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Internationalism, the Mexican Revolution, and the Uses of History

Bad Mexicans: Race, Empire, and Revolution in the Borderlands. By Kelly Lytle Hernández. New York: W. W. Norton, 2022. Pp 384. $19.95 paperback.

Arise!: Global Radicalism in the Era of the Mexican Revolution. By Christina Heatherton. Oakland: University of California Press, 2022. Pp. 335. $29.95 cloth; $27.95 paperback; $16.95 eBook.

Riding with the Revolution: The American Left in the Mexican Revolution, 1900–1925. By Dan La Botz. Leiden: Brill, 2024. Pp. 558. $185.00 cloth; $185.00 eBook.

How can the lessons of past struggle inform movements for political change today? This is a question raised, in ways both implicit and explicit, by three recent books—Kelly Lytle Hernández's *Bad Mexicans*, Christina Heatherton's *Arise!*, and Dan La Botz's *Riding with the Revolution*—that return to the era of the Mexican Revolution to explore currents of cross-border radicalism. While the chronology, scope, emphasis, and form of each book differs, they all ask how the complex and multifaceted struggle that constituted the first major social revolution of the twentieth century inspired solidarities and reactions both across the border and around the world. Lytle Hernández's book is a gripping narrative history that argues that Mexican revolutionary struggle played a key role in the history of the United States; Heatherton's is an interdisciplinary theorization of the transnational "convergence space" (18) opened up by the revolutionary moment; and La Botz's is an encyclopedic compendium of various sectarian and sectoral foreign engagements with Mexico's revolutionary process. Reading the three together and comparing these different analyses of radical pasts puts one into a political and strategic, as much as historiographic, frame of mind. On a rapidly shifting terrain structured by global crises that refuse to hew to national boundaries, each author invites readers to consider how past histories of internationalism inform today's struggles to build new movements and political cultures adequate to the shared challenges we face.

All three books return to the radical milieu of the Partido Liberal Mexicano (PLM), led by a group of young intellectuals—including Camilo Arriaga, Juan

and Manuel Sarabia, and Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magón, among others—who opposed the longstanding rule of the dictator Porfirio Díaz and sought to foment revolution in early twentieth-century Mexico. Though the rapid succession of these books' publication might appear to announce a sudden confluence, perhaps even a historiographic trend, in the recovery of the importance of the Flores Magón brothers and their PLM compatriots, theirs is far from a forgotten history. In fact, as Lytle Hernández acknowledges, scholars have been "tending to the *magonista* story like a fire in the night" (12) for some time. She cites some 20 books published in both the United States and Mexico on the topic since the 1960s, just a small part of the steady stream of histories over the decades that situated the Magón brothers and their comrades as the "intellectual precursors of the Mexican revolution," as James Cockcroft's foundational 1968 text put it.[1]

Since then, scholars have put the *magonistas* to various kinds of use: as national heroes reclaimed by official histories that served to buttress the state's revolutionary bona fides; as honorable but defeated radicals repressed by the more conservative victorious revolutionary factions that came to power in the Mexican state; and as forerunners to the Chicano movement of Mexican-American militants who refused the logic of national borders during the tumult of the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, these various interpretations were explicitly taken to task a decade ago, in Claudio Lomnitz's 2014 *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón*, which sought instead to understand these Mexican revolutionaries as a "transnational phenomenon."[2] In his book, Lomnitz detailed the connections the PLM had with the U.S. radicals who took up what he calls the "Mexican Cause" from the turn of the twentieth century until 1922, when Ricardo Flores Magón died in Leavenworth prison.[3] That group included writers, intellectuals, and agitators such as John Kenneth and Ethel Duffy Turner, Elizabeth Trowbridge and John Murray, Frances and P. D. Noel, Job Harriman, and William Owen, who spearheaded what Lomnitz called "the first major grassroots Mexican–American solidarity network."[4]

In a sprawling, lyrical reconstruction of that network, full of evocative photos and reproductions of archival sources, Lomnitz traced the connections between U.S. and Mexican militants, including through groups such as the International Workers of the World (IWW) and the Socialist Party of America, and in the labor and anarchist newspapers published in the United States by figures such as

1. James D. Cockcroft, *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution, 1900–1913* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).
2. Claudio Lomnitz, *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón* (New York: Zone Books, 2014), xxxvi.
3. Lomnitz, *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón*, xvi.
4. Lomnitz, *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón*, xlii.

Emma Goldman. But the book also looked squarely at the many debates, splits, and betrayals both between and among the U.S. and Mexican circles, eschewing the heroic hagiography of prior narratives for a clear-eyed analysis that did not shy away from the strategic, theoretical, and personal shortcomings of the *magonistas* and their erstwhile allies.

Given the length and kaleidoscopic complexity of Lomnitz's now decade-old book—as well as the previous work on the topic in books such as Justin Akers Chacón's 2018 *Radicals in the Barrio*, Colin MacLachlan's 1991 *Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution*, Dirk Raat's 1981 *Revoltosos*, or John Mason Hart's 1978 *Anarchism & The Mexican Working Class*—one could be forgiven for wondering what there is to add to the story of cross-border radicalism during the Mexican revolutionary era. But each of the three recent works under study here brings a new emphasis and new archival material to the task, and together, they contextualize the *magonistas* and their world in important new ways.

Lytle Hernández seeks to place the story of the *magonistas* squarely within the frame of U.S. history; that the book won the Bancroft Prize in 2022 indicates that she succeeded admirably. In some ways, this was also the task of older scholarship, beginning with Juan Gómez-Quiñones's 1973 *Sembradores*, which claimed Flores Magón for the Chicano movement. But while Lytle Hernández is insistent that "Latino voices and stories have been shunted to the sidelines of U.S. history," despite having "long been major players" in that history (308), her emphasis is less concerned with centering Mexican and Mexican-American perspectives than with understanding how the struggle of the *magonistas* made and remade key parts of the modern U.S. state. "The story of the United States as a global power cannot be told without Mexico," (8) she writes—an assertion certainly consonant with my own work.[5] Picking up from a theme in her 2017 book, *City of Inmates*, which traced the "roots of the nation's carceral core" in Los Angeles, *Bad Mexicans* places heavy emphasis on the "cross border counter-insurgency campaign" against Flores Magón and his allies (13).[6] In so doing, the book centers the history of repression of the Mexican revolutionary struggle in the history of the U.S. carceral state. "The campaign to crush the magonistas opened a new chapter of policing in the United States," Lytle Hernández writes (11), detailing how, for example, the Bureau of Investigation, which would later become the FBI, cut its teeth in the *magonista* struggle.

5. See Christy Thornton, *Revolution in Development: Mexico and the Governance of the Global Economy* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021).

6. Kelly Lytle Hernández, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 1.

If this sounds somewhat wonky and technical, the book is anything but: fast-paced and frequently thrilling, *Bad Mexicans* narrates the constant battle between the Mexican militants in exile in the United States and the agents of both the U.S. and Mexican governments that sought to monitor, capture, and incapacitate them and their revolutionary project. To do this, the book makes great use of state surveillance files from both the United States and Mexico, detailing how, for example, the coded letters sent by PLM militants within the United States were tracked and deciphered by a network of federal agents, who then used that information to raid safehouses and make arrests.

The gripping descriptions of this political surveillance, and the coordination among a range of local and federal law enforcement agencies that it required, are rooted in correspondence archived in the American Embassy files of the Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs—an archive which, Lytle Hernández notes in an ironic aside, is now located on Avenida Ricardo Flores Magón in Mexico City. Using these files in coordination with files from the State Department in the U.S. National Archives; the large corpus of PLM material archived digitally in the Archivo Electrónico Ricardo Flores Magón; and the ample secondary literature, Lytle Hernandez crafts an archivally rich and deeply compelling narrative that emphasizes what she calls the "three Rs of U.S. history: race, rebellion, and repression" (300). *Bad Mexicans* therefore brings a strong interpretive frame—one that emphasizes the campaign against Mexican revolutionaries as key to the development of U.S. state power—to non-specialist audiences. With its narrative style and popular reach, the book seeks to offer a more general reader the "opportunity to learn what the PLM, and histories like theirs, can teach us" (308).

Heatherton's *Arise!* shares Lytle Hernandez's concerns with race, rebellion, and the uses of history and puts them at the center of a theorization of the influence the Mexican Revolution had in the world. Heatherton sets out to "understand conjoined but distinct forms of oppression under capitalism" (16), and she proposes the concept of the "convergence space," which, she argues, "refers to contradictory socio-spatial sites where people from different backgrounds and different radical traditions have been forced together and have subsequently produced new articulations of struggle" (18). Heatherton maintains that the Mexican Revolution, as a material and ideological challenge to the rising hegemony of the United States and the global expansion of U.S. capital, provided fertile terrain on which a series of radicals from around the world would frame distinct kinds of "internationalist consciousness," intended to meet their increasingly international challenges (14).

Arise! traces the ideas of thinkers from around the world who found themselves in Mexico and engaged with Mexican radicals during that country's revolutionary upheaval and in the tumult that followed. While the Flores Magón brothers and the PLM play a key role in her story, she traces a longer chronology over the course of the book, extending into the 1940s. She profiles the Okinawan radical Shinsei Paul K□chi, the Indian Marxist MN Roy, and the American journalist John Reed, demonstrating how their encounters with the Mexican revolutionary process changed how each understood not only the place of Mexico, but also their own struggles within and against a rapidly changing global capitalism. In a riveting chapter that follows the Flores Magón brothers and other radicals imprisoned by the United States, Heatherton uses Bureau of Prisons records from Leavenworth penitentiary to detail the workings of a night school inside the prison's walls, creating what she calls a "university of radicalism" (75) run by prisoners themselves, which included classes taught by Enrique Flores Magón. Even a brutal federal prison, she shows, could become a radical convergence space, where conceptions of shared struggle were forged across lines of color, nationality, and political tendency. Finally, she examines time spent in Mexico and working with Mexican radicals by the Soviet feminist and ambassador Alexandra Kollontai, the Communist Californian labor organizer Dorothy Healy, and the Black North American artist Elizabeth Catlett, whose diplomacy, organizing, and art were each shaped by the contours of Mexico's revolutionary experience. As these brief descriptions demonstrate, the book spins a broad web of engagement with Mexico and Mexicans in the first decades of the twentieth century, arguing for the global significance of the Mexican revolutionary moment. In each of the episodes Heatherton chronicles, she argues that "internationalism had to be forged, not simply found" (53).

In comparison with Lytle Hernández's fast-paced narrative, *Arise!* is more theoretically explicit. Heatherton, trained in American Studies, engages at length with radical geography, cultural studies, and sociology in framing her key concepts and situating the book's interventions. But it is also stirring in its prose, written with literary flourish and similarly devoted to the recovery of history—because, like Lytle Hernández, she argues that "these expansive conceptualizations of internationalism still have much to teach us at present" (20). For Heatherton, in fact, this teaching is the reason to return to the messy, complicated constructions of previous internationalisms, to understand not merely the structural changes that conditioned the emergence of internationalist politics, but to ask how that politics was enacted—"how internationalism was made" (126), as she stresses. To do so, she argues, is to "write a book against impossibility," against the "cruel fictions that dissuade people from fully comprehending histories of mass struggle" and therefore "preclude many from

ever engaging in them" (179). Having sketched maps of prior struggles for internationalism, she wants to "make future roads possible" (183).

If there is anyone who has traveled the road of internationalism between the United States and Mexico, it is Dan La Botz. His new book *Riding with the Revolution* is the culmination of a long career of research, writing, and organizing across borders. A longtime labor activist, socialist organizer, and writer, La Botz spent years traversing the U.S.–Mexico border to support and document the struggles of labor activists who organized independently, outside the tightly-controlled corporatist unions of Mexico's twentieth-century single-party state. He also earned a PhD in history in the late 1990s with a dissertation about the "slackers," young war resisters in the United States who avoided being drafted into the First World War by traveling to Mexico. As La Botz continued to organize, he published a host of other important books on rank-and-file unionism and Mexican labor activism and democracy and even ran for Senate as a socialist. However, his doctoral dissertation remained unpublished—until the appearance last year of *Riding with the Revolution*, which significantly expands and revises his research from the 1990s. As he rewrote the book, he explains in the preface, he realized he was writing not just a history of transnational solidarity and labor organizing, but also of the "experiments in the social laboratory of the era of industrial capitalism in North America in the early 20th century" (vii), an emphasis he shares with Heatherton.

The resulting book is a massive, 500-page tome that chronicles an expansive swath of broadly left U.S. engagements with the Mexican Revolution as it unfolded—though in chapters that are somewhat uneven, as is perhaps to be expected of a book compiled over many decades. Across the book, chapters take somewhat different forms; only a few appear to rely on in-depth archival research, while others use frustratingly few secondary citations for such a comprehensive and authoritative study, somewhat limiting the book's use for future researchers. But it is certainly comprehensive: here we have the cast of characters that Lomnitz called the "Mexican Cause" joined by myriad other individuals and organizations, in what La Botz characterizes as a "collective biography" (1) of the U.S. left in Mexico. Chapters chronicle the interest in Mexico of Progressive-era Protestant groups; Socialist Party leaders such as Eugene Debs and socialist writers such as John Kenneth Turner and John Reed; anarchist thinkers such as Emma Goldman; union leaders in the American Federation of Labor; muckraking journalists; self-exiled "slackers" and IWW organizers; Communist party militants; U.S. feminists; and even the populists of the now-obscure Farmer Labor Party.

Divided roughly into two chronological parts around the hinge of 1917—the year that solidified the Mexican Revolution into its constitutional form, and that the Russian revolution made possible the new form of Communist internationalism to come—the book provides a rough outline of the features of each group that La Botz identifies as important: "each political tendency's ideology, its concept of social and political action, its view of the role of the working class, its relation to the capitalist class and other classes, [and] its conception of how social change would take place" (4). While the precision with which La Botz undertakes this sociological comparison of these groups varies across chapters, the overall result is an accounting of the aspirations and outcomes of the U.S. left's engagement with the Mexican Revolution and the state that emerged from it.

The balance after all this accounting, however, is one that is decidedly negative. Having detailed at length each of the factors listed above for each group and individual he considers, La Botz concludes that "several of the U.S. left's interventions in Mexico led to serious failures while others contributed to disasters" (12)—among them, the decision by the PLM to invade Baja California with the support of IWW and others. Ultimately, he argues, while anarchists had a relatively accurate interpretation of developments on the ground, "the American anarchist movement was too small, too fragmented, and its influence too dilute" (161) to make much of a difference on either side of the border. La Botz reserves no less opprobrium for socialists or progressives in subsequent chapters. For example, he details how, at the outbreak of the revolution, Eugene Debs rejected the *magonistas* and threw in his lot with the reformer Madero, who, Debs thought, would usher in the bourgeois revolution necessary for the development of socialism in Mexico; an editorial that La Botz quotes from the *International Socialist Review* in 1911 lectured, "have patience, comrades!" (116). A few years later, he details, socialists such as John Kenneth Turner would come to support the constitutionalist Venustiano Carranza rather than the more radical revolutionary factions, and in a better-known story, Samuel Gompers and the American Federation of Labor would do the same. Consequently, La Botz argues, many labor internationalists in the United States were compelled to channel their solidarity through unions and labor organizations that were controlled by the Mexican state—thereby undermining any chance at real change for the Mexican working class.

La Botz expresses more sympathy with the Communists in his study, arguing that they had a "generally correct analysis" (12) of the political economy in Mexico and were "modestly successful" (440). But they, too, failed to understand the weight of the nationalist forces unleashed in the revolutionary struggle, as Daniela Spenser argued in her 1999 book *The Impossible Triangle* (which was,

perhaps not coincidentally, the book she was writing while La Botz was researching in Mexico, at CIESAS, in the late 1990s). Thus, like the other factions of the U.S. left, "the American agents of international Communism failed in their ultimate goal," he concludes (465). In the end, La Botz argues, the reformist internationalists contributed to the consolidation of a soft-authoritarian, capitalist state, while the revolutionary internationalists could not compete with the forces of nationalism and the corporatist integration of Mexico's popular classes into the state project.

For La Botz, then, this era was one of largely *failed* internationalisms on the part of U.S. actors, whatever their good intentions. This stands in striking contrast to the emphasis on state repression in Lytle Hernández's work and appears antithetical to the recovery of internationalist imaginaries that animates Heatherton's more global analysis. Indeed, in a review La Botz published of these two books in the socialist journal *New Politics*, he dwells on Flores Magón's Sinophobia and vanguardism, describes at length Dorothy Healy and Alexandra Kollontai's Stalinism, and laments Heatherton's lack of attention to Trotsky.[7] The shortcomings, missteps, and failures of these varied forms of internationalism, his book implies, must be faced—but to what end? La Botz writes in the preface that he continues "working with my comrades to establish international alliances that can advance the working class and the struggle for socialism" (viii). But how readers who share that goal should assess the overwhelming failures he narrates is left unaddressed by the book.

Today, facing the global climate crisis, an increasingly unstable global capitalist system linked to profit-driven technological innovations, and the growth of an internationally networked far-right movement bent on rehabilitating racism and xenophobic nationalism, how might history serve to inspire new generations toward an internationalist movement that could meet this moment? If we need masses of people here in the United States to reject what Heatherton calls the "prison of the present" (179) and to organize, collectively and across borders, against forces that tell us other worlds are impossible, does history have a role to play in inspiring that action? Though they share a goal of motivating people to see the world, and their place within it, in new ways, these books offer remarkably different models. Should we provide new popular narratives of U.S. history centered on marginalized actors and the forces arrayed to repress them, written to reach broad swaths of non-specialist readers? Should we weave together apparently disparate pasts in an attempt to break down barriers of race, ethnicity, and nationality, using theory to highlight what has been shared across

7. Dan La Botz, "Book Review Essay: Mexico, Transnational and World Revolution," *New Politics*, March 12, 2023. https://newpol.org/book-review-essay-mexico-transnational-and-world-revolution/.

different historical struggles? Or should we shine the cold light of critique to give a sober accounting of past missteps and unanticipated consequences of earlier movements? All three authors write against what Lomnitz called "a North American order that is blighted by a lack of imagination for a collective future of cooperation and mutual aid," but reading these books together reveals a great deal about our own contemporary disagreements regarding the uses of history in the fight for a different kind of order altogether.[8]

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8. Lomnitz, *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón*, xl.