

Chapo 'El Bandito' Alger

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MELIXA ABAD IZQUIERDO, SEP 2 2015

Described by the U.S. Treasury Department as 'the world's most powerful drug trafficker', Joaquín 'el Chapo' Guzmán has emerged as one of the world's most notorious criminals, albeit one with what we might call 'fans', both at home and abroad. Invariably, print and social media coverage of Guzmán's spectacular escape has engaged in navel-gazing as to why the drug lord is popular among sections of the working class in his home state of Sinaloa, Mexico. In such explanations, there tend to be references to the job opportunities that his international narcotics enterprise offers, thus attenuating the problems associated with the region's declining agricultural and public sectors. Moreover, the weakness and/or corruption of the Mexican state frames the discussion, providing further explanations why el Chapo has a growing number of sympathizers in Sinaloa.

Bubbling below the surface of mainstream 'news' coverage is the power of popular culture, specifically the palpable role of fiction and heroes in the development of national identity, and how this might contribute to his appeal among some segments of Mexico's working class. Rather than portraying el Chapo as 'real person', he is instead geopolitically choreographed against historical figures, European fables, and racist stereotypes. Most frequently, he is compared to the character of Robin Hood, an English thief that famously stole from the rich to give to the poor. However, this analogy rings false; while Chapo runs a massive drug cartel that distributes a global commodity in high demand, Chapo is not a thief but rather the chief executive officer of a commercial empire that happens to be illegal.

While the comparison to Robin Hood is clearly stated in much of the coverage there is another implicit gestalt that lies beneath the U.S. coverage of the El Chapo's escape, that of the *bandito*. The depiction of Mexicans in western comic books and films as dark, short *banditos* goes back to the early 20th century, echoes of which manifested in recent comments by U.S. Republican Party presidential front-runner Donald Trump, which in turn prompted a supposed death threat (via Twitter) from el Chapo, thus creating a tragicomic, mass-mediated, cross-border war of words between a reality TV star and one of the world's most wanted men. While most journalists avoid actually using the racist language that was once common in American society to refer to Mexican men, the *bandito* is nevertheless an image that the drug-trafficking business conjures in the U.S.'s 'modern geopolitical imagination'. While always negative and menacing in the U.S., the *bandito* image in Mexico invokes more complex associations, particularly those linked with the Mexican Revolution (1910-1921). Among that diverse array revolutionaries and social groups that revolted against the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz was Pancho Villa, a former muleteer and part-time *bandito* who organized the pivotal *División del Norte* and became the de facto leader of the Mexican state of Chihuahua. Of course it is not coincidence that the rise of the *bandito* image in U.S. media coincided with the Mexican Revolution, given its overlap with the explosion of new forms of popular culture (particularly motion pictures, comic strips, and radio).

Certainly, Chapo's life story certainly has a *bandito* streak, but it also has similarities with the 19th-century 'rags-to-riches' stories of American novelist Horatio Alger. In his formulaic novels, Alger wrote about an orphan boy or young man who migrates from the countryside to the city. In an urban setting, the character faces adversity, but thanks to his quick wits and innate, he always becomes a respected and wealthy man at the end of the story. These morality tales were aspirational for the millions of immigrants who poured in the United States during the late 1800s, and even became fodder for the U.S.'s exportation of its national image abroad via other forms of popular culture in subsequent decades. Despite the self-improving message, Alger's yarns delineated the (gendered and racialized) limits of the American dream as all of his stories were about white males. Yet, these narratives contributed to the

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mythic ideal of the entrepreneurial self-made man. Thus, in Chapo's life story we see a youth from the marginalized countryside who has achieved a level of power almost unthinkable for someone of his social class. El Chapo appeared alongside Bill Gates and Michael Bloomberg when his name was included in the Forbes World's Billionaires list in 2009, powerfully reiterated in a 2012 profile of the drug lord in which he is described as a 'self-made' man.

Like it or not, el Chapo is an international entrepreneur, rising through the ranks of the Sinaloa Cartel to become one of the most powerful people in the world. His fantastic escape in the midst of a cacophonous debate about 'controlling the U.S. border', demonstrates the porousness of international relations in the contemporary era where Twitter often trumps CNN. However, as a synecdoche for the (failed) War on Drugs, Guzmán's success indicates the ineffectiveness of the prohibitionist policies both north and south of the U.S.-Mexico border. Both governments have the power to abandon the War on Drugs and changes are occurring slowly. If in the future, we see the drug epidemic being treated as a health issue it is, and the sale and distribution of marijuana becoming legal and regulated (thus producing a thriving generation of Mexican self-made men [and women] operating farms across Mexico), el Chapo may then be seen as a genuine pop-cultural icon for the masses, not just a hackneyed Mexican 'Robin Hood'.

About the author:

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