Anarchism in Mexico

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Anarchist roots in Mexico date back to the 1860s, when a small group of radical intellectuals embraced the doctrine. Greek immigrant Plotino Rhodakanaty, often considered the father of Mexican anarchism, was particularly important to the initial spread of the ideology, as was the Gran Círculo de Obreros de México, a workers' association founded in the Federal District in 1870. Fanned by escalating labor unrest, and a radicalization in the liberal opposition to the government, anarchists helped to lay the organizational and intellectual foundations of Mexico's growing revolutionary movement.

Ricardo Flores Magón was the most prominent anarchist during the first decade of the twentieth century. He, together with his Liberal Party of Mexico (Partido Liberal Mexicano, PLM), mounted the only serious opposition to Porfirio Díaz's government at the time. Organized in a network of Liberal Party "clubs" that were distributed throughout Mexico and in parts of the United States, the Magonists contested the legitimacy of the dominant regime, mobilized workers to challenge its economic foundations, and tried desperately to ignite the revolution.

A dedicated journalist, playwright, and publisher, Magón railed against the government's authoritarianism and hypocrisy in a prodigious stream of texts. His newspapers, *El Hijo del Ahuizote* and *Regeneratión*, were major instruments in his battle against the state and had genuine mass appeal: for instance, the former had a circulation of 24,000 in 1904 and the latter reached 30,000 readers in 1906, despite being officially banned. These publications were one source of his repeated incarcerations as well as his 1903 flight to the United States, where he remained for the rest of his life.

On the economic terrain, the PLM organized strikes in vital parts of the national economy, such as in the copper mines in Cananea and in the textile industry in Puebla, Veracruz, Tlaxcala, Querétaro, Jalisco, and the Federal District. These strikes cultivated working-class militancy and made exploitation a matter of public debate. The Cananea strike was remarkable for its anti-imperialist content: the mines were American-owned and, as a result, the strike forced Díaz to choose between yielding to the workers' demands or acting against them on behalf of an American capitalist. He chose the latter, which inflamed doubts about his fidelity to the fatherland.

The PLM also launched multiple insurrections against the regime. In 1906, when a leading Magonist, Práxedis Guerrero (1882–1910), had 46 guerilla units under his command, they participated in uprisings in Coahuila, Tamaulipas, and Veracruz. In 1908, they staged armed revolts in Viesca (Cohuila), Las Vacas (today Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila), and Casas Grandes and Palomas (Chihuahua). In 1911, Magonists seized Tijuana, which they declared a socialist republic before being routed.

An ambiguity about PLM goals compromised its chances of success. The party's 1906 "Program" was a liberal document that called for constitutional reforms, such as limiting the president's term to four years; the institution of an eight-hour working day; improvements in education; and other, non-revolutionary demands. However, the PLM also had a radical wing, led by Magón himself. Magón, who had grown increasingly – though privately – dedicated to anarchism, hoped to galvanize and lead the resistance to the government and turn the Mexican Revolution into an anarchist revolution. The contradictions between these two positions created discord within the PLM and some public confusion. Commenting on the matter, one scholar observed that the "Magonists took their public discourse from liberalism, and their strategy from anarchism" (Esperanza Valdez 2000: 182).

The PLM attempted to rectify this in 1911 by publishing its "Manifesto," an explicitly anarchist text that superseded the "Program" as the main statement of the party's goals. However, the Mag-

onists had lost their presence in national affairs by this time and thus their clarification had little public impact. Indeed, although Magón continued agitating until his 1922 death in Leavenworth Penitentiary, the years of struggle, and the many unforeseen events linked to the outbreak of the Revolution, had exhausted his capacity to marshal a compelling alternative. Neither he nor the PLM would again occupy a central place in Mexican political life.

During the Mexican Revolution, anarchists would significantly affect the urban labor movement in general and the Casa del Mundo Obrero (House of the World Worker) in particular. The Casa, formed in Mexico City in 1912 by militants who had intended to start an anarchist school, quickly became the anchor of the country's radical workers' movement. In addition to providing a loose confederal structure for the many workers' organizations then operating, it also sponsored myriad cultural activities designed to foster revolutionary consciousness among the country's laborers. It published newspapers, sponsored educational programs, and put on plays and poetry readings, among other initiatives. It was strongly committed to the use of direct action and the general strike in battles with employers and as a mechanism for realizing its long-term, revolutionary aspirations. The Casa had deep roots in the working class and launched major mobilizations, including multiple general strikes.

However, navigating revolutionary Mexico's shifting political landscape, with its multiple contenders for state power, proved difficult. Though Casa anarchists rejected the state in principle, they also realized that alliances with one political force or another could yield tangible benefits. Thus, bowing to the demands of expediency, they formed an alliance with the Constitutionalists, which led to the creation of the Casa's "Red Battalions," armed units sent into battle against Pancho Villa and Zapata's forces. This alliance lasted until 1916, when the Constitutionalists – troubled by the presence of armed workers – felt powerful enough to dissolve the Casa.

The suppression of the Casa was part of a broader – and successful – government crackdown on worker militancy that took place in the latter part of the century's second decade. Although this campaign, and the passage of the 1917 Constitution, handed a decisive defeat to the Mexican Revolution's most radical tendencies, anarchists continued to resist the consolidation of the post-revolutionary order.

Regrouping after the repression, they challenged the legitimacy of the state in their voluminous writings and through diverse cultural events crafted to reaffirm popular revolutionary aspirations. The Grupo Luz, for instance, circulated its newspapers widely and sponsored frequent public gatherings. Numerous anarchists groups were organized in Mexico City and throughout the country.

Anarchists were instrumental to the 1921 foundation of the General Confederation of Workers (Confederación General de Trabajadores, CGT), a labor federation formed in opposition to the pro-government, Mexican Workers' Regional Confederation (Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana). The CGT embraced anarchist principles such as direct action, class struggle, and libertarian communism. It also fought vigorously against government-sanctioned unionism and, increasingly, members of the Communist Party.

Anarchists were central to a 1922 rent strike that shook Veracruz, a hub for militant workers and anarchists. An anarchist tailor by the name of Herón Proal led this dramatic and bloody confrontation.

It was in the 1930s that anarchists finally lost their mass influence, as the post-revolutionary state assumed a more mature institutional form and established more efficient mechanisms for

regulating and repressing dissent. The 1931 passage of the Ley del Trabajo, a labor code augmenting the government's role in the mediation of class conflicts, was pivotal.

Nonetheless, anarchist contributions from this period live on in Mexico's political culture. Magón is revered as a revolutionary hero and parts of the 1917 Constitution have roots in the PLM's 1906 "Program." Likewise, echoes of the Casa's worker mobilizations are perceptible, at least indirectly, in the Mexican government's strong corporatist commitments.

Many Spanish anarchists fled to Mexico after Franco's 1939 victory in Spain. The most famous was former CNT-FAI leader Juan García Oliver (1901–80). Another émigré, Ricardo Mestre (1906–97), helped found the Biblioteca Social Reconstruir (Library for Social Reconstruction), an anarchist library and meeting place in Mexico City that exists to this day.

The Mexican Anarchist Federation, founded in 1941, was the only group with even remote links to the movement's heyday to survive into the post-World War II period, although it never became more than a small publishing circle. Anarchists had no organized impact on Mexico's new left, despite the presence of strong anti-authoritarian sensibilities.

There was a renewal of interest in anarchism in the 1980s, thanks primarily to the impact of punk rock and cultural ties to countries such as Spain and the United States, in which anarchism also experienced a revival. Anarchists politicized at this time have built a vibrant counterculture linked together by social centers, newspapers, conferences, gatherings, websites, and email lists. The 1994 Zapatista uprising gave a boost to anarchists, who were quick to participate in Zapatista support groups. Anarchists are presently well represented among ideologically defined, left-wing youth, although they have been unable to articulate a compelling program for social change, which has undermined their efforts to rebuild anarchism's mass base.

SEE ALSO: Anarchism and Culture, 1840–1939 ; Anarchism in the United States to 1945 ; Anarchism in the United States, 1946–Present ; Anarchosyndicalism ; Mágon, Ricardo Flores (1874–1922) and the Magonistas ; Mexican Revolution of 1910–1921 ; Mexico, Worker Struggles and Labor Unions, 1950s–1970s ; Spanish Revolution ; Zapata, Emiliano (1879–1919) and the Comuna Morelense ; Zapatistas, EZLN, and the Chiapas Uprising

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