

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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REBELLION OF THE HANGED (1954)

Emilio Fernández (Mexico)

Genre: Drama

Link to video: <https://youtu.be/i3o6gfgisg4>

OVERVIEW

Based on one of the “Jungle novels” by B. Traven, author of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *The Rebellion of the Hanged* is a passionate cry for social justice for the Indians of Chiapas, who were a brutalized underclass forced into the service of greedy foreign corporations and the sadistic Mexican ruling elites. With the cinematography of Gabriel Figueroas, director Emilio Fernández creates a film that has a gut-wrenching initial impact on the viewer. Further, it creates an awareness not only of the social inequality with respect to the indigenous peoples and the Mexican elites, but also of the abject cruelty in the mahogany operations that decimated not only entire ecosystems, but also an entire sector of the population. The film rehumanizes the impoverished and exploited Indians, and it exposes Mexico under Porfirio Díaz as a place that achieved industrialization and economic growth through a fiendishly cruel destruction of the vulnerable people as well as the ecosystem.

KEY CHARACTERS

Cándido Castro	Tzotzil Indian mahogany operation worker
Modesta	Cándido’s relative who accompanies the family to help
Celso	Foreman who works for the Montellano brothers
Don Félix Montellano	Oldest of the Montellano brothers; sadistic
Don Acacio	Montellano brother; blinded with thorns
Don Severo	Montellano brother
Don Gabriel	Representative of the foreign company owner

SYNOPSIS

Deep in the mahogany-rich rain forest of the southern Mexico state of Chiapas, the poor Tzotzil Indian farmer, Cándido Castro, takes his wife, ill with appendicitis, to town to visit the doctor. Desperate to pay for medical care for his wife and the mother of his sons, Candido falls into a trap and unwittingly signs up to be a laborer on a mahogany operation in exchange for \$200 pesos. Sadly, his wife died before she could have the operation, Now obligated to work to pay his debt, Candido and his two sons joined a massive group of other Indians marching to rain forest, where foreign-owned entities were destroying the ecosystem just to cut down and haul out the wood, so highly prized in Europe. Run by the notoriously cruel Montellano brothers, the mahogany operations literally worked the Indians to death. The methods used to extract the most amount of labor possible were cruel; they were whipped and hung up for hours by their wrists, along with other sadistic and cruel behaviors. Those who attempted to escape were often shot dead. Candido’s own attempt to flee was tragic as well; his older son drowned. After enduring increasingly brutal conditions, the workers devised a plan for an uprising that would result in freedom for everyone. With guns smuggled in, and fire, the uprising workers were able to trap the Montellanos, burn down the camp, and subject Felix Montellano to his own behaviors. In the end, with the burned camp still smoking in the distance, the mistreated and disrespected workers regained their freedom.

THE STORY

Candido's wife falls ill. Candido Castro is a subsistence farmer, a Tzotzil Indian, who follows indigenous customs and who has no formal education. His wife falls ill and he comes into town to do what he can to save her life. What he encounters is indifference and greed; the doctor demands a fee that is around 20 times what Candido can pay. He heartlessly refuses to treat her until receiving payment in full. He carries his wife in his arms.



A terrible bargain. Candido signed away his freedom to pay for his wife's appendectomy, the operation is too late, and she dies. Candido, who can neither read nor write, must make a mark on the contract. Despite his illiteracy, he is bound to a contract he could neither read nor understand. He is under obligation to pay the debt he incurred not only with his wife's failed operation, but also in the overpriced coffin, funeral, and other services. Now, Candido must labor in the mahogany operations in the Chiapas rain forest. Silhouetted against the sky, the Indians make the long trek on foot to the dangerous rainforest where they will be worked literally to death in order to fulfill contracts for the precious mahogany wood, which they will be forced to brutally rip from the habitat, while undergoing unspeakable horrors.



Punishment for not making daily quota: Cándido and the other new arrivals learn, to their horror, that the punishment for not making your quota is to be hung by the wrists for hours, while the heat, humidity, mosquitoes, biting flies, and more attack. The groaning of the men can be heard all the way into the shacks where they sleep. After they are cut down, their work companions must come and rub their wrists and insect-bitten bodies with a special ointment. Some of the hanged men do not survive the torture.



**Manual Labor
and Very Few**

Punishment for the attempts to escape: After being tortured and hanged, several of the men decide to run away to escape. They are unsuccessful and are pursued by the Montellano brothers and their employees who hunt down the escapees and shoot them dead. They force the Indians to dig their own graves and graves for the companions.



Castro family attempts to flee : In their attempt to flee, the Castro family take a boat across the river. However, the person operating the boat is drunk and they end up capsized. Angelino, Candido's older son, is drowned. Once they return, the vicious attacks continue, and Modesta flees her would-be sexual assailant. More are whipped as well as being hung from the trees, and when they are cut down, their injuries are treated with ointment. In a final, fiendishly cruel move, Felix Montellano prepares to cut off the ear of Candido's young son as punishment.



The Women Are Fair Game: The presence of a new, young, pretty woman (Modesta) arouses a lascivious and completely unwanted attention. Not only is she targeted by all the men who have any authority, those same men compete against each other to see who can have her. She has no say in the matter whatsoever.



Revenge: Outraged by the ongoing abuse and savagery, and the aggression toward them, the Montellano brother who has been menacing Modesta is blinded by having thorns thrust into his eyes. Later, blinded and in agonizing pain, he shoots himself in the head, bringing an end to his own life.



Uprising of the workers: The company representative has learned of the rebellion and the fact that they are not delivering the quantity of mahogany required by their contract. This interesting point of view shot shows one of the Montellano brothers explaining the situation. Later, the organization buildings are surrounded by angry workers who have managed to obtain guns other weapons in order to attack and gain their freedom. It is worth noting that it is highly unlikely that such an uprising would actually happen because the broken-down, destitute Indians would have no money and no contacts for purchasing weapons and ammunition. The Indians unite and burn down the mahogany operation offices and outbuildings. They then capture Felix Montellano, the most cruel. Modesta lists his offenses, and then she tells her companions to kill him. Before they do, Candido grabs a rope and takes Felix by the neck to hang him from a mahogany tree -- this time upside down. What he had inflicted on others is now inflicted on him in Dantesque fashion.



Freedom: With the Montellano brothers killed and the rest of the leadership demoralized, and their camp burned down, the Indians escape en masse and return to their homes with their lives, but not much else except deep physical and psychological wounds. The end seems to have a positive denouement, but does it? The Indians in the camp are able to leave, but when they leave, do they really have freedom? Social inequality makes it clear that the world they are returning to will not treat them well.



THEMES

Capitalism. The film is a sharp rebuke of capitalism. The novel, *Trozas (Logs)* is one of several novels that B. Travan wrote about the conditions in the jungles of southern Mexico. Travan was associated with the movements to shed continuing light on the atrocities committed in the aftermath of colonialism and in the corrupt government of the dictator, Porfirio Díaz. The Mexican Revolution was an attempt to wrest back the control of land and resources from the elite few, and the primary target was President Díaz, although all the landowners were complicit. Not only did they ravage the land for resources and brutally exploit labor as in the tradition of the Spanish colonial empire, they also sold the land and resources to European investors who similarly ravaged the land.

Racism. There is a viciously enforced racial hierarchy in the society depicted in *Rebellion of the Hanged*. On the top are the wealthy capitalist elites, who either are descended from European colonizers, or who are Europeans themselves. The Germans who have purchased rights to the logs and who are selling valuable mahogany to markets in Europe, and also the white Mexicans of Spanish descent are perhaps the most racist, as they consider the Tzotzil Indians to be good only as beasts of burden or to used for fugitive pleasures as they sexually abuse young Indian women. Their racism is evident not only in their treatment of Indians, but also in their use of despective language.

Social Inequality. Dehumanization is the first step to social inequality. The Tzotzil Indians of Chiapas are first reduced to poverty, and then are considered to be less than human. They are forced to live in the most filthy and degrading of conditions and are not provided adequate food, water, or health care. Instead of taking the position that improving the lot of all members of society will result in a better world for all, the elites (mainly white descendents of the Spanish colonizers) treat the Indians like rats or beasts of burden. Examples in the film abound, beginning with the doctor's refusal to treat Candido's wife, gravely ill with appendicitis, until he produced the princely sum of 200 pesos.

Sadism. The Montellano brothers are infamous for their sadistic cruelty, not only in managing the labor force (the Tzotzil Indians), but also in the obvious delight they take in causing people to suffer. Felix Montellano is by far the most cruel, and he is the one who devised the vicious punishments, which included hanging men by their wrists by trees and cutting off the ear of young boys. They laugh when they think of the suffering of others, and have truly lost their humanity.

Environmental Degradation. When mahogany became popular due to its gorgeous color, hardness, and versatility, European companies rushed to Chiapas and other states in southern Mexico to obtain rights to harvest it. Thanks to a corrupt government, greedy officials, and rapacious landowners, the Europeans were able to insist on high quotas. There was absolutely no regard for the environment, to the point that at one point, Felix Montellano remarks that he does not care if Mexico is in revolution all around them. They will work all the Indians they can, even if they have to hang every one of them, and they would happily reduce the entire rainforest to a barren desert.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Cándido Castro: Cándido Castro is a Tzotzil Indian from the southern state of Chiapas, Mexico, who, at the beginning of the film, leaves his small farm to travel with his wife and two sons to the nearby town where he seeks medical assistance for her. Since he is a subsistence tenant farmer, he is cash-poor and only has a few pesos to his name. His community is one that works with barter rather than cash. After the conquest by the Spanish, Mexico lived under a very rigid race hierarchy, with at least 16 categories (called “casta” which literally means “caste”), with Spanish born in Spain being on the top, and the Indians (and African slaves) on the bottom. Because of his situation at the both of society’s caste system, Cándido has not had access to education and thus cannot read or write.

Naive: Cándido’s isolation and illiteracy make him naive to the nefarious intentions of others. He is aware that there can be trickery and chicanery, but has no experience with it so is unable to recognize it when it happens, or to see the legal snares before he steps into them. For example, when Cándido signs a contract to work in exchange for money to pay for his wife’s medical treatment, he does not know what he is getting himself into. He is willing to work, but he does not realize what the work will entail. His naivety makes him overly trusting, and he also automatically treats whites with deference and respect, although they do not deserve it.

Hard-Working: Cándido is extremely strong and hard-working, and he has a good attitude about work. However, the tasks of cutting down mahogany trees with only a small, old axe is patently absurd. The men are completely expendable; even though they are not very efficient, they are cheaper than machines, and so are used until they literally drop dead. Cándido is not alone in his work ethic; literally all the other Tzotzil men he works with are equally willing to work hard.

Victim: Cándido does not have a victim mentality. However, he and all the other Tzotzil Indians who are working in the rainforest with him are victims, as are the animals and the ecosystem itself. The victimization of the majority of people and of nature itself by a handful of elites who are controlling the system is something that is showcased in this film. The victimization, along with the brutal dehumanization and cruelty, serve as reminders of why there was an uprising and how Communism did get a foothold in old colonial empires. There is no mention of the fact that the rebellion of the workers in this particular mahogany plantation is ultimately futile, and very few victims were ever able to transcend their situation.

Courageous: In spite of the degradation, humiliation, brutal beatings, and assaults on his family, Cándido does not ever lose faith or his determination to protect his family. He shows courage in many ways, ranging from standing up to the brutal Montellano brothers and the work bosses, to fighting to protect his sister-in-law, and to find a way for the family to escape. Finally, he participates in the uprising, putting himself at risk for the freedom of all.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. When a man in a store in town suggests to Cándido that he will pay him the money he needs for his wife's medical treatment in exchange for a contract for work, what are the indications that the townspeople know that it is a terrible deal? When do they spur on the negotiation rather than intervening to save Cándido and his family?
2. List five scenes in which individuals speak badly about the indigenous Tzotzil people. You may include in the town, in the medical clinic, on the march to the mahogany operations, at the mahogany operations camp, and in the mahogany operations themselves.
3. Describe the role of women in the mahogany operations. When Modesta arrives, what options does she have? Why does she elect to work in the kitchen? How is she renamed? What is the role of the other women? What are the indications that they are expected to put up with sexual assault?
4. When the company representative pays a visit to the Montellano brothers, what is his primary concern? What does he say about the fact that the Mexican Revolution is brewing? Why does he say it will only intensify the demand for mahogany logs in Europe?
5. What is the final outcome of the uprising or "rebellion"? What happens to the mahogany operations? What happens to Felix Montellano? As the Tzotzil Indians march slowly out of the operations and toward home, is there a sense that things will truly change? How does the landscape reflect the feelings / mindset of the film?