BOOK REVIEW

Gibler, John. *México rebelde: Crónicas de poder e insurrección*. Trad. Juan Elías Tovar Cross. México, D.F.: Random House Mondadori, 2011. 358 pp.

JOHN Gibler's *México rebelde* could be said to suffer from a slightly misleading translation: the Mexico in his historical account and ensuing chronicles is not made up of rebels without a cause, as the Spanish title might imply. Rather, as the original English *(Unconquered Mexico*, 2008*)* indicates, he focuses on the unconquered—*los y las invictos*—who continue to resist all aspects of the conquest that Gibler effectively argues is very much still in progress in the Mexican state. In a clear reference to Mariano Azuela's 1915 classic revolutionary novel *The Underdogs*, the book is dedicated to *los de abajo* of the past and present: indigenous communities, forgotten rural communities living in poverty, proponents of agrarian reform, Zapatistas, and individuals in the struggle against governmental corruption and exploitation. Gibler begins and ends with broad historical, political, and theoretical overviews of conquest, colonialism, and imperialism; in between are polyphonic collections of interviews, mosaics of chronicles that grow more specific as the book advances, at one point dedicating an entire chapter to Gloria Arenas Agis, founder of the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo Insurgente (ERPI). His exhaustively researched accounts are organized, as he tells us in the prologue, so that "cada capítulo podría estar incrustado en todos los otros, o dicho de otra forma, cada capítulo sangra en todos los otros: comparten la misma sangre" (32).

Gibler's vacillations between the broad and the specific are established from the very beginning, as he employs the history of the life and violent death of revolutionary leader and agrarian reformist Rubén Jaramillo as a springboard into a discussion on the social, political, and economic impact of the Spanish Conquest in Mexico. The segue is abrupt yet effective, as Gibler then traces back the elements of Jaramillo's

death to a series of causes with roots that run several centuries deep: the strict order and profound divisions of social classes in New Spain, for example, are connected to the class divisions found in Mexico in the present day. He examines the impact of the following major conflicts after the end of the conquest and the Viceroyalty of New Spain (the War of Independence, the War of the French Intervention, the Revolution) on divisions of race and gender as well as class (20). The prologue and the rest of the book rest on these two fundamental and interconnected concepts: the Conquest (of the Americas as well as Mexico) is still underway; ergo, "hay gente y lugares que no han sido conquistados" (20). Gibler casts an unsparing eye on those would-be conquerors (politicians, drug traffickers, corrupt police forces, imperialists from within and beyond Mexican borders) while he recounts the stories of the unconquered.

The first chapter of the book is an impressively researched history that also serves to cement Gibler's position regarding the historical continuity between the Conquest and ensuing rebellion. While the chapters are all intended to 'bleed into one another,' as he states in the prologue, the first creates the conceptual and historical bedrock upon which the following chapters are built. The first two chapters are the ones most clearly directed to United States-educated audiences, as Gibler takes on the reductionism and erasure of indigenous cultures, presence, and histories, noting that such reductionism was used by the Spanish to justify their genocidal mistreatment of the indigenous peoples that they encountered. This technique was echoed in history books in North American classrooms in later centuries, as Gibler recalls inaccurate teachings from his own childhood (25, 34-5, 41). He presents a highly condensed and masterfully interwoven history, moving from the pre-Conquest to the emergence of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in 1994 in just under 30 pages, carefully exploring issues of cause and effect along the way.

The second chapter is devoted to drug-related violence and the abject failure of the war on drugs in both the United States and Mexico. Mexico, Gibler plainly notes, has suffered from the fallout of that war much more than its neighbor to the north—even though the bulk of the demand is from the U.S. side. Gibler offers a compelling account of the complex and far-reaching connections between the cartels and the

Mexican government and police force, and the ways in which the cartels have rendered the government largely ineffective through their economic influence as well as their violent reactions in the face of any resistance. It is all well and good to write laws, he says; it is another thing entirely to enforce them (70). It is here that he takes on the idea of the "rule of law" (*el estado de derecho)*, proposing that in Mexico it is authority, not the law itself, that is respected and followed. The impotence of the law alongside the system of authority lies at the root of the type of example-setting violence that is enacted: "La autoridad implica una compleja red de relaciones sociales de dominación; una amenaza en cualquier ubicación puede poner en peligro la red entera" (69). In such a system, Gibler argues, there is no room for social protest. Rather, Luis Estrada's 1999 satire *La ley de Herodes* is referenced to establish the rule of law in the country: it is not until the hapless civil servant Juan Vargas obtains both "el librito y la pistola" that he can exercise his authority (71). Torture is a common means of exerting authority in such a state. Rather than viewing torture as an anomaly, Gibler poses that it is in fact an integral part of the system. "Otra vez: detención arbitraria, uso sistemático de tortura a *todos los niveles* de la policía y las fuerzas armadas, e impunidad total para los oficiales. ¿Pueden prácticas tan extendidas y perdurables considerarse irregularidades del sistema? No. Son el sistema" (78).

In the third chapter, Gibler shifts his focus to the economy, and more specifically, poverty in Mexico, noting that the conquest has shifted in nature from military to economical. He describes poverty as an ideology more than a condition: "una construcción ideológica diseñada para legitimar y salvaguardar la dominación económica sobre la misma gente cuya supuesta condición de privaciones lamenta" (95). He is careful to state that this declaration does not negate the concrete realities of poverty, but the idea of poverty as ideology is also that which allows it to continue. Such an ideology, Gibler argues, serves to creating misleading notions regarding those who are responsible for creating the condition of poverty for those who live in it, thus convincing "millones de personas que viven en la miseria de que en realidad nadie tiene la culpa de su estado, y que los gobiernos nacionales y los economistas internacionales son quienes mejor sabrán ayudarlos en su situación" (96). He then spends several pages dismantling one of the most recent articulations of the

ideology of poverty: American economist Jeffery Sachs' 2005 book *The End of Poverty*, in which Sachs poses that poverty is merely due to slower economic growth in some areas than others, and that the same solutions for economic growth may be successfully applied anywhere, regardless of the culture or history of the region in question. Using texts from Frantz Fanon, Eduardo Galeano, and Enrique Semo, as well as a careful consideration of historical and cultural contexts, Gibler effectively dismantles Sachs' arguments before turning to the "abyss" in the title of the chapter: the gaping wage gap between the richest and the poorest citizens of Mexico. It is easy enough to describe how rich Mexico's rich are with facts and figures, but to describe the poor, Gibler shifts to individual stories of families in Guerrero and Oaxaca to capture snapshots of the reality of those who live in severe poverty: a four-year-old girl who works picking coffee beans and must walk and hour and a half to her elementary school; an injured man who was so completely paralyzed that he could only move his eyes and had received no treatment or physical therapy; a mother who spent time and money she did not have to go to the city to fetch a doctor who refused to come because neither mother nor son were registered in a particular federal assistance program (110). Meanwhile, politicians helicopter in, make promises in front of cameras, and leave; clinics are promised but never built, or built but never staffed. Gibler insists that hunger is a biological weapon in the class struggle—no accident at all.

The situation for migrant workers is also not an accident, as Gibler states in the fourth chapter. It is here that he really hits his stride: the prose has more flow and more bite than in the previous chapters, and it is here that the stories and personal accounts begin. While the first three chapters are more academic in nature, chapters four through seven consist of interwoven mosaics of personal accounts as well as the deeper historical contexts leading up to the present situation: of migrants victimized by *coyotes* or *la migra* and of communities left empty since so many of their inhabitants had crossed over to work in *El Norte* (Ch. 4), the uprising in Oaxaca (Ch. 5), and the Zapatista uprising and their struggles for political and economical autonomy (Ch. 6). Gibler's description of the emergence of the Zapatista army is as striking as it is brief: "Tuvieron que taparse la cara para ser vistos" (210).

In chapter 7, Gibler narrows his focus even more, describing Gloria Arenas Agis's participation and incarceration for her participation in guerilla resistance as a *comandanta* in the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo Insurgente (ERPI), continuing the struggle against an unjust government. Gibler gives Arenas Agis the last word in the chapter, and it is through her that he describes precisely the kind of rebellion that is underway. "No pienso en la rebelión como exclusivamente armada o exclusivamente no armada; podría ser un movimiento social, y ese movimiento podría adoptar diferentes formas de lucha, depende de las circunstancias, pero no definidas por un dogma desconectado de la experiencia" (268). Gibler's final chapter serves as a conclusion as well, returning to the more academic and historical construction of the beginning of the text. He began with a history of Mexico's cultural, political, and economic clashes and ends looking outward, with a short study on imperialism and its effects in Mexico and on a continental and global scale. In the seventh chapter as well as the conclusion, Gibler ends with the words of Gloria Arenas Agis, who does not issue a call to arms, but a call to *power*: this power must be constructed, not taken, and it must begin *desde abajo*, from the grass roots of the nation: "...lo que necesitamos es *construir* el poder, desde abajo, y empezar ya" (268, 298). While there are some issues with the translation—the Spanish does not flow well in the earlier chapters, which occasionally renders sentences ambiguous—Gibler's text would be an excellent and useful addition to an undergraduate history or literature course with a focus on Mexico. I think this would be particularly true for North American English speakers studying Spanish, but Gibler's impeccably researched text is a fine contribution to the corpus on resistance and revolution in Mexico in either language.

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