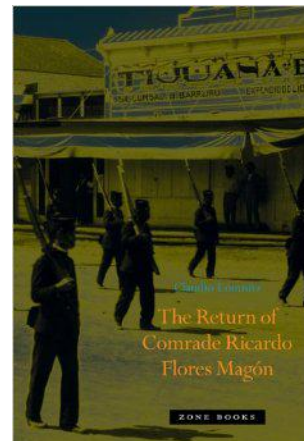


Ricardo Flores Magón: Mexican Anarchists and American Socialists

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Claudio Lomnitz. *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón*. New York: Zone Books, 2014. 594 pages. Notes. Index of Names. Photos. Hardback. \$35.95.



If it were a house, Claudio Lomnitz's *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón* would be a rambling, decaying mansion with various jerrybuilt stories and wings, a ramshackle place filled with archives and artifacts, old political posters and antique typewriters, a building straddling the U.S.-Mexico border, a shared abode whose residents are an interesting and odd collection of characters, some of them lovely people, some noble, and others quite disagreeable, coming and going at all hours, sometimes reciting poetry. And don't be surprised if, while you're visiting, the place is raided by Furlong or Pinkerton agents, by the police or the Texas rangers who carry off some of the boarders to prison; some of whom will be gone for years at a time.

For this house—which over the years was moved from Mexico to the United States and then from one city to another—is the headquarters of a band of anarchist and socialist revolutionaries and their American friends and comrades most of whose time is spent in putting out the newspaper *Regeneración*, in organizing disastrously failed insurrections in Mexico, and in campaigns to get their *correligionarios* out of prison. Don't be shocked if Ricardo Flores Magón, the leader of this outfit, gets angry with you, calls you a pederast and a pervert, a degenerate and a traitor, and publishes in his newspaper a call to have you executed. Don't take it personally, you are hardly the first. Finally don't be surprised if the author mistakes this house for a communist utopia, for he has been visiting it for a long time, knows everyone and their brother, and his deep immersion in their cause has on the one hand given him a remarkable familiarity with the place and its people, but on the other hand also sometimes clouded his judgment, as it clouded theirs. And I know how that happens, for it has happened to me too.[1]

The Return is a prosopography of a dozen or so Mexicans and Americans, the former mostly anarchists and the later mostly socialists, who at the beginning of the twentieth century were engaged in the common cause of defending and supporting the Mexican revolution and its revolutionaries in their attempt to overthrow the dictator Porfirio Díaz. Ricardo Flores Magón and the other Mexican Liberal Party leaders—anarchists and socialists—imprisoned by Díaz in 1903, fled the next year to the United States to continue their organizing and to publish their newspaper *Regeneración* first briefly in St. Louis and then for many years in Los Angeles. There the Mexicans and their American supporters worked together to expose and publicize conditions in Díaz's Mexico, above all the existence of a system of debt peonage that was tantamount to slavery and a dictatorship that was every bit as bad that of Czarist Russia.

Ricardo Flores Magón stood at the center of the exiled Mexican anarchist group together with his brother Enrique, while John Kenneth Turner, author of *Barbarous Mexico*, his wife Ethel Duffy Turner, John Murray, and Elizabeth Darling Trowbridge were at the center of the American socialists. The Mexicans had founded and led the Mexican Liberal Party (PLM)—which despite its name was actually an anarchist organization—while the Americans were part of the Los Angeles chapter of the Socialist Party of America, the party of Eugene V. Debs. Also supporting the Mexicans, though from a distance, was Emma Goldman, publisher of *Mother Earth*, the most famous figure of American anarchism. The brothers Flores Magón and the American socialists worked together in relative harmony from 1904 until 1911, when the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, led by Francisco I. Madero, led to a break between socialists and anarchists both in the United States and in Mexico, after which the two political tendencies were generally opponents and even enemies. On both sides of the border the socialists broke with the anarchists and supported Madero's revolution, while the anarchists urged their supporters to resist Madero as a capitalist and the enemy.

In his introduction Lomnitz writes that he wants in *The Return* to rescue Ricardo Flores Magón from two particular misinterpretations: first, that which sees the *Magonistas* and the PLM as only “precursors of the revolution,” a title and also an official organization created by the Mexican government; and, second, that which “brownwashes” the *Magonistas* and the PLM by seeing them as the origin of the Chicano movement, a point of view developed by Juan Gómez-Quiñones.[2] Lomnitz wants to shift the framework for telling this story, arguing that the history of the Mexican Revolution has usually been told as national or international history, “but analysis of the revolution as a transnational phenomenon has not yet made a deep mark”—though in fact there have been several earlier transnational histories.[3] Flores Magón, the PLM and its allies, Lomnitz argues were not precursors, they were part and parcel of a transnational movement that formed an essential part of the Mexican Revolution.

We have had many biographies of Ricardo Flores Magón and the Mexican Liberal Party, as well as several books that have described their transnational political collaboration, but Lomnitz's *The Return*, a collective biography based on new archival research on both sides of the border as well as on previously unknown or untapped sources, and written as a cultural history of this milieu and period, represents the fullest and richest account so far.[4] Lomnitz, the Campbell Family Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University, brings to his study of this group his anthropological sensitivity to the complexity of cultures and a deep interest in and fascination with language and literature. While the historical narrative is clear enough, the author is also given to leaving the main highway and taking us on to side roads and occasionally footpaths, especially if he hears someone over the hill reciting a poem. *The Return's* solid foundation in the historical record allows Lomnitz to explain previously misunderstood issues; and when he doesn't have evidence, he boldly risks intelligent psychological speculation about desires, motives, and intentions, many of which are compelling, though not all of them are convincing.

While I love rambling through this big old house with Lomnitz, I can't always share in his explanations and sometimes find them farfetched. For example, he spends a couple of small sections of the book called “Families of the Cause” (pp. 214-220) and “Edendale” (pp. 441-443) describing the family relations of the PLM leaders and some of their American allies. He argues that their families were “novel households,” partially reflecting the earlier bohemian lifestyle of their youth, “compounds” involving more than one family, which he says he is “tempted to christen the ‘Liberal Joint Family System’....” He writes:

Communism, in short, had a real social base. It was not ‘utopian,’ because it was built on real circumstances and on everyday solutions to everyday problems by groups of workers who had pooled resources, shared rooms, supported one another and composite new families that

could, under certain conditions, morph into veritable colonies. Communism was an ideal, certainly, but it also existed, right there, as real lived experience. (p. 220)

A passage like this—which makes us think of contemporary discussions that developed around the Occupy Wall Street movement under the name of “prefiguration”—strikes me as making a theoretical mountain out of an everyday molehill. Many working class people, and perhaps more commonly among Latin Americans, form families made up not only of parents and children, but also grandparents and grandchildren, aunts and uncles, an often “fictive kin” who are incorporated as well. Poverty is the mother of invention of these families where then and now people share mortgages or rent, clothing and food, as well as incomes and bills in order to survive. While as Ethel Duffy Turner wrote, “There was a remarkable camaraderie in those days,” there was also as Lomnitz himself observes, grinding poverty: people lived close, too close, didn’t have enough money, enough space, or enough to eat. To call this, “Communism...right there...as lived experience” is not only not convincing; it seems downright silly.

But Lomnitz then goes on to draw from that inference this fantastic conclusion:

This, in the end, was why many workers felt robbed when the state appropriated these forms, in Russia, for example. The soviets had been betrayed. The state was not a union of soviets, but an armature that had been raised above them and that exploited even their name, only to turn around and call the small-c communists “utopians”

But I am getting ahead of myself.

But Lomnitz is not getting ahead of himself—for he never returned to these issues later in the book. He jumped from his observations about the need of Mexican and American radicals to share housing, to the deduction that that was a kind of prefiguration of the communism they desired, and from there to the conclusion that the Russian Revolution had somehow destroyed all of that. It’s hard to take such a passage seriously, especially as there is no sustained discussion of the differences between anarchists and socialists and hardly another mention of the Russian Revolution until the very end of the book and there only in passing. The anarchist movement’s relationship to the Russian Revolution is an important and complicated one that if it is going to be raised deserves more serious comment than this. One also sees in this passage what is a large amorphous problem with this book, namely that because of the author’s immersion in this milieu and identification with its protagonists, it is often hard to separate what the *Magonistas* are doing and writing from what Lomnitz thinks about it.

A Rich Book-Poor in Politics

Lomnitz is clearly at some level in love with Ricardo Flores Magón and company; one sees this in his practice of calling all of the Mexican anarchists and American socialists that he likes by their first names, while others, following standard practice, are called by their last names. Yet Lomnitz has to be credited with seeing the *Magonistas* as they really were. Lomnitz makes it clear that they were incompetent revolutionaries whose failure to create a clandestine organization meant that their mail was read by the U.S. and Mexican governments, leading to the failure of their insurrections in 1906 and 1908 and to the execution of many their comrades. He also agrees with other historians that the PLM-Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) invasion of Baja California in 1911 was not only a military failure but an even worse political fiasco.[5] Lomnitz doesn’t hesitate to point out that when differences with his comrades arose, Flores Magón lashed out viciously, calling his former friends and comrades not only “traitors” but also “lesbians” or “pederasts” and “perverts.” He also describes how Flores Magón sent out orders that a former comrade who had left the group be shot and mentions other published calls to execute former PLM leaders. And he doesn’t hesitate to

mention Flores Magón's glorification of violence motivated by hatred and a desire for revenge. Yet, while he recounts these faults, we find no systematic political critique of them, so that one comes away feeling that Lomnitz still romanticizes and loves the *Magónistas* despite these political and moral faults.

The one political problem that Lomnitz fails to deal with is the *Magonistas'* opposition to the Chinese, a serious problem for a group that took pride in its proletarian internationalism. The *Magonistas'* reformist program of 1906 stated, "The prohibition of Chinese immigration is, above all a measure of protection to workers of other nationalities, principally the Mexicans. The Chinese, disposed in general to work for the lowest wage, submissive, petty in his aspirations, is a great obstacle to the prosperity of other workers. His competition is fatal and it must be avoided in Mexico. In general, Chinese immigration doesn't produce the least benefit to Mexico." [6] This was a view shared by the American Federation of Labor and other unions in the United States, a virulent racist sentiment that in the U.S. led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and in Mexico during the revolution to the massacre of the Chinese by Francisco "Pancho" Villa's troops.

What is most disturbing about Lomnitz's *The Return* is that it never systematically discusses the *Magonistas'* political views or how they came to them. One can read a few hundred pages of this book before the word "anarchist" receives any discussion, though the *Magonistas were anarchists*.. What is missing from this book is what was at the core of Cockcroft's *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1913*: that is, a clear intellectual and political description of the *Magonistas* as Bakuninist anarchists. If one understands their Bakuninism, one then understands the *Magonistas'* dual revolutionary strategy of one the one hand behaving as a vanguard organizing repeated revolutionary insurrections and on the other hand acting as an ideological center to guide the rising of what they view as the ignorant and inchoate masses. If one knows they are Bakuninists, one also understands the PLM's conspiratorial character, its authoritarian leadership, its insurrectionism, and its lack of a working class strategy. Lomnitz writes that merely discussing the ideological differences between anarchists and socialists doesn't explain the developments that took place in the relations among the Mexican and American radicals, and perhaps not, but the reader surely needs that basic information and understanding, even it is supplemented by other material regarding the milieu and the cultures in which it existed.

When Lomnitz does occasionally venture into political analysis, for example in a short section titled "Revolutionary Theory" (pp. 329-335) he ends up giving us another short historiographical essay (such as we had in the introduction) and then a few paragraphs that suggest that the *Magonistas* failed "...either because they had insufficient local ties or because leaders who did have ties were often compelled to subordinate their ideals to the practical desires and requirements of local factions and so became vulnerable to accusations of treason from Ricardo, back in Los Angeles" (p. 335). While there may be some truth in this, one would hardly call this a discussion of "revolutionary theory." There is no discussion of social classes, political organizations, revolutionary strategy, or plans for governance. This book, rich in so many things, is poor in politics.

If this book were a body of water, it would be a Mississippi, a great meandering river, twisting and turning through the land, at flood carrying everything with it, depositing all the soil and debris, the flotsam and jetsam of a season into the Gulf of Mexico. And if we travel with Lomnitz on his raft down that river, we get a tremendous ride, see many sights, meet a good number of interesting people along the way, but never get up on a hill, never have an overview that allows us to understand what it all means. We can see why he loves the river, but not how the river shapes history.

[1] I have been working for about twenty years on a history of the Mexican Revolution and its influence on the American left between about 1900 and 1930 and have also been intrigued, absorbed, and sometimes bewitched by the Flores Magón group and their American allies.

[2] Juan Gómez Quiñones, *Sembradores: Ricardo Flores Magón y el Partido Liberal Mexicano: A Eulogy and Critique* (1971).

[3] Transnational studies of this period include: W. Dirk Ratt, *Los Revoltosos: Mexican Rebels in the United States, 1903-1923* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1981); Javier Parés, *La Revolución sin frontera* (Mexico: UNAM, 1990); Colin M. MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution: The Political Trials of Ricardo Flores Magón in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); James A. Sandos, *Rebellion in the Borderlands: Anarchism and the Plan of San Diego, 1904-1923* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992).

[4] The best known individual and collective biographies are: Diego Abad de Santillán, *Ricardo Flores Magón* (Mexico, D.F.: Grupo Cultural "Ricardo Flores Magón," 1925); Ethel Duffy Turner, *Ricardo Flores Magón y el Partido Liberal Mexicano* (Morelia, Michoacán: Editorial Erandi del Gobierno del Estado, 1960); James D. Cockcroft, *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1913* (Austin: University of Texas, 1971). Transnational studies are: W. Dirk Ratt, *Los Revoltosos: Mexican Rebels in the United States, 1903-1923* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1981); Linda B. Hall and Don M. Coerver, *Revolution on the Border: The United States and Mexico, 1910-1920* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988); Javier Parés, *La Revolución sin frontera* (Mexico: UNAM, 1990); Colin M. MacLachlan, *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution: The Political Trials of Ricardo Flores Magón in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); James A. Sandos, *Rebellion in the Borderlands: Anarchism and the Plan of San Diego, 1904-1923* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992).

[5] Lowell Blaisdell, *The Desert Revolution: Baja California, 1911* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1962); Lawrence Douglas Taylor, *La campaña magonista de 1911 en Baja California* (Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 1992) and *La gran aventura en México* (Mexico: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1993), two vols.

[6] Fernando Zertuche Muñoz, *Ricardo Flores Magón: El sueño alternativo* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995), p. 85.