

Pedro Castillo and
Albert Camarillo

FURIA Y MUERTE

Los Bandidos Chicanos Reissued

Latinx Studies

Collection Editor
MANUEL CALLAHAN

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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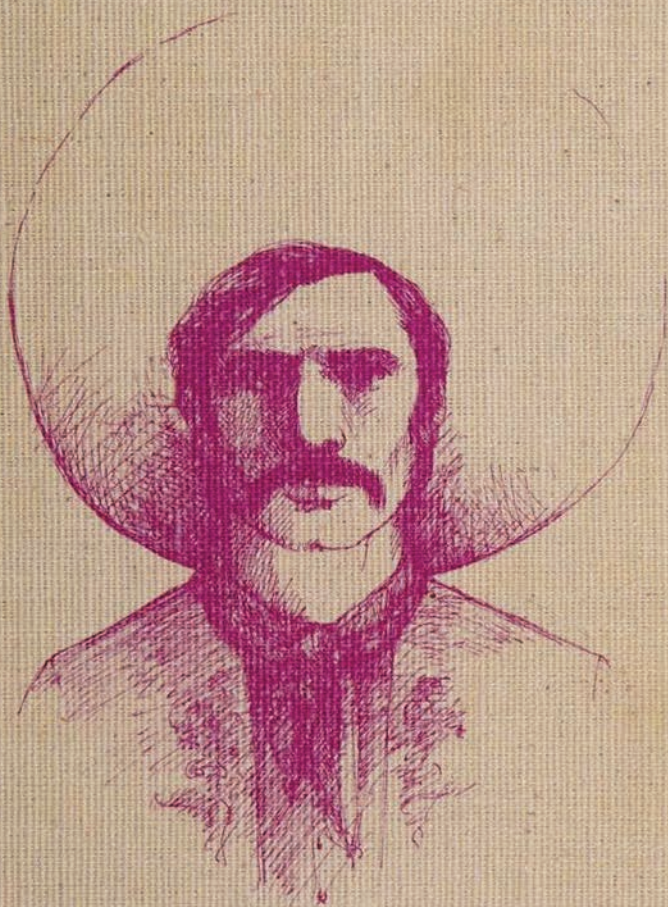
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Para nuestros padres



**FURIA Y MUERTE:
LOS BANDIDOS
CHICANOS**

MONOGRAPH NO. 4, AZTLAN PUBLICATIONS



A spirit of hatred and revenge took possession of me.
I had numerous fights in defense of what I believed
to be my rights and those of my countrymen.

I believed we were being unjustly deprived of the
social rights that belonged to us.

Tiburcio Vázquez

Preface

Edited with a new preface by Albert M. Camarillo and Pedro Castillo

Stories about the so-called “Mexican bandidos” of the nineteenth century in the Southwest live on, generation after generation. So, too, do the seemingly contradictory versions about the history of these legendary figures. Most recently, for example, Kevin Costner’s multi-part television series *The West* (History Channel, 2025) included an episode about Joaquín Murieta, arguably the most notorious character of Gold Rush-era California. The title of the episode, “The Robin Hood of El Dorado,” based on a book and motion picture from the 1930s, is a giveaway: it offers a romanticized version for understanding Murieta as a hero and defender of his people. At the same time, Murieta is characterized as a ruthless outlaw, a gold miner who sought revenge by killing the “Gringos” who murdered his wife and turning to a life of thievery. Depending on your point of view, one of these characterizations continues to define Murieta and other Mexican brigands of the West.

When we first considered the publication of *Furia y Muerte* in 1972, as graduate students in history at UCLA (Camarillo) and UC Santa Barbara (Castillo), we knew instinctively there was more to the stories about the bandidos than portrayed in motion pictures and television. Many of us grew up listening to tales told by elders in our family and community about the bravery and bravado of the bandidos. Old Spanish-language *corridos* (folk ballads) often

painted them as heroes. We were among the first cohort of Mexican American college students of the 1960s. And, as products of the Chicano/a Student Movement with the opportunity to enroll in the first ethnic studies courses ever offered in higher education, we rejected the all too familiar negative portrayals and stereotypes of Mexican bandits. We bristled when stereotypic depictions of bandidos were given new life in popular culture in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the “Frito Bandito” cartoon character – a short, fat, *sombrero* covered, and mustachioed Mexican bandit with six-shooters strapped to his waist – was introduced in TV commercials sponsored by Frito-Lay Company. (For an excellent analysis and critique of the Frito Bandito stereotype, see Chon A. Noriega, *Shot in America: Television, the State, and the Rise of Chicano Cinema*, 2000).

As budding historians, part of a small group of Chicano graduate students working together with a few young faculty members at several universities across the Southwest in the early 1970s, we were intent on creating new, more balanced, more accurate and alternative ways to understand the history of Mexican-origin people. We did not realize at the time, but we were laying the foundations in the early 1970s for what became, over the next two generations of scholarship, a vibrant, new subfield of study in Western and U.S. history – Chicano history and Chicano Studies.

The “new” Chicano/a history was part of a larger renaissance in higher education that gave birth to a “new” Black history, Asian American history, Native American history, and women’s history. Most of us were deeply affected by the political and social protest movements of the post-civil rights era. The anti-Vietnam War movement, the rise of the United Farm Workers’ movement, and

the Black Power movement of the late 1960s all helped set the political and identity-shaping contexts that inspired us. We were among the first group of Chicanos/as to have the privilege and opportunity to attend colleges and universities in an era when we could proudly claim our ethnic/racial identity and reject assimilation as the only route to achieve socioeconomic and political progress. We were also among the first to be exposed to an emerging curriculum that opened our eyes to new ideas, new theories, and new ways of thinking about ourselves, our families, communities and American society at large.

We were committed, as budding scholars and educators, to advancing scholarship and using our skills to help move the social justice agenda forward for a people largely forgotten and ignored in American history for far too long. With an unprecedented, though tenuous foothold in higher education in the 1970s, we were fortunate to be a part of a small but growing community of people dedicated to building new programs to help facilitate research, curriculum development and publication of new scholarship about race and marginalized communities across the United States. The idea to publish *Furia y Muerte* was born of these efforts.

As graduate students on a path to becoming part of the first group of Chicano faculty members in higher education, we had many lively conversations about books and articles we had read, some of which stimulated discussions about new ways to interpret different aspects of Mexican American history. Neither of us recalls exactly how we landed on the topic of nineteenth-century Mexican bandidos, but we remember reading British scholar Eric Hobsbawm's book, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic*

Forms of Social Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries (1959). It was an “aha moment.”

Hobsbawm introduced the idea of “social banditry” to explain premodern European peasant “outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society.” The description that resonated with us most was Hobsbawm’s characterization of these peasant rebels when they were considered by their people as “fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case men to be admired, helped and supported.”

In the earliest stages of our development as historians, we eagerly and wholeheartedly embraced the concept of social banditry because it explained so much about the historical figures we brought together in *Furia y Muerte*. Vásquez, Murieta, Baca, Cortina, and Cortez each fit, in one way or another, within the model of social banditry based on Hobsbawm’s framework. The essays we gathered about each of these men offered useful descriptions of the local societies in which each lived, all undergoing tremendous change during the post-Mexican War decades.

In 1972, we took our idea for the publication of an anthology of readings about Mexican bandits/resistance fighters to Juan Gómez-Quiñones, director of the recently established Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA (and graduate adviser/mentor to Camarillo). He enthusiastically encouraged us to assemble the readings, write an introduction to apply the social banditry interpretation to Chicanos in the Southwest, and publish the book in the center’s new publication unit, Aztlán Publications. When

Furia y Muerte was published in 1973, it was the fourth in the series of books issued by Aztlán Publications.

When we surveyed the literature in preparation to draft the introduction to *Furia y Muerte*, it was abundantly clear to us the historical scholarship was extremely limited for providing context for better understanding the lives, times, and local societies in which the Mexican bandidos operated. Some fifty years later, it is gratifying to acknowledge how the previous scarcity of historical writing about nineteenth-century Chicano history, and the history of the West in general, has changed tremendously. Thousands of articles, books, documentary films, and public television programs now offer an abundance of knowledge about the history of Mexican-origin people and many other groups who lived in the American Southwest in the half century following the U.S.-Mexico War. (An excellent reference that provides a historical overview and a useful bibliography is Laura E. Gómez, *Manifest Destinies – The Making of the Mexican American Race*, 2018.)

The topic of Mexican outlaws in literature, both scholarly and popular, also increased over the decades but less so in comparison to the cavalcade of public television programs, motion pictures and documentary films about each of the men featured in *Furia y Muerte*. With some exceptions, the television programs and historical documentary films about these men paint a robust portrait of how and why each turned into an “outlaw” in American frontier society. For example, the 1982 film, *The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez*, directed by Robert M. Young and starring Edward James Olmos, brought to viewing audiences the story of a South Texas Mexican rancher who, due to a language miscommunication with a local sheriff, set off the largest manhunt in U.S. history up to

that time. Based on the book *"With a Pistol in His Hand" - A Border Ballad and Its Hero* by cultural anthropologist Américo Paredes (a portion of his 1958 book was reprinted in *Furia y Muerte*), the film examines the man and the context of race relations in which he lived in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands region. The pioneering work of Paredes set the stage for director Young to use film to retell the compelling story, wrapped in history and myth, and one recounted generation after generation by Mexican American Tejanos every time the folk ballad, *El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez*, was sung with the strum of a guitar.

More recently, the often-retold tale of Joaquín Murieta was given new life in a 2016 PBS documentary by filmmaker John J. Valadez. *The Head of Joaquín Murrieta* traces Valadez's decade-long fascination and search for the bandido's missing head, cut off by California Rangers, assembled by the governor, who offered a handsome cash reward to find and kill Joaquín. Valadez's search for the head pickled in a jar, once paraded around California as a trophy representing American superiority over a vanquished Mexican outlaw, provided the filmmaker a lens through which to view anti-Mexican racial attitudes of the Gold Rush era that doomed Murieta. The 2023 Amazon Prime Video series of the same title continued the mythification, dramatization and fictionalization of the adventures of the so-called Robin Hood of El Dorado.

Whether it was Murieta's head in a jar or Tiburcio Vásquez's broken neck and lifeless body swinging from a rope after a public execution in downtown San José, California in 1873, the fury and death that defined the history and myths about most Mexican bandidos made for an appropriate title for our edited collection

of essays. But *Furia y Muerte* was more than a call for reconsideration of ways to understand banditry. It was also a challenge for historians and others to examine more fully the broader context of the theme of resistance in Chicano/a history.

The historical theme of resistance took many other forms in addition to individual and gang lawlessness. Resistance of Mexican American communities to oppression, injustice, and intolerance and the corresponding themes of resilience, adaptation, cultural persistence, and interracial cooperation are all now richly documented. The "Salt Wars" of El Paso in 1877 (see Paul Cool, *The El Paso Salt War of 1877*), Las Gorras Blancas (The White Caps) of New Mexico (see Erlinda Gonzales-Berry and David Maciel, eds., *The Contested Homeland: A Chicano History of New Mexico*), and the "Sugar Beet Strike" of 1903 in Oxnard, California (see Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California*), to name a few, are all pieces of the larger historical mosaic about Chicano/a resistance of which bandidos must be considered a part. And when we trace narratives about resistance in broader contexts, especially in examples of community organizing and labor unionization, the roles of women take center stage.

Views of Mexican bandidos of the nineteenth century as resistance fighters or, by contrast, as villainous outlaws will no doubt continue to define the dichotomy of characterizations about these men of the past. Television, film, and literary depictions about the history and myths that surround them are sure to continue. The enduring fascination with the bandidos by writers and the public at large is understandable.

John Boessenecker, the author of the most comprehensive history to date of the life of Tiburcio Vásquez, got it right. In the conclusion to his 2010 book, *Bandido: The Life and Times of Tiburcio Vasquez*, Boessenecker pinpointed the reason why we, as young Chicano/a historians-in-the-making in the early 1970s, wanted to publish a book about bandidos.

In the end, Tiburcio Vasquez...will forever ride through our collective imagination as the laughing, romantic bandido, seducing young women, robbing the Anglos, outwitting sheriffs, and escaping on horseback into the mountains. While a portion of his power and potency lies in that mythical image, the real Vasquez made an indelible mark on his world. In an era when most Hispanics were largely disenfranchised, often deprived of basic civil liberties, and able to obtain only the most menial labor, rightly or wrongly he came to symbolize their struggle for social justice. (*Bandido*, 382)

Embedded in folklore, imagined and reimagined in print and visual media, the stories of bandidos endure. The republication of *Furia y Muerte* underscores their legacy.

Abstract

Furia y Muerte takes up the question of how legendary “Mexican *bandidos*” Joaquín Murieta, Tiburcio Vásquez, Elfego Baca, Juan N. Cortina, and Gregorio Cortez were branded in traditional historical accounts as criminals and outlaws. *Furia y Muerte* contests these negative stereotypical representations by reclaiming these so-called “*bandidos*” as “social bandits” and as resistance fighters after the U.S. annexed their homeland following the War with Mexico in 1848. They were celebrated by their Mexican compatriots for contesting Anglo imperial conquest. A republished version of the original 1973 edited volume for the Latinx Studies Collection recovers this early scholarship to inspire new generations of scholars committed to interrogating Anglo arrival in what was once northern Mexico. The new preface revisits the impact of this early scholarship by also recognizing the persistence of old and new forms of criminalization directed at the Latinx community and the historical theme of resistance.

Learning objectives

1. To provide an alternative historical perspective for understanding Mexican "*bandidos*."
2. To understand how "social banditry" is part of the larger historical theme of Chicano resistance to U.S. annexation of northern Mexico after 1848.
3. To describe the historical contexts for understanding the experiences of Mexican Americans during the second half of the nineteenth century.
4. To explain how and why the legends about "*bandidos*" continue to inspire the imagination and cultural/social history of the West.

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Introduction

A substantial portion of Chicano history in the latter half of the nineteenth century is dominated by the presence of a sequence of Mexican “bandits.”¹ The “bandidos” have been depicted either as fictionalized and romanticized folk-myth personalities or as murderous, blood-thirsty, thieving outlaws. To accept these existing characterizations of the “bandit” is to accept limited viewpoints, to perpetuate prevailing myths and stereotypes, and to falsify Chicano history. As Chicano historians write the history of their people, the image of the Mexican “bandit” must be re-examined. Therefore, a new perspective on Chicano outlawry is needed—the Chicano social bandit.

What is social banditry? The British historian Eric J. Hobsbawm has written an outstanding study on peasant movements and broadly defines social banditry as:

... a universal and virtually unchanging phenomenon
... little more than endemic peasant protest against
oppression and poverty: a cry for vengeance on the rich
and the oppressors, a vague dream of some curb upon
them, a righting of individual wrongs.²

The key element in this definition is viewing banditry as individual peasant insurrection: a subordinate group member’s reaction to his inferior status which is dictated by a ruling class or dominant

group. But this definition alone is not adequate for describing a Chicano social bandit. However, as Hobsbawm expands his definition, the significance of the social bandit and his relationship to his fellow compatriots becomes apparent.

The point about social bandits is that they are peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who remain within peasant society, and are considered by their people as heroes, as champions, avengers, fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case men to be admired, helped and supported.³

Hobsbawm has therefore provided a framework from which to further illuminate the characteristics of the Chicano social bandit.

The two main points Hobsbawm presents are crucial for understanding Chicano bandits. First, the dominant Anglo-American society viewed the Chicano as an outlaw, fugitive, and criminal. This view, however, is not concretely based upon fact. In actuality, many Chicanos, seen as bandits through Anglo-American eyes, were not lawbreakers. They were instead victims of the Anglo-American invasion of Northern México, later known as the Southwest—their actions were those of men who refused to submit to this invasion. The Chicano social bandits presented in this anthology (Tiburcio Vásquez, Joaquín Murieta, Elfego Baca, Juan N. Cortina, and Gregorio Cortez) can be described as victims of injustice. They were forced into a life that was outside of the newly imposed Anglo-American law; theirs was a banditry in the form of retribution and for the purpose of survival. Secondly, the Mexican population viewed the Chicano bandit favorably. The Chicano social bandits who remained within peasant society or specifically within the social and cultural environment

of a subjugated Mexican heritage, became sources of pride to their people. There was, of course, the Mexican elite who was adamantly opposed to Chicano banditry. However, the masses boasted of the feats and adventures of their own particular social bandit. In many ways, the people would lend their assistance, if not physically (Cortina, Vásquez, Murieta and Cortez), then emotionally and spiritually (Baca).

How can one explain the dichotomous attitudes between Anglo-Americans and the Mexican elite and those of the Chicano masses? Why did the accounts of the social bandit's bravery, skill and defiance of Anglo-American society become immortalized for future generations in the form of corridos, tales and poems? The activities of the Chicano social bandits illustrate the reactions of certain individuals against the oppressive elements in their environment. Moreover, the identification with the social bandits by the Chicano demonstrates a conscious and subconscious approval of the bandits' actions. The Chicano bandit may have been a personification of what many Mexicans felt was necessary action to achieve justice.

Eric Wolf argues that the bandit in addition to being a popular hero is also a primitive revolutionary, a political leader who articulates the aspirations of the peasantry.⁴ The meaning behind peasant support of social bandits is described succinctly by Hobsbawm:

There is what remains when we strip away the local and social framework of brigandage: a permanent emotion and a permanent role. There is freedom, heroism, and the dream of justice.⁵

The Chicano social bandit may be a gauge for measuring the sentiment and reactions of a people "removed from history."⁶

In the past, Chicano banditry has been regarded by historians and other writers as spontaneous and sporadic episodes that were merely a small part of the taming of the "Old West." But, a critical insight into Chicano banditry is extremely important for understanding the historical process of the Chicano people. Social banditry is the struggle of an oppressed people to assert themselves and defend what they felt was rightfully theirs.

Bandits, according to Hobsbawm "... reflect the disruption of an entire society, the rise of new classes and social structures, the resistance of entire communities or people against the destruction of its way of life."⁷ The conquest of Northern México established a foreign government which was neither understood nor supported by the indigenous population. This Anglo-American conquest created the social bandit and provided a background for his activities. The Chicano brigand may act as an indicator of the negative socio-economic and political conditions that confronted the masses of Chicanos during the second half of the nineteenth century.

In order to place the Chicano social bandit within his proper perspective, we must examine the background for his activities and look at the social forces that created the brigand. Perhaps the most effective way to do this is by providing a brief historical sketch of Chicano society in the Southwest from 1848 to 1900 and to examine each state individually. An analysis of the Southwest as a whole would tend to obscure the evident regional variants associated with the Chicano population. Only those three states

that contained the vast majority of the Chicano population will be discussed—California, Nuevo México, and Texas.⁸

California

After the Mexican War, the gold rush spurred a massive influx of Anglos into the territory. By 1850, northern California had experienced an amazing population growth of tens of thousands of Anglo-Americans and other foreigners. This event radically changed the social fabric of California life. Previously the “ranchero” Californios and the laboring “mestizo” classes lived in a calm and undisturbed pastoral existence during the Mexican period. In California, the small Mexican population was quickly overrun by the Anglos.

The mining areas became a base from which attacks upon the Mexicans took place. The first attacks were directed against the rancheros who tried their hand at mining; once they returned to their ranchos, the mestizo miner from México became the next target. After the Chicanos had been successfully excluded from the gold mines, the avaricious Anglo-Americans desired something more—the land. To the Yankee, “the problem of precisely how to react to the remaining ‘Spaniards’ shifted from violence to legislation, from legislation to litigation, and back again to violence.”⁹

The northern ranchos were the first to suffer from the advance and proliferation of the United States frontier in California. Through the efforts of “shyster lawyers,” rapacious and parasitic frontier squatters, and others, the northern ranchos were doomed. Leonard Pitt excellently sums up the situation:

In the north of California, the basis of land-ownership had changed drastically by 1856. Through armed struggle,

legislation, litigation, financial manipulation, outright purchase, and innumerable other tactics, Yankees had obtained a good deal of interest in the land. The transfer of property destroyed the irenic vision provided by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which guaranteed the Californios the 'free enjoyment of their liberty and property'—an obligation that did not worry many Yankees.¹⁰

Relatively speaking, the southern rancheros did not suffer the consequences as gravely as did their northern compatriots. Yet, by the time the southern ranchos became the new focus of Anglo entrepreneurs, natural catastrophes (droughts and floods) added to the devastation of the ranchos. As a result, the ranchero became heavily in debt and, the process which had occurred in the north earlier, began to take place in the south. The land speculation booms of southern California during the 1880s accelerated the dismantling of the ranchos and greatly added to the Anglo influx of southern California.

By the 1890s, the ranchero class of Californios, for all intents and purposes, was destroyed. Some were able to hold on to remnants of their originally massive land grants, but most were not. We know for the most part what happened to the ranchero class in the wake of the United States takeover of California, but we know very little about that fairly large class of mestizos who were dispossessed of their traditional occupations when the ranchos were decimated. Rodman Paul, however, does mention what most likely happened to them:

As the years passed and their [mestizo] familiar jobs disappeared, some of the mestizo ranch hands drifted into the growing cities and towns to join the colonies of their