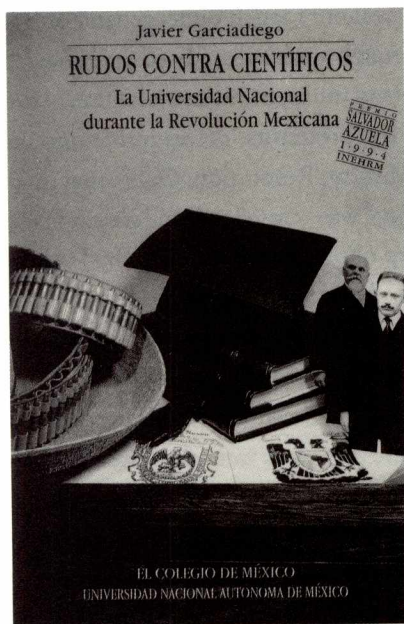


# Reviews



*Rudos contra científicos*  
*La Universidad Nacional*  
*durante la Revolución Mexicana*  
(Ruffians vs. Scientists. The National University  
During the Mexican Revolution)  
*Javier Garciadiego Dantán*  
El Colegio de México, UNAM  
Mexico City, 1996, 455 pp.

## The Mask vs. Samson?<sup>1</sup>

Javier Garciadiego's book enthusiastically delves in careful detail into the National University's first ten years after its founding in 1910.

The labels we are so fond of are useless for this book because we would have to attach too many: it is an institutional history as well as a cultural or intellectual one. It is a history of educational policy, at the same time that it has a certain sociological, perhaps even regional, slant. But it simultaneously goes beyond any of these categories. In the end, it is much clearer and more precise to simply state that what we have here is a book of history, original and excellently put together. It is original because the topic had not been dealt with before. And I will explain why I say it is excellently put together.

Throughout its ten chapters, organized chronologically and thematically, Garciadiego takes a close, rigorous look at his themes, distinguishing them from each other and linking them up again: university projects and the activities they involved; links between the institution and political power; and the behavior and organization of professors and students alike. All these are perfectly situated and subtly elucidated by the sweeping political social and economic

<sup>1</sup> Mexican wrestling matches, an extremely popular spectator sport, are between the ruffians, "the bad guys," and the technical fighters, "the good guys". This symbolism has been very important in the formation of popular Mexican culture. On occasion, the matches involve elements of identity. For example, the loser of a match may also lose his playful face (the mask) or one of his symbols of virility (his long hair). [Editor's Note.]

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events of the period. The specific themes it touches on and the flawless establishment of the context put the book in a different class from history textbooks or manuals. No one who wants to know when Porfirio Díaz was deposed, what happened during the *Decena Trágica* (The Tragic Ten Days)<sup>2</sup> or how President Carranza died will be able to satisfy his curiosity in *Rudos contra científicos*. It is not a history of the Mexican Revolution, although it is set in that period and evidences a profound knowledge of it.

This work should be obligatory reading for all university students and professors not only because of its topic, but also because of the historical and critical rigor with which it was written. It is based on an exhaustive analysis of the sources: the author reviewed everything which might have some piece of data about the university and what transpired there, as well as all the biographical material about its protagonists. But make no mistake about it: despite being full of information, it makes for pleasant reading. The information is perfectly selected and presented; the data serves to situate the actors, not to just pad exhaustive references. *Rudos contra científicos* bases itself on a very critical perspective to offer explanations backed up by the facts. To present the results of his study, the author uses a similar approach to that of his teacher, the prestigious University of Chicago professor Dr. Friedrich Katz, who is held in high esteem in

<sup>2</sup>This refers to ten days of bloody clashes in Mexico City in February 1913 which began with a garrison uprising against then-Mexican President Francisco I. Madero and ended with his arrest and deposition by his own commanding general, Victoriano Huerta. Three days later, Madero and his vice president were murdered on orders from the usurper Huerta. [Translator's Note].

Mexico: he poses a series of questions both to himself and the reader and then proceeds to answer them. He sometimes closes a point with new questions that arise out of the explanations themselves.

On occasion, though not very often, these questions do go unanswered, to be addressed at another time and elsewhere. It is also true that Garciadiego did not include all the detailed information he has (and that the reader might like to know) in his book, but he never withholds data needed to understand the process he is explaining. The game of questions and answers or explanations permits him to move forward through the material at the same time that it allows for the presentation of the subtleties of emphatic statements, a characteristic of inestimable value in Garciadiego's work.

The book presents many hypotheses, too many to examine here. Therefore, I will only touch on its general objectives. Garciadiego, through a critical study of the behavior and attitudes of university students and an evaluation of the political positions of the professors, delves into common assertions about the Mexican Revolution. One is that in its final stages, the *Porfiriato*<sup>3</sup> was a closed political system in the hands of a select group of old men, headed up by Porfirio Díaz himself. That is, besides an oligarchy, they were a gerontocracy. The other assertion is that young professionals opposed the regime, seeking a space that it denied them, and often became university teachers to better their income and achieve prestige. If these assertions were absolutes, Garciadiego thinks it would be valid to suppose that the young, both professors and students, would have had an interest in bringing down the regime that limited their prospects. However, the research results tell quite a different story.

While the author does not come to such drastic conclusions, it is not easy for the reader to avoid considering the students, as a social sector, quite complacent and not very committed, with the exception of some specific areas like their nationalist position on the unequal relations between Mexico and Latin America on the one hand and the United States on the other. As part of the urban middle class, students did not seem to have a defined ideology, or even notice what was going on around them. Neither were they willing to

<sup>3</sup>The 30-year dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz which ended with the 1910 Revolution. [Translator's Note.]

lose the position their parents had achieved for them, a relatively privileged position for the time. I would like to close this point by adding that Garciadiego combines and links the biographies of hundreds of individuals with the university's process as an institution to describe and explain the collective without ever forgetting the individuals.

Another of the work's important hypotheses deals with the basis for the university. The author says,

The destruction of the old regime and the emergence of a new social order after the revolutionary struggle had a great impact on the National University, to the degree that we can say that by 1920, its nature had changed radically. We could even say that the institution was really born in 1920 and not in 1910, and that the heritage of the *porfirista* Justo Sierra is smaller than that of the revolutionary José Vasconcelos.

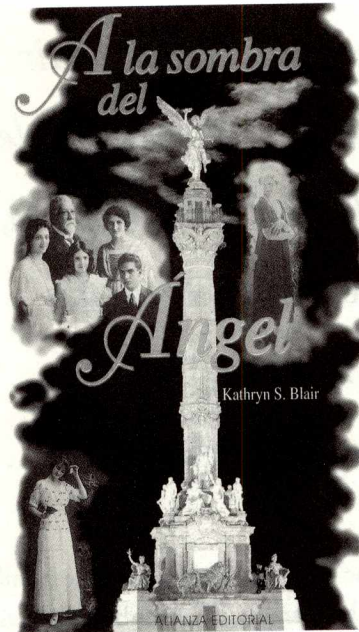
What was the nature of the university that underwent this change? According to Garciadiego, the answer may be that it became an institution interested in and which actively sought to solve social, political and contemporary problems. But what is absolutely clear is that at that time—and perhaps even more so today—the university had to struggle and change in order to endure.

Finally, a comment on the title of the book: *Rudos contra científicos*. I think it is an attractive title, even captivating, that makes a beeline for the dynamic of what we already know about the spectacle of wrestling matches, and undoubtedly, in pejorative terms. To continue with the author's playfulness in giving his book this title, we might ask ourselves who are the *ruffians* and who are the *scientists* or *technicians* in the story? Were some of the players truly “the good guys” and others “the bad guys”? Is that impression valid? What did they fight for: in favor or against the university? What did they have riding on the struggle? The Mask vs. Samson? Who won?

To find the answer, you have to read the book. I have no intention of telling you the outcome of the battle. You would miss the wonderful adventure of sitting down to a good read of an original and extraordinary book by an intelligent, rigorous and critical historian. ❧

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**A la sombra del ángel**  
(In the Angel's Shadow)

Kathryn S. Blair

Editorial Alianza

Mexico City, 1996, 554 pp.

Stories abound in Mexico of men and women who have stood out in social, political or cultural life. We only know most of them from the outside, their public activities. We do not know the private, intimate side: who they shared their life with, who influenced them or whom they influenced. *A la sombra del ángel* (In the Angel's Shadow) is a historical novel, the result of more than 10 years of painstaking research. Its purpose was to study the life of Antonieta Rivas Mercado, a woman from the beginning of this century, who dedicated her life and fortune to promoting culture and change in the Mexico of her time.

This historical novel written by Kathryn S. Blair, the wife of Antonieta's only son, starts, paradoxically, with Antonieta's death; she killed herself in Paris, before the image of Christ, in Notre Dame Cathedral. The author then takes us back to the dawning of the twentieth century, to the moment of Antonieta's birth, explaining events which would eventually lead to her suicide.