Casa Against Campesino

Kyle Flannery and John Michael Colón

31 March 2023

Libertarian socialists played a key role in the Mexican Revolution – and its betrayal.

Mexico in 1910 is celebrating its 100th year of independence and its 34th year of dictatorial technocracy, the Porfiriato. Formally and informally, General Porfirio Díaz has ruled Mexico in the name of "order and progress." It is a liberal dream: investments in infrastructure, centralized armed police, strong extractive exports, the destruction of indigenous communities, and very attractive prices for foreign investors. A government by scientists with a thin veneer of democracy. But under the surface, a storm is brewing. Within a generation, this ancien regime will have been wiped out by the first great revolution of the twentieth century.

For generations the Mexican state had been engaging in a radical campaign of enclosure similar to that which had already occurred in Europe. With fanatical thoroughness they privatized land that had traditionally been held in common for anyone to grow their food on; they even forcibly expropriated the private land of any small farmers and indigenous tribes who could not produce written proof of their ownership rights, which conveniently enough for the government had never been necessary before and thus did not exist; and they converted all this stolen land into large cash-crop-growing haciendas under the control of the big capitalists. By the turn of the twentieth century, this landowning elite was a noxious mix of the Mexican bourgeoisie and foreign imperialists like the newspaper baron William Randolph Hearst and the wheat magnate William Wallace Cargill. By the end of the Porfiriato, 95% of the peasant villages in Mexico had lost their lands, leaving their former owners with no option but to sell themselves into wage slavery as tenant farmers on the grand estates or factory workers in the new maquiladoras of the cities. In either case, it grew increasingly difficult for working people to make a decent living. Child labor, sweatshop conditions, corrupt local political bosses, and state violence against the working classes were all commonplace.[1]

But the rapacious capitalism and developmentalist dictatorship of the Porfiriato did not go unchallenged. Throughout the nineteenth century Mexico had been developing a rich and deep-

[1] The definitive account at the time of the ultimately untenable regime of land tenure in pre-revolutionary Mexico was *Los grandes problemas nacionales* (1909) by the left-liberal reformer Andrés Molina Enríquez, who had worked as a notary and petty official in the Mexican court system and seen up close how the gruesome sausage of enclosure was made. This work proved influential among all the factions of the Revolution. For a modern account that seconds most of Molina Enríquez's claims, see Friedrich Katz, "Labor Conditions on Haciendas in Porfirian Mexico: Some Trends and Tendencies," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 1974, 54(1).

rooted radical political tradition. By the eve of the revolution in 1910, the radicals had a massive base among urban workers and rural peasants alike. It is a little-known fact that this radical tradition was influenced more than anything else by libertarian socialism.

Two libertarian streams flowed into the mainstream of Mexican socialism. The first was the traditional communalism of Mexico's indigenous stateless societies, which persisted well into the twentieth century within the larger fabric of the Mexican political system and were familiar to everyone. This also had a way of manifesting itself in massive uprisings organized along radically democratic lines, such as the predominantly mestizo and indigenous peasant army in Mexico's War of Independence inspired by the freethinking criollo priest Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, which wielded Our Lady of Guadalupe as its battle standard.[2] Therefore they were commonly cited by socialists as an inspiration, an alternative form of life where land and other key resources were held in common and managed through a form of direct-democratic assembly. The second was European anarchism, which entered Mexico through immigrants and refugees in the nineteenth century (such as the Greek philosopher Plotino Rhodakanaty) who brought with them the teachings of Fourier, Proudhon, and Bakunin as well as connections with international workers' organizations abroad. This tendency proved massively influential among intellectuals and journalists, who kept abreast of developments in anarchism in other countries and influenced the workers' movements in that direction.[3]

These two streams of influence combined in the pre-revolutionary social movement of *magonismo*, which both helped spark and essentially laid out the entire agenda of the Mexican Revolution. Centered on the Partido Liberal de Mexico, this libertarian socialist revolutionary tendency was named after its primary theorists, the three brothers Enrique, Jesús, and especially Ricardo Flores Magon — though as Ricardo once famously had a character declare in his play *Verdugos y victimas* (1922), this was a misnomer: "I'm not a magonist, I am an anarchist. An anarchist has no idols." The PLM, despite its name, skewed anarcho-communist. Its revolutionaries — including the guerrilla insurgent Práxedio Guerrero, the feminist journalist Andrea Villarreal, the newspaper editor Anselmo L. Figueroa, and the syndicalist organizer Antonio Díaz Soto y Gama among many others — created a fighting organization for the campesinos and industrial workers that stretched across Mexico and up into the borderlands with the United States. Many had indigenous ties (the Flores Magon brothers' father was Zapotec), and they formed deep political and military alliances with indigenous tribes like the Yacqui to resist the Porfiriato. When the dictatorship cracked down on the PLM the main organizers continued their revolutionary activity from exile in California, where they partnered with the Industrial Workers of the World and helped bring the latest anarcho-syndicalist ideas to Mexico.

The PLM was the main organization behind major labor actions and insurrections such as the Cananea strike (1906), the Río Blanco strike (1907), and the Acayucan rebellion (1906) that set helped build up the insurgency against the Porfiriato and set the stage for the later Revolution. In

[2] The long tradition of uprisings by the campesinos is an important part of Mexican history. It also has ethnic implications, since so many of the peasants in Mexico were and remain at least partly indigenous and have preserved many old democratic ways of life. The story of these uprisings, so often inspired by syncretic religious beliefs melding Catholic and indigenous rites, and their influence on Mexican libertarian socialism is admirably summarized in *For God and Revolution: Priest, Peasant, and Agrarian Socialism in the Mexican Huasteca* (2013) by Mark Saad Saka. For the story of the charismatic Padre Miguel, we highly recommend Antonio Serrano's biopic *Hidalgo: La historia jamás contada* (2010), which is great fun and a blockbuster hit of Mexican cinema.

[3] For the influence of European anarchism on Mexican politics, see *Anarchism in Latin America* (2017) by Ángel Cappelletti, translated by Gabriel Palmer-Fernández for AK Press.

their newspaper *Regeneración*, they explicitly brought together European anarchism and indigenous communalism into a coherent and ambitious libertarian socialism accessible to the ordinary Mexican worker. Its minimum programme included land reform to guarantee every peasant a plot and basic workers' rights like the 8-hour workday, the weekend, safety regulations, and the abolition of child labor; its ultimate goal was a society where capitalists were completely expropriated, the land and the factories were owned by workers and self-managed as a democracy of assemblies, racial privilege no longer existed, the means of subsistence were freely available to all, and the state was abolished in favor of an Industrial Republic.[4]

Though early and vigorous state suppression meant the PLM itself did not participate in the Revolution as an organization, these demands and organizing methods became those of the most important left-wing factions in the civil war, and those PLM cadres who lived to see the Revolution often took leading roles in its radical factions. In short, the PLM was the seed out of which the Mexican Revolution grew. What this means for us in retrospect is clear: the first socialist revolution of the twentieth century was led by indigenous people of color and undeniably libertarian socialist in character.

***

In the end it was not the increasing class polarization, nor the rage of the dispossessed campesinos, nor favoritism to US interests, nor the evocative anti-democratic *pan o palo* ("bread or bludgeon") policy, that finally caused the carefully calculated political order to spool out into Revolution. Instead the immediate cause was a crisis of succession in the dictatorship. Díaz was 80 and seeking a seventh reelection, ironic given that he came to power in a coup against his predecessor for seeking a single reelection. The vultures were circling the old man, whose failure to carefully ensure a hand-picked successor provoked a chain reaction of power struggles. A bright young reformer and scion of a wealthy landowning family, Francisco Madero, challenges the dictator. Diaz puts him in jail. He smuggles out a public letter, making vague promises of land reform to the peasants (which it's doubtful he'd have carried out) if they overthrow the government and free him. Chaos ensues, the country erupts in revolt. In January of 1911 a coalition of the PLM, predominantly indigenous peasants, and international socialist forces — including the IWW, the Socialist Party of America, US-based Chicanos, and revolutionaries from as far away as Wales — establish a network of revolutionary communes in Baja California, declaring that a far more thoroughgoing social revolution than anything Madero imagined is underway. (He will prove unimportant to the Revolution's most radical elements: within two years he will be dead, overthrown by a fascist military commander, and the workers and peasants will keep revolting all the same, often against his own flimsy attempted government.) By May 25th, 1911, Díaz has resigned and the revolution enters its much more violent and well-known period.

When leftists today study the conflict that ensued, Emiliano Zapata is their most common choice for a champion. Zapata's politics, dating back to his agrarian youth, centered on land reform. Radical elements among the Mexican campesinos had long been demanding that the

[4] For an excellent translation of the PLM's theoretical framework in their own words, see *Dreams of Freedom: A Ricardo Flores Magón Reader* (2005) edited by Chaz Bufe and Mitchell Cowen Verter. For the PLM's indigenous ties and alliances, see *Magonismo y movimiento indígena en México* (1997) by Juan Carlos Beas, Manuel Ballesteros, and Benjamín Maldonado. For the formative influence the PLM had on the Mexican Revolution, see *Sembradores: Ricardo Flores Magón y el Partido Liberal Mexicano* (1973) by Juan Gómez Quiñones and *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution 1900-1913* (1970) by James Cockcroft.

large estates owned by absentee owners and worked by wage laborers be broken up so that each peasant had their own plot. Zapata had seen his neighbors impoverished again and again by a legal order that rewarded wealth with wealth and privilege with privilege; he would not accept reforms that did not directly address the peasants' grievances. In his famous Plan of Ayala, Zapata declared his support for all the most radical land reform measures of the PLM platform. He even took the key magonista slogan for his own: Tierra y Libertad, Land and Freedom. In a centuries-long tradition, indigenous people and campesinos heeded the call, and Zapata became the general of one of the twentieth-century's most famous libertarian socialist armies.

The Zapatistas acquitted themselves well in the war, frequently winning battles, capturing cities, forcing the central government to the table, and not just threatening but occasionally entering the capital. From the ground, Zapata's story is romantic. Díaz had enemies beyond counting, but of them all it was Zapata who won the Battle of Cuautla, the decisive moment that led Díaz to realize he could no longer hold onto power.[5] The Zapatistas could even be called joint winners of the war until its very last stages, bringing to heel the successive Díaz, Madero, and Huerta governments one after another.

Yet by 1920 Zapata himself was dead and the rival Constitutionalists were in power, under the leadership of the landlord Venustiano Carranza. Zapata's chosen policy platform remained popular – incremental land reforms were one of the main tools of consolidation for the republic as it stabilized – but the sort of grand victory leftists crave did not materialize. Instead it was the centrists that won. How?

It is tempting for leftists today to flatter themselves by thinking they'd have been Zapatistas in the Mexican Revolution — clearly in retrospect the correct position, with its uncompromising dignity and unimpeachable stand for the working peasant in a predominantly peasant country and its strong roots in indigenous communities. However, Zapatismo was not the only leftism – or even the only libertarian socialism – active in the Mexican Revolution, nor is it the one that resembles the organizations that are most popular today. We must turn our attention to the Casa del Obrero Mundial, the "House of the World Worker."

The Casa del Obrero Mundial was formed in 1912, in the same revolutionary crucible as Zapatismo, and in a parallel trajectory also was rooted in a long-standing class consciousness (the PLM syndicalist Antonio Díaz Soto y Gama was one of its co-founders). While Zapatismo flowed from the peasant grievances against the rural landlords who benefited from the Díaz vision of order, the Casa del Obrero Mundial tapped into the wellspring of proletarian rage in the new urban industries. The dominant approach among industrial workers was anarcho-syndicalism – the Mexican National Congress of Workers was 50,000 strong in 1880 before they were pushed underground, from where this became the common thread for wildcat strikes and student protests for the next several decades. This latent anger precipitated into more formal organizing over the course of 1909-1911, when the Catalan anarchist Amadeo Ferrés arrived and began to orga-

[5] Zapata won the battle, but was outmaneuvered quite badly during the transfer of power, much of it happening while he was still in battle. The succeeding liberal Madero government attempted to entice Zapata into the fold with wealth that Zapata spat on: "I did not join the Revolution in order to become a hacienda owner; if I am worth anything, it is because of the confidence and the trust which the farmers have in me" (Albert Rolls, *Emiliano Zapata: A Biography* [2011] p. 39). Zapata proved unwilling to either join the new government or forcefully disarm his supporters, and the government began a heavy-handed crackdown on his home region which radicalized large swaths of fence-sitters into Zapatismo. Zapata's stoicism and dignity contrasted with the increasingly irrational interference of the central government.

nize the Confederación Tipográfica de México.[6] This particular organization would be both the nucleus and leadership source for the Casa del Obrero Mundial when it was formed in July 1912.

Relative to the Zapatistas, the Casa del Obrero Mundial was more intellectual, more invested in theory. Mexico's average literacy was 20%, but among the urban working classes was over 30%, and the railway union claimed to have 100%.[7] The Casa del Obrero Mundial initially started as an educational org, but rapidly sprawled out to be the de facto nexus of an entire left-wing ecosystem of newspapers, labor unions, and revolutionary cells, with a shifting quilt of affiliate names and ideas. As a taste, here is a translated quote from the manifesto of the militant group Luz:

> To enlighten an enslaved and ignorant people. To overthrow the tormentors of mankind, clergy, government and capital. To refuse to serve the ambitions of any political charlatan because no man has the right to govern another. To make known that all men are equal because we are all ruled by the same natural laws, not by arbitrary ones.[8]

Fairly classic revolutionary rhetoric – down with the church, the bosses, the man. Yet when it came time to choose sides, it was with the man that they threw in their lot: the Casa del Obrero Mundial, extremely surprisingly, put its considerable armed forces with the reactionary-liberal Constitutionalists. This was a position they took explicitly against Zapata and his northern ally Pancho Villa.[9] Why on earth would libertarian socialist-leaning syndicalists betray their peasant counterparts?[10]

The simplest fault line is the Church. The Casa del Obrero Mundial found the peasants' affection for the Virgin Mary, monasteries, priests to simply be all too much. The Constitutionalist leader Carranza may have been bourgeois, but that was at least straightforward and familiar. With enough theory you can rationalize your aesthetic distrust for alien piety into a principled stand against illusionary reaction. Of course that requires justifying yourself with additional rationalizations about the peasants – if they're not doing this out of self-interest, then they must be receiving some sort of backing from nebulous Church & banker forces.[11] Surely that's enough to justify crushing revolution in the name of revolution.

---

[6] John M. Hart, "The Urban Working Class and the Mexican Revolution: The Case of the Casa del Obrero Mundial," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* Vol 58, No 1 (February, 1978) pp. 1-20.

[7] Alan Knight, "The Working Class and the Mexican Revolution, c. 1900-1920," *Journal of Latin American Studies,* Vol. 16 No. 1 (May, 1984), pp 51-79.

[8] Ibid.

[9] To use historical analogies, this would have been like if the CNT-FAI, having existed in Russia instead of Spain, threw its weight behind the White Army and the Kadets, in order to crush the Makhnovites.

[10] Lest American Marxists get too self-righteous about the atrocious betrayal by the Mexican syndicalists — "well of course, because anarchists are mere idealists," etc — no less a pillar of US state socialism than the Socialist Party of Eugene Debs also tended to side with Carranza at this point in the Revolution. As we've seen, individual SPA members were willing to aid the PLM and other Mexican leftists. But the SPA as an institution (and its incompetent leadership) dithered incoherently on Mexico's civil war, failing as an organization to offer solidarity to the Revolution's left-wing factions and turning itself, many critics believe, into a de facto instrument of the foreign policy of the American business unionist Samuel Gompers. It was anarchists like Emma Goldman and syndicalists like the IWW who were consistent in their material support of the Zapatistas. For a detailed and well-sourced account, see "US Socialists in the Mexican Revolution" by Dan La Botz in *Against the Current*, No. 149, November/December 2010.

[11] Knight 1984.

There were also economic factors. The urban worker had a vested interest in keeping the factories, power plants, mines all running – or at least only shut down when they had control of a strike. When a factory was shut down because the (rural) inputs were missing, this hurt the proletarian for no apparent gain on their part. The workers did not merely resent the peasants but began to identify their class interests with that of the bosses. When the economy failed, the peasants had the ability to rest on the non-cash subsistence economy; the urban workers without money simply suffered and submitted: "They, after all, could not retreat into their *milpas* when times were hard."[12]

For decades, the Mexican bourgeoisie had been laying the groundwork for the possibility of a bourgeois-proletariat alignment: it had commissioned major reports on labor after the 1906 "year of strikes." In their eyes the urban worker was at least somewhat civilized, and their discontent could be channeled into politically acceptable expressions of discontent like radical theater.[13] The peasant — a category which, in Mexican political discourse then and now, intersects heavily with those racialized or self-identified as indigenous people — was not as readily redeemed or co-opted in this logic.

Years later, during the civil war, this logic reached its devastating conclusion. The Casa Del Obrero suffered greatly under the Huerta government, with raids, arrests, and physical destruction of Casa facilities. When Huerta was defeated by Carranza, the Carranza government restored the Casa to its prior state and courted them as allies. Prepped by years of softer persuasion and argument, the Casa del Obrero were grateful and receptive to Carranza's aims. When constant strikes at power plants were wrecking the Carranza government, a well-trusted, vetted, but ultimately moderate electrician in the Casa del Obrero Mundial leadership, Luis N. Morones, was promoted to a managerial position in the public electrical utility. Morones was not at all interested in anarchism as a principle, and his tenure eventually saw the total disbandment of the Casa del Obrero Mundial, being unable to forcefully negotiate with the post-revolutionary government on their own strength.[14]

The Casa del Obrero Mundial contributed 12,000 troops in their Red Brigades to the war effort, who mostly participated in low-intensity combat against Villa and Zapata. The peasant forces at one point controlled nearly all of Mexico outside of the northeastern coastline, but when a Constitutionalist army of 15,000 inflicted upwards of 50,000 casualties on Villa at the Battle of Celaya, the war rapidly turned and the peasantry was no longer a contender for the winner's seat of the Revolution. For their efforts the Red Brigades were disarmed and disbanded.

***

So what are we to make of these events as libertarian socialists today?

First, the decisive (if catastrophic) role of the CDO shows that anarchists, far from being ineffectual, can be kingmakers in a revolutionary civil war with multiple factions — but only if they build up institutions of dual power which place real resources under the direct-democratic control of assemblies, as the urban and rural libertarian socialist movement alike did in Mexico for decades before the Revolution broke out.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Hart 1978.

Second, and more pessimistically, it turns out you don't need to have a group like the Bolsheviks running around (that is, a state-socialist faction that believes in the one party state and purging all other factions) for a revolution to go sideways. Here, after all, was a revolution with not one but two libertarian socialist factions, each in favor of worker control and each employing methods of assembly democracy — but they were two distinct factions of workers, one of whom chose to sell the other out based on sectional interests.

Third, and relatedly, it was divides that did *not* have to do with someone's relationship to the mode of production per se (i.e., class in the Marxist sense) — namely, the divide between town and country, and the divide between mestizo and indigenous Mexicans — that played a definitive role in the CDO's betrayal of the Zapatistas. Thus, such non-class forms of hierarchy can have a major role in the mobilization of class forces, whether in a war like the Mexican Revolution or in times of relative peace.

Fourth, one should note that despite the democratic aspirations of the Mexican syndicalist movement, the in fact relatively top-down decision-making structure of the Casa Del Obrero contributed to their betrayal as well. It was the very same elected leaders within the union who made the call who were later coopted by the postwar corporatist regime as apparatchiks. It's quite possible that if the CDO had more rigorously principled libertarian socialist norms of assembly democracy in their governance, the error may have been avoided — as evidenced by the fact that a great deal of the rank-and-file actually defected from the organization and joined the Zapatistas.

There is an eerie way in which the CDO-Zapatista divide echoes certain divides within the socialist movement today. The Zapatistas were unquestionably working-class, heavily indigenous, and part of a longstanding tradition of rural revolt that often employed religious imagery and rituals. The Casa Del Obrero was a theory-heavy movement of urban intellectuals and workers, and it was precisely the best-educated men (all men) who always dominated their elected governing boards that also betrayed the revolution. In a weird way, if you see the CDO's relationship to the Zapatistas as analogous to the situation of the country as a whole, it was a microcosm of the very Porfirio Diaz technocracy that the revolutionaries had sought to overthrow, which they replicated in their own relations to their rural counterparts and one another.

There is an important sense in which the libertarian socialist factions won despite being defeated — and not just in a sentimental, beautiful-loser sort of way, but in a material sense. Marxists often like to note that many of the concrete demands of the *Communist Manifesto* — for income taxes, universal suffrage, free public education, and so on — were *largely achieved* even within capitalist countries in the twentieth century as a result of socialist revolts. Similarly, then, the Constitution of 1917 that ended the war, despite being a document drafted by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional regime that would govern Mexico autocratically for the rest of the century, *needed* to include many of the key planks of the libertarian socialist platform going all the way back to the PLM's manifestos in order for their regime to have any legitimacy. The magonistas' minimum programme of land reform and workers' rights, in fact, formed the backbone of the modern Mexican constitution's labor documents. (Amusingly — and tragically — the adoption of the collective *ejido* system on the one hand and the dissolution of the CDO on the other meant that the betrayed peasants got a better deal than their syndicalist betrayers.) These gains were precarious; they would often be reversed, and then not only because of great social struggles; they remain contested today. But it is undeniable that the struggle for libertarian socialism in Mexico left the working classes there in a better position than they started, although the industrial democracy of self-governing peasants and workers has not yet been achieved. Their long

chain of struggles from indigenous revolts to *magonismo* to syndicalism to *zapatismo* constitute a proud tradition and an inspiration to the world.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Kyle Flannery and John Michael Colón
Casa Against Campesino
31 March 2023

Retrieved on 12 April 2023 from strangematters.coop.

theanarchistlibrary.org