality. As echoes, they appear in the collective memory of Amerindian defeat and loss—but in the nineteenth century, not in the sixteenth century.

To extrapolate these different values of firearms, I analyze a vast cultural corpus ranging from literature and music to visual culture.⁴ This provides a

The Values of an Object: The Firearm as Example		
Functional Value What is it used for?	Tool	Instrument to kill
Economic Value How is it produced, obtained, and traded?	Commodity	Technological and coveted product to be produced and traded
Spectral Value What does the object leave behind when it is no longer there?	Echo	The object is no longer present but it appears as an echo through what it left behind as a direct result of its functional value
Symbolic Values—Dimensions: <i>What does it symbolize or stand for?</i>		
Sociocultural Value	Artifact	The object's sociocultural meaning in relation to its function and the subject that holds it, e.g. the firearm makes a person a combatant
Allegorical Value	Trope	The metaphorical meaning adjudicated to the object, further removed from its function and the individual subject, e.g. the rifle as liberation
Performative Value	Prop	The performative significance of the object, used like a stage prop, furthest removed from its lethal function, e.g. a dysfunctional rifle used for deterrence or decoration

particular take on weaponry and on material culture in general, as something created and negotiated in text, sound, and image. I touch upon the object's physical materiality, but I am mainly concerned with its symbolic construction within cultural expressions. Songs, photos, and novels are prime vehicles for the communication and contemplation of violence, and the weapon acquires its sociocultural significance through them. But I also relate the symbolic meaning back to the object's functional-technical and economic aspects.

Tools and Commodities: Death, Technology, and Trade

In the conflicts discussed throughout this book, several firearms stand out: for the Mexican Revolution, the US American Winchester Model 1894, called the *treinta-treinta* for its use of .30–30 cartridges, as well as German Mauser models and early machine guns; for the Sandinista Revolution, the FAL (Fusil Automatique Léger), a Belgian battle rifle; for the ensuing Contra War, Soviet

AK-pattern rifles; for the drug war, assault rifles such as AK-47s and AR-15s. The types of firearms reflect both the available technology and the means of production and trade at each time. Local firearms production in Latin America has been limited, but there have been some symbolically significant instances of the development of artisan weaponry. Most firearms in Latin America have been imported from countries with big military industries such as the United States, the former Soviet Union, and Western European countries. The rifles and cartridges used during the Mexican Revolution were the result of many nineteenth-century innovations in weapons technology that had made the old front-loaded muskets obsolete. These inventions included cartridges, which encased bullet, powder, and primer in a metal container instead of having to put them separately into the barrel; breech-loading rifles, in which the ammunition was inserted into the rear part rather than from the muzzle; as well as repeating rifles, which contained several rounds of ammunition (Bull 55, 217). Breech-loading, the *treinta-treinta* Winchester was a lever-action repeating rifle and the Mauser a bolt-action rifle. These innovations meant that the firearms used during the Mexican Revolution were more powerful and easier to handle. Mass production made them more accessible.

Following a long-standing pattern, the Mexican rebels acquired most of their firearms in US border towns.⁵ The history of the US-Mexican borderlands is inseparable from that of arms trading. During the Mexican Revolution, US merchants readily provided firearms. Many hardware stores along the border became gun shops (Díaz 75). US companies targeted Mexicans in their ads: “Do you want a good rifle? Remember that an unarmed man is of no value. Write today. . . . It is our desire that each Mexican has a rifle” (quoted in Díaz 75). The arms trade was “funded by a booming export economy (guns for cattle, guns for oil)” (Lomnitz 383–84). In many ways, it determined the military power of the revolutionary factions. The Villistas in the Mexico’s north went through great efforts to protect their railway lines to the border and thus secured their arms’ supply for several years. In contrast, the Zapatistas in the central Mexico struggled to obtain weapons because they did not have such supply lines. The Orozquistas never managed to grow into a bigger movement because anti-US sentiments prevented them from trading (Aguilar Camín and Meyer 30). In response to the Orozco rebellion in 1912 and 1913, the US Congress prohibited arms exports to countries in the hemisphere with internal conflicts, but despite that, arms still passed the border (Díaz 74).

President Woodrow Wilson tried to influence the revolution by controlling weapon flows, at first during the summer of 1913 by giving only Huerta access to legal weapon imports (while other factions had to smuggle theirs). In early 1914, however, flows to all factions were opened. The US occupation of the

port of Veracruz in part had to do with impeding the arrival of a German ship full of arms for Huerta (Katz, *Secret War* 167, 184–86, 196; Knight, *Mexican Revolution: Very Short Introduction* 52). In November 1914 the US forces abandoned Veracruz, leaving behind massive arms supplies. Some historians argue that this was to aide the Carrancistas (Joseph and Buchenau 73), whereas others say it was just “another episode in the long history of US forces mislaying military hardware” (Knight, *Mexican Revolution: Very Short Introduction* 64). Only when World War I increased the demand, did the arms trade in the United States become more difficult for Mexicans. Only the Carrancistas, one of the triumphant factions, were successful in running their own munitions factories (Katz, *Life and Times* 489).

Other important nineteenth-century innovations that played a role in the Mexican Revolution were smokeless powder, machine guns, and trains. Built under the Díaz regime to modernize Mexico, the railway system was appropriated by the rebel troops and used for the swift transportation of troops and weapons. This made the Mexican Revolution a modern violent experience in the Virilian sense, characterized by speed and war logistics. The “scale of the killings was unprecedented, and it reflected in a perverse fashion the depth of the Porfirian progress” (Lomnitz 383). With a death toll of more than one million people, the revolution presaged the two world wars to come: modern wars with swift massive troop movements and high casualties.

Whereas the Zapatistas were severely affected by their lack of trains and firearms, the Villistas “developed an awe-inspiring professional war machine” (Aguilar Camín and Meyer 43). Villa’s massive army, the División del Norte, had at some point more than seventy thousand fighters, including a powerful cavalry. The Villista movement swiftly adopted many aspects of modern warfare, such as international trade, machine guns, trains, and strict military organization with ranks and pay grades (44). Yet they did not adapt quickly enough to the changes in combat tactics that followed the invention of smokeless powder; reducing visibility by means of trenches, ditches, and dust clouds became key (Aguilar Mora, *Una muerte sencilla* 62–63). General Álvaro Obregón had studied the Boer War and the beginning of World War I, and during the 1915 battles of the Bajío, he defeated Villa’s powerful cavalry with trenches, barbed wire, and machine gun nests (62).

The Villistas tended to blame ammunition shortages for their loss, but their defeat had more to do with tactics as well as internal quarrels (Katz, *Life and Times* 492; Knight, *Mexican Revolution* 2:324–25). Villa’s large, well-equipped, and reckless army had been successful against the federal and Huertista forces from 1910 to 1914, but its massive force was relatively powerless against this different style of warfare: “the élan vital of massed cavalry charges

... proved suicidal in the face of Obregón's well-organised, scientifically generalised army" (Knight, "Peasant" 46). Thousands died during the 1915 battles, and this bitter defeat of the División del Norte irrevocably changed the course of the revolution. Many fighters went home, and Villa turned to guerrilla warfare. In the end—after many more years of fighting—the more moderate elite forces, not the peasants and peons, won the war.

By offering these glimpses of the relation between war technology and the Mexican Revolution, I do not want to exaggerate the importance of weaponry over other political dimensions of the conflict, both internal and external. Realism in political science and international relations can be too simple, as it appears to reduce politics to counting weapons—that is, whoever has more weapons has more power. Yet, as DeLay puts it, the "arms trade emerges as a necessary, if insufficient, factor shaping first-order events in Mexican history. Again and again, the shifting architects of Mexico found their plans dependent upon, deformed, or demolished by arms flows from the U.S." (8). Weapons technology itself shaped the development of conflicts. Without explaining conflicts in their totality, highlighting these connections provides insights into how the weapon as tool and commodity affected the Mexican Revolution as well as conflicts that followed throughout the twentieth century.

Sixty years after the end of the main armed phase of the Mexican Revolution, the political and economic landscape of Latin America had changed considerably. The two world wars and the ensuing import substitution industrialization (ISI) policies had lessened Latin America's dependency, and Latin America was in the process of a rapid urbanization. What had not changed, however, was the profound inequality. At this junction, for progressive and poor segments of Latin American societies the Cuban Revolution and Marxism presented instances of intense hope that conditions could change, whereas conservative elements saw Leftist ideologies as an immense threat. This threw Latin America in the midst of the bipolar confrontation of the inaccurately called Cold War: in most world regions except Europe, the United States, and Australia, it was an intensely fought "hot" war—in desperate need of arms supplies.⁶ Unlike the rebels of the Mexican Revolution, the guerrilla groups in Central and South America did not have direct access to the US market. Cuba became their main supply channel. After the Cuban Revolution had triumphed in 1959, Cuba, following an internationalist tradition, tried to export and aid guerrilla movements around the world, particularly in Latin America. Aid came in the form of training, advice, provision of a place to rest and plan on the island—and of course weapons. Usually those firearms were produced in Western Europe or in the Soviet Union and then channeled to Latin American guerrillas.

The Sandinistas, for example, smuggled weapons provided by Cuba into Nicaragua via Panama and Costa Rica (Castañeda 59). They also received generous gifts of arms from Venezuela and Panama, made deals with merchants from the Middle East, and got unexpected help from the *caudillos* of “peace-loving” Costa Rica, who in the 1970s dug up their hidden weapons arsenals for the Sandinistas, remembers Sergio Ramírez (*Adiós* 127–28, 249–50). When the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) split in three different factions—Guerra Popular Prolongada, Tendencia Proletaria, and Tendencia Insurreccional—the pluralist Tendencia Insurreccional, or Tercerista, the one focused on creating broad alliances, was most successful in obtaining weaponry. It also acquired the most political power.

For the Sandinista guerrilla the most important rifle was the Belgian FAL, a powerful fully automatic battle rifle. The National Guard in general was better equipped than the FSLN, but the guerrilla force’s acquisition of fully automatic weapons made them a serious opponent for the first time. Overall, however, the Sandinista guerrilla remained poorly armed in comparison to the military power of the Somoza regime, which did not hesitate to bomb entire cities and to use tanks and machine guns to attack Sandinista hideouts in urban spaces. The Sandinistas used any weapon they could get their hands on: AR-15s, M-1s, pistols. In 1978 a lack of firearms prompted people to take production into their own hands. In particular in Monimbó—an urban, indigenous neighborhood of Masaya famous for its artisan craftsmanship—people used their skills and the gunpowder from fireworks to make homemade bombs and resisted the National Guard with nets, masks, and marimbas. Celebrated by the Sandinistas as a heroic symbol of indigenous resistance in Nicaragua, the use of such weaponry shows the extreme precariousness of the fight.

Many people assume that the global weapon of insurgency, the AK-47, was also the most important firearm of the Sandinista guerrilla. Relatively simple in its technical aspects, it has become one of the most commercially successful weapons worldwide because it is easy to use and fares well under difficult environmental conditions. From the Kalashnikov of the Soviet Union, it became the rifle of liberation struggles in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, making it even onto the flag of independent Mozambique. However, the AK-47 only entered Nicaragua on a large scale in the 1980s, once the guerrilla force had become the regular army. The AK-47 was the weapon of the times of the Contra War. Financed by Nicaraguan elites and the United States, the Contra War erupted shortly after the Sandinistas took power and lasted through the 1980s. The US government under President Ronald Reagan was a powerful, ruthless enemy that did anything to provide the counterrevolutionaries with arms, as evidenced by the infamous 1985–86 Iran-Contra affair. During this

episode, members of the Reagan administration illegally sold arms to embargoed Iran to continue financing the Contras, which had been prohibited by the US Congress. The Sandinistas, turned from an insurgent guerrilla into a revolutionary state party and military fighting counterrevolutionary insurgents, answered with an arms buildup.

In the meantime, conflicts in other Central American countries—in particular, El Salvador and Guatemala—intensified, as conservative authoritarian military regimes cracked down on guerrilla organizations and civilians. In the 1980s the Central American armed forces grew from forty-eight thousand to two hundred thousand members and US military aid to Central America's military governments grew exponentially (Pearce, "From Civil War" 594–95). The Salvadoran guerrillas started to receive arms from across the world, including Ethiopia and Vietnam, smuggled through Cuba and Nicaragua (Castañeda 98). The Western solidarity movements also chipped in. The radical left in West Germany, for example, started a fundraising campaign called Weapons for El Salvador and collected more than 3 million deutsche marks for the Salvadoran guerrillas. The Salvadoran guerrilla became one of the world's best equipped guerrilla movements. Whereas both Cuba and Nicaragua fought "relatively short, small-scale guerrilla wars, with less than a few thousand poorly armed combatants" (Castañeda 102), in El Salvador the war turned into a drawn-out conflict between two heavily armed armies. In Guatemala, where the guerrillas were never very strong in size and equipment, the Guatemalan military used the threat of the guerrillas to militarize the country and slaughter the civilian indigenous population, under the pretense that they were base communities for the guerrillas.

In all of Latin America, between 1959 and 1990, an estimated half a million people were killed "mainly by counterrevolutionary violence" (Beverley 58). In Central America alone, more than three hundred thousand people were killed and over two million displaced (Kurtenbach 95), of these over two hundred thousand in the Guatemalan genocide. With regard to the Sandinista Revolution, an estimated ten thousand to thirty-five thousand people died during the fighting in the 1970s and another ten thousand to forty-three thousand died during the Contra War in the 1980s (Lacina 405). In the early 1990s peace agreements were reached in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala; disarmament and demobilization processes began thereafter. Tens of thousands of combatants from both sides were demobilized and thousands of weapons destroyed or sold. Yet the violence did not end. Central America still feels like a battlefield, only that now the lines have become blurrier. Throughout Central America, especially in El Salvador and Honduras, homicide rates are among the world's highest. Governments have responded with militarist tough-on-crime *mano dura* politics to the gang violence that emerged in the



FIGURE I.1. Diego Rivera, *Paisaje Zapatista El Guerrillero*. Banco de México Diego Rivera Frida Kahlo Museums Trust, México, D.F./Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York (reproduction rights); Museo Nacional de Arte (MUNAL) (provided high-quality image).

poor neighborhoods as a result of Latino gang members deported from the United States; however, the major drug-trafficking organizations have been allowed to operate in the region with impunity. The precariousness of many of the youth gangs has manifested in the return of artisan makeshift weapons: easily discarded cheap pistols made out of metal tubes and springs, called *armas hechizas* or *chimbás* (Godnick 8).

The leftover weapons from the wars in Central America have sometimes ended up in the Mexican drug war, a conflict that has been brewing since the 1970s but escalated in 2006 when President Felipe Calderón declared a war on drug trafficking. The main source for the weapons used in the drug war is the US retail market. According to a 2013 edition of *Small Arms Survey* (“Captured and Counted” 295), an estimated 68 percent of the firearms used by drug-trafficking organizations in Mexico come from the United States. Assault rifles such as the AK-47 and the AR-15 are the order of the day. The AK-47 is the most important weapon associated with Mexican narcos; many narcocorridos sing of the AK-47, affectionately calling it “goat’s horn” due to the rounded shape of the magazine. Yet the firepower acquired officially by government forces far supersedes that of alleged criminal insurgents. Since 2007 Mexico has undergone a process of heavy militarization. Human rights violations and disappearance have increased exponentially. Many people have died in this conflict: an estimated 170,000 people dead and counting (*El País*). In both Mexico and Central America, military spending is on the rise. As the Cold War confrontations fade into memory, the region still operates under the sign of the rifle.

Artifacts and Tropes: Citizenship, Militancy, and Modernity

The meaning of firearms as artifacts and tropes goes to the heart of my analysis. The firearm appears as an artifact of participation within state and modernity in texts about the Mexican Revolution, as an artifact of militancy and a trope of modernity in texts about the Nicaraguan Revolution, and as a confusing sign in the current drug war. These symbolic meanings relate to the question of the use of force in politics, the dangers of militarism and revolutionary justice, and the complex interactions between gender and weaponry.

The Rifle as Artifact for Participation within State and Modernity

Diego Rivera captured the symbolic significance of weaponry in *Paisaje Zapatista El Guerrillero*, one of his earliest paintings of the Mexican Revolution (figure I.1). He painted it in 1915, after a momentous encounter with the young writer Martín Luis Guzmán. Rivera was at the time studying painting in Europe. Guzmán, recently exiled from Mexico, visited him at his studio in Paris and gave him a riveting firsthand account of the rebel campfires and the Villista and Zapatista occupation of Mexico City. Rivera would later judge the cubist painting to be his “most faithful expression of the Mexican mood” (cited in Ades 129). Except for the still volcanoes in the background, everything in this painting is in turmoil, floating in an upside-down world: the shad-

ows in the painting are white, not black, and through the cubist technique of faceting, most objects appear in pieces. There are fragments of a colorful serape and a tall wide-brimmed hat. The Mexican peasant attire points to a rural context, but no person takes shape. Only two objects appear intact: a rifle in the center and an empty paper note seemingly nailed to the right corner of the canvas. Amid the upheaval, the rifle is the only thing that is distinguishable, the only object that stands out clearly. Meanwhile, the empty paper note—somewhat detached from the painting because of its *trompe l'oeil* three-dimensionality—is a reminder of the tasks ahead: to write the story of the revolution, to give it shape, to make sense of the turmoil. This story must necessarily start with the rifle.

The multiple uprisings and diverse events commonly referred to as the Mexican Revolution involved local and national elites, but it was also one of the most important peasant insurgencies in Latin America, encompassing indigenous and mestizo peons and small farmers in the south as well as cowboys, settlers, and rural workers in the north. This is what lurks behind the rifle: a new political entity. Through the rifle the peasant enters the political arena and national consciousness. The rifle at that moment stops being just a tool of violence or a commodity and becomes an artifact. It is the rifle as artefact that Rivera captures in his painting and that appears in so many other cultural expressions of the revolution. By joining *la bola*—the revolution's mobile collective of insurgents traversing the country—the combatants realized their self-worth and affirmed their presence. *La bola* gave them, as Aguilar Mora puts it, “the precious gift of finding their place; of finding that . . . with just a Winchester rifle as their sole property, their life was pertinent precisely because of the fact that they owned it” (*El silencio* 126).⁷ Equipped with a rifle and draped in cartridge belts, these peasant insurgents manifested themselves within the nation and became visible as social and political subjects.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has famously argued that subalterns cannot speak since they are not being heard, in the sense that subalterns rarely manage to imprint their subjectivity within history. But to some extent, they do speak when they carry a rifle—even more so when their images circulate widely, as was the case during the Mexican Revolution, the first modern mass-mediated revolution. In *Mexico's Once and Future Revolution*, Joseph and Buchenau caution against overstating the influence of the Mexican Revolution, arguing that in terms of impact it “pales by comparison to the Cuban Revolution” (9). Arguably, the Cuban Revolution had greater global repercussions, but the symbolic and hemispheric significance of Mexico's massive peasant insurgency should not be underestimated, especially because of its powerful iconography. Therefore, throughout this book the Mexican Revolu-

tion is the starting point for all inquiries into the meaning of firearms in the region. The rebels, especially the Villistas, had photographers, writers, and film crews at their disposal, enabling them to project to a broader audience. The rebels thus imprinted their peasant-popular political subjectivities into the collective imagination, and these images were taken up in songs, novels, paintings, and movies, traveling far and wide.

The rifle as artifact carried other important symbolic significance. It meant a visible participation within modernity. Generally dismissed as backward and stuck in tradition, peasants were handling rifles, mounting machine guns, riding trains, and having their picture taken. Thus they undeniably participated in modernity in all its swiftness and belligerence, as theorized by Virilio (*Speed and Politics* 62, 149). Appropriating modern technology, these peasants rose to resist an elite project of modernity and demand an alternative one built around social justice and identity politics.⁸ Violence can also be seen as a “communicative exchange . . . in which destruction of property and the infliction of physical harm (sometimes unto death) is the essential mode of signification” (McDowell 19), and the firearm is a pivotal object in this exchange. Letting the arms speak in the form of an insurgency, a collective revolt against authority, is a form of negotiation, an act both vis-à-vis and within the state: part negotiation with the state apparatus, part participation within the state’s formation.⁹

In cultural expressions from or about the Mexican Revolution, the firearm appears as such an ambiguous artifact of communication—from the corridos about the *treinta-treinta* to the novels of the revolution such as Mariano Azuela’s *Los de abajo*, Nellie Campobello’s *Cartucho*, Martín Luis Guzmán’s *El águila y la serpiente*, and Rafael Muñoz’s *Vamónos con Pancho Villa*. Often these depictions are not necessarily positive or affirmative. In fact, many novelists appear horrified by the unruly peasant armies, their frenzied violence and never-ending firing squads. Horacio Legrás, for example, has pertinently argued that most *novelas de la revolución* “express such dismay at the lack of moral or ideological convictions involved in the revolution that one is forced to wonder in what sense these are novels of the revolution” (*Literature and Subjection* 112–13, italics in the original). Subaltern studies generally advocates turning to court cases and other archives to surface subaltern thought and talk, yet we can also analyze fiction created by elites and read it against the grain to excavate the subaltern thought imprinted within it. Legrás as well as Juan Pablo Dabove in *Nightmares of the Lettered City* and Max Parra in *Writing Pancho Villa’s Revolution* have offered such against-the-grain readings of novels of the Mexican Revolution. My book does so as well, but by focusing the reading on the main instrument of expression of the insurgents. In many

of these texts, writers fixate on weaponry, trying to discover its deeper meaning. This representation has two sides: the political-performative reality of the peasant insurgent and his firearm manifest in the literary piece, and the mediation and interpretation by elite discourse.

As the meaning of the revolution reveals itself in the firearm or is sought in the firearm, we as readers can sense both the firearm's potent political-symbolic significance and the powerful form of myth-making in relation to the firearm. Weapons become a means to mediate the political, not in the sense of the often negatively connoted "party politics" within a representative democracy, but rather "the political" as the sphere of actions, attitudes, and processes that revolve around forms of social organization, generally in the form of a state, and around power. What is peculiar about the symbolic significance of weaponry in the cultural expressions of the Mexican Revolution is that firearms do not primarily appear as artifacts to take over the state apparatus but as artifacts to affirm one's presence vis-à-vis the state and society, to become and to be recognized as a social and political subject—a prosthesis for citizenship.

The use of force in the realm of politics is a topic hotly and long debated in philosophy and political science. There are those who see war as the natural order of things (Thomas Hobbes) and those who see war as the "continuation of politics with other means" (Carl von Clausewitz), or its inversion by Michel Foucault—namely, politics as "the continuation of war by other means," ("Society" 15) or politics as a field of friends and foe with the latent possibility of war (Carl Schmitt), so violence as inherent to politics. There are those who warn firmly against its use and perils, who warn not to confuse violence with power (Hannah Arendt), and those who theorized and embodied non-violence as a powerful tool (Mahatma Gandhi). Then there are those thinkers who to varying degrees defend revolutionary political violence as a means to bring about change—in particular, to end the harm inflicted by capitalism and colonialism (Karl Marx; Friedrich Engels; Frantz Fanon). As Idelber Avelar illustrates in *The Letter of Violence*, the legitimation of the use of force in Marxist political thought is based on the axiom "that revolutionary violence brings with itself, by definition, the promise of an end to violence as such" (5). The idea that revolutionary violence is redeeming constitutes the "ethical basis for the vindication of violence" (5, italics in original). Yet from today's perspective, it is questionable whether revolutionary violence can "be neatly separated" from other types of violence (6). Also, spirals of violence after the triumph of an insurgent group and authoritarian tendencies of many left-wing revolutionary movements and regimes have cast doubt on this utopian disposition and possibility.

“Violence” is a slippery word as it encompasses many more aspects than direct or physical violence, which is physical harm against people and property. Johan Galtung coined the term “indirect violence” (83), violence that materializes in poverty, inequality, and dependency. Spivak described epistemic violence (76), which is exerted through language, knowledge systems, and their assertions and negations. Slavoj Žižek called the former “systemic violence” and the latter “symbolic’ violence” (1–2, 9). Revolutionary violence is often directed explicitly against direct—as well as indirect and epistemic—violence and can in turn exert its own direct, indirect, and epistemic violence. Throughout the book, my main focus is direct violence, although I keep these overlapping yet different types of violence within analytical view. I attempt to ground the discussion of political violence by focusing primarily on physical violence and one of its main tools and artifacts.

While this book does not propose a solution to the conundrum of the use of force in the political realm, it offers an exploration of the complex and contradictory nature of insurgent violence by pointing to its instrumental, economic, symbolic, and traumatic dimensions. For that purpose I analyze the firearm as the object through which these dimensions of direct insurgent violence are expressed and negotiated—within the particular discursive space opened up by cultural production. I turn to Walter Benjamin, who developed a complex take on violence in the political realm. He questioned the nexus between ends and means when it comes to the justification of violence. According to Benjamin, this nexus is the most common but flawed construction within natural and positive law. Written before his immersion within Marxist thought and under the impression of the writings by anarcho-sindicalist Georges Sorel, Benjamin’s 1921 essay “Critique of Violence” offers a critical evaluation of violence in relation to the state, in particular to the law. Often misunderstood, partly because in German the word *Gewalt* simultaneously means force, violence, coercion, and power, the essay points to the violence underlying any conception of law. Benjamin distinguishes between three different types of violence/power/force: law-making (*rechtsetzend*), law-preserving (*rechtserhaltend*), and law-destroying (*rechtsvernichtend*). He criticizes law-making and law-preserving violence but exalts law-destroying violence because it destroys the violence of the law and does not intend (yet) to impose a new order, to become law-making violence. Whereas law-making violence is menacing, bloody, avenging (*sühnend*), and concerned with affirming its own power, law-destroying violence is striking (*schlagend*), sovereign (*waltend*), expiatory-absolving (*entsühnend*), and life-affirming (59–60, 64).

Law-destroying violence, also called divine violence by Benjamin, is a pure, cataclysmic violence that erases what was before. Divine violence is violence

that just is. It is only means and does not need to express an end. In many ways the armed violence of *la bola* is an expression of this violence. It appears most clearly in Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo*, the most canonical novel of the Mexican Revolution. In the book men take up arms and they continue to fight, all the while refusing to explain why. The peasant insurgents compare themselves to a stone that keeps on rolling (Azuela 207). Fighting and moving is paramount (209), and what comes after is of lesser importance. By pointing to the stone metaphor or to the law-destroying violence present in narratives of the Mexican Revolution, I by no means want to repeat the dismissive gesture of the fiction itself, where this representation served the purpose of highlighting the peasants' lack of political conviction or consciousness. There exists a generalized tendency in politics and historiography to depoliticize, minimize, or criminalize peasant insurgency. Ranajit Guha has argued most compellingly against this tendency, since it takes subjecthood away from the peasants in the very moment that they manifest themselves as subjects through insurgency (*Elementary Aspects* 3). Analyzing the case of peasant insurgency in colonial India, Guha pointed out that this "was a motivated and conscious undertaking on the part of rural masses" ("Prose of Counter-Insurgency" 46) and cautioned against narratives of spontaneity about peasant insurgencies where these appear as natural phenomena without direction; Guha cautioned that generally peasants had too much at stake to rise in an act of "absent-mindedness" (*Elementary Aspects* 9; "Prose of Counter-Insurgency" 45–46). For the Latin American context, Florencia Mallon has argued against the idea that peasants in the long nineteenth century (1820s–1930s) did not have a conception of the nation and argued for a historiography that "accounted for the active participation and intellectual creativity of subaltern classes in processes of nation-state formation" (3).

The metaphor of the stone appears to deny subjecthood to the peasant, and Azuela's oeuvre is full of these natural metaphors to describe the masses (Dabove, *Nightmares* 256). Yet, in a Deleuzian reading, Dabove has compellingly argued that the political dimension of the "nomadic politics" of *la bola* lies precisely in the rebels' refusal to explain the purpose of their insurrection (253–54). Dabove sees the political dimension of the insurgency in *Los de abajo* in the fact that the peasant insurgents "never appeal to 'Mexico' as the final cause of the war" (254), meaning that they operate outside of the conceptual confines of the nation-state. Yet if we add Benjamin to the mix, we see the state dimension of their acts, since the destructive dynamic of *la bola* makes away with one of the pillars of the state: the violence of law. Azuela wants to highlight the unjustified, directionless violence of these peasants, especially in the more negative second edition.¹⁰ However, Benjamin helps us

to see the acts of this small *bola* not as a lack of conviction or ideology but as a manifestation of divine violence—a violence that destroys the previous regime but that is nonviolent in its affirmation of life versus the blood violence of the law.

Benjamin's defense of insurgent violence, however, is not a defense of revolutionary terror. In fact, he explicitly criticizes executions as violent means of positing law ("Zur Kritik der Gewalt" 43). When revolutions start to judge and execute people for the purpose of establishing their own *Gewalt*, they cease to be an instrument of law-destroying violence and become an instrument of a new violent law-making and law-preserving force. This is crucial as we think through the issue of what has wrongfully been called "revolutionary justice," but which is rather utterly problematic revolutionary law making. The French Revolution's guillotine and the Mexican Revolution's endless firing squads stand as a reminder of the violence directed against supposed internal and external enemies. So do the Cuban Revolution's televised executions of former henchmen and the instances of guerrillas turning against their own, which are among the most chilling and disturbing moments of the Latin American left (Franco *Cruel Modernity* 120–51).

The Sandinistas wanted to escape this dangerous circle of revolutionary law-making violence. The expression by FSLN founder Tomás Borge that his "personal vengeance would be the right of his torturer's children to schools and flowers" sums up the FSLN position and myth on that subject: in this revolution, from a position of moral superiority, there would be no acts of vengeance or execution. While there were instances of executions in the aftermath of the war, the Nicaraguan Revolution was a revolution that in general "refused the temptation of the *paredón*" (Gould 13, italics in original).¹¹ Yet the Sandinista Revolution fell prey to another form of law-making violence: militarism. Benjamin specifically warned against militarism. Based on the definition by Martina Klein and Klaus Schubert (196), I understand militarism as the organization of the state and society according to military ideals and values, including bellicose categories of thought (the necessity of war, hierarchy, discipline, and obedience) and the glorification of military culture through marches and the display of uniforms and weaponry. Benjamin defined it more broadly as "the compulsory, universal use of violence as a means to the ends of the state" ("Critique of Violence" 241) and used it to establish the critical interrelation between violence and law.¹² Militarism uses violence to preserve and to make law and subordinates the citizen, in particular through conscription, under the law for a "legal end" ("*Rechtswzweck*," "Zur Kritik der Gewalt" 40). Quite pointedly, forced conscription under the Sandinistas (the Servicio Militar Patriótico established in 1983 in the midst of the Contra War)

is one of the main reasons that the Sandinistas lost popular support. This is the danger when the revolutionary violence starts to establish itself, when it becomes the new regime: it oozes its own law-making and law-preserving violence and thus becomes violent again, because it no longer suspends the violence of law-making. Militarism is an imminent internal danger of regimes that have come to power through armed conflict or that are, or feel they are, under attack by internal or external enemies.

Since Benjamin's text is not a theory of revolution but a *Kritik* (a critical evaluation of different forms of violence), and because he defends an undirected pure-means violence, Benjamin seemingly does not offer an answer to the possible organization of a postrevolutionary regime. There is, however, a hint of how he interprets the meaning of insurgent violence for the order that follows it in his criticism of representative democracy. Benjamin criticizes parliaments for offering a "woeful spectacle because they have not remained conscious of the revolutionary forces to which they owe their existence" ("Critique of Violence" 244).¹³ It would be a mistake to simply see his frustration as an example of the German mistrust of democracy in the context of the Weimar Republic, as Avelar has pointed out (*Letter of Violence* 97). Rather, it is a call for more radical politics, for a legislature that makes laws according to the force/violence/power (*Gewalt*) of the people that created it. Benjamin's is a call for more daring, radical politics, "worthy of the violence" ("dieser Gewalt würdig") ("Zur Kritik der Gewalt" 46) that created the parliament in the first place. On the one hand, he wants to point out that it is a fallacy that parliaments are nonviolent means for making politics, since "positing law is positing power and as such an act of immediate manifestation of violence."¹⁴ But on the other hand, there is a hope in the text, however vague, that parliaments use their power to develop a radical revolutionary political agenda. It is unclear how that would work, but if we go back to the only violence that Benjamin exalts (law-destroying violence), it would need to be leveling, absolving, life-affirming, and always destroying its own authority.

In the cultural production throughout *Modernity at Gunpoint*, the firearm is the symbol and a reminder of the need for such insurgent politics—meaning that the violent, radical, precarious gesture of armed insurgency appears as a call for a politics that levels. As such, the firearm appears as a prosthesis for citizenship, a means for people to affirm themselves as political and social subjects. That a firearm functions as a prosthesis of citizenship is far from ideal—and through the notion of the firearm as echo, I discuss many of the harmful effects of this violent conception of politics. Yet it has to be seen within the postcolonial reality of countries built on feudal-capitalist and racial hierarchies. Within these structures the majority has always been

excluded from positions of power within the state and market, and as such the firearm becomes a means to be seen or heard.¹⁵

Rifles and Gender

This participation within state formation through firearms is also, unsurprisingly, deeply tied to questions of gender.¹⁶ Often the people affirming themselves through firearms are men, and with the firearm they affirm themselves both as men and as citizens. That power, state formation, and citizenship are so often played out through men and arms has consequences. Within armed conflict an “extreme masculinity” can emerge (Franco, *Cruel Modernity*). Based on “an idealization of the dominating and ruthless male figure,” this form of masculinity uses “massacres, rape, and desecration” for internal cohesion of groups of aggressors who are trained to become oblivious to acknowledging the body’s vulnerability (*Cruel Modernity* 15). Rape of women and men, dead or alive, is used to denigrate the enemy and impose one’s masculinity. In this context the rifle is not only an important artifact and trope of masculinity; it can also become a menacing repurposed tool and trope of sexual violence.

Extreme masculinity is not the only masculinity that emerges when it comes to armed conflict. In the cultural expressions studied here, two main types of masculinity are at play: the virile masculinity of the man of arms, both desired and feared; and the frail masculinity of the man of letters, fearful or effeminate, mocked but also affirmed. These are symptomatic of the gender and class dimensions at work when it comes to masculinity, weaponry, and politics in Mexican and Central American cultural production. The men of arms often come from a peasant or generally lower social background than the intellectuals, and the awareness of class and education distances them, frequently giving a patronizing tone to the intellectual’s maneuvers. In many novels the intellectual appears as being drawn to the man of arms, his violence and virility, but also as trying to position himself outside of the violence, portraying himself as a pillar of reason amid frenzied action. The intellectual figure tends to flaunt his lack of dexterity with the gun, but he also needs the firearm or the man of arms to substantiate his revolutionary status and virility. It seems like the frail, seemingly nonviolent masculinity of the intellectual is often devalued. Yet the power-savvy rationality and linguistic capacity of this masculinity is also reaffirmed as the form that will prevail and shape the future of the nation: exalting the war masculinity but administering it from afar.

When it comes to women and war, things become even more complicated: often women are either absent from war narratives or the woman with the

rifle is a highly ambiguous and controversial image. There is a deep interconnection between gender roles and war. Across cultures and history, war and gender have always mutually influenced each other (Goldstein 9–10). At the core of the correlation lies the pattern that in order to “help overcome soldiers’ reluctance to fight, cultures develop gender roles that equate ‘manhood’ with toughness under fire” (9), whereas they keep “women away from killing roles” (127). The military relies on women but also needs to keep them away from “combat”—a term that “is usually conveniently vague in definition” (Enloe 13). By maintaining “combat” as a male domain, men can continue to “claim a uniqueness and superiority that will justify their dominant position in the social order” (15). Throughout history, however, women have changed and subverted gender roles in relation to war by participating in numerous ways and adopting combat roles (Cooke and Woollacott 323). By constantly redefining “combat” and the “front,” the military has used the essential services supplied by women for a smooth functioning of the war machine but still managed to make women appear as “creatures marginal to the military’s core identity” (Enloe 6).

There is an assumed gendered division of labor during war that equates the military sphere with public-masculine and the civilian sphere with domestic-feminine. Mary Louis Pratt has pointed out that within this common misconception the military sphere is the space where history is made by men-citizens who carry out productive (war) activities: they fight, they are soldiers. The civilian-domestic sphere is outside of history, constituted by women-noncitizens who carry out reproductive activities in the home: they wait, they are daughters, wives, girlfriends, sisters of soldiers (“*Mi cigarro*” 159). Yet while war narratives often operate with these dichotomies, the history of war tends to be more complicated than simple oppositions (Cooke 31).¹⁷ There is an enormous dependency and permeability between the two spheres. During armed insurrection, spaces of participation can open up for women, but they are generally still determined by patriarchal structures of power, and there is an enormous economic and social pressure to remain in the civilian-domestic sphere. While the rifle in the hands of a woman intrigues societies and artists, it breaks gender roles so drastically that it seemingly always needs to be qualified, chastised, or restrained. The woman with the rifle threatens both the gender and the war system; thus, the weapon generally appears as an uncertain or transient artifact in the hand of a woman.

At the same time, the female element can be used to legitimize war, which was the case especially among the Sandinistas. One of the most iconic photographs of the Sandinista Revolution is that of a breastfeeding woman with a broad smile on her face and an AK-47 on her shoulder: “*La miliciana* de

Waswalito” taken in 1984 by Orlando Valenzuela.¹⁸ This image has been used multiple times in political campaigns and murals and is still commonly sold as a postcard in Nicaragua. It is a powerful image because of the unselfconscious naturalness of the breastfeeding woman and because of the simultaneous presence of a baby and a rifle. Liberation and joy emanate from the photo.

The problem, however, was that even though the woman in arms was celebrated, her own liberation was not necessarily part of the Sandinistas’ agenda. The photo has hence been criticized for “harnessing women for war without altering fundamental gender relations” (Goldstein 81) and for initiating the de facto return of women to the domestic sphere after the war (Enloe 166). The figure of the emancipated female combatant soon gave way to the conventional one of the mother producing warriors for the nation, as both Goldstein (81) and Sofia Montenegro have pointed out. The photo can be viewed in two ways. One possible reading shows that women can be both mothers and warriors, simultaneously carrying a baby and rifle, thus allowing for complex identities. In the other interpretation, the revolutionary gesture is celebrated, but the radicality of the armed woman is reined in by the presence of the baby and the rifle is a temporary accessory, a prop in a photo op.

Regardless, overall there is a strategic use of women in the Sandinista discourse. Through the presence of women, Sandinista songs, posters, and literary texts underscored that their violence was different from that of reactionary forces and right-wing dictatorships. It could not be the same if women were a part of the fighting. Ileana Rodríguez offers an extensive analysis of this in *Women, Guerrillas, and Love* and cautions that “the revolutionaries deluded themselves in believing that by proposing an ‘alternative maleness,’ one incorporating female traits such as *tendresse*, they would deliver the New Man” (33, italics in the original). In a way the focus on *tendresse* made the Sandinistas overlook their own authoritarianism and militarist machismo. The relationship between sandinismo and women (particularly feminist struggles) is an often disheartening tale (Kampwirth; Randall, *Sandino’s Daughters Revisited*; Montenegro; Heumann; I. Rodríguez), but for many women the participation in the insurgency was nonetheless a pathway for personal liberation (Belli, *El país*; Randall, *Sandino’s Daughters*). Despite the limitations and obstacles that women faced within the guerrilla organizations, it is certain that the Central American guerrillas saw a proportionally much higher number of women in combat and leadership roles than in previous insurgencies.

The Rifle as Artifact of Militancy and Trope of Modernity

In the second half of the twentieth century, as guerrilla movements erupted across Latin America, there were more active fighting roles for women, but

this was not the only change. While the peasantry was the main agent in the early twentieth-century insurgencies, in the guerrilla period it was the middle class—at times in broad alliances with peasants and elites—that took up arms. The Cuban Revolution (1956–59) and the Guevarian theory of the *foquismo* became the example to follow: a small group of insurgents fighting a guerrilla war in the mountains creates a focus that then supposedly triggers a general insurrection. The triumphant Cuban Revolution did not invent armed struggle, there was a long tradition across Latin America, but the Cuban regime “refined a tradition, and made it a policy of state and party” (Castañeda 69) and “affirmed armed struggle as the only way to bring about change” (Franco *Decline and Fall* 88).

Given that the Cuban Revolution became the example and supporter of many armed movements in the world, it is curious that the revolution’s iconography rarely features weapons. Rather, the militarist and masculinist elements of the guerrillas in the Sierra Maestra are encapsulated in the men’s beards, uniforms, and cigars—attributes with which Fidel Castro and Che Guevara rarely parted throughout their lives after the Sierra Maestra. Only a handful of photos exist that feature Guevara with a firearm. The rifle only becomes central after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution as the artifact that turns men and women into *guerrilleros* and *guerrilleras* and that bestows true militant status. Even though the FSLN eventually moved away from the Guevarian focus theory, the Sandinista militants aspired to be like El Che. The rifle as artifact became a prosthesis for militancy. It showed one’s will to use violence but, more important, one’s willingness to sacrifice, to take on the hardship and danger of guerrilla warfare, in the mountain or the city, and to live in the proximity of death. The rifle was a symbol—artifact, trope, prop—of one’s conviction. Holding it therefore brought one closer to El Che, whose emaciated cadaver, whose sacrifice as Latin America’s very own Messiah, was the example to follow.

Whereas the rebels of the Mexican Revolution spent little time justifying violence, the Central American guerrillas did. In the Sandinista discourse there were many very deliberate and careful attempts to justify the use of violence. In this context the rifle often got detached from its lethal function and instead became a trope of the new dawn. Although the Sandinista Revolution did not have a deep grounding in Marxist thought and the revolutionaries took a certain pride in not being theoretical nor dogmatic, they still operated under the Marxist notion of revolutionary violence as redeeming (Avelar, *Letter of Violence* 5). The promise of the Sandinista Revolution was an end of violence. Through armed struggle, Nicaraguan society would be cleansed of its long history of both indirect and direct violence. The revolution was also

aimed at ending epistemic violence—that is, it was going to give agency and a voice to subaltern people so that the nation could come into its own.

In the Sandinista discourse the projection of a nonviolent future materializes in what I call an enchanted modernity. This concept, discussed in detail in chapter 4, appears vividly in the songs of Carlos and Luis Enrique Mejía Godoy, Nicaragua’s most famous singer-songwriters. Contrary to Max Weber’s well-known conceptualization of modernity as characterized by an increasing rationalization that leads to disenchantment (“Wissenschaft als Beruf”), in the Mejía Godoy brother’s songs a vision appears in which armed struggle brings about a romantic, egalitarian, nonsecular, nonpositivist and hence enchanted society. This ideal is embodied and symbolized by the metaphor of a rifle that shoots auroras.

While the Sandinista Revolution differs in many aspects from the Mexican Revolution, it was also haunted by its powerful iconography. The Sandinista discourse similarly harbored the idea that the rifle as artifact could function as a prosthesis for citizenship. The song “Asalto al Palacio” from *Canto épico al FSLN* retells the events of the spectacular seizing of the Nicaraguan Congress in August 1978 by a Sandinista commando. A corrido composed and written by Carlos Mejía Godoy but sung by Mexican singer Amparo Ochoa, the song activates the memory of the Mexican Revolution. It celebrates the firearm as the object that gives people the power to exercise their political rights, to effectively become citizens: “when the furious rifle roared . . . for the first time, the citizenry was truly in session.”¹⁹ In the song, true citizenship starts with the roar of the rifle. The difference is that most Sandinista militants were not subaltern subjects trying to affirm their presence through the rifle. These were generally men and women already constituted as political subjects by their class or formation; however, the Somoza regime had made their citizenship and life—and those of others—precarious. Whereas the Mexican rebels rose to negotiate and participate within state formation, the Sandinistas rose with the explicit aim to take over the state apparatus. The rifle was an expression of militant citizenship, of insurgents who wanted take control of the state apparatus because it had lost legitimacy and represented an exclusive, repressive, and exploitative elite project.

The Rifle as Blurry Sign: Neoliberalism and the Citizen as Violent Entrepreneur

In the context of today’s drug war in Mexico and Central America, the connection between rifle and citizenship appears less evident. More than a hundred years after Rivera’s 1915 painting, the rifle again is the only thing that stands out sharply, but what lurks behind it is far less clear. This is partly due to the conflict being current, since it tends to be easier to evaluate events in

retrospect. But the blurriness also has to do with the conflict and the times themselves. The current drug war is alternately seen as a criminal insurgency, a civil war, or a conflict through which a state tries to control its market share via counterinsurgent techniques. Granted, the Mexican Revolution was also an all-out civil war, utterly confusing and with shifting alliances, different rural and local concerns, and state and nonstate forces overlapping and changing. Yet the issue with the current drug war is that no clear political identity seems to lurk behind the rifle but the narco—a nebulous shape of ruthless capitalist interests and desperate attempts of survival and consumption. However, this does not make the conflict any less political.

Including the narco complicates things because it seems to not quite fit. My main concern in this book is insurgency by violent nonstate actors, but sometimes these cannot be so easily distinguished from paramilitaries and state actors.²⁰ Battle lines are often blurry as insurgents take on state functions, counterinsurgents disguise or see themselves as insurgents, or a state creates supposed insurgents. In the current armed conflict, any ideological underpinning other than neoliberalism is hard to see, and the narcos are certainly not a leftist group trying to take over the state via armed struggle. But the lack of a clear political ideology does not make the thousands of civilians, paramilitaries, private security guards, and state forces who are currently under arms in the region any less real. This urges us to think about the narco phenomenon in relation to state formation, citizenship, and modernity.

Including the narco phenomenon helps us to see that these conflicts are not as separate as some would make them out to be. It helps to see continuities, similarities, and differences. There have been overlaps between insurgency, counterinsurgency, and the drug business. During the Cold War, for example, drugs were used to finance insurgent and counterinsurgent actions (Andreas 283; Valenzuela Arce 20). Once the Cold War was over, drugs replaced guerrillas on the US radar; drugs have been a welcome reason to stay involved in the region and have dominated relations and military aid since the 1990s (Andreas 285, 288). Meanwhile, the state apparatus in most Latin American countries has responded to drug-trafficking organizations in the same manner as it did to the guerrillas: counterinsurgency warfare, often euphemistically called low-intensity warfare. Dawn Paley has argued that a greater historical awareness, especially of the “US-backed counterinsurgency war in Central America,” helps to elucidate the drug war in Mexico since the Central American wars are “part of the repressive memory that has been activated in order to carry out the ongoing ‘war on drugs’” (“Repressive Memories” n.p.). Unsurprisingly, many former elite soldiers from Central America and Mexico now work for drug-trafficking organizations.

In the current conflict there appear to be very few insurgents; most of the men with guns appear to be state forces or paramilitaries, meaning that they are violent actors operating in relation to the state or taking on state functions. Thus the rifle as a prosthesis for a citizenship constructed within insurgency does not quite fit. But maybe the firearm in the narco context is precisely that appropriately nebulous artifact for intervening within a receding state in a neoliberal, postmodern context. The citizen has become an entrepreneur, and the narco is a good market-citizen in the sense that he uses all means—exercising violence and embodying other state functions—to make a profit. In this conflict the rifle is, above all, a blurry sign. As such, it appears as a tool of violence and an artifact of a neoliberal conception of citizenship and modernity but more often as a mere prop.

Props: Theater and Truth

When a firearm is used for performative purposes, it becomes a prop; the firearm's symbolic significance is paramount and it is furthest removed from its lethal function. In photos of the Mexican Revolution, the firearm is both artifact and prop, when Zapata, Villa, and rank-and-file rebels pose with firearms and cartridge belts strapped across their chest. The use of the firearm as prop becomes even more evident in the hands of women, which in turn underscores yet again the ambiguity of the female combatant. There are photos from the Mexican Revolution of women “armed” and uniformed through *rebozos* crossed over the chest, emulating the men's cartridge belts. In her memories of the Sandinista Revolution, Gioconda Belli recalls that during the early days after the triumph, she and other Sandinista militants who had not actively fought in the guerrilla went through Somoza's arsenals to equip themselves with the all-essential rifle dangling from their shoulder. This use of the firearm as a revolutionary accessory makes it both artifact and prop, a sociopolitical and performative symbol of militancy (*El país* 329).

The use of firearms as props becomes most visible in the violent contexts that emerged after the end of the Cold War. One example are the *neozapatistas*. In the early 1990s, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari deepened the neoliberal restructuring of Mexico and all seemed quiet. The revolutionary fervor seemed a sentiment of the past. But in 1994 an indigenous group from Chiapas disguised with ski masks and armed with a few rifles erupted onto the world scene and declared war on the Mexican government. The Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) laid down their arms but never surrendered them and turned into what Anne Huffs Schmid has called a “discourse guerrilla.” They invoked Zapata and demanded that this time not the

generic peasant but the indigenous subject be recognized as a citizen of the nation. The new Zapatista army was poorly armed and used the rifle more often as a prop than a tool; several members marched only with wooden rifles. By quickly ceasing fire but without rendering their arms, they garnered widespread global support. Yet it was the memory of the previous massive insurgencies that gave power to a group that defined itself as speaking through “the fire and the word” (“el fuego y la palabra”). This made their performative politics so forceful. The new Zapatista army used the ski mask as a sly reference to the bandit trope so often applied to armed peasant insurgents and as a conspicuous artifact to underscore the invisibilization of indigenous people within the Mexican nation-state. The insurgents used the real and wooden rifles as a reminder of the violent potential of the people and the need for more radical politics. The rifle as symbol, once converted into a prop in the form of a wooden rifle, became not obsolete but rather symbolically more powerful without obliterating the threat of insurgency.

But such a wooden prop is also a sign of the precariousness and lack of funds of the Zapatistas. The wooden rifle is as much a symbol of power as it is of powerlessness. It is the prop of defense of the losers of colonization and globalization. The wooden rifle also appears on *La Bestia*, the cargo trains used by Central American immigrants in desperate attempts to cross Mexico and migrate to the United States to escape violence and poverty. It is a dangerous trip, and the trains are repeatedly attacked by gangs and security forces. So the migrants use sticks as props for deterrence, as Oscar Martínez observed on his travel on *La Bestia*: “A Guatemalan indigenous man holds a stick, which he holds as if it were a rifle and aims at the darkness. The silhouette deceives” (72).²¹

These wooden “rifles” contrast sharply with another prop prevalent in current times: the lavishly decorated golden and silver assault rifles and pistols displayed in narcocultural expressions. Golden AK-47s appear on album covers of narcocorrido singers and on Instagram accounts of self-denominated narcos. Similarly, the Mexican government under Calderón spent much time and energy on elaborate displays of confiscated weapons obtained in government raids of houses of alleged narcos: always the most powerful sniper rifles up front, boxes full of ammunition, and soldiers holding up golden assault rifles and pistols for the press. The government used these weapons arrangements to showcase and exaggerate the firepower of narco organizations but also to underscore their cultural-moral threat, their exotic otherness and ostentatious indecency. In narcoculture—the cultural and material production around the real and imagined traits of the lifestyle of those involved in the illegal drug business—the not necessarily functional golden rifles are objects

of a different performance than that of the government. The objective is to underscore virility and to display social mobility through an unapologetic consumerism. Different parties thus use the rifle as prop to stage different “truths” about the drug war, which makes it one of the most important but also most confusing signs of the war.

Echoes: Trauma and Legacy of Insurgency

Firearms are not only present as tools, commodities, and symbols; they also manifest themselves when the object itself is no longer present. They acquire a spectral value in the wounds they leave behind. They leave a trace, an echo, in the body and the mind. In Nellie Campobello’s *Cartucho*, for example, the echo of the firearm manifests itself in numerous ways; weaponry appears as the source of physical and psychological trauma. Campobello’s book is full of the echoes of violence, full of corpses left behind by battles and executions, full of desecrated bodies, full of cruel and senseless violence, and full of women like Nellie’s mother who is “tired of hearing the 30–30s” (“cansada de oír los 30–30”) (84) and whose eyes have grown big and hard during the revolution pressed against “a rifle of her memory” (“un rifle de su recuerdo”) (83). The cartridges and Winchester rifles leave an indelible echo in the text. Both Margo Glantz (47) and Jorge Ruffinelli (“Nellie Campobello” 64) have argued that bullets and rifles are the true protagonists of *Cartucho*. They can be sensed and heard within the rhythm, the sonority, and the constrained rapid fire lyricism of the narration. Thus Campobello re-creates the atmosphere of war and the penetration of senses and thoughts by weaponry.

Published during the Calles era (1928–1935), *Cartucho* was explicitly written against the then common vilification of Villa (Parra 51–52), and in defense of the insurgent gesture of so many rank-and-file rebels who took up arms to affirm their presence before state and society. But the book also shows the brutal and traumatizing reality of revolutionary war. The book “is a haunting and haunted text” (Linhard *Fearless* 175). An acute sense of trauma runs through the text, which speaks from the wound (178). *Cartucho*’s main narrator, a little girl, is haunted by the firearm as echo. For example, in the vignette “Desde una ventana” (Campobello 88), the girl appears fascinated with and haunted by a corpse that for days lies on the street in front of her window. When people take the corpse away, the girl hopes that they execute another one close to her window. Weimer sees this attitude as a normalization of violence (112), but I find that the narrator’s apparent nonchalance is also a way of dissimulating her trauma and compassion. The girl’s tone suggests that *el muerto* does not affect her, but she feels compelled to look at the corpse all the time, especially

because he “seemed so afraid” (“parecía que tenía mucho miedo”). She cannot sleep thinking about the “doodle of his body” (“garabato de su cuerpo”), the echo of the armed violence, imprinted on her mind.

Along these lines, Martín Luis Guzmán’s *El águila y la serpiente* dedicates a chapter to the wounds left behind by firearms. At the military hospital in Culiacán, Sinaloa, the novel’s protagonist is shocked to see the manifold wounds inflicted by “the imagination of the bullets” (“imaginación de las balas”) (144). So shocked is he that he intellectualizes the horrors by anthropomorphizing the bullets, complaining that not all dutifully fulfill their lethal duty. He had always believed that bullets would have “a certain sensitivity, a certain conscience” to follow their “exclusively deadly mission” (“de cierta sensibilidad, de cierta conciencia . . . su misión exclusivamente mortífera”) (144). But now he finds that bullets are more imaginative, humorous, and playful, inflicting great pain, mutilating and leaving terrible and ridiculous wounds: a perforated abdomen, cerebral and spinal wounds, a missing eye, slicing the earlobe (145). The talk of the “good humor” (“buen humor”) (147) of the bullets is contrasted with the scenes of agony that surround the protagonist in the hospital. Memoirs by Sandinista militants, too, are full of echoes of armed violence—in particular, the ghosts of the fallen. Sergio Ramírez recounts the anguish when he received yet another call about a slain militant and how he lived in constant company of death: “There was a smell of formaldehyde in the air” (“Había un olor a formol en el aire”) (*Adiós* 46). The many deaths incurred in the guerrilla years led to a fervent death cult for the revolution’s martyrs. When Salman Rushdie visited Nicaragua in 1986, he found the country “full of ghosts” (7).

Current postwar and war literature, less nostalgic and more disenchanting and angry than the Sandinista memoirs, are equally haunted by the echoes of war: the hurt bodies, the traumatized minds, and the demobilized combatants who, afloat after the peace agreements, are ever ready to return to their weapons. Militarism is the specter of these novels. In Horacio Castellanos Moya’s *Insensatez*, fragments of terrible witness accounts and a paranoid yet justified fear of the Guatemalan militarist-racist police state haunt war victims and the protagonist. In Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda’s *Contrabando*, about the Mexican drug war, an eerie Rulfian atmosphere reigns where villagers tell stories of incursions by armed men as well as dead and disappeared relatives. The firearm as echo in these texts reveals armed insurrection as a precarious political gesture, desperate, overshadowed by the possibility of one’s own death and that of others. This echo in these cultural expressions enables us to see a complex dynamic in which the firearm becomes a means for political or socio-economic participation within unequal societies, which leaves behind wounds

and voids: physical and psychological trauma and loss as well as political and social trauma due to a drastic militarization of society during conflict.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1, “Carbines and Cartridge Belts: Affirming One’s Presence,” examines the prominence of rifles and cartridge belts in songs and Campobello’s *Cartucho*. From the perspective of a little girl, *Cartucho* tells of the local and quotidian aspects of the Mexican Revolution in Chihuahua. The book presents the most complex depiction of revolutionary war, as it fully embraces the revolution’s contradictory nature: brutal, precarious, dignified, and traumatic. The firearm appears as an artifact and echo of dignity and pain. *Cartucho* as well as several corridos tell a story of the Mexican Revolution, in which the masses primarily used firearms not to take power but to affirm their social and political presence. *Cartucho* illustrates the insurgent gesture of the many, often anonymous, rank-and-file rebels who died during the revolution, commemorating their precarious life and death. Drawing on ideas by Walter Benjamin, I show that Campobello represents the insurrection of the people of northern Mexico as constituting an imperative for more radical politics. There is an intent in Campobello’s text to incorporate women in the same radical democratic state-building, but often the rifle has not the same meaning for women. For women the rifle tends to be not an artifact of empowerment but a trope for male violence. This representation has to do with historical realities as well as with Campobello’s literary-political project. On the one hand, she celebrates and defends the revolutionary armed gesture of the brave men of the north, but, on the other hand, through the presence of women, she highlights nonviolent means for state-building: compassion and story-telling.

Chapter 2, “Pistols and Paredón: Violent Politics of Affect and Modernity,” examines the relationship between war technology and modernity in Guzmán’s *El águila y la serpiente*. The novel narrates the experiences of an intellectual who between 1913 and 1915 accompanies the rebels, first in the north and then in Mexico City. The novel’s main focus, however, is Pancho Villa and his pistol. Again and again the narrator turns to the famously irascible and affectionate rebel leader. Villa’s politics of violence and affect are both appalling and appealing to the intellectual. His pistols and firing squads implode the intellectual’s primary ordering principle: the dichotomy between barbarism and civilization as the pillar of Latin American political thought. Instead, the novel leads the intellectual to the unfathomable realization that there is a deep interconnectedness between modernity and violence. The intellectual experiences the Mexican Revolution as a modern event of speed (through trains,

telegraphs, photographs, and moving images), which all point to a modern rural political subjectivity that the intellectual cannot quite grasp.

Chapter 3, “Riddled by Bullets: Weaponry, Militancy, and People in Arms as Desire and Enigma,” discusses the importance of weaponry in autobiographical texts of Sandinista militants. In such books as *La montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde* by Omar Cabezas, *Adiós muchachos* by Sergio Ramírez, and *El país bajo mi piel* by Gioconda Belli, the firearm is the artifact that makes a person a *guerrillero* vanguard. The bourgeois protagonists of the texts have to create their militant identity in relation to the firearm, even though not all had active combat roles. The chapter traces the disintegration of the Sandinista trope of the “people in arms,” when peasants took up arms against the revolution during the Contra War.

Chapter 4, “Songs of Guerrilla Warfare and Enchantment: Popularizing and Legitimizing Armed Struggle,” analyzes the one medium that was specifically aimed at reaching “the people”—the music of Carlos Mejía Godoy and Luis Enrique Mejía Godoy. Widely popular but understudied, their music was a central medium for the communication of the ideals and the self-conception of the Sandinista insurgents. In particular, the albums *Guitarra armada* and *Amando en tiempos de guerra*, launched during the intensification of the fighting in 1979, popularized and legitimized armed struggle by teaching listeners how to use firearms such as the FAL (the Fusil Automatique Léger) and, more significantly, by sanctifying, zoomorphizing, gendering, and sexualizing armed struggle. The firearm is intrinsically linked with the Sandinista vision for an enchanted modernity. Analyzing their 1981 post-triumph cantata-suite *Canto épico al FSLN*, I highlight the intersection of utopian, Catholic, romantic, and militaristic discourses in this vision for a future society, which like a phoenix was to emerge from the ashes of violence. This vision of modernity materializes in pastoral images: biblical rivers of milk and honey; fallen guerrillas turned into birds and trees; and an aurora-shooting carbine.

Chapter 5, “Hidden Arsenals: Demobilized Combatants and the Postwar State of Mind,” examines the significance of weapon arsenals in contemporary Central American postwar fiction. Hidden caches and depots with grenades, assault rifles, and rocket launchers appear as tropes and echoes of the unresolved legacy of war and the pressing postwar violence. They belong to demobilized combatants from both the right and the left. So prominent is the figure of the ex-combatant in this literature that I have identified an emerging subgenre that I call the demobilized combatant novel. Former fighters roam Central America equipped with a heavy arsenal in such novels as Horacio Castellanos Moya’s *El arma en el hombre* and Franz Galich’s *Managua, salsa city* and *Y te diré quién eres*. While these novels about vi-

olence workers offer an astute critique of the devastating and violent effects of neoliberal modernity, because of their uncritical adoption of an action movie aesthetic, they fail to develop a more critical engagement with the legacy of militarism. I contrast these texts with Claudia Hernández's short stories from *De fronteras*, which lay bare the emotional and societal trauma of war precisely by not featuring violent showdowns or high-tech firearms.

The flashy aesthetics and flamboyant uses of weaponry are the focus of chapter 6, "Golden AK-47s and Weapon Displays: The Props of the Drug War." The chapter examines literary texts, songs, and visual materials about the Mexican drug war to highlight the different meanings of firearms in this conflict. The firearm often becomes a nebulous artifact, identifying people as participants in the conflict but not their affiliation. In Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda's novel *Contrabando*, armed men repeatedly attack settlements in the Chihuahua mountains, but it is unclear whether they are narcos or state forces or both. Weapons are used for performative purposes within official government discourses and within narcoculture. In this theater of war weapons become props to create dangerous, exotic criminals, to present the government as a pillar of righteousness amid moral decay, or to display manly prowess and unapologetic consumerism in the context of a violent life.

Looking at and through the Barrel of a Gun

My cultural analysis of weaponry provides new perspectives on violence, material culture, and state-building. I trace how firearms are used to narrate and negotiate insurgent and counterinsurgent violence. Many scholars have studied representations of armed conflicts in Latin American texts and songs, yet they have devoted little attention to the tools of violence such as firearms. Curiously, two important studies of the objects of modernity in Mexico forgo firearms, focusing instead on seemingly more innocuous or less politically charged objects. The recent *Technology and the Search for Progress in Modern Mexico* by Edward Beatty focuses on technologies of industrialization in nineteenth-century Mexico: the sewing machine, the glass bottle-blowing industry, and the cyanide processes for gold and silver refining. Rubén Gallo's *Mexican Modernity*, a seminal study on objects of modernity, focuses on the Vanguardist fascination with cameras, typewriters, radio, cement, and stadiums—after the armed phase of the Mexican Revolution. This is a curious omission because for Mexican avant-garde artists, the firearm was an important point of reference. Campobello not only wrote a book titled after the rev-

olution's cartridges, and which featured bandoliers on the cover, but she also put on a massive ballet with more than a thousand dancers called 30–30, after the revolution's Winchester rifles. Famous Italian-American photographer Tina Modotti during her time in postrevolutionary Mexico took still life pictures with cartridge belts. There is also the oft-overlooked radical art movement ¡30–30!—recently analyzed by Tatiana Flores in *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Gardes*.

Modernity at Gunpoint puts the firearm—the object that most clearly encapsulates the violence inherent in projects of modernity—in the center of analysis. It starts right between Beatty's and Gallo's books, when the rifle changed the face of Mexico. Next I analyze the object's role in the region's other cataclysmic conflicts. I build on the exceptional work done by scholars of literature, culture, history of the Mexican Revolution (Aguilar Camín and Meyer; Aguilar Mora *Una muerte, El silencio*; Arce; Dabove *Nightmares*; Gollnick; Knight "Peasant"; Legrás *Literature and Subjection*; Linhard; Lomnitz; Noble; Parra; Pratt; Ruffinelli). For the Sandinista Revolution, I build on several important studies (Chávez; Franco *The Decline and Fall*; Henighan; I. Rodríguez; Saldaña Portillo) and scholarship by Leonel Delgado and T. M. Scruggs. With regard to Central American postwar literature I draw on William Castro, Beatriz Cortez, Misha Kokotovic, Catalina Rincón Chavarro, and many others. Finally, for narcoculture and narconarratives, the scholarship of Luis Astorga, Shaylih Muehlmann, Juan Carlos Ramírez-Pimienta, Omar Rincón, and Oswaldo Zavala has been indispensable.

Violence in Latin America has been and continues to be a topic of widespread public, political, and academic concern. In the midst of an abundance of academic studies on violence in Latin America, often with a high level of abstraction, critical voices have called for "more grounded" studies on such topics as cruelty and weaponry (Pratt "Violence and Language"). While several outstanding and chilling books have done so by analyzing torture, such as Franco's *Cruel Modernity* and Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, mine is the first book specifically devoted to the cultural meaning of firearms in the Latin American context.

Writing *Modernity at Gunpoint* has brought me to places where few scholars in the humanities have ventured, and lesser so female ones. The research brought me, among other places, to a shooting range in New Hampshire as well as to a tucked-away section of the library, dark stacks with no trace of human traffic: classification U, about military science. The editors of *A Cultural History of Firearms in the Age of Empire*, a study of the cultural symbolism of weaponry in the context of Anglo-American expansionism, say that they put their book together to take "firearms from the clutches of encyclopediasts and

technical enthusiasts” and to study them beyond their technicalities and as artifacts central to “class, gender and ethnic identities in both the metropolis and the colonies” (Jones, Macola, and Welch 1). Similarly, my book works to bring the critical study of weaponry into the realm of the humanities. It provides a different angle by thinking about weapons and gun culture in relation to cultural production and in relation to political and criminal violence in Latin America. The aim is to establish a dialogue with scholars in the humanities and social sciences and show how cultural production shapes the sociocultural significance of objects. Many historians of the Mexican Revolution happily cite novels as part of their sources or to illustrate points. In much historical scholarship one notoriously finds a reference to the most famous chapter of Guzman’s *El águila y la serpiente*, “The Fiesta of Bullets” (Joseph and Buchenau 2, 55; Knight *Mexican Revolution: Very Short Introduction* 1, 54) analyzed in detail in chapter 2 of this book. Historians use Guzman’s novel as a striking or problematic metaphor to describe the revolution but do not engage with the literary construction of this most controversial chapter. Yet we have to analyze cultural texts as products in their own right, as distinct discourses, pivotal to myth-making and state-building.

Text, music, and visual culture constitute different means to aid, condemn, understand, or represent armed conflict, and they touch the audience on different aesthetic, affective, and sensory levels. Weapons acquire meaning through cultural expressions and, in turn, give meaning to them. Several photographs of revolutions have become iconic, first and foremost, because of the presence of weaponry; and throughout songs resound the roars and bursts of the rifle. Then there is the firearm to which novelists return again and again as the object harboring a deeper meaning about insurgency. All these cultural expressions make the firearm such a polemic and formative object.

Looking at Mexico and Central America Together

Modernty at Gunpoint shows that the firearm has shaped sociopolitical developments and literary traditions of Central America and Mexico in the twentieth and twenty-first century. This book thus brings together two neighboring regions that are rarely studied together: Mexico and Central America. A look at the shared and divided history, politics, and literature of Mexico and Central America illustrates the profound cultural-political impact of national revolutions within the region as well as the interconnectedness of these conflicts. It highlights similarities and discontinuities in armed negotiations of politics and modernity and offers a better understanding of their rich literary traditions, as they relate to insurgency and beyond.

History and Politics: Differences and Connections

When looking at Mexico and the seven Central American countries together, one faces blurry demarcations.²² Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama are ethnically and linguistically diverse countries that share history, culture, and politics. However, nationalist attitudes as well as the sheer geographical, demographic, and economic size of Mexico in contrast to the Central American countries have impeded attempts to compare them or to think about them together. Often these countries are viewed as completely separate entities, with Mexico occupying the position of the powerful empire in the north and the Central American countries that of the poor, troubled, small countries to the south. Mexican political and academic life tends to be fixated on national history, combined with an often imperial attitude toward the isthmus. In Central America, Mexico is admired but also eyed with suspicion given its regional power. At the same time, discussions about the lack of Central American regional integration and unity or each country's national history, tend to be more important than Mexico. For both Mexico and Central America, ultimately the difficult relationship with the big imperial power further north—the United States—tends to be more decisive for their outlook on foreign and internal affairs than the relationship between Mexico and Central America.

Both regions have been impacted by their proximity to the United States. Since the nineteenth century, they have suffered US military, political, and economic interventions. The resulting deeply ingrained anti-imperialism notwithstanding, Mexico and several Central American countries have seen substantial flows of immigrants to the United States and rely heavily on their remittances. Yet the topic of migration often divides rather than unifies the regions. Mexico has acted as the extended arm of the United States, charged with impeding Central American immigrants who traverse the Mexican territory from making it to the US-Mexico border. In the United States, Central American immigrants often become invisible because they are mistaken for Mexican Americans or nullified by Latino discourses (Arias *Taking Their Word* 186–87).

Internally, Mexico and the Central American countries are organized around powerful discourses of *mestizaje*, often designed to negate the indigenous and Black elements in nations ruled by white and mestizo elites. Furthermore, both Mexico and the Central American countries were repeatedly unsettled by divergent projects of development and social justice: liberalism versus conservatism, or export-oriented elitist regimes versus protectionist-nationalist, egalitarian projects. As such, Mexico and Central America share

a history of armed conflict and insurgency. The Mexican Revolution served as an inspiration for Central American movements and the postrevolutionary regime as a place of rest and material support. The postrevolutionary regime in Mexico, even though often repressive toward its interior, became a safe haven for political exiles from Central America. One of them was Nicaraguan guerrilla leader Augusto C. Sandino, who during his fight against US marines (1927–33) went into exile in Mexico in 1929. Yet because he was there during the Maximato—a time of consolidation of a more moderate revolutionary project—Sandino failed to secure real support from the Mexican government.

In the 1980s the Sandinistas encountered a more favorable Mexican government. The memoirs of Sergio Ramírez contain various episodes that recall the generous help from the Mexican government. In July 1979, Mexican president José López Portillo sent the government airplane Quetzalcoatl II to fly the provisional Nicaraguan government from San José to Managua (Ramírez, *Adiós* 266). In the 1980s the representative of the Mexican Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in Managua would always encourage them to ask for more supplies: oil, construction material, helicopters, medicines, and teaching materials: “That’s very little, add more. Don’t be shy” (“Es muy poco, agrégueles sin pena”) (74). In 1982, when López Portillo himself visited Nicaragua with his cabinet, one of his ministers asked what treatment Nicaragua should receive. López Portillo responded: “That of a state of Mexico” (“El de un estado de México”). This affirmation did not offend anyone, Ramírez writes; “rather it flattered us” (“más bien nos halagaba”) (74). It is a telling tale that illustrates the complex mix of dependence and solidarity between two (post)revolutionary governments unequal in size and power.

Mexico was an important point of reference during the Central American wars. Guerrilla fighters from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua fled to Mexico and regrouped there, under the watchful eye of the Mexican state.²³ The Lacandon jungle on the Mexican side was a point of entry for guerrilla excursions into Guatemala as well as a refuge for civilians from Guatemala. Later in the 1980s, through the Contadora group, the Mexican government acted as an important mediator in the Central American conflict. The support was not limited only to the level of government. Many Mexicans were inspired by this new revolution in the region and came to Nicaragua to help with the war effort or the coffee harvest. Just as the Mexican revolution had inspired Central American leftists, now the Nicaraguan revolution inspired Mexicans and other internationalists. Managua became an artistic and intellectual hub similar to Mexico City, albeit on a smaller scale. The Nicaraguan Revolution, often seen as the last Third World revolution and the last modern revolution, had an enormous appeal across the world and sparked

solidarity movements worldwide (Delgado, “Memorias apocalípticas” 108; Henighan 508).²⁴ This appeal was owed in part to the strong presence of poets and priests, and it marked a clear contrast to the Cuban Revolution: “Nicaragua brought together, as Cuba did not, the poetics of the avant-garde with the vanguardism of the revolution and the messianism of liberation theology” (Franco, *Decline and Fall* 111–12).

In the meantime, and in the same Chiapanecan jungle to which the Guatemalan refugees fled, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (the EZLN) carefully studied the shortcomings and successes of the Sandinista Revolution. The Zapatista concept of “mandar obedeciendo,” leading while obeying the will of others (Subcomandante Marcos), can be seen as an attempt to curb the authoritarianism and militarism that plagued the Sandinistas. Following the example of the Sandinistas, the Zapatistas knew that a strong global solidarity was key for the guerrillas’ success. They called for “intergalactic” meetings in Chiapas, and people from across the world answered the call. Thus it was in Mexico in 1994, after the end of the Cold War and the supposed end of the grand ideological narratives, that the armed subaltern rose again, informed by the Central American experience.

Now, in the new millennium, as Mexico finds itself in the worst armed conflict since the Mexican Revolution—the drug war—the collective memory of counterinsurgency in Central America might hold the key to better understand the conflict. After all, arms flows and the flow of violence workers in the region are connected. Former elite soldiers from Central America and Mexico—from the Guatemalan Kaibiles and the Mexican GAFES (Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales)—have joined the drug business in such groups as Los Zetas (Paley, *Drug War Capitalism* 175). The former soldiers employ counterinsurgent techniques learned and refined during the guerrilla period.

Thinking about these seemingly disparate regions yields new perspectives and unexpected discoveries. The South-South comparison destabilizes the often monolithic notions of nation-states and challenges the often limited view of national history. When one looks from the center, one tends to only see the capital or the national territory. But when one observes from the margins, one can see complex interactions and unequal relationships within the South: the wall between Guatemala and Mexico, for example, or the poor treatment of the many Nicaraguan immigrants in Costa Rica. Also, one can see what happens beneath the level of government. Nongovernmental solidarity becomes visible: revolutionary-internationalist solidarity or the solidarity of the poor, as epitomized by Las Patronas, poor women in Mexico who help the Central American immigrants on passing cargo trains by throwing food and water to them. Exploring from the margins and through connections complicates

national and imperial storytelling, and so does writing and reading from the real and imagined margins occupied by Mexican and Central American literatures.

Grappling with Insurgency and the Lettered City

The lettered city plays out differently in Central America and Mexico. The term “lettered city” refers to the combination of institutional, discursive, and individual practices in Latin America, which since the Spanish colonization have cemented a power structure around and through the written word (Rama; Dabove “Ciudad letrada” 56). In Mexico for a long time the lettered city corresponded to the colonial and modern power and splendor of Mexico City—challenged over the past two decades through the emergence of a prolific literature in the north. From the times of the viceroyalty to today, Mexico has boasted a vast array of literary productions, which circulated widely in the Spanish-speaking world. In Central America the lettered city generally saw itself in a more precarious role. The image propagated by Nicaraguan Vanguardia poet José Coronel Urtecho of his “library in the jungle”—filled with North American classics—is emblematic of this notion (Coronel Urtecho; Delgado, “La biblioteca” 35). The lettered city was seen as a small, erudite, cosmopolitan fortress.

A sense of marginality tends to dominate discourses on Central American literature, since the region suffers a double marginalization within the global North-South divide and Latin America itself (Arias, *Taking Their Word* xii). Literary production from the isthmus often seems to become invisible next to the economic and social capital of Mexican and South American letters, their big transnational publishing houses, and their famous boom authors. Yet I find this view too limited. Central American literature is the foundational literature of Spanish-American modernism; it brought about the second Latin American Nobel Prize winner of literature; it was at the center of the debates on *testimonio*; and the poetry and narrative that emerged in relation to the conflicts in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala was widely read. Nowadays, Central American literature is at the center of a renaissance of Maya literature and it boasts a prolific postwar literature, often published by such big publishing houses as Tusquets and Alfaguara. This necessarily incomplete list of some of the most prominent literary milestones and contributions shows that these successes are not an exception to a rule but a sign of the consistent and innovative literary production by Central American writers. Given the difficult economic and political conditions for the production and distribution of literature from Central America, the richness and vastness of this cultural production is nothing but astounding.

Mexican literature has for a long time enjoyed considerable state support and a high level of institutionalization (Sánchez Prado, Nogar, and Ruisánchez Serra 11).²⁵ In Central America, state support of the arts has generally been scarce—with some exceptions, like the Sandinista regime, but which was severely affected by economic scarcity. Despite these differences in terms of literary institutions, there are many connections between the two literary traditions. Mexican literature has for decades benefited from the presence of Central American writers in Mexico. Mexico City was a hub for Central American intellectuals. There in exile or to study, they made essential contributions to intellectual life in the Mexican capital.²⁶ Central American literature has also benefited from the Mexican infrastructure, in particular through book fairs which provided space and financial support.²⁷ Meanwhile, in Central America the yearly meetings titled *Centroamérica cuenta* and organized under the auspices of the novelist Sergio Ramírez have provided an important space for better recognition and exchange among Central American writers; several Mexican writers are always in attendance, too (*Centroamérica cuenta*).²⁸

Central American and Mexican literature share certain thematic and aesthetic concerns. For one, writers often have felt torn between a desire for universalism and cosmopolitanism and for nationalist or politically committed literature. Rubén Darío's swans and princesses and his anti-imperialist poetry in *Prosas profanas* and *Cantos de vida y esperanza* visualize the two sides of the spectrum. Moments of insurgency were always key moments for literature, since the revolution unsettled the nation-state, catapulted the countries onto the world stage, and created a need for the narration and interpretation of these events for a national and international audience. This also meant a possibility for the writer to position or create himself or herself in this context. This built a complex relational quadrangle of writer-state-people-violence in modern Mexican and Central American literature. Both literary traditions have key narrative moments that have to do with this relationship between the writer, popular sovereignty, state logic, and violence. Just as Mexico and Central America share a history of insurgency, they also share a literary history of grappling with the figure of the insurgent.

The Mexican Revolution constituted one of the most powerful hemispheric memories of peasant insurgency, and it haunted the guerrilla movements and their readings during the Cold War period. Yolanda Colom from the Guatemalan guerrillas recounts that in the mountains they read books from the Mexican Revolution: Guzmán's *El águila y la serpiente*, John Reed's *Insurgent Mexico*, and several novels from B. Traven's revolutionary mahogany cycle (228–29). The Central American guerrilla movements yearned for the cultural and political legitimacy of the figure of the peasant-in-arms, even though

their actual relationship with the peasantry was often fraught with distrust. They encountered in the literature of the Mexican Revolution this desired political subjectivity—mediated through a literary form that had revolutionized Latin American literature.²⁹

In Central American literature, however, it was ultimately not through the *novela de la revolución* as such but through poetry, testimonial literature, and later memoirs that writers and militants took on the role of narrating and interpreting the Central American insurgent gesture. In Central American literature, the aim hereby was always to bridge elite and subaltern forms of literary expression (Arias *Taking Their Word* xiv).

Music constituted another point of connection between Mexico and Central America, and between lettered and folk-popular spheres. Sandino's army fought against US marines in Nicaragua singing "La Adelita" in the mountains of Segovia. Mexican rancheras were immensely popular in Nicaragua and later the Mejia Godoy brothers made other musical connections through *mazurcas*, *romances*, and *corridos*.³⁰ Lyric-centered genres like the *corrido* and *nueva canción* constituted effective, affective, and lyrical means of communication and representation of insurgency in a largely illiterate context.

Many noteworthy instances invite us to think about connections and comparisons between Mexican and Central American literature and music in this book and beyond.³¹ Even though I highlight connections, I discuss each literature and each insurgency in separate chapters in order to explore them in their specificity. This book thus offers not a straightforward comparative analysis but rather a complementary look on Mexican and Central American literature as an invitation to think about two neighboring regions and literatures together to see connections, influences, entanglements, or overlaps. It is an invitation to read from the margins and centers occupied by these literatures.

Despite the homogenization processes brought on by big publishing houses, contemporary Mexican literature, due to the vastness of production and presses and decentralization processes, is characterized by an "unprecedented diversification and proliferation" (Sánchez Prado, "Mexican Literature" 375). The situation is not unlike similar processes taking place in contemporary Central American literature, where some authors routinely publish with Alfaguara and Tusquets, whereas others publish with small publishers in El Salvador and Guatemala. Furthermore, the Central American literary output of the past two decades has been characterized by a forceful and plentiful return of experimental fiction (Ortiz Wallner).

This rich history and prolific diversity warrants further study, yet both literatures are to varying degrees still marginal within the English-speaking

academia. Mexican literature, while read and studied in Mexico and Latin America, in English-speaking academia was “for many years eclipsed by Chicano studies or by the dominant interest in the Southern Cone” (Sánchez Prado, Nogar, and Ruisánchez Serra 1). Only in the past decade or two has it “grown and evolved considerably” (1), while also pushing beyond the previous fixation on questions of *mexicanidad* (3). Central American literature, however, is still often seen as peripheral in US academia (Arias, *Taking Their Word* 186). This marginalization is a problem given the immense cultural production of both Mexico and Central America and the entangled relationship between these countries and the United States. The Anglo-American, Mexican American, and Central American student body at US institutions deserves to be introduced to this rich literary tradition and to know more about the often painfully shared history of the United States, Mexico, and Central America.³²

There are signs of improvement, though, in particular because students and faculty have fought and worked for greater visibility.³³ The spaces for academic reflection on either Mexican or Central American literature are growing.³⁴ Now it is time to bring the two together. I hope *Modernity at Gunpoint* is one of many more studies that explore a transnational, complementary, or comparative angle, to help us better understand Mexico and Central America, their stories, and imaginations—in their disparity and their connectivity. Much remains to be done.