

## The Spanish Conquer Mexico (Again)

Money Heist – or La Casa de Papel as known in Mexico – a show about 8 robbers named after cities led by a very awkward yet deeply intelligent character nicknamed “El Profesor” has slowly taken over. In fact, this charismatic gang of criminals performed one of the most difficult tasks in entertainment. No, I’m not talking about how they managed to break into the Royal Mint of Spain, taking 67 people as hostages, printing off 2.4 billion Euros, and (spoiler alert!) leave the scene of the crime free and rich (Jones). I’m talking about how they managed to infiltrate the hearts and minds of Mexican people, become the third most popular show in the country throughout 2018 and 2019 and constantly being over 15 times more in demand than the average series (Saim; Katz; “The most popular digital TV Series”). So, how did they do it? Well, while the answer could be boiled down to “Netflix made it popular”, it is much more complicated. While Netflix did introduce it to the Mexican market where it was previously unavailable, the show managed to relate with the current anti-systemic feelings in Mexico, which was essential to connect with viewers and attract a larger audience, and in doing so it made spectators further buy into its anti-systemic message.

The storyline and values of the show related to the anti-capitalistic and anti-government feelings of Mexicans when it was released in 2017. After the 2008 economic crisis, the income gap widened, creating disbelief in the system and distrust in large corporations and the government (Jones). Furthermore, Mexico had been going through high levels of corruption – scoring 29/100 (with 0 being highly corrupt) in the 2017 Corruption Index, close to all time low

of 26.5 (“Mexico Corruption Index”) – and poor budget spending, leaving many frustrated and disappointed with the government. With the show’s gang stealing from the government and revealing their secrets, they became the Robin Hoods people desired in their own country. In the first episode, the Professor says “people will think, ‘bastards, I wish I thought of that plan’” (Alex Pina). Indeed, many Mexicans probably subconsciously desired this to happen to their own corrupt government. The creators of the show wanted to connect with the disappointment in governments and central banks to become a symbol of anti-systemic feelings, and they did just that (Marcos). In fact, there seems to be a link between the 2018 election of a new populist Mexican president that promised to dismantle corruption and help the lower rungs of society with the rise in popularity of this anti-systemic show in the same year.

Moreover, the show related to the crime glorification existent in Mexico by portraying the criminals as good people and romanticizing them (Jarvis). While *narcos* are the cause of a lot of violence in Mexico, they reign over areas of the country and provide services to the people that the government and large companies cannot. Drug cartels often fund roads, healthcare, churches, local businesses and communities, and have even provided COVID relief supplies when the government is unable to, creating a good relationship and loyalty with the population (Sierra; De Cordoba). In the show’s first episode, the Professor says “we won’t steal from anyone ... we will seem so sympathetic, it’s fundamental we have public opinion on our side. We will be the heroes of these people” (Alex Pina). Indeed, people wait outside the building for them holding signs of support and wearing the Dali masks the gang was known for, just like Mexican people build shrines in the name of powerful drug lords, glorifying their ‘Robin Hoods’ (Sierra; De Cordoba). Money Heist connects with this notion of crime glorification and criminals not being

so bad, which fuels its popularity by relating to views widely held in Mexico. This element of crime glorification is dangerous, however, as people could be permanently skewed to think criminals aren't that bad, be empathetic to them, and even overglorify them.

Furthermore, the symbols used by the *not so bad* criminals in Money Heist quickly became symbols of resistance and change in Mexican society, deepening the connection the show created with local culture. The most notable example is Bella Ciao, an Italian song of resistance against Fascism the Professor introduces to the gang and essentially becomes their anti-systemic anthem sung in times of success or challenge. The creators argued that anyone could use Bella Ciao, the red jumpsuits, and Dali masks as symbols in their own fight for change, which is just what happened (Money Heist: The Phenomenon). These three elements can often be seen in protests for climate change action or human rights, or simply at Halloween parties. By constantly using these symbols, people unknowingly publicize the show and its anti-systemic message by making its iconography more present in Mexican culture. As creators argue, this iconography was one of the main elements to the show's success as it gave people an item to identify the show with and employ it in their own lives (Money Heist: The Phenomenon). The adoption of these symbols also shows how globalization has allowed foreign cultural objects to permeate across borders and become a significant part of the local culture, often introducing ideology like Money Heist does with its anti-systemic message.

But how could this story that glorifies criminals and represents anti-systemic feelings entice individuals that weren't as resentful towards the system? Creator Alex Pina intentionally combined elements from many genres to make the show deeper than the conventional action shows and also spiced up traditional, rational heists with Latin Emotions, making the show "much

more Latin than Spanish, more passionate” (Jones). In doing so, the show ended up including events that happen on every Telenovela (an already widely popular genre), such as a love triangle, cheating and relationship drama, suspenseful cliff-hangers, twisted storylines, and injuries or deaths (Nagi). However, the key component that resembles telenovelas is that a poor person (or in this case the gang) gets rich. While, on the surface, Mexican audiences would enjoy this storyline as it connects with their desire of going from rags to riches and ascending in classes, it is much deeper than that. In most telenovelas, a poor girl gets rich by marrying a wealthy man, but in *Money Heist*, the gang gets rich by stealing from the government. The creators of *La Casa de Papel* employed this similar storyline to already popular telenovelas to engage audiences, but in doing so it also made viewers subconsciously buy into this anti-systemic idea of class ascendancy through crime. As a result, people unknowingly accepted and even supported this idea of going against the system, in this case to get rich.

The unpredictable events that make it impossible for viewers to stop watching are another way to make audiences subconsciously buy into the show’s anti-systemic message by making them hope that the characters – who are criminals – make it through all the perils they face (Jones; *Money Heist: The Phenomenon*). Creator Alex Pina argues that writers intentionally ended each episode and season in a cliffhanger to keep audiences hooked, and he did just that from the very first episode (Marcos). That first chapter ends as the gang drags Rio into the building after being shot at, with Tokyo holding him while crying and others screaming in frustration (Alex Pina). This suspenseful ending is used to create desire among viewers of continuing to watch the show to find out what happens next, but it also serves an underlying purpose. By ending the episode in intense events where the city-named criminals battle death,

it makes viewers desire for them to stay alive. However, these characters are criminals, so most people don't realize they are subconsciously supporting the idea that "criminals aren't so bad" and unknowingly adopting anti-systemic ideas by hoping the members of the gang stay alive. While it is true that "once you see the first chapter of the show, you are lost in it," as Alvaro Morte (The Professor) said in an interview, these cliffhangers not only keep viewers hooked but also push anti-systemic ideas by making audiences support these principles without them even realizing (Jones).

Moreover, while many could think that the show highlights the power strong female characters exert in their male-dominated spheres to simply counterbalance the outrageously misogynistic Berlin, once again, there is an ulterior motive. In the third episode of season 2, after Berlin says "this is a patriarchy, and that's why I'm in control" Nairobi grows uneasy at his sexist comments and the many mistakes he makes so she knocks him out and takes control, exclaiming "let the matriarchy begin" (Alex Pina). Scenes like this one, plus many others with Raquel and Tokyo, provide an example for Mexican girls to follow in breaking the gender barrier in their own lives. Furthermore, it also introduces a critique of traditional power structures, like those in the Mexican government and corporations, that are usually commanded by men. Once again, these elements of feminism become an anti-systemic message for people in a society that is (unfortunately) deeply sexist and unequal. In fact, it makes the viewers (including men) subconsciously support these ideals by making them praise characters like Tokyo and Nairobi that are symbols of this feminist critique against misogynist systems.

La Casa de Papel was an amazing success due to how it managed to relate to and become a symbol of the anti-systemic feelings held by many in Mexico. However, it also pushed these

ideas and made people subconsciously adopt them. Now, I am not saying that the translation of such contrarian messages is a positive thing. In fact, I believe that the connection anti-systemic shows like this one have made with foreign populations shows the world's general disbelief and disappointment in their governments while further reinforcing these feelings, an issue governments and populations must be wary about. These messages could also lead to people perceiving criminals as better people than government officials by whom they feel betrayed. This could lead to two roads; the first, with criminal organizations taking away more power and legitimacy from the government – as they have in recent years not just like drug cartels in Mexico but like organizations in far flung places such as the Mafia in Italy or terrorist groups in failed African states. This adoption of anti-systemic ideals could also lead to a second path; one with the population becoming encouraged to demand justice, equality, and systems that benefit the masses and not the few. Even though I believe the second outlook is equally possible and even positive to a certain extent, I argue that the first is more problematic and an issue that countries will have to monitor closely so that these criminal organizations don't debilitate the legitimacy of governments and leave behind many failed states that lost control of their territories and population.

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