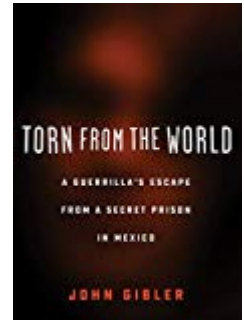


John Glibler. *Torn from the World: A Guerrilla's Escape from a Secret Prison in Mexico.* City Lights Publishers, 2018. 260 pages \$16.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-87286-752-9.



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Since the end of the Cold War and the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, left-wing scholars have downplayed the evolution of the mainstream Mexican Left and popular nationalist discourse. Instead, journalists like John Glibler have interpreted Mexican episodes of resistance against neoliberal practices through the lens of postcolonial and decolonial frameworks. Nonetheless, it is impossible to avoid the 1970s counterinsurgent repression of guerrillas and social movements when looking into the unresolved kidnapping and murder in September 2014 of forty-three Ayotzinapa college students in the southern state of Guerrero.

John Glibler's *Torn from the World: A Guerrilla's Escape from a Secret Prison in Mexico* explores the detention and torture of Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR) guerrilla Andrés Tzompaxtle Tecpile in 1996 and his incredible escape from Mexican security forces. The book appeared originally in Spanish in 2014 by the commercial publishing house Tusquetes. Glibler prepared the English translation as part of a book series about state

violence and repression and will share space with books by Noam Chomsky and Mumia Abu-Jamal. *Torn from the World* recounts the reactions to those events of journalists, the EPR leadership, Mexican newspapers, human rights activists, Mexican authorities, the victim, and his family. Glibler maintains that the testimony of Andrés Tzompaxtle must be acknowledged despite its contradictions and gaps because it brings to light the return of 1970s dirty war strategies of counterinsurgency in contemporary Mexico and the use of those same tactics by state agents and organized crime in the pursuit of personal gain (see pp. 248-49). *Torn from the World* recovers an understudied guerrilla movement (EPR) and contextualizes the violence in Guerrero in the late 1990s. Moreover, this incident is a useful reminder of the weakness of the “democratic transition” (1988-2000) and forces us to look outside Mexico City or Chiapas. Glibler has written a powerful exposé of the Mexican state violence, but he does not discuss the role of the guerrilla at a moment

when democratization and non-armed struggle developed in this region.

As an American journalist based in Mexico, John Gliber has covered a broad range of conflicts in southern Mexico since the late 1990s, from the teachers' uprising at Oaxaca in 2006 to the struggles for indigenous rights in Chiapas and Guerrero. Recently, he has worked on an oral history of the Ayotzinapa Massacre in 2014 that will appear in the same series as *Torn from the World*. Gliber continues the tradition established by John Reed's *Insurgent Mexico* (1914) and John Kenneth Turner's *Barbarous Mexico* (1910) of engaged journalism that documents, this time in Guerrero, the ongoing process of resistance and repression. He argues that this process reflects the effects of a colonial regime that oppresses indigenous and poor people long after Mexico declared its independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century. In this interpretation, the Mexican state has developed an ideological justification under the umbrella of a "revolutionary" discourse to deflect blame and hide exploitation of the indigenous population.

Torn from the World is organized thematically and chronologically. It discusses the detention and brutal torture of Tzompaxtle, a Nahua indigenous, first from the point of view of the reporters covering the reemergence of the EPR, and then introduces the testimony of Tzompaxtle himself, with special attention to the problems that pertain to the description of torture and violence. This is accompanied by a reflection about how best to assess the truth of testimony of an "impossible" escape and the role of the journalist in writing about violence. Gliber turns to the ambiguous relationship between human rights activists and the guerrilla groups when facing a state involved in human rights violations. Finally, Gliber tries to recover the point of view of Tzompaxtle's wife through a lengthy interview conducted by Tzompaxtle. As Gliber recognizes in the introduction, the book aspires to "disarm strategies of delegit-

imization and re-victimization by showing how discrete mistakes in memory do not challenge or undermine the truth of traumatic memories, and what is more, often the 'mistakes' of memory reveal truths of a different order" (p. 19).

Gliber struggles with some of the common problems faced by any researcher interested in human rights violations and political violence in contemporary Mexico, especially the issue of sources. The author relies mostly on testimonies from journalists, activists, and guerrillas to build his narrative. He also quotes some of the written and oral testimonies provided by Tzompaxtle to the Mexican press after his escape. He makes some use of criminal records and human rights complaints, but he mostly considers them in passing when he narrates the detention of Tzompaxtle's brothers in 2006. On the other hand, the interview of Tzompaxtle's wife, "Nube" (Cloud), provides a window into the life and ideas of a working-class woman whose husband has been detained by the Mexican state security forces. However, Gliber's treatment of other participants in the case—for example, female human rights activists—is less charitable. He questions the activist behind the human rights complaint related to the Tzompaxtle case and considers her doubts about Tzompaxtle's identity a reflection of racism. Gliber's emphasis on the persistence of indigenous heritage in contemporary Mexico and the paradox of Mexican racism alongside a pro-indigenous public discourse is only thinly related to the activist's doubts. Ultimately, readers are left to their own interpretations of the truth.

The break with other studies of Mexican state violence is starker when considering Gliber's use of theoretical developments from postcolonial and decolonial studies. The theoretical approach of the book wavers between Gliber's recognition of class-based inequalities (the "objective conditions" to armed struggle in the Guevarista discourse of the 1960s) and other types of oppression. Considering twentieth-century develop-

ments in Mexico, the introduction of postcolonial/subaltern studies into the Mexican context is problematic. As Florencia Mallon has previously shown, that approach does not consider how the postrevolutionary regime in Mexico sustained itself with more than just repression and it simplifies the realities of resistance and cooperation with the state.[1]

It is hard to find Gliber's voice in large portions of the book, but his position appears when he engages in a theoretical discussion about the role of the journalist. The pro-militant stance of Gliber may deceive an unprepared reader who ignores some of his previous work on contemporary violence in Mexico. At first, *Torn from the World* seems another romantic portrayal of the armed resistance of an indigenous guerrilla against a colonial state in Latin America. A closer look reveals in-depth research combined with a savvy reading of the postcolonial critique of the modernizing project in Latin America and the unequal societies it has produced. The problem with Gliber's text is not that it ignores the violence of the state against social movements and the civilian population in Mexico's countryside or that it fails to recognize the mechanisms of collaboration with the state. The book fails to reference other, non-guerrilla opposition forces that suffered state repression during the same period. Gliber only mentions the 1995 Aguas Blancas massacre as context for the public emergence of the EPR, but he leaves readers without enough context to understand the long history of Guerrero's guerrillas and electoral conflicts. The reader unfamiliar with the political context in Mexico during the 1990s may end up thinking that Guerrero's case has a greater national significance than is granted in other narratives of the period. Gliber's analysis works by ignoring the role of the masses who participated in the state project.

Gliber underscores the origins of the EPR guerrillas in the poverty, exclusion, racism, and authoritarianism experienced by subjects like An-

dres Tzompaxtle, but downplays these connections with other guerrilla movements, ideologies, and national political events. He affirms that Tzompaxtle "did not base [his] decisions on books or films, the histories of Che or Ho Chi Minh, the images of the piled bodies in Tlatelolco, or the texts or theories of long-dead Germans or Russians" (pp. 71-72). This is a bold argument considering the role of ideological education among left-wing guerrillas such as the EPR and its connections with a rural intellectual milieu of elementary school teachers and high school students. Gliber's emphasis on objective conditions ignores a long history of subaltern political education and the appropriation of Marxist and nationalist revolutionary discourses by peasant communities. He cites Mexico's dirty war historiography thoroughly, but the influence of postcolonial discourse on his analysis precludes other approaches to explain state counterinsurgency tactics. Perhaps the solution resides in reading this book along with some of the previous books by Gliber, where he provides useful context about Guerrero's dialectics of repression and resistance.

Torn from the World rebuts doubts about Tzompaxtle as a real escapee from state prison and rejects accusations of treason toward Tzompaxtle, even though other guerrilla leaders, human rights advocates, and reporters repeatedly questioned Tzompaxtle's story. This situation points to an unexplored subject, the infiltration of the guerrillas and social groups in Mexico. Despite many suspicions, the issue remains taboo, and access to materials in Mexico's National Archives restricted. Perhaps the scope of this infiltration will become known with the anticipated opening of the Secret Service archives.

Memories of the 1970s counterinsurgent repression help contextualize the contemporary War on Drugs (2006-18) and the history of social movements and electoral politics in Mexico since the late 1980s. Gliber's book expands our knowledge of the resistance to the authoritarian regime

prevalent in twentieth-century Mexico. Gliber has documented the disappearance of civilians as a strategy of terror based on the heritage of the 1970s dirty war against guerrilla groups. *Torn from the World* remains a compelling call to action and an indispensable source for understanding the persistent use of torture against dissidents and political prisoners in Mexico.

Note

[1]. See Florencia E Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). For a similar approach focused on recent developments, see Randall Sheppard, *A Persistent Revolution: History, Nationalism, and Politics in Mexico since 1968* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2016).

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