

The Rebellion of the Hanged: B. Traven's Anti-Fascist Novel of the Mexican Revolution

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B. Traven's six "Jungle Novels" are set in the years leading up to the Mexican Revolution of 1911. They were written contemporaneously with the rise of German Nazism in the 1930s. The first in the series, *The Carreta*, was published in Berlin in 1930, the year in which six million Germans cast their votes for the Nazis at national elections. *March to the Monteria*, the third, appeared in Zürich in 1933, the year of the Reichstag fire and of Adolf Hitler's assumption of full powers as chancellor. The next in the sequence, *The Rebellion of the Hanged*, followed in 1936, in October of which year the Rome-Berlin axis was formed. The last of the "Jungle Novels" was *General from the Jungle*, which depicts the success of the Revolutionary forces in overthrowing the tyrannical regime of the dictator, Porfirio Diaz, in 1911. The novel appeared in Stockholm in 1939, the year of the Nazi invasion of Poland. The irony could not have been lost on the author. As a native German, who had held a post in the abortive anarchist Räterepublik in Munich in 1919, who had been arrested by the White reaction and forced to flee his homeland under sentence of death, and who had had his works blacklisted and burned on the Nazi takeover, Traven must have written his studies of the Mexican Revolution with one eye firmly on the rise of the Fascist tide in central and southern Europe.¹ As he wrote of Mexico in 1910-1911 and the triumph of libertarian forces there, it was with the threatened eclipse of those forces in Europe inevitably in mind. To my knowledge, only Jörg Thunecke to date has examined Traven's fiction (in this case, *Government*) against the wider historical context of their composition.² In this paper, I attempt a similar exercise, but in connection with *The Rebellion of the Hanged*. I approach the novel as partly a study of a proto-Fascist social organization, and I also consider Traven's view of the ideological alternative which it sets in motion through a dialectical process. I should clarify at the outset that I take the novel's anti-Fascist content as an implicit subtext, subordinate to Traven's ostensible literary purpose, which was an imaginative reworking of events in Mexico some twenty years before he wrote.

Thunecke has noted the difficulty experienced by scholars over the last two decades in reaching a consensus as to what Fascism is or was.³ The term

¹ Will Wyatt established the historical "facts" of Traven's early career in *The Man Who Was B. Traven* (London: Cape, 1980). As many other Traven commentators also appear prepared to do, I am assuming that Wyatt's biographical sketch for Ret Marut/B. Traven is probably accurate in its broad outlines. However, there is still dispute on various B. Traven mysteries, including the most basic assumption of all—that Ret Marut, the Bavarian revolutionary, was actually the same person as B. Traven. It will obviously be a long time before anything like consensus is achieved.

² Jörg Thunecke, "Political Satire Mexican-style. Critique of Proto-Fascist Tendencies in B. Traven's *Government*," in *B. Traven: Life and Work*, eds. Ernst Schürer and Philip Jenkins (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987) 233-44.

³ Thunecke 233-44.

has continued to be used after World War II (when it must surely have seemed a totally unambiguous term, for most) in a variety of political and national situations, usually involving the ruthless exercise of state power in the maintenance of authority and in the control of dissident opinion, to put it at its simplest. As I write, the term is employed in many quarters to characterize the behavior of the Peking regime, following its suppression of the "pro-democracy" movement in the early days of June 1989. The press also carries reports of the failure of the ongoing investigations into the excesses of the Fascist military rulers of Argentina in the 1970s, when thousands of left-wing political opponents were "disappeared." The Chinese Communist Party and the Argentinian Junta make unlikely bedfellows, but B. Traven himself would have appreciated the incongruity. In any case, an overtechnical fastidiousness here about the origins and characteristics of organized Fascism would be to do violence to the spirit of Traven himself, for he approaches his material primarily through non-theoretical channels, being mainly interested in how a broadly proto-Fascistic social structure affects both its human objects and subjects. If we have to have definitions, though, I am satisfied, like Thunecke, to make use of Manfred Clemenz's, namely that the term "Fascism" may be divided into generic (its social circumstances of origin), functional (its role within a given political entity), and phenomenological (its organization, means, and creeds) components.⁴ Since I will be referring to several of these aspects, this should suffice as a working framework of reference for my discussion.

In *Government*, Traven had exposed what Thunecke calls "forms of nascent fascism (proto-fascism)" in the Diaz dictatorship (235). I will take as read the fact that, for Traven, the Diaz regime is synonymous with a hierarchical social organization which curtails the rights of the majority by empowering an influential oligarchy, that this oppressive system operates with the collusion of and in the economic interests of the capitalist class, and that one of the gravest consequences in human terms is the physical exploitation and destruction of the impoverished Indian *peons*, who, as the result of a system of debt-slavery, are transported to work in the dreaded mahogany plantations (for which read forced-labor camps), where the absolute expendability of human life in the cause of profit is taken for granted. Whereas *Government* had concentrated on manifestations of "nascent fascism" at the lowest level (in the persons of small-town mayors, petty bureaucrats, police officers, storekeepers, and entrepreneurs) and had only darkly alluded to the camps, in *The Rebellion of the Hanged* the mahogany plantations (*monterias*) become the horrifying focus, a hellish stage for a bestial system of human degradation only just falling short of organized genocide (the vast majority of the workers are Indians, and therefore regarded as subhuman by their "white" *Ladino* overseers). The plantations are nothing more than the "logical" but concealed end product of the dominant political mentality, just as Auschwitz and Dachau would become the inconceivable and unspeakable physical correlates of a fundamentally anti-human ideology pursued to its ultimate extremes.

In its narrative structure, *The Rebellion of the Hanged* is one of the most clearly schematic of the "Jungle" series, dividing quite neatly into three main

⁴Thunecke 234.

stages, each dealing with a distinct mode of social organization: first, there is what Traven calls the "'independent' or self-constituted agricultural colony"⁵ of the rural Indians; secondly, there is its antithesis in the rigidly totalitarian world of the *monteria*; lastly, Traven analyzes the new revolutionary society which evolves in reaction to the latter. Traven intends the reader to make comparisons and to draw his own conclusions as to the relative humanity, morality, and efficiency of the three. Traven's admiration for the communally based life of the rural Indians comes through strongly in the documentary travel work, *Land des Frühlings* (1928), and in *Government* (1931). It has been well documented by Michael Baumann (1977), Seibert (1987), Friederike Baumann (1987), and others.⁶ Pearson (1976) has described the quality of Traven's *indigenista* enthusiasms as well as any. In the novels, she maintains, "the orderly operation of the Indian community emerges consistently as a paradigm for ideal political intercourse. His vignettes of village life illustrate the assumption that natural man is uncorrupted and that, in contrast, Porfirian society reflected a disruption of the natural harmony between man and his environment."⁷ In *Government*, Traven had extolled the society of the Pebvil nation, a federation of four tribes sharing a common language, customs, and traditions. Traven is especially impressed by the high level of intertribal cooperation in their self-sufficient division of labor, and in their democratic and republican political arrangements. As Pearson notes, Traven "believed that such a society represented a high point in human achievement to which the modern ethos was insensitive" (184). The "modern ethos" was more than "insensitive", one might add, for the ideological principles implicit in such a social model were being threatened with outright annihilation in the Europe of the mid-1930s.

Traven's technique in characterizing the Indian system of values is primarily through the social conduct of its main representatives (the peasant, Candido, and his sister, Modesta), and by means of contrast with the mores of the larger Mexican society, dominated by the *Ladinos*, whom Traven refers to regularly as "those cunning, glib-tongued white rascals" (17). In what is essentially a caricature of the *Ladino* world, Traven introduces three leading rascals in the persons of the doctor, the labor agent, Don Gabriel, and Don Alejo, the Chief of Police. Together, these pillars of the community embody cupidity, materialism, religious hypocrisy, racist intolerance, and an absolute lack of compassion and Christian charity (all of the vices, in fact, that Traven had previously highlighted in the *Ladino* bureaucrats of *Government*). Their every act appears motivated by monetary gain, the most grotesque instance of this being the doctor, who refuses to operate on Candido's dying wife, Marcelina, until he is paid his exorbitant fee, and then refuses to release the corpse until Candido

⁵ B. Traven, *The Rebellion of the Hanged* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1970) 5. Subsequent references are to this edition, and will be indicated parenthetically.

⁶ For a discussion of *Land des Frühlings*, see Michael L. Baumann, "B. Traven: Realist and Prophet," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 53. 1 (Winter 1977): 73-85; and Friederike Baumann, "B. Traven's *Land des Frühlings* and the Caoba Cycle as a Source for the Study of Agrarian Society," in *B. Traven: Life and Work* 245-57. Also in *B. Traven: Life and Work*, see Peter Seibert, "Traven's *White Rose*: Regressive Idyll or Social Utopia?" 156-80; Cynthia Steele, "The Primitivist as Anarchist: Two Novels by B. Traven in the Mexican Literary and Political Context of the 1930s," 307-15; Lydia D. Hazera, "The Making of Two Guerilla Generals in Azuela's *The Underdogs* and Traven's Jungle Novels," 345-55.

⁷ Sheryl Marie Pearson, "The Anglo-American Novel of the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1940: D.H. Lawrence, B. Traven, Graham Greene," an unpublished doctoral dissertation (University of Michigan, 1976) 174-75.

pays for the "consultation" and the "post-mortem examination" (even though the doctor's insistence on payment before treatment is responsible for the woman's death). Traven also reveals how relationships in this milieu are dictated by economic considerations. Don Gabriel advances two hundred pesos to Candido to meet the cost of the operation and thereby immediately benefits the doctor. Don Gabriel relies on Candido's debt to the doctor in order to be able to pocket his commission later from the *monteria* owners, to whom Candido is to be contracted. In order to provide a legal veneer to his chicanery, Don Gabriel must also buy the cooperation of the Chief of Police. Not to be outdone, even the coffin maker profits from Candido's bereavement, plying the simple Indian with clever religious arguments in order to sell him a more expensive coffin than the impoverished Candido can really afford. In all of this, the unfortunate peasant seems only to exist as a means to financial gain in the eyes of the mercenary *Ladinos*.

Using a strategy similar to that he employed in *Government*, Traven concentrates on the simple stoicism, integrity, and emotional authenticity of his Indian characters, in order so to elevate his natives that it becomes the "civilized" but emotionally empty *Ladinos* who appear to be the real savages. In contrast to the *Ladinos*, Traven's Indians are prompted by feelings of tribal and family loyalties and obligations, as with the Indians who pass Candido on the road, as he sits by the side of his sick wife. The Indians belong to the Tsotsil tribe, like Candido himself, and are from the same parish. It is natural, therefore, that they should interrupt their journey in order to build a primitive stretcher on which they carry Marcelina all the way back to the town of Jovel, which they have just left. Their demonstration of tribal solidarity is mirrored soon after this in the familial reciprocity shown by Candido's youngest sister, Modesta, who, in spite of his protests, resolves to accompany her brother and his two small sons on the arduous march into the mahogany jungles. "As if life wasn't hard for you when you took charge of me as a little child without protection and not having either father or mother!" she declares. "How can it be hard for me to help you now, to be at your side with your children, and they having no mother?" As he usually does (most strikingly, I would say, in *Government*), Traven manages to convey the raw emotion of the peasant without the slightest trace of sentimentality. In answer to Candido's anxious questions about the fields and livestock he has had to leave behind, Modesta explains that uncles, aunts, and cousins (the extended family, that is) have responded to the crisis to safeguard Candido's meagre livelihood, "We did the natural thing" (47), Modesta says.

Paul Berman has made some particularly useful observations about the character and significance of the *monteria* camps in the novel, and about their relation to the outside world from which they appear to be so far removed, geographically at least. Firstly, there is the point that "the plantation is the jungle outpost of that larger society which the Indians cannot visualize: world capitalism."⁸ The *monteria*, then, is "world capitalism" writ large, or at least the dehumanizing and acquisitive ethic which Traven is convinced it conceals behind its "civilized" facade. In *Government*, Traven had already made his point that the

⁸ Paul Berman, "B. Traven, I Presume," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 18.1 (Winter 1978): 92.

exploitation and enslavement of the Indians is connected to a network of global market imperatives, and to the Western consumer's taste for mahogany gramophone cabinets and dressing tables. In *The Rebellion of the Hanged*, Traven describes the Management office as "the heart and brain of the lumber-camp," since it receives "the official communications from the national Treasury, letters from banks . . . reports from agents in New York and London" (52). In the forests (which in Traven's fiction are often a setting in which white men unleash their rapacious instincts), the mask of "civilization" is simply dropped, as the legitimizing hypocrisies are no longer required, much in the same way that they are rendered redundant in the Congo jungle of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. If we accept the premise, then it should follow that the moral and ethical system which informs "world capitalism" will be magnified in the social organization of the lumber camps. As Berman puts it, in the camps "the market rules." The plantation owners, the Montellano brothers, find themselves under ever-increasing pressure to raise output in order to avoid business failure. To this end, the laborers are routinely overworked, abused, beaten, tortured, and killed by the camp's master class of managers, foremen, and overseers. As Berman defines it, the terrifying jungle community that Candido and the others join is "the new communal society of the white man's creation: in place of the ancient village, the modern labor camp" (92).

The involvement of the plantations in a web of capital relationships operating at local, national, and international levels helps to explain their existence both generically and functionally, according to Clemenz's description. However, these formal characteristics do not engage Traven's attention so extensively (*Government* had been his major statement on these aspects). In *The Rebellion of the Hanged*, Traven is more interested in the camp as a kind of institutional analogue to Indian society of the Pebvil type, and investigates the effects of camp regulation on the lives of the human beings who control and who are controlled by it. Pearson has remarked on the way that *monteria* organization "duplicates the colonial arrangement that continued to dominate Mexico until the Revolution. At the top of the hierarchy sit the *hacendado*, the Montellanos, who trace their authority to land ownership; below them are the various classes of *mestizos* who make up the camp's small bourgeoisie—artisans, tradesmen, and overseers; at the bottom . . . are the Indian laborers" (186). In contrast to the representative republicanism of the Pebvil federation (with its regular councils, elections, and strict rotation of administrative powers), the camp is a repressive autocracy, under which the community has no voice in its government. "The only right you have here is to keep your mug shut" (65), Candido is told by one of the brothers. The population has no means of rectifying abuses and injustices, and no power to resist the armed thugs who operate as *monteria* Brownshirts to enforce the Montellanos' ruthless control through a repertoire of violence, which ranges from flogging to ear-chopping. In effect, the Montellano brothers exercise dictatorial authority over a Fascist system in microcosm, employing the typical methods of coercion.

In its lurid bluntness, Traven's description of the Montellano brothers is reminiscent of the standard cartoon representation of the capitalist slave driver which appeared in the American radical magazines of the 1910s and 1920s, like *The Masses* and *The New Masses*. They are presented as heartless

and totally ruthless brutes. We are told that there has been no news from the youngest Montellano, Don Acacio, since the brothers bought the plantations, but that Don Severo and Don Felix, the other two, "would not have shed the smallest tear on account of the premature end of their brother: because, in any case, they would have consoled themselves thinking that, from then onwards, the profits would be divided into two and no longer into three parts. The death of a brother was a small matter for them. To make money was the only thing that interested them" (53). Where money-making is the only criterion, the value placed on human life is drastically reduced.

Profit and inhumanity go hand in hand at La Armonia. Since one of the four camps has been shut down due to flooding, it becomes necessary to triple or, if possible, quadruple the output of the biggest camp, La Armonia. "It was a question of yield," says Traven, "because the mahogany was there in La Armonia in sufficient abundance to cover any deficit" (57). As a direct result of the economic emergency, the normally brutalized existence of the workers is made even less tolerable, with their regular daily output of cut mahogany raised from two to four tons, and with a novel system of torture applied to guarantee that the new level of production is met. The worker found "guilty" of not reaching his quota is taken out into the forest at night and hung from a tree by his four limbs. This is the Montellanos' own "new invention," says one of the cutters, Santiago, and another of the men explains how the victim's nostrils and ears are smeared with fat in order to attract insects—a refinement introduced to ensure that an uncooperative victim will cooperate fully in his own punishment on future occasions. At one point, Traven details the appalling results of one of these overnight hangings: "The eyes of the hanged were swollen and bloodshot, their bodies covered with ulcers caused by the bites of red ants and the stings of mosquitoes. Hundreds of ticks of all sizes had penetrated so deeply beneath their skins that the heads of these insects were completely buried. It required time and infinite patience to extract them without leaving the heads behind, so that the bites should not become dangerous and difficult to cure. Wherever a tick worked its way in there remained, even after its removal, a terrible itching which lasted for at least a week and compelled the victim to scratch himself incessantly to relieve the burning. The bodies of the tortured men were covered with ants now escaping, each one replete with his bloody booty or feed of flesh. Jiggers left their eggs deposited in profusion in the toes. Spiders had invaded their hair and the biggest of them had begun to weave their webs to catch flies attracted by the blood and sweat of the strung-up men" (81). This barbarous system is no mere casual brutality, however. On the contrary, it is a tried and tested means of worker motivation and productivity enhancement. As Traven says, the hangings "did not result in injury likely to prevent working. What remained—and with magnificent result—was the terror of having again to live through such frightful hours" (82).

With the value of human life so comprehensively diminished by the camp, Traven is well aware of the damaging effects on the psychology of the oppressed and of the danger of the total immobilization of individual thought and action. Steele (1987) oversimplifies when she claims that in *The Rebellion of the Hanged* "Traven concerns himself with neither anthropology nor psy-

chology,⁹ for a good deal of the central *monteria* section is taken up with important psychological changes undergone by the inmates, the "development of the Indian from a stoic, downtrodden beast of work to a man who finally makes a decision to rebel against his masters," as Hazera has put it.¹⁰ One of the more experienced workers tells the newly arrived Candido that the camp is "the final pit of Hell . . . the far end of Hell itself" (75)—words that recall the ominous inscription above the crew's quarters in *The Death Ship*, Traven's novel of 1926 ("He / Who enters here / Will no longer have existence; / His name and soul have vanished / And are gone for ever").¹¹ Indeed, there is more than a loose parallel in the way both camp and death ship provide a descent into depersonalization, torture, toil and, also, a form of purgatorial testing which may finally bring some sense out of the anguish. The *monteria* setting is a kind of inferno, which urges the "hanged" to surrender their hope, their human sympathies, and the instinct for human kinship felt so powerfully by Candido and Modesta at the familial and tribal levels. The camp is the antithesis of these and spells their destruction in its victims (or, such is one of its aims). So it seems, at any rate, when Candido hears the screams of the "hanged" for the first time. No one in his group "rose to go over and ask the old hands the exact meaning of the lamentable cries filling the jungle," Traven writes: "They did not wish to lose their last grain of hope. They were afraid to know the truth. They wished to persuade themselves in their inner beings that it was not their companions who were being tortured, but that it was merely the coppices which droned or the myriads of insects beating upon them. Not one of them went into the thickness of the jungle to try to see what was happening, nor indeed did anybody from the other group" (76). Traven obviously sees the newcomers' response as a reflection of the wider political scenario, for he adds that they knew "it was better not to show oneself too curious nor to go deeply into the cause of the dolorous shouts, groans and wails which arose from the wells, the deep caves or from the vaults of ruined convents. The labourers and peons knew by experience that the inquisitive person who was drawn by the victims' cries and tried to help would not have to wait long before he would utter similar groans."

At the outset, Candido's reaction to the horrors of La Armoria dramatizes the nadir of the Indian slave-class consciousness—disoriented, submissive, deprived of independent initiative. "What can we do, little sons?" says Candido on learning from Don Severo that the boys are to work as cowherds and not with him in the forest, "He's the master and we must obey him" (63). A moment later, Don Felix bloodies the Indian's nose when he objects to his four-ton daily quota: "Candido shrunk into himself and tried to stop the bleeding by applying a handful of grass to his nose. Modesta remained standing in front of Don Felix, her head lowered. The incident was more painful to her than to Candido, but, like the rest of her race, she was accustomed from infancy to bear silently the worst treatment from the ladinos, the white bosses. She did not move; not a gesture, not a contraction of her face betrayed what she felt" (65). But, this state of psychological acquiescence does not last long. Traven uses Candido's slow enlightenment as an index (a kind of lowest common denomi-

⁹ Steele 312.

¹⁰ Hazera 349.

¹¹ B. Traven, *The Death Ship* (London: Pan Books, 1988) 99.

nator) to the inevitable stirring of a spirit of rebellion amongst the laborers at large, as Candido is swept along by events orchestrated by the more politically aware and class-conscious workers.

Traven marks Candido's "awakening" through several formative experiences, beginning with the nascent comradeship he develops with Celso, who nurses the newcomer through the difficult first two weeks of cutting, at the risk of being punished for falling short of his own quota. Candido is puzzled as to why Celso should want to help: "Tell me, companero," he asks, "why you're helping me in this way? I hardly know you, and yet you're running the risk of being beaten for having lost so much of your time with me" (86). Celso's reply ("Aren't we Indians?") is an elementary first lesson for Candido in racial identification and solidarity, which will become a powerfully cohesive force in the later revolutionary action. But, due to his lack of education and class awareness, and his inability to conceive of a workers' movement united through common grievances, Candido's progress follows an erratic course. For example, when one of his sons is drowned in a canoe accident, Candido reacts according to his peasant lights, by simply wanting to go home, rather than work against the political conditions which were the cause of the child's death (conditions which the simple peasant is unable to identify, of course). "I just can't stay here," he tells Modesta. "They have killed my Angelino, murdered Marcelina's first-born child. We're going to go back to the village. I'm homesick . . . and I must go back to my field, to my maize, to the house I built with my own hands"(155). As with every individual act of rebellion in the story, their escape attempt ends in disastrous failure, but not before Candido has at least made tentative circumstantial connections from his own experience of oppression. Rejecting a religious explanation for the accident ("that wasn't the wish of the Most Holly Mother"), Candido declares that the boss "couldn't bear the children; he wanted to kill them. I know! A hundred times he told me that they ought to be working in order to have a right to be with me. The children of poor Marcelina who was also murdered—murdered by the doctor because I hadn't any money" (156). Thus, in his own ponderous fashion, Candido gropes his way toward an understanding of the economic basis of the Indian's exploitation at the hands of the *Ladinos*.

Through the scene of Candido's punishment by Don Felix, Traven dramatizes the developing spiral of mutinous sentiment and increasing counterrevolutionary violence. Conscious that not only the camp but the whole country is "sitting on a barrel of dynamite" (125), Don Felix takes this timely opportunity to demonstrate the camp regime's resolve to nip any insurrectionary feeling in the bud. As an exemplary punishment, Don Felix has Candido's ears amputated, together with those of his surviving son. In the best tradition of the concentration camp commandant, Don Felix announces afterwards, "That's what will happen to everybody who tries to escape or rebel, who sings songs of revolt during the night, or even to anybody who's insolent. They'll all work—work! That's all they'll do" (167). If Candido's punishment symbolizes Indian degradation absolute and total, then it is seen at the same time by Traven as almost a "necessary" incident in the formation of the revolutionary impulse. Traven traces this through the individual case of Modesta, who is forced to witness the atrocity. Later in the narrative, with the rebellion in its early stages, Modesta

dates her devotion to the rebel cause to the unjustifiable and unforgivable mutilation of her young nephew. The experience leaves her with an all-consuming urge for just revenge which Traven sees as playing a significant role in the complex of revolutionary motivation. With a firm grasp of the dialectics of repression, Traven shows the innocent and subservient village girl transformed into the "woman of the Revolution" (186) as the direct result of "official" bestiality.

In its immediate concentration, *The Rebellion of the Hanged* is more to do with a localized rebellion than with a nation-wide Revolutionary movement in any coherent and organized sense, although there is no doubt that to a large degree the woodcutters' insurrection is meant to mirror the events unfolding across the Republic, "behind" the action of the narrative. The novel focuses on a rebellion which is in the process of becoming a revolution, a process which Traven views with his habitual combination of enthusiasm and skepticism, no doubt with his own unhappy revolutionary experience of 1919 in mind. It is quite characteristic of Traven that the emphasis in the novel is more on individuals in uprising than on a class in systematic revolutionary action. This bias seems to be revealed in the individual initiative which gives rise to the rebellion—Celso's murder of the brutal overseer, El Gusano, for his maltreatment of Modesta. At this point, the workers unite only in their common desire for escape from the *monteria* and a return to their homes and families; their plans go no farther than the killing of their camp oppressors in order that the murder of El Gusano does not "rebound." It is left to the Professor, the ex-school teacher Martin Trinidad, to divert the men's rebellious energies into a broader plan of action aimed at the obliteration of the entire machinery of oppression, the landowners, the rural and federal police, the mayors and political chiefs at all levels. "All our enemies must be killed," he declares, "and we must kill all who can become our enemies" (180). Significantly, he has nothing to say about longer-term political objectives, except that true *peon* freedom can only come through *peon* ownership of the land—"Land and Liberty."

There seems no need here to detail the progress of the Indians' revolt as it moves towards its declared purposes. Nor do I think it necessary to document Traven's sympathy for the mutineers and their motives, for their single-minded dedication and their undoubted spirit of altruism. What interests me more is the characteristic sense of balance and the sharply ironic eye that prevent Traven from sentimentalizing the movement and its methods. As Berman has remarked, we are brought up again by "the contradiction between revolutionary zeal and ironic pessimism," by Traven as at once "revolutionary and resigned, ardent and ironic, engaged and detached" (95). One cause of Traven's pessimism lies in the fact that the uprising brings no apparent improvement in what one of the rebel leaders calls "the mean souls of men" (267). It is very much a case of virtue and violence, as Revolutionary excesses turn out to be as bloody and sometimes as indiscriminate as the crimes committed by the previous rulers. The most striking instance of this is the massacre of the innocent artisans' families by the "Wild Men," ex-*monteria* workers who had fled into the jungle and lived there wild. Traven concedes that the rebels are "animated by sentiments of death and destruction," but he insists that this be seen in its historical-political perspective. "Even if workers should have proposed an ami-

cable discussion with the bosses on a basis of equality," writes Traven, "the bosses would have replied with machine-gun fire: because it was a crime against the State to make a proposal which would permit bosses and wage-earners to study debatable questions. It was also a crime to concede to the workers the right to submit a proposition about anything. The worker had the right to obey and work hard. That was all. The rest concerned the Dictator and his acolytes. Furthermore, the right to give orders and to criticize was theirs, and theirs only" (217). The Indians did not kill and destroy from "mere savagery," Traven continues. "They gave proofs of cruelty only because their adversaries and oppressors were a hundred times more savage and cruel than they themselves, and such proofs were provided only to safeguard their own interests."

What seems to trouble Traven more than revolutionary terror, however, is the possibility that the efforts and sacrifices of the rebels may finally bring about only a superficial change to the society they are striving to reshape. This danger is made quite clear in the closing pages of the novel, when the Professor explains to Andreu what he means by "practical revolution." The rebels have just liberated the small village of El Requemado, which is now under *peon* control, but the Professor declares that "the instinct of possession and property are more anchored than before": "Only the name of the owner has changed. And I can predict to you, comrade, that tomorrow or the day after the new proprietors will fight like devils among themselves with machetes until only one is left, if even one, to enjoy the property. The man who gets possession of the revolver will be the new master, and the one who has the shotgun will be overseer. And those who by chance survive will become peons again" (265). The villagers have "changed ownership of fields and pigs," concludes the Professor, whereas "what ought to have been changed are the ideas on which the whole system rests." Traven is noncommittal as to whether these "ideas" are likely to be changed in the end or not.

The closing scenes of *The Rebellion of the Hanged* are so freighted with ironies that it almost seems that Traven was having trouble keeping a completely straight face over his peasant army and their revolutionary ambitions. As the men trudge forward to do battle with the *rurales*, Traven describes the bellowing voice of Celso (who is now a Lieutenant) as he harangues the troops with a string of insults and curses ("Damned lot of lousy Indians!"; "Dogs and a lot worse"; "You goddamned greasy lot of Indians"). The style and the vocabulary are almost identical to those used by the Montellano brothers and their overseers when abusing their *monteria* slaves. A moment later, the Professor and the General agree on the promotion of the zealous Celso. "I've already got one colonel, ten captains and about fifty lieutenants," the General points out, "yet I haven't so far got a major. With your permission, comrade, tonight when we encamp we'll make Celso a major" (268). The Professor is unable immediately to ratify the suggestion, writes Traven, as he had tripped over a root and fallen, leaving his face "sunk in the mud." This is a "downfall" in more than just the literal sense, for it had been the Professor himself who had described the rebellion at its inception as having "no chiefs or officers; we're all only privates" (186). Clearly, Traven hints, the idealistic camaraderie and antiauthoritarianism of the rebellion's early days seem already to have been forgotten, and we

are left with a revolutionary social unit which is already stratified. This cautionary and decidedly downbeat conclusion to Traven's saga of revolt makes it difficult to agree with Steele's overcategorical reading of the rebellion as "a prototype for the total anarchist revolution of the future, which would eliminate all forms of authority and bureaucracy in Mexican society" (312). Such a view takes no account of Traven's endlessly qualified commitment to revolutionary action. "Total anarchist revolution" may have been what Traven prescribed, politically, in afterthought, but it seems unlikely that it will be realized by an organization containing ten captains and fifty lieutenants. It should be kept in mind that Traven was writing in the anticlimax of the Mexican Revolution, when it must have seemed to him as it did to many others that the lot of the *peon*, for one thing, had been only marginally alleviated at best. I believe that what we have in these enigmatic closing lines, rather than a revolutionary call to arms, is a half-ironic lament for a purity and intensity of anarchic purpose, a momentary unity of radical aim and perspective, which becomes diffused and diluted in the installation of the revolution proper—a political phenomenon not without its various historical precedents, after all.

We are told that *The Rebellion of the Hanged* was "a favourite object" among the members of the Czech Resistance, and was "smuggled especially from Bohemia by brave freedom fighters into Nazi Germany."¹² It seems to have played a similarly morale-lifting role in Sweden, where it "was printed in 1941 in a second edition of 12,000 copies in the book series of the Swedish Workers' Educational Association, at a time when Sweden was surrounded on all sides by Hitler's armies and when the last hours of Swedish democracy and the Swedish labor movement seemed close at hand."¹³ It is not difficult to see how, for the Swedes as for the Czechs (and for many other Europeans in the late 1930s and early 1940s)¹⁴ Traven's novel spoke loudest as a statement of revolutionary inevitability, albeit grounded in the actualities of Latin-American history. In the words of Martin Trinidad, Traven's Professor, the novel does demonstrate that "the Dictatorship and tyranny are neither invulnerable nor invincible" (183). There is no denying that the novel did and still does function as a powerful anti-Fascist rallying call, reverberating as it does with a contempt for oppressors of every stripe, from the Dictator himself down to the pettiest slave-camp *kapo*, and with the warmest admiration for the ordinary Candidos and Modestas among the oppressed who find the courage to resist and to strike back. Given the critical historical moment, it is also perfectly understandable that the Czech anti-Nazis and the besieged Swedes would not have

¹² Rudolf Vapenik, "B. Traven From a Czech Point of View," in *B. Traven: Life and Work* 270.

¹³ Helmut Müssener, "B. Traven in Sweden," in *B. Traven: Life and Work* 282.

¹⁴ *The Rebellion of the Hanged* appeared in Prague in 1937. In the following year it was published in Paris, Amsterdam, Stockholm, and Moscow. The dates are taken from E.R. Hagemann's "A Checklist of the Work of B. Traven and the Critical Estimates and Bibliographical Essays on Him; together with a Brief Biography," in *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 53 (1959): 37-67. This remains the fullest listing for the numerous international editions of Traven's works.

cared to notice the other more ambiguous and more reflective B. Traven, always skeptical, but, it would seem, never completely disillusioned. Recent Traven scholarship has placed us in a better position to recognize this other face of the author, but, it seems to me, we should not allow its presence to obscure the overwhelmingly humane philosophy which illuminates *The Rebellion of the Hanged* as it does the rest of B. Traven's writings.