

The mexican rotation



Environmental determinism claims that a society's physical environment predetermines its social and cultural development. Naturally, environmental determinists would argue that Mexico's appreciation of nature and agricultural roots influence its circular outlook and thus determine its laidback mentality. Mariano Azuela's *The Underdogs* tells the story of Demetrio Macías, a rebel, who becomes a general in Pancho Villa's army during the Mexican Revolution. Although Azuela rapidly relays the events of the Revolution, he describes Mexico's landscape with vivid detail. The novel ends in the same sierra it began with Macías and his men still fighting the Federalists. Despite a lack of progress, *The Underdogs* is seen as one of the greatest novels of the Mexican Revolution because its preoccupation with nature brilliantly encompasses the cyclic nature of Mexican society.

Mexico's environmental memory has been reinforced through decades of ritual and sacrifice. In the ancient world, the Aztecs believed in a deep connection between the human body and their chinampa agriculture. The different crops they grew had different representations: "human flesh being equated with maize, vegetable foods and the earth itself; human blood with rain and flowing water" (Clendinnen 74-75). In order to ensure that the chinampas produced enough food, the Aztecs sought assistance from cosmic forces through the practice of human sacrifice. They believed that the Gods controlled the seasons and provided sun and rain necessary for plant growth. The Aztecs thought these cycles would continue until the world's ultimate destruction.

Mexicans' ancient dependence on these planting and harvesting cycles resulted in their relaxed, cyclical conception of time. During the Conquest,

the Aztec emperor, Montezuma, did not originally view Hernan Cortés' arrival as a threat: "The gods departed because their period of time was at an end, but another period returned and with it, other gods and another era" (Paz 94). Mexicans are typically more concerned with religion, tradition, and relationships than time because they believe that time is endless. Thus, Moctezuma interpreted the Spaniards' arrival as the beginning of a new cosmic period and welcomed Cortés to Tenochtitlan with gifts. Mexicans' deeply-rooted laissez-fair attitude of time and events largely affected the outcomes of the Revolution.

Aesthetically attractive landscapes are laced throughout *The Underdogs*. Azeula celebrates the land as he describes the physical environment in more detail than the battles during Revolution. When Macías and his men leave the Camila's ranch, Azeula intricately describes the way the men "rode through the canyon up and down the steep, round hills, dirty and bald as a man's head, hill after hill" (Azuela 59). The comparison of the hills to a man's bald head cleverly ties humanity to nature and the cosmos. However, the negative connotation of the word 'dirty' suggests that Azeula does not support the Revolution because it covers the beautiful hills in worthless deaths. Azuela's eloquent accounts of nature suggest that human actions are relatively insignificant in an environmentally determined society.

The rebels' behavior is the same behavior they are fighting to end. The novel begins with Macías escaping to the mountains after the Federalists arrive in Limón and kill his dog. Similarly, when the rebels arrive in new villages, they gather supplies, including ammunition and saddles. Macías can hear the "sound of doors being beaten down and forced open" (Azuela 102). The words

'beaten' and 'forced' imply that the rebels are unwelcome in local homes. The rebels are greedy, violent, and brash; they rape women, murder men, and loot villages. Macías and his men committed the same crimes that were committed against them, which demonstrates the cyclical nature of Mexican society.

Furthermore, the rebels are often unsure who or what they are fighting for. Even Macías, a leader in the Revolution, cannot justify his involvement. When his wife asks him why he keeps fighting, he frowns and throws a rock into the canyon. "'Look at that stone,'" he says, "'how it keeps going...'" (Azuela 158). Like the rock, Macías falls victim cyclical nature of Mexican society. He gets caught up in the whirlwind of battle continues to fight even after he has lost sight of what he is fighting for. Macías fails to take his wife's advice and dies fighting the Federalists in the same sierra in which he won his first battle—the ultimate epitome of Mexican cycles.

Mexican society is trapped in a constant stage of development because the role of Mexicans cannot be disentangled from the land: their source of opportunity. The Underdogs is more nature oriented than battle oriented in an attempt to articulate the role of nature in a society's overall development. The Revolution is an epitome of a 'revolution' because although it improved some conditions, it also created new problems by replacing one authoritarian regime with another. Mexican religion fosters a cyclical conception of time in which history is repeated in cycles until the world's ultimate destruction. Similar to when the Spanish arrived, many Mexicans accepted the inevitable during the Revolution and simply sought to preserve their existence.