

Introduction



Translating Fear

A Mexican Narrative of Militancy, Horror, and Redemption

AURORA CAMACHO DE SCHMIDT AND ARTHUR SCHMIDT

*The writer's role is not free from difficult duties.
By definition he cannot put himself today in the service of those
who make history; he is at the service of those who suffer it.*
—Albert Camus¹

IN *Surviving Mexico's Dirty War: A Political Prisoner's Memoir*, Alberto Ulloa Bornemann gives readers a text of uncommon critical power. Thirty years after he was captured by the Mexican authorities because of his political involvement with southern armed rebels, he rescues a key moment in Mexican history through a difficult act of memory and literary imagination. Literature here does not mean fiction, but narrated fact, an account of lived experience where words vibrate with a life of their own.

The literary canon is rich in prison literature: Ricardo Flores Magón, Oscar Wilde, Emma Goldman, Victor Serge, Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, Antonio Gramsci, Eldridge Cleaver, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Václav Havel, Nelson Mandela, and so many more. But whereas Ulloa Bornemann’s narrative deals profoundly with the harsh realities of life in prison in Mexico City, it goes beyond it. First, it was not written at the time of his incarceration. It has appeared a generation later as part of a widespread Latin American set of reflections on the era of tumultuous revolutionary and counter-revolutionary struggles that followed the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959. As one analyst of Latin America’s “dirty wars” has noted, for a region “populated by ‘recovering authoritarians,’ . . . recovery begins with memory.”² In Mexico, where the issues of holding officials accountable for the deeds of state terror

still remain unresolved, memory and justice are often said to go hand in hand. The editors of the magazine *Nexos* recently remarked that “Saying ‘never again’ to the systematic and unpunished violation of human rights means saying today—yes to memory and yes to justice.”³ Second, Ulloa Bornemann’s story encompasses the author’s initiation into the militant left of the late sixties and early seventies. Whereas some former guerrillas in Mexico have published short accounts of their personal experiences, studies of armed movements, and even fiction, *Surviving Mexico’s Dirty War* stands out for its descriptive power and its depth of self-criticism.⁴ It is the product of Ulloa Bornemann’s painful awakening to the fact that he had been wrong, that the answers to Mexico’s deep-seated political, social, and economic problems did not lie in armed struggle.⁵

TESTIMONIAL TEXTS

In the last third of the twentieth century, Latin American literature saw the development of a special kind of chronicle: the testimony. Subjects, especially women who never before had access to authorship, spoke about their lives as representative of the lives of many others, in a denunciation meant for readers beyond their nations. Often written in collaboration with an educated editor, testimonial texts reconstructed the microhistories of a former slave, a slum dweller, peasants, miners, indigenous communities, and guerrilla fighters.⁶ *Surviving Mexico’s Dirty War* is a testimonial text because it too bears witness and illuminates a reality that had been hidden from view. Like other testimonial authors such as Esteban Montejo, Elvia Alvarado, Domitila Barrios de Chúngara, or Rigoberta Menchú, Ulloa Bornemann imbues his narrative with a moral force. His story contains a tacit accusation, directed not at people, but at an entrenched power structure that allows unspeakable horror to be unleashed when the state exercises its repressive apparatus. Still, there are many differences between most testimonial texts and the narrative of Ulloa Bornemann. He comes from an upper middle class family and is well educated.⁷ He is the sole author of his text. And while denunciation is part of his account, it is not its purpose. Readers soon realize that they have been allowed into a deep personal reflection, an act of remembering that yields an unforgiving evaluation of what once looked like a heroic stance—the wager of one young and promising life to revolutionary change in Mexico.

For readers of Mexican literature, some parts of *Surviving Mexico’s Dirty War* could hark back to *La sombra del caudillo* (*The Shadow of the Strongman*, 1929) by Martín Luis Guzmán (1887–1976), especially the scene in which Axkaná González is abducted and blindfolded in a fast-moving car. Both

Axkaná and Alberto Ulloa Bornemann reconstruct the city in their minds at every turn the car takes before reaching a final destination where each will be tortured. More than a simple coincidence, the kinship of these two texts created seventy-five years apart resides in the depiction of a murderous regime in which innocence or change are almost impossible, and in the representation of Mexico City as a space equated with violence.⁸

Surviving Mexico's Dirty War appropriately belongs in the company of other literature on the Latin American dirty wars of the Cold War era that took place in parts of Central America and the Andes, and in the Southern Cone countries of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay. Films, texts, and truth commission reports have portrayed the horrors of political violence, in particular the abuses of counter-insurgency regimes that arose between the mid-1950s and the early 1990s. Today citizens who suffered under those regimes continue their efforts to prevent their official crimes from passing into oblivion, most notably the Chileans pursuing legal measures against General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte and the Argentine Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo whose children and grandchildren were disappeared during the purges of the military.⁹ One internationally famous text is Jacobo Timerman's *Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number*, a gripping story of thirty months of prison, isolation, and torture. Timerman was the Argentinean-Jewish editor of *La Opinión*, and like Ulloa Bornemann, an intellectual and an expert in communications. He argued in vain that legal public trials constituted the best method for combating subversive political violence. For Timerman, it remained essential for regimes to offer channels for diverse political expression. "No one is immune to episodes of violence and terrorism," he wrote, "yet it should be possible at least to avoid a situation in which terrorism and violence are the sole creative potential, the sole imaginative, emotional, erotic expression of a nation."¹⁰

MEXICO'S ONE-PARTY SYSTEM

Some readers in the United States may be surprised to discover that Mexico had a smaller dirty war of its own, one certainly lesser in scale than those of the Southern Cone, but one that nonetheless resulted in the terrible cruelties that Ulloa Bornemann depicts in his narrative. How did Mexico slip into the "episode of terrorism and violence" that forms the context for *Surviving Mexico's Dirty War*? What were the motivations, as one of Ulloa Bornemann's interrogators demanded to know, of a young man "educated in a Catholic private university, who had set aside the opportunities that his family background and education offered him in life and had decided instead to join

a big, messy upheaval in which he had nothing to gain and much to lose?" Mexico's legal system, its politics, and its cultural life all find themselves engaged with these questions today.

It is clear that Mexico's guerrilla movements and its dirty war were the products of a collision between a restive society and an increasingly anachronistic and repressive ruling system, hostile to independent forms of political expression. Since 1929, a single party, known during its heyday after 1946 as the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI—Institutional Revolutionary Party), had monopolized political power in Mexico. During the "peace of the PRI," the official party won all the electoral contests for important offices. State and party remained virtually inseparable. An authoritarian presidency stood at the center of the system. Chief executives served six-year terms, each playing the determining role in the selection of his successor. Designed as a solution to the threats of further civil strife that followed the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917), the system of one-party rule provided a long period of stability combined with significant economic growth and an expanding system of government benefits. For a generation, the regime managed to imbue the official tradition of the Mexican Revolution with the atmosphere of "continuous and ceaseless renovation."¹¹ Between 1940 and 1970, the Mexican economy expanded more than six-fold, sustaining one of the highest and most consistent growth rates in the Third World. The PRI embraced a variety of political currents within its ranks, permitted an open if ineffectual set of opposition parties, and demonstrated a remarkable capacity to buy off dissidents, co-opting them into the world of officialdom.¹² For those operating outside its limited range of tolerance, the government employed an apparatus of selective force and intimidation, including a national intelligence service—the political police to which Ulloa Bornemann refers—responsible to the president and his closest officials.¹³

Eventually, however, the "eternal future" of the one-party system fell victim to the social changes that its policies had done so much to engender. By the time that Ulloa Bornemann attended the Universidad Iberoamericana in the 1960s, Mexico had become a younger, more urban, and more unequal society, ill suited for the constraints of an authoritarian political system derived from an earlier, more traditional, and more rural world. Twice as many Mexicans existed than in 1940; over half were under twenty years of age. More than 40 percent lived in communities larger than 15,000 in population; nearly one in every five Mexicans resided in the Mexico City metropolitan area alone. As the economy grew, so did inequality. The personal income of the top 20 percent of society had risen to sixteen times that of the bottom 20 percent, an increase over the ten to one ratio that had prevailed after World War II.¹⁴ The

government reacted to change by becoming more closed and authoritarian, particularly under the presidency of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964–70), dubbed “a soldier of the system” by one Mexican historian.¹⁵ Early in his presidency, Díaz Ordaz clashed with intellectuals, with politicians seeking reforms in the official party, and with a doctors’ movement in government hospitals. In 1968, a landmark breach opened between state and society when the government repressed a popular student movement in Mexico City. With their élan and with their agenda of moral and political reform, the students held a good deal of public sympathy. They sought an end to corruption, freedom for political prisoners, the liberalization of political life, and the abolition of sections of the penal code that the government arbitrarily used to jail political dissidents. Shortly before the 1968 Olympic games were due to begin in Mexico City, the government attacked a rally attended by thousands in the Tlatelolco plaza, killing between three and four hundred, and detaining over two thousand.¹⁶ The massacre abruptly and traumatically brought the student movement to an end, opening a new and often painful chapter of political and social struggle in Mexico.

BEYOND TLATELOLCO

For many young activists, Tlatelolco proved a defining moment. “After 1968, it seemed armed struggle was the only alternative,” commented Gustavo Hiraes, an expert on Mexican armed groups and former member of the 23 of September League, a prominent guerrilla movement of the 1970s.¹⁷ Yet not all those inspired by 1968 picked up arms. Many engaged in political and civic struggles that eventually helped to bring about a greater liberalization to Mexican political life.¹⁸ Some of Mexico’s most prominent urban popular movements were organized by activists from *Política Popular* and *Organización Regional Compañero*, both founded in the wake of “lo de ‘68.” Often operating clandestinely, both organizations shared the influence of Maoism and the desire to live and work among the “masses,” getting involved in their daily struggles for housing, services, and other basic needs.¹⁹ *Surviving Mexico’s Dirty War* reflects these same idealistic impulses at work in Ulloa Bornemann. He abandoned work and family in order to dedicate himself full-time to the revolutionary struggle. He attempted to live for a while with a poor peasant family. He gave of his time and possessions, driving dissidents to various parts of the republic, donating his car to the cause, and offering shelter in his apartment to those on the run from the political police.

Yet, as towering as the impact of 1968 was upon Mexico, one must not regard “every major development of the following three decades as flowing

inexorably from the student-popular movement and its bloody repression.”²⁰ As Ulloa Bornemann’s story shows, other factors, both before and after 1968, also exercised powerful influences. The tumultuous events of 1968 scarcely appear in *Surviving Mexico’s Dirty War*. (As a member of the Liga Comunista Espartaco, Ulloa Bornemann followed its line and stayed away from the student movement because it lacked roots in the peasantry and the working class.) Before 1968, like so many others of his generation, he found himself captivated by the Cuban Revolution, in particular by the mystique of the heroic guerrilla fighter Ernesto Che Guevara, who embodied “the social utopias and dreams of an entire generation.” Despite the failure of his naive trip to Cuba in October, 1967, Ulloa Bornemann continued to demonstrate “the exaltation of will” that so characterized El Che, the notion that “there was no obstacle too great for willpower.”²¹ As was true with Guevara, Ulloa Bornemann’s enduring obstinacy obliged family members to undergo great suffering, especially his wife Tere. Like Guevara, Ulloa Bornemann’s willfulness exposed him to repeated dangers that at the time appeared more heroic than mistaken. Unlike Guevara, however, his misjudgments did not prove fatal. “Today,” he remarks in *Surviving Mexico’s Dirty War*, “I am very conscious of the good fortune I had.”

As recent historical scholarship has increasingly emphasized, the “peace of the PRI,” really constituted a political myth. Mexico was not a quiescent society that suddenly awoke in 1968 with the advent of the student movement. Even in the midst of Mexico’s “Golden Age” of political stability and rapid economic growth after 1940, diverse and substantial resistance movements, both rural and urban, punctuated public life.²² Among the most notable were the strikes and protests of teachers, railway workers, and others in 1958 and 1959. The government responded to these serious challenges with a combination of minor concessions and major force, including long-term jail sentences for some of the railway leaders. But authorities could not prevent generational change and the impact of the Cuban Revolution from percolating through left-wing politics in Mexico throughout the 1960s.²³ The experiences of Ulloa Bornemann demonstrate an element of continuity in resistance movements that links the post-World War II years with the generation of the 1960s and 1970s. *Surviving Mexico’s Dirty War* expresses Ulloa Bornemann’s high regard for Mónico Rodríguez Gómez, former member of the Mexican Communist Party, and inveterate participant in many rural and urban popular struggles for over thirty years. Rodríguez Gómez was exactly the sort of dedicated figure that Ulloa Bornemann and his *compañeros* admired in their search for authenticity in revolutionary struggle. The Organization, the loosely

constructed clandestine movement to which Ulloa Bornemann belonged, identified with other radical tendencies noted for their freedom from rigid left-wing orthodoxies. Three movements, all of which originated before 1968, appear prominently in his narrative.

LEFT-WING RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS IN MEXICO

Ulloa Bornemann joined the Liga Comunista Espartaco after his return to Mexico following his “naive and stupid trip” to revolutionary Cuba in 1967. The Liga originated as the Liga Leninista Espartaco after the departure of the well known writer José Revueltas from the Mexican Communist Party in 1959. Over time, the Liga merged with other dissident groups, distanced itself from Revueltas, and changed its name and views. Its new perspectives identified “popular masses” as revolutionary protagonists more than the traditional proletariat. The Ho Chi Minh Section constituted the most active element within the Liga Comunista Espartaco in establishing ties with workers, peasants, and teachers in central and southern Mexico. When the 1968 student movement arose, the Liga Comunista Espartaco doubted its significance, stayed out of the events of that year, and ultimately dissolved. The Ho Chi Minh Section went its own way. Dionisio and Isauro, two of Ulloa Bornemann’s closest compañeros, helped produce a devastating critique of the behavior of the Liga leadership in 1968. Some from the Ho Chi Minh Section participated in urban popular movements during the 1970s, while others created the Organization, described by Ulloa Bornemann as a “remnant” of the Ho Chi Min Section.

In some places, *Surviving Mexico’s Dirty War* describes members of the Organization as “Espartaquistas Jaramillistas,” referring to the political influence of a second radical tendency, that of the long-time revolutionary activist from Morelos, Rubén Jaramillo. For an entire generation, from the cane workers struggle in the early 1940s until his assassination by the military and police in May, 1962, Jaramillo devoted himself to peasant and worker causes in his home state. He took up arms against the government on several occasions, organized strikes and protests, and established his own political party, the Partido Agrario Obrero Morelense (PAOM). He claimed to have won his two races for the governorship of Morelos in 1946 and 1952.²⁴ Jaramillo’s personal and intellectual influences upon the Organization were extensive. Many members of the Ho Chi Minh Section came out of the PAOM. Younger activists particularly admired his courage, rectitude, and independence. Like Mónico Rodríguez Gómez with whom he collaborated at times, Jaramillo gave his

entire life to local social issues. Although he cooperated with the Communist Party on occasion, Jaramillo preferred his own autonomy to party orthodoxy. On more than one occasion, he survived assassination attempts and refused payoffs from the government and private interests. The political platform of the PAOM stressed land reform, autonomy for peasant communities, the unity of workers and peasants, and women's participation, all measures that appealed to the participants in the Organization.

More problematic but certainly even more influential in the life of the Organization—and in the experience of Ulloa Bornemann—was its relationship with a third radical movement, the insurrection in the state of Guerrero of the Partido de los Pobres under the direction of Lucio Cabañas Barrientos. Guerrero offered stark contrasts between the opulence of international tourism associated with the postwar development of Acapulco and the enduring poverty of much of its citizenry. For generations, as Ulloa Bornemann notes, the state had been a region of harsh social conditions, local governmental despotism, and movements of popular resistance.²⁵ In the traditions of “Guerrero bronco,” public school teachers had often taken on instrumental roles in community life, furthering local improvements, intervening in relations with government, and, in the generation after World War II, organizing movements for greater democracy and accountability in state and municipal politics. Teacher training institutes in both Guerrero and Mexico City became centers of civic organizing. Guerrero teacher activists were influenced by a dissident teachers movement—the Movimiento Revolucionario del Magistrado (MRM) that emerged in Mexico City in the late 1950s and would be an important precursor to nationwide popular movements in the late 1970s and 1980s.²⁶ Both Genaro Vázquez Rojas, another Guerrerense teacher-activist turned guerrilla leader, and Cabañas belonged to the MRM. Each undertook armed campaigns in the mountains of Guerrero when repression from the state and federal governments made peaceful civic action impossible. Genaro Vázquez Rojas found himself forced into hiding after an army attack on a peaceful protest in Chilpancingo, the capital of Guerrero, resulted in the deaths of eighteen people in December, 1960. Jailed in 1966 and subsequently liberated in 1968 by an armed commando of his followers, Vázquez Rojas operated an independent guerrilla campaign until his death in an automobile accident in February, 1972.²⁷

Cabañas' guerrilla uprising proved the more significant of the two, lasting until his death in battle in December, 1974. He originally took to the hills in May, 1967 after police in Atoyac attacked a demonstration and killed seven people including his brother. Two years earlier politically powerful local figures opposed to Cabañas' social activism had forced his transfer to a teaching post in the distant north-central state of Durango. Cabañas emerges in *Surviving*

Mexico's Dirty War as a courageous, but provincial and quixotic figure. While undoubtedly influenced by the Cuban Revolution, his outlook clearly was more homespun, reflecting the inspiration not only of Marx, Lenin, and Guevara, but also of the Mexican anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón and, above all, the Guerrerense environment in which he had been raised and educated. He deeply felt the injustices that the common folk of Guerrero experienced at the hands of local *caciques* (political bosses) and well-off property owners. He joined the Mexican Communist Party, leaving it after a short time because of what he considered its lethargy and opportunism. The armed contingents of his Partido de los Pobres drew recruits from the highly impoverished zone of the Costa Grande in Guerrero, long an area of rural unrest and conflict between *ejidatarios* (communal farmers) and the merchants and private landowners who controlled water resources and the distribution of coffee and other principal cash crops.²⁸

As readers of *Surviving Mexico's Dirty War* will readily note, the strategy of the Partido de los Pobres was eclectic and depended highly upon Cabañas and the force of his personality. The Brigada de Ajusticiamiento undertook to execute local “exploiters” and abusive officials, and the Partido de los Pobres never transcended its regional origins to become a national political movement. For all of the travels Lucio (or Miguel, as Ulloa Bornemann often calls him, using his *nom de guerre*) undertook to various parts of Mexico, he failed to establish a solid partnership with any of the other armed movements operating in Mexico at the time. As was the case with these other movements, by 1971 the Partido de los Pobres came to rely upon bank robberies and kidnappings as the principal means of financing itself. Ulloa Bornemann narrates his great discomfort with these tactics, particularly the assault upon a Mexico City branch of the Banco Comercial Mexicano and the 1974 kidnapping of senator Rubén Figueroa Figueroa, the wealthy patriarch of a well-entrenched Guerrerense political dynasty and the PRI candidate for governor at the time. As Ulloa Bornemann feared, robberies and kidnappings proved self-defeating, alienating revolutionary resistance movements from society while at the same time corrupting them internally.

THE DIRTY WAR AND IMPUNITY

Ulloa Bornemann mentions many of the armed radical movements that proliferated in Mexico in the early 1970s—Movimiento de Acción Revolucionaria, Comandos Lacandones, Procesos, Guajiros, Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre, and Frente Urbano Zapatista. This militant, but highly splintered Mexican left flared up only briefly and was largely gone by 1976,

extinguished both by government repression and the suicidal futility of its own tactics. The impulse to extreme radicalism accelerated after the Corpus Christi Massacre of June 10, 1971, a landmark event that Ulloa Bornemann mentions in *Surviving Mexico's Dirty War* in which twenty-five students died, and many more suffered injuries when armed Halcones attacked their peaceful demonstration in Mexico City. Government responsibility for the massacre went right to the top. "It is well established that the Halcones are an officially financed, organized, trained and armed repressive group . . ." wrote the Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy shortly after June 10. "It stretches the imagination," he added, "to believe that [President Luis] Echeverría could not have forced the disbandment of the Halcones had he so desired or that he was not aware of plans to severely repress the June 10 demonstration . . ." ²⁹ Echeverría, president from 1970 to 1976, was engaged in a double game, the full dimensions of which are still not known. On the one hand, socially generous, populist policies characterized his regime. Echeverría reached out to the country's youth, expanded higher educational opportunities, initiated a mild political opening, fired some of the major officials associated with the Corpus Christi massacre, and officially disbanded the Halcones (although, many continued working for the government. Ulloa Bornemann labeled many of his jailers in the Campo Militar Número Uno as ex-Halcones). On the other hand, as Secretary of Gobernación in 1968, Echeverría bore a major responsibility for the student killings at Tlatelolco. During his presidency, the Mexican government engaged in a concerted dirty war of unprecedented scale throughout the country that employed beatings, armed violence, torture, and disappearances.

Since Mexico has not yet established an official "truth commission" of the sort created in other countries victimized by state terrorism, many aspects of the government's dirty war of the 1970s remain shrouded in secrecy. U.S. government documents make it clear that American diplomatic officials knew of these events, but they chose to downplay them and thus avoid any publicity that might create difficulties for U.S.–Mexican diplomatic relations. During these years Amnesty International reported on government human rights violations in Mexico, but the full extent of these abuses remains to be clarified. The National Human Rights Commission, established by the Mexican government in 1990, reported documenting 350 cases of persons "disappeared" at government hands between 1974 and 1978, but many in human rights organizations consider the number to be higher. Officials killed at least 143 captives on military bases and arranged to have their bodies jettisoned into the sea from government helicopters.³⁰

Despite the breaking of the PRI's monopoly hold on the presidency in 2000, the National Human Rights Commission and a Special Prosecutor for

Social and Political Movements of the Past have remained notably unsuccessful in bringing criminal or civil charges against officials guilty of human rights abuses. Human Rights Watch has labeled the work of the Special Prosecutor's office "deeply disappointing." Mexican courts have repeatedly ruled against its poorly presented charges of genocide against former president Echeverría for the Tlatelolco and Corpus Christi massacres, most recently in July, 2006. In February, 2006, disgruntled employees of the Special Prosecutor leaked a confidential draft report detailing the crimes of the dirty war. In late November, 2006, just before leaving office, the Fox administration issued an 800-page report from the Special Prosecutor that constituted the first unequivocal government admission of past official responsibility for the crimes of the dirty war. Nevertheless, impunity and prosecutorial ineptitude have constituted, in the words of an editorial in the daily *La Jornada*, "a devastating blow for a country that has for over three decades clamored for justice in the crimes of presidential power." Although the dirty war has long since ended, serious human rights abuses and patterns of official impunity have not. It would be hard to argue with the editorial's view that Mexico cannot "aspire to a civilized, peaceful, and legal order of conviviality" unless it establishes the full historical truth and responsibility for the abuses of the past.³¹ Major massacres have taken place in recent years—at Aguas Blancas in Guerrero in June, 1995 and at Acteal in Chiapas in December, 1997—while over four hundred women have been slain or disappeared over an eleven-year period in the cities of Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua. "Arbitrary detention, torture and ill-treatment by police [have] remained widespread, particularly at state level," according to Amnesty International. "The authorities [have] failed to combat these practices effectively or to ensure judicial remedy to victims."³²

HORROR AND FEAR

Ulloa Bornemann knows the world of official impunity quite well. It is a world of fear and helplessness. Only by luck did he move from his two months of secret detention in the Campo Militar Número Uno into the judicial system. Had he not been tortured into revealing the name of Dr. Ignacio Madrazo Navarro—Luis in his *nom de guerre*—and had Dr. Navarro's family not had powerful social and political connections, Ulloa Bornemann might well never have made that transition. His fate, in all likelihood a clandestine death, the normal mode of departure from the Campo Militar Número Uno, would have remained a secret buried by the weight of time. When officials came to remove Ulloa Bornemann from his cell (in order to transfer him into the hands of civilian law enforcement authorities in downtown Mexico City), one of the

Halcones confiscated his sandals, so certain was he that Ulloa Bornemann would no longer need them. In his experience no prisoner ever left the clandestine military prison alive.

Ulloa Bornemann escaped an almost certain death when he left the clandestine Campo Militar Número Uno, but he remained far from safety until his amnesty in 1978. Although prison constituted a fearful world of confinement and violence for both the political prisoners of 1968 and for Ulloa Bornemann, many of the former also regarded their cells as an extension of the university. "The time spent behind the walls of Lecumberri provided [student movement] leaders a physical space to do what they longed to: devote themselves to study."³³ This was not the case for Ulloa Bornemann. Like the leaders of 1968, he was a university-trained intellectual, but *Surviving Mexico's Dirty War* depicts no element of "intellectual liberation" in his prison experience. His days editing the inmate newspaper *Oriente* provided a momentary escape from the daily oppression of his incarceration, but this respite proved to be only a short-lived hiatus that promptly ceased when the government removed prison reformers from their administrative control of the Reclusorio Oriente.

The stories told in Ulloa Bornemann's narrative, in other prison literature, and in the testimonial writings from other Latin American dirty wars have one element in common: they portray horror. Prison is a closed space where violence defines everyday reality. Violence can be organized vertically, through a chain of command as Ulloa Bornemann discovered behind the walls of Lecumberri and Santa Martha Acatitla; but violence can also result from the interaction among inmates, as *Surviving Mexico's Dirty War* reveals in its tales of the drug-addicted, down and out convicts like Guillermo Zúñiga and the prison "capos" such as Alberto Sicilia Falcón or David Noriega. Other than the moments of family visits, no human transaction is possible without the likely presence of violence. Indeed, a prisoner must be constantly aware of the possibility of losing his life, as Ulloa Bornemann said in a recent television documentary:

Being in prison presents a very delicate situation. One has to be very alert. All of your senses must be in a state of alert at all times because many things can happen, right? It may be that someone wants to cause trouble for you, and he will place a marijuana cigarette among your belongings, and then accuse you. And the guard comes and discovers it, and a new legal case is opened against you, for example. Or maybe you rubbed someone the wrong way, or he feels that you have done him wrong, that you

have injured him. So at your slightest moment of distraction he comes and sticks a shiv in you. And you can die, just like that!³⁴

As readers of *Surviving Mexico's Dirty War*, we soon become aware of the superfluity of the prison population, the low value of anybody's life. Studying prison narratives, Ioan Davies writes:

Prison writing is centrally about violence. The beginning of a sense of violence is the awareness of death. Prison writing, more than most, is contemplation of death, our own deaths, the deaths we impose on others, the deaths imposed on us by others, the great gamble between our deaths and theirs.³⁵

That great gamble with life is framed in fear. In this book readers will find over seventy expressions of fear, fright, dread, terror, despair, anguish, anxiety, affliction, pain, uncertainty, tension, panic and other variations on the theme of horror. It will be neither a simple repetition nor a monotonous framework of events. Each occurrence expresses the state of mind of the protagonist, who experiences it from the standpoint of subjugation. Early on after his apprehension, Ulloa Bornemann was reduced to outward passivity at the hands of an all-powerful authority for whom his life was useless and his death bore no cost. When we asked the author whether his arrival at the clandestine jail at Campo Militar, where he was first detained, had produced repugnance—at the absolute lack of sanitary facilities, awful food, and the presence of rats and vermin—he answered: “No. When you feel terror you cannot feel anything else.”³⁶

“Terror” is not the same as a great fear of something clearly defined, a well known enemy whose strength can be sized up. The famous study of Bulgarian-French theoretician Julia Kristeva on horror and abjection remarks on this quality:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. . . . A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me.³⁷

This is the terror of the tortured body or the body about to be tortured. It implies isolation, separation from those one loves. It cancels meaning, and therefore, language, as Elaine Scarry wrote in *The Body in Pain*. It can only be apprehended from the outside, in memory and the imaginative act. In a society in which state terror is a systematic practice all institutions are in jeopardy, as the experience of Argentina and Chile in the 1980s has shown. Moreover, the “culture of fear” is difficult to eradicate.³⁸

The publication of Ulloa Bornemann’s story in English is not intended to feed a U.S. thirst for what Mexican writer Juan Villoro calls “literature of the open wound... monochrome, distorting, sentimental, and written for ideological children.”³⁹ Ulloa Bornemann does not indulge in his past suffering. He does not profit emotionally from his experience: he lays it bare for us to know. He does the opposite of simplifying the reality of his involvement in a guerrilla movement that failed. At every turn there is surprise, nuance, introspection, judgment. His is a literary memory because only literature can bring us into the experience of one man’s survival and transformation as if they were our own.⁴⁰ An unusual degree of honesty in self-criticism makes this book unique.⁴¹

CONTRADICTIONS AND COMPLEXITIES

Surviving Mexico’s Dirty War: A Political Prisoner’s Memoir brings the illegal and corrupt actions of the Mexican judicial system and prison authorities out in the open.⁴² It also discloses the workings of armed rebels in a clandestine world. We are amazed at the ignorance, brutality, and senseless cruelty of those in power, and appalled at the naïveté, lack of discipline, and criminal actions of guerrillas and inmates. In this way, the narrative is an important contribution to the slow work of democratization, as it produces a consciousness of those ills and their dire results. Those evils do not always have the last word. One also learns about enlightened officials—Dr. Sergio García Ramírez, for example—who were working to change the system, and sees human solidarity at work, sometimes heroically.

The world depicted in this narrative is a masculine world. Soldiers, guards, the jailers and most of the jailed are men. With few exceptions, women are not revolutionaries, but men’s *compañeras*. In Latin America the fantasy of the hero, fed by the legendary life of Che Guevara, requires a masculinist social arrangement. Despite the book’s critical deconstruction of power, male prerogatives are largely unquestioned.⁴³ Here Ulloa Bornemann’s story parallels the narrative of the student movement in which males have “come to dominate public discourse about ‘68, almost as spokesmen of a generation.”⁴⁴ The

book's relegation of women to the background provides an accurate reflection of the male attitudes that dominated leadership roles in the 1960s–70s, not only in the Mexican student movement, but more broadly throughout Latin American revolutionary organizations in the generation after the Cuban Revolution. For those detained in 1968 and for Ulloa Bornemann as well, the salience of the prison experience has provided a predominantly masculine cast to the narrative.

Social status also shapes facets of Ulloa Bornemann's narrative. Readers of *Surviving Mexico's Dirty War* may notice an emphasis on racial markers as the narrator describes people's physical appearance. Perceived good looks or the degree of pigmentation in somebody's skin correlates most of the times to that person's place in the social scale. The text makes assumptions about white supremacy subliminally. This is not surprising, since Ulloa Bornemann's revolutionary involvement and his incarceration switched him from one social class setting, where lighter skin tones prevailed and certain comforts and privileges were taken for granted, to rural and urban lower class environments, where darker skins were the norm. As a postcolonial people (the child of imperial Spain), Mexican society remains acutely aware of an individual's location in the hierarchical continuum from Indian or African to European.⁴⁵ Colonial legacies are usually rife with ambiguities. Racial features in Mexico often serve as markers for class status and even signifiers for moral qualities. While incarcerated at the Campo Militar Número Uno or at the civilian jails of Lecumberri, Reclusorio Oriente, and Santa Martha Acatitla, Ulloa Bornemann found himself in the hands of individuals—often racially different from him—for whom work for the government as a soldier or prison guard constituted economic security and possible social mobility. They lacked education and training, and they occupied subordinate positions within hierarchical organizations imbued with cultures of authoritarian behavior and corruption. Having a “subversivo” of a higher social status in their hands brought an inversion of power relationships that both sides—jailer and prisoner—reflexively registered in racial terms.

Surviving Mexico's Dirty War contains some silences, but not only because no account can ever be complete. A few times the author seems to stop at a threshold and decides not to enter. This is part of his narrative strategy, and probably his wish to protect somebody's privacy. His ordeal is also the ordeal of his family. Especially moving is the role of his wife, María Teresa Alvarez Malo de Ulloa, a woman of tremendous intelligence, strength, and fidelity. She demonstrates these qualities in Arturo Ripstein's recent release of *Los héroes y el tiempo* (*Heroes and Time*), presented at the Cannes Festival in May, 2005. This documentary interviews once more the four men, including Ulloa Bornemann,

that Ripstein filmed thirty years ago in his earlier work, *Lecumberri*, giving voice this time to family members who relate what the incarceration of a husband or a father meant to their lives.

Since the time of Ulloa Bornemann's amnesty in 1978, Mexicans have taken great strides to overcome the traumatic era of the dirty war and to assert themselves. Civil society stood up to government incompetence in 1985 when two earthquakes devastated sections of Mexico City. Major electoral opposition to the regime in 1988 shook the political system to its foundations. A flourishing of popular movements and civic organizing has characterized the last twenty years. The 1994 Zapatista revolt in Chiapas generated a widespread domestic and international response. The Mexican left has become a major participant in the country's more open political system, one no longer dominated by one official party.⁴⁶ The major news media offer a greater variety of opinion and journalistic independence.⁴⁷ Yet as with the question of accountability for the abuses of the dirty war, the country remains far from having resolved its most pressing issues. As the 2006 elections demonstrated, widespread skepticism prevails in Mexico about the capacity of the political system to produce good candidates and effective policies. The country's historically unequal income distribution has continued to become more inequitable. Economic growth has been too anemic to generate an adequate amount of jobs and opportunities. Serious overcrowding still characterizes prison conditions. While armed radical groups no longer disrupt cities, narcotrafficking, street crime, and kidnappings do cast the specter of violence over urban life.⁴⁸

We asked the author how he would describe his book to young men and women who want to change these pressing circumstances:

This is the memoir of a young middle class man who lived in an undeveloped country full of economic, political, and social injustice. This man believed that revolutionary activity would provide a way out of marginality for many people in his country. He thought he would also find himself, and a sort of happiness in self-fulfillment in that process. But he suffered from a great ignorance of the history and the social and political structures of Mexico. No young person should attempt to act politically without preparation and study. A moral impulse is at the basis of their desire to address injustice, but that is not enough. Young people must avoid the easy trap of believing that there are only good and bad people, and that their wishes and hopes put them on the side of the good. They should know that reality is always more complex than they think, and far more difficult to face.⁴⁹

Albert Camus, whose life was marked by strife, said that writers do not write for the makers of history, but for its sufferers (“ceux qui la subissent”). In the same Nobel banquet speech he said that writers aim at “stirring the greatest number of people by offering them a privileged picture of common joys and sufferings.” This Alberto Ulloa Bornemann has done superbly well.