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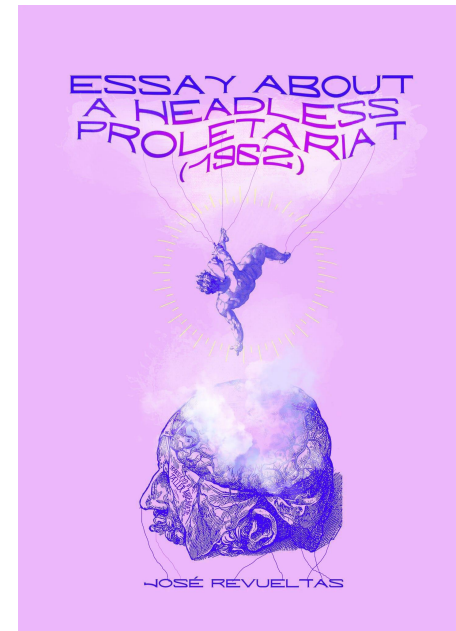
# Essay About a Headless Proletariat

José Revueltas

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1962 / 2022

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1962 / 2022

**approaching: the disappearance of all that  
makes us unhappy: Authority, Capital and  
Clergy.**

**Ricardo Flores Magón**

*(From Regeneración, No. 262 of March 16, 1918)*

To be continued in part two of this edition.

The Bolsheviks understood long ago that the revolution, although of a political character at first, must become economic and social, and that this latter character of it has nothing to do with differences of race or national frontiers, and therefore, the future of our revolution must be international. The revolution must pass over the frontiers and distinctions of race, to crush the ideas opposed to it because if it remains confined to a people adopting principles of peace and economic and social equality, it will be stifled by the capitalist and authoritarian states.

We will continue to propagate our ideals in all countries to obtain this result: first of all the spread of anti-monarchist and anti-capitalist ideals precipitate the termination of the war.

Such a peace, sustained by the insurrectionary peoples, is the most desirable program.

We also call for revolution in all countries because by its very nature the Russian revolution cannot remain isolated.

The nations must be organized either on a capitalist basis or on an anti-capitalist proletarian basis. The two systems cannot coexist. Russia can't exist without capitalist and industrial banks if she has to deal with countries that still have them.

Let no one falter at this moment when it is necessary for all of us who suffer the effects of a system that crushes us, to have our minds prepared to see with serenity what is

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will say), then that historical necessity was neither necessary nor historical, but remained «merely the feverish fantasy of a wild dreamer, outside reality».

That is why it is in the interest of true proletarian thinking to separate Flores Magón, the anarchist doctrinaire he later became known as, from the proletarian ideological representative he always was concerning the independence of the working class within the bourgeois-democratic process.

To finish the profiles of the historical image of Flores Magón that remains as a proletarian inheritance from whose sources the tradition of a true socialist conscience in Mexico derives, let us see the opinions that Lenin and the October Revolution earned from him without prejudice to the fact that a short time later, already completely in the sphere of anarchist sympathies, he pronounced himself in his writings from the prison in which his days ended against the proletarian dictatorship. Here are the words of Flores Magón in 1918:

**Nikolai Lenin, the Russian leader, is at this moment the revolutionary figure that shines the brightest in the chaos of the existing conditions in the whole world because he is at the head of a movement that has to provoke, whether those conceited with the present system of exploitation and crime want it or not, the great world revolution that is already knocking at the doors of all peoples; the great world revolution that will bring about the most important changes in the way human beings live together.**

**The revolution in Russia is not a national revolution but a world revolution. The Bolsheviks are the true internationalists. They are the only ones who wish to see the ideas of the revolution spread throughout the world.**

**The Liberal Party [the name adopted by the Magonista movement as a revolutionary inheritance of the struggles of the Reform in the previous century] does not approve nor will it approve Madero, or his State program.**

**The Liberal Party is a working-class movement. If it triumphs it will immediately proceed to return the stolen lands to the people, to their legitimate possessors.**

However, to obscure what Flores Magón's attitude represents, as an authentic proletarian thinker, when he so clearly and firmly points out the need for the working class not to alienate itself to the bourgeoisie, the current bourgeois-democratic ideologists make a tendentiously exclusive emphasis on his anarchist ideas.

Thus, Flores Magón appears before the eyes of the contemporary working masses, dominated by pro-government and bourgeois democracy, as someone who opposed the struggle for the disappearance of the State to the historical tasks entrusted to the revolutionary movement of 1910–17.

Confusing in such a way the anarchist theoretician that Flores Magón was, with the proletarian revolutionary thinker that he also was, whose mind echoed such a fundamental and decisive historical exigency as that of guaranteeing the autonomous participation of the working class in the process, then, not only this last aspect of Flores Magón's attitude but the historical exigency itself. And in this lies, without a doubt, the class tendency that inspires the representatives of the bourgeois-democratic ideology to throw the Magonista cause to the ground, disposing of it.

If the historical necessity for the proletarian class to participate independently throughout the bourgeois-democratic revolution was not posed in any other way than as antagonism for all forms of the State (as the bourgeois-democratic ideologists

## Flores Magón, Lenin and Revueltas walk into a bar

*«How quickly time passes, and how the fortunes of people change, except mine! My comrades of that time are now generals, governors, secretaries of state, and some of them have even been presidents of Mexico.*

*They are rich, famous and powerful, while I am poor, gloomy, sick, almost blind, with a number for a name, marked as a felon, rotting among this human flock, whose crime was to have been so ignorant and so unwise to have stolen a loaf of bread, while it is a virtue to steal millions.*

*But my former comrades are practical men, while I am only a dreamer, and, therefore, it is my own fault.*

*They have been the ant and I the cicada; while they have counted dollars, I have spent time counting the stars.*

*I wanted to make a human being out of every human beast; they, more pragmatic, have made an animal out of every human being, and have made themselves shepherds of the flock. However, I would rather be a dreamer than a practical man.*

*With my best wishes of universal comradeship, I remain your brother»*

– Ricardo Flores Magón, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1920.  
Oakland, California.

## Lenin, Magón, Revueltas

Some positions appear irreconcilable — that is, if one is fooled by what appears and rather isn't, except on the surface, the apparent. Once this interconnection is grasped, all theoretical belief in the permanent need of the existing conditions collapses.

We hear an echo, clamoring: *it is absolutely in the interest of the ruling classes to perpetuate a senseless confusion.*

Flores Magón, Revueltas and Lenin are an odd cast. José Revueltas, who the State imprisoned on multiple occasions, attributing to him the authorship<sup>1</sup> of the 1968 student movement, joined the Mexican Communist Party in 1928. Nevertheless, he was expelled in 1943 for his critique of their bureaucratic, democratic-bourgeois practices.

His “*Essay About a Headless Proletariat*” took the gloves off while describing the inconsistent, dogmatic, and often self-serving attitudes of the vanguardist approach in the Mexican left. Revueltas was not afraid of calling out the perpetrators of the corrupt efforts by name, despite many of them once close friends.

We present an excerpt from the ex-communicated pen — Revueltas, the Leninist, the fervent believer, the unrelenting skeptic; the heterodox, the devout, the contradiction. Revueltas, always torn between tendencies. Despite his desire for dogma, the party — whether it was the PCM, or the *Liga Espartaco*, founded by himself, and of which he was

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<sup>1</sup> Journalist Julio Aguilar, after reviewing a series of documents housed in the General Archive of the Nation, retrieved from the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office the “version of the agent, [who assured] Revueltas is a delinquent, because ‘he is fully aware that his weapon is his mind, from where his teachings emanate to awaken consciousness in the student milieu’”.

**ical freedom; but in economic practice you will continue to be as enslaved as today, and as today you will only have one right: that of bursting with misery. Political freedom requires the concurrence of another freedom to be effective: that freedom is economic freedom: the wealthy enjoy economic freedom and that is why they are the only ones who benefit from political freedom.**

The enormous political significance of the fact that someone could already foresee, before and in 1910, the danger to which the working class was exposed, that its participation in the revolutionary armed movement would mean its alienation by the bourgeois democracy, will always be underestimated.

Flores Magón understood that the struggle for the pure reestablishment of democratic freedoms (the validity of the Constitution of 1857) was not the proletarian demand that the working class should demand from the revolution and that in order not to continue “being as slaves as today”, the workers should fight, together with political freedom, for “economic freedom”.

This meant nothing else than to address what was essentially the historical task of the stage of development: to give the working class the proletarian awareness of the bourgeois-democratic revolution; and not the other way around, which is how it has happened historically: that the working class would take as its own the bourgeois consciousness, in the same way as if this were the form of being of its consciousness, following the prevailing circumstances in virtue of how premature the struggle for socialism would have been then.

This clearly determines Flores Magón's position before Madero. Flores Magón wrote in *Regeneración*, on December 17, 1910:

“conscious propellants” of the revolution, and if Flores Magón was not heard, in the sense in which he advocated it, in the sense that precisely the proletariat would participate independently in a revolution which was not theirs, it is because the bourgeois-democratic ideology managed to take possession of it more easily of the workers’ mind.

Magonism does not try to introduce into the movement class demands antagonistic to the bourgeois-democratic revolution. Instead, it insists *on pointing out*, without any euphemism, where the historic task of the working class lies: in not allowing its action to be alienated by the bourgeoisie. The following paragraphs bear witness to this, which we copy from the same manifesto:

**And since the revolution must break out, without anything or anything else being able to contain it, it is good, workers, that you draw from this great popular movement all the advantages that it brings in its bosom and that would be for the bourgeoisie, if, oblivious of your important entitlements as a class producer of social wealth, you would appear in the struggle as simple machines of slaughter and destruction, instead of carrying in your brains the clear and precise idea of your emancipation and social exaltation. [...]**

**Thus, if you go to the revolution with the purpose of overthrowing the despotism of Porfirio Díaz, which you will undoubtedly achieve, because the triumph is certain, if you do well after the triumph, you will obtain a government that puts into effect the Constitution of 1857, and, with that, you will have acquired, at least in writing, your polit-**

too expelled<sup>2</sup> — kept manifesting, to his eyes, continuously, hostile to individual freedom.

Revueltas admitted frequently, “a critical spirit does not submit to the herd of any ideology.”<sup>3</sup> Likewise, “the suppression of freedom is the most serious crime that can be committed in a class society”. According to Revueltas, a society “without freedom, is pure bestiality.”<sup>4</sup> Revueltas, who had been deprived of his freedom several times, knew this very well. And he knew that freedom was threatened not exclusively by the bloodthirsty regimes of capital — reigning our era — but rather, this characteristic was not foreign among the authoritarian wolves in sheep’s clothing. Concerning autonomy, Revueltas affirmed:

**«freedom must be unrestricted in a socialist or capitalist regime.**

**We have to rescue the heterogeneous, who is completely threatened by a regime of production, of technique, which invades the individuality of each person, in some countries as in others. We have to be alert concerning that unrestricted freedom that must exist because freedom is not licentiousness»**

In another interview, he acknowledged:

**«The intentions to create the party of the working class have suffered a continuous failure. We have struggled in that direction for more than twenty years and we have failed. Now we have to look for new routes.»**

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<sup>2</sup> It was impossible to write that fact without giggling, sorry.

<sup>3</sup> Poniatowska, 2001. c: 205.

<sup>4</sup> Flores, 2007, c: 74.

Revueltas, nevertheless, lived and died a Leninist.<sup>5</sup> For this, we present to you this bricolage, an excerpt from his “*Essay About a Headless Proletariat*” — to our knowledge not available in English,<sup>6</sup> thus translated, perhaps clumsily, for the first time. The selected excerpt might appear to the orthodox — and orthodoxy is not solely limited to Marxism — as a peculiar fever dream, if exposed to the documentation, and the reflections of Revueltas’ cunning pen.

Lenin, and the anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón, in agreement? Was Magón not an anarchist? Why would he ever write favorably about a proponent of the dictatorship of the proletarian?

Do not be fooled by the exoteric, as we reminded you in the opening paragraph. Flores Magón was an anarchist, through and through.<sup>7</sup> So, you might be wondering, how were these views reconciled by the Mazatec anarchist? Was it a moment of weakness?

Ricardo Flores Magón was a man committed to his word, to his convictions. We shine light to an incident: at the request of the Mexican Chamber of Deputies, the State was allowed to grant alimony to Ricardo and his comrade, Librado Rivera, which would last as long as both remained in jail abroad in the United States.

Weak, ill, hungry, almost blind, while facing the offer, Ricardo<sup>8</sup> Flores Magón responded:

**«I do not believe in the State; I support the abolition of international frontiers; I fight for**

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<sup>5</sup> In 1963, after he was expelled from his Liga Leninista Espartaco, he formed with the expelled minority the “*Leninist cell Karl Marx (without party)*”.

<sup>6</sup> But what do we know!

<sup>7</sup> Moreover, one we deeply admire in the ahuehuete, aware of his imperfections.

<sup>8</sup> United States Federal Penitentiary. Leavenworth, Kansas. December 20, 1920. Nicholas T. Bernal. Oakland, Calif.

who only until 1910 proposed to call the people to an armed struggle.

The manifesto of Ricardo Flores Magón which, on the very eve of the unleashing of the armed movement, *Regeneración* published, “To the proletarians”, is a categorical and clear formulation in which the imperious need for the working class to participate in the imminent armed struggle is put forward, but safeguarding, above all, its independence as a class, its political and economic motive. We copy the following excerpts from this great historical document<sup>6</sup>:

**«Workers, my friends, listen: it is necessary, you must bring to the approaching revolution the conscience of the epoch; it is necessary, it is urgent to embody in the great struggle the spirit of the century.**

**Otherwise, the revolution that we fondly see incubating will differ in nothing from the already almost forgotten revolts fomented by the bourgeoisie and directed by the military leadership, in which you did not play the heroic role of conscious propellants, but the not at all graceful role of cannon fodder.**

**Know it once and for all: to shed blood to bring to power another bandit who oppresses the people is a crime, and that is what will happen if you take up arms with no other object than to overthrow Diaz just to put in his place a new ruler!»**

It is remarkable the fact, within the transcribed paragraph, that in 1910 the workers already were spoken of in Mexico as

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<sup>6</sup> A Leninist is praising an anarchist publication. The sky is covered by flying pigs, look out of your window!



Salado does not succeed in giving him a name, but which instills in him that vague superstitious fear of the unknown historical forces that make the ruling classes live in perpetual anguish. That something is none other than the threatening presence of the revolutionary class spirit in the distinguished figure of Flores Magón. Let us see how Don Victoriano expresses himself:

**Great are the faults of the terrible agitator; but when one remembers his good faith, one thinks that whatever is good and bad about the revolution is due to Magón and that those philosophies that are made about Madero and Zapata are as unmotivated as they are meaningless.**

**Madero tried to return to the family clan; Zapata wanted to return to the indigenous *calpulli*; Magón had the vision of a red city of the future to reach which one had to wade through rivers of fire and blood. That is why he ended up blind in both eyes. His retina was burned by that horrible bonfire he had lit, just as his followers were devoured by the abyss of the past, more inexorable than those mysterious beetles that traditions say kill those who violate the Egyptian sarcophagi.**

Flores Magón is not, as bourgeois-democratic historians would have it, a simple “precursor” of the Mexican revolution. The workers’ strikes of Cananea and Rio Blanco, before the armed struggle, are movements led by the Magonists. And the peasant insurrections of Acayucan, Viesca, and Las Vacas (1906) are movements that Magonism leads with absolute independence from the bourgeois-democratic conspirators

**the universal fellowship of humankind; I consider the State as an institution created by capitalism to guarantee the exploitation and subjugation of the masses.**

**Therefore, all money obtained by the State represents the sweat, anguish, and sacrifice of the workers. If the money came directly from the workers, I would gladly, and even proudly, accept it, because they are my brothers. But coming from the intervention of the State, after having been demanded –according to my conviction – from the people, it is money that would burn my hands, and fill my heart with remorse.»**

Preparing for Christmas 1920, on December 6<sup>th</sup> of that year, the U.S. Department of Justice proposed to discharge Ricardo Flores Magón on the condition of signature on a petition for forgiveness and repentance of his ideals. Flores Magón flatly refused to ask for forgiveness. In a series of letters addressed to Nicolás T. Bernal, Ellen White and Gus Teltsch, Ricardo reinforced his ideals by flatly refusing to repent.

**«At the Justice Department, Mr. Weinberger was told that nothing can be done in my favor if I do not make a request for pardon. This seals my fate; I will be blind, and rot and die inside these horrendous walls that separate me from the rest of the world, because I will not ask for pardon. I will not do it!**

**In my twenty-nine years of fighting for our freedom I have lost everything, and every opportunity to become affluent and famous; I have consumed many years of my life in prisons; I have experienced the path of the**

vagabond and the outcast; I have found myself fainting from hunger; my life has been in danger many times; I have lost my health; in short, I have lost everything, except one thing.

One thing only, which I foster, pamper and preserve almost with burning rage; and that thing is my honor as a fighter...

[...] To ask for forgiveness would mean that I abdicate my anarchist, anti-statism ideals; and I do not retract them.

I affirm that if the human species ever comes to enjoy true fraternity and autonomy, and communal justice, it must be by means of anarchism.

Thus, my dear Nicholas, I am condemned to blindness and death in prison; but I prefer this to turning my back on the workers, and having the prison doors open at the price of my shame.

I shall not survive my captivity, for I am already old; but when I die, my friends will perhaps inscribe on my grave, "Here lies a dreamer," and my enemies, "Here lies a lunatic."

But there will be no one who will dare to stamp this inscription:

Here lies a coward and traitor to his ideas..."»

With this brief prelude, we present Revueltas' fragments from *"Essay About a Headless Proletariat"*, as clumsily translated by the equally headless, equally disembodied spectrums of the taller ahuehuate.

because I saw the impact that the copies of *Regeneración* had on the public.

For that reason, as soon as I arrived to Washington, I submitted a plan for the persecution of communists on both sides of the border for the consideration of ambassador Creel.

If the shameful attitude of Salado Álvarez is ignored, the historical fact that remains in his unseemly confidences is of first-order importance in establishing the political category of Magonismo. What Salado Alvarez narrates takes place in 1909. A few months later,

Attorney of Justice in the United States,

Madero and his political co-religionists constitute the Revolutionary Junta in San Antonio, Texas, and for them not only there is not the least persecution from the government of Washington, but they are even supported and allowed to acquire arms in an unrestricted way, a circumstance that determines, from the political point of view, the fall of the dictator Diaz.

It was evident that in Ricardo Flores Magón the U.S. imperialist bourgeoisie discovered an irreducible enemy, and not the potential and obsequious ally it had hoped to find in Francisco I. Madero.

In order not to deal anymore with Salado Alvarez in the aspect of his deplorable political activities, we will quote finally the judgment he provides of Flores Magón, and how he cannot but discover in him something that makes him different, something that distinguishes him from the contemporary bourgeois-democratic revolutionaries, and to which, of course,

of the paragraphs that Salado Álvarez devotes in his memoirs to Flores Magón, but Cánovas falls short and does not mention other equally or more revealing references, which constitute an invaluable ideological testimony regarding the true content of the Magonist political activity.

Salado Álvarez, with a cynicism that is truly astonishing, but which seems not to cause him the least embarrassment — and which in his own eyes is justified most intrinsically because it is the struggle against “the communists” — does not have the faintest scruple when he confesses, with impudent effrontery, the sad dealings of a stowaway and informer to which he surrendered, as an official of the Porfirian embassy in Washington, to make the American authorities suppress the activities carried out in the United States by Flores Magón and his supporters, who, after all, were also his compatriots. It is almost “delicious” to read it. Here it is:

**Communists were pursued almost negligently, and the services of untrustworthy police agencies were used because it was believed that they could count on the reliable assistance of American justice.**

**No less in the spring of 1909, that is to say, on the eve of the revolution, Attorney General Wickersham referred to me that, because of a complaint from the Mexican government and because of several other very clear facts from Washington, the Magonistas were condemned not to eight months of arrest, but a year and a half of imprisonment in a penitentiary.**

**I had become aware of the importance of their propaganda because I read many of the publications that were sent to us, and**

Revueltas, an avid reader of Lenin, was able to find — and even praise — the character of the anarchist, encountering in his struggle valuable contributions. And, for his part, the defender of land and liberty, the anarchist Ricardo, found *“that the Bolsheviks understood long ago that the revolution, although of a political character at first, must become economic and social, and that this latter character has nothing to do with differences of race or national frontiers, and therefore, the future of our revolution must be international.”*

If, in the face of their contrasting, and contending stances,<sup>9</sup> both Revueltas and Magón<sup>10</sup> were able to recognize re-

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<sup>9</sup> “When I was in the communist party I was fighting for an internal democracy because it seems to me that internal democracy should be characterized by an impulse to access political reality and not for the imposition of a dogma. That theory was too advanced for my time.

I believe that if there is no democratic vanguard capable of thinking and rationalizing the phenomena, history cannot be directed. I believe that history can be directed, but to a certain extent [...] there are things we cannot aspire to direct, neither the sciences, nor art, nor other things. We direct politics, in the best of cases. And examples of this type of party were given by the French Jacobins and the Russian Bolsheviks, but they did not last long under that rule, which is why the theory of the party must be revised very deeply.”

Revueltas, José. Excelsior Newspaper. Mexico City, Thursday, April 15, 1976. Translated by Lluvia Benjamin.

<sup>10</sup> Magón detailed his position afterward; he shared with the Russian revolutionaries the urgency of violently ending capitalism, but he despised the solution proposed by them: the establishment of a new dictatorship:

“I understand perfectly well your disillusionment on seeing how many comrades support the government of Lenin and Trotzky. I, of course, oppose Allied intervention in Russia. We must oppose it; but, at the same time, we must avoid giving the impression [of endorsing the idea] that Marxist tyranny is a means to freedom. Tyranny can only beget tyranny.

If our illusions and hopes are mercilessly killed by the harshness of reality, and lie lifeless, there flourishes among the noble bodies something more valuable than our beloved dead: Experience! I have witnessed day by day the retreat and annihilation of revolutionary principles in Russia. Of course it is regrettable to note the inhuman murder of the vague hopes of the peoples; but, in the long run, nothing will have been lost. Even if today they

deemable features in other entities across the polar opposite political spectrum, what will be made apparent, and consequently undeniable, in the revolutionary panorama, upon reaching some understanding of the traits that by a shared priority, sharpened the eyesight of these two figures? What lessons does history have in store for us? What potential contradiction might be reconciled?

We continue to believe that the day will come when anti-authoritarian factions will cease to defer their scriptural affinities to their papal figures, and instead look inward, which may point them around them, then outward, toward often adversarial sources. The same can be said of the Marxist blood in the veins of many, in the midst of the alchemical frenzy that exegesis brings. One day, from the depth of Faust's study, they will remember that they are dealing, in fact, with matter, with the material, and that it must be treated with urgency. Every day the sun rises, and with it dawns hunger, forced migrations, misery, exploitation, plundering, the destruction of the earth, violence, pain and war.

If one day we manage to expand our perspective beyond the atomization of individual identification with a tendency, and focus on the weaving of a fabric conformed by transcultural solidarity, we will collectively devise and enact the stab pointing to the heart of the hydra, where the metamorphic value-form resides once and for all. And the chants of land and freedom will no longer be utopian echoes, nor promises of the hereafter.

**«This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short, by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This antagonism**

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believe that Freedom can be reached by the path of Dictatorship; tomorrow they will have gained in wisdom, and will conquer Freedom by breaking their shackles. Courage!"

Flores Magón, Ricardo. Private correspondence, 1921.

On the one hand, proletarian consciousness does not renounce obtaining advantages for the workers, more beneficial labor contracts, protective laws, etcetera. But it places these conquests only as a point of reference. The workers' history of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in our country offers a great number of antecedents of the proletarian ideology, of which, by the way, there is a detailed reference in Alberto Bremauntz's book *"Panorama social de las revoluciones de México"* (*Social panorama of the revolutions in Mexico*). However, although such data will have to be investigated in a later work, in this one we will limit ourselves to examine only and it has already been said that not with the depth required — what Magonism and Ricardo Flores Magón represent, as the most genuine proletarian ideological current in the process of the Mexican bourgeois-democratic revolution.

In this way, the revolutionary activities of Flores Magón (Ricardo) and the Magonists are, in our opinion, the starting point where we must place the contemporary antecedents of a proper, Mexican working-class conscience.

It is highly significant that Ricardo Flores Magón is not considered by bourgeois-democratic ideologues as one of the representative figures of the Mexican revolution and that the official historiography does not count him, either, among its great heroes. This is a distinction that honors Ricardo Flores Magón's life, his person, and revolutionary activity to a high degree as an authentic proletarian precursor in our country.

Bourgeois historiography leaves in the hands of the reactionary writer Victoriano Salado Alvarez the task of showing him "from the other side of the barricade" with an unquestionable hatred and historical aversion which further enhances Flores Magón, indicating the place he occupies in the panorama of class struggle in our history.

The historian Agustín Cué Cánovas, in his book on Flores Magón and the alleged filibustering action of Magonism in Baja California (January 1911), transcribes with great acumen some

not yet appear, to acquire with the organic development of the proletarian masses (increase in their number and their concentration in the great industrial centers), a kind of second nature, one deformed in their consciousness. That is to say, where once spontaneous actions cease to be so, but artificially since the consciousness which directs them is not based on the natural and certain development of the working class (as the most enslaved class in society and the one which denies classes, etc.), but acts based on false assumptions.

Thus, from the positive and negative forms adopted by the results of spontaneity, two currents of distorted workers' consciousness emerge respectively: a] reformism, and b] anarcho-syndicalism.

## Flores Magón

Reformism thus seeks to “improve” bourgeois society by obtaining good labor contracts, the enactment of laws protecting the worker, and even participation of workers in the profits of enterprises, but without proposing the destruction of the capitalist system. In this regard, it is more than significant the attitude that the reactionary party of National Action [Partido Acción Nacional] intends to assume, which would establish among its “workers” demands, precisely that of participation of workers in the profits of enterprises.

Anarcho-syndicalism, for its part, pretends that the negative results of the struggle (the violent repression of strikes, the imprisonment of workers by the bourgeoisie) have the virtue of “educating” the proletarian masses and of opening their eyes to the brutal and merciless nature of the capitalist system and the State which represents it.

True working-class consciousness denies these two positions equally.

**is the secret of the *impotence of the [...] working class*, despite its organization. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And the latter is quite aware of this.**

**But the evil does not stop here. It continues across the ocean...»**

— Karl Marx

## Essay About a Headless Proletariat (1962)

«I am afraid that through unshakable dogmas one gets nowhere...»  
– José Revueltas<sup>1</sup>

Revueltas died forty-six years ago in Mexico City, on a day like today: April 14, 1976. To commemorate his struggle, we present to you our (shall we, euphemistically, call ‘*artisanal*’?) translation.

The following excerpts have been extracted from his book, *An Essay About a Headless Proletariat*, a labyrinth of revolutionary reflections, a maze of sentences that often lead to a wall, yet at times guide us outside the cave we were unaware to have been inhabiting.

Revueltas’ critical analysis is frequently at odds with his theoretical dogmatism. A reader from the West might find some parallels between Paul Mattick and Revueltas’ oeuvre while admitting their approaches varied vastly. Both thinkers, contemporaneous and ahead of their times, found themselves dissecting the vestiges of more hopeful days, of the promised yet bygone revolutions, of the unsatisfactory and fully subsumed capitalist reality built over the ruins of a crude, blind, insurgent optimism. Revueltas would’ve nodded to Mattick’s maxim: *Marxism signifies neither more nor less than the destruction of capitalism. Even as*

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<sup>1</sup> Translated and illustrated by taller ahuehuete.

struggles does not represent their class ideology but supplants it, deforms it, and acts under the disguise of a radical and “*work-erist*” phraseology but becomes a bourgeois leadership of the workers’ movement.

We call the previous phases of our revolutionary process: thinking *by* and *for* the working class are but a preparation for the next phase, thinking *with* or *from* the working class.

For example, if consciousness thinks with a sector, with a faction — even if it is very numerous, even if it outnumbers the rest — of the working masses when these do not want anything else but to obey their immediate — and irrepressible — impulse to throw themselves into the struggle without caring about the circumstances in which that struggle must be waged to triumph in the long-term, that consciousness ceases to function in the very act as class consciousness to become, simply, a consciousness of spontaneity that allows itself to be led wherever the unconscious impulse of the masses takes it.

Thus spontaneous actions represent only relative independence, which, without conscious working-class direction, inevitably turn into movements favorable to bourgeois society, to the dominant bourgeois ideology, either in a positive or in a negative form.

The positive form (from the point of view of bourgeois society, but negative from the proletarian point of view) is when such spontaneous actions tend to “*correct*” certain aspects of capitalist exploitation, and thereby create in the proletarian masses the illusion that bourgeois society can “*correct*” *itself* through the pressure of the working class, but with no need for the latter combat power dynamics. The negative form is when the spontaneous actions of the working masses are crushed by the repressive apparatus of the bourgeoisie, the workers’ movements are dissolved, and the labor struggle is condemned, for a certain time, to dispersion and inactivity.

These two forms into which the spontaneity of workers’ struggles inevitably lead, when true proletarian sentiment does

For example, a false demand can mobilize the masses, and certain working-class sectors, under certain circumstances, against the peasants (and in Mexico, it has happened). Nevertheless, a mobilization of such a nature, one placing the peasants and the workers as opponents, even if the masses participate, will *never* be a truly proletarian movement in nature, but rather, an *anti-proletarian* one.<sup>5</sup>

There is therefore a norm, a basis of principles that must govern the elaboration of revolutionary demands. This rule is none other than that of always establishing a harmonious, non-contradictory relationship between the demands elaborated for an immediate situation and the historical ends of the working class. A rupture of this harmony or the existence of a contradictory situation between the immediate demands of the working class and its historical ends strips the working class of its movement. It removes the proletarian class essence and turns it into a bourgeois cause, which pretends to “correct” the most irrational and inhuman aspects of the capitalist system, instead of the very inhumanity and irrationality on which such a system is founded.

This happens, for example, when the working masses are abandoned to their spontaneous struggles and lack, therefore, a conscious aim. Or when the conscious factor that directs their

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<sup>5</sup> “It must not be forgotten that by virtue and because of the solidarity of the proletariat, the emancipation of the worker cannot be achieved if the freedom of the peasant is not achieved at the same time.

Otherwise, the bourgeoisie could set these two forces against each other, and take advantage, e.g., of the unlearned condition of the peasants and fight and restrain the righteous impulses of the workers in the same way that, if the case arises, it could use the unconscious workers and throw them against their brothers in the countryside.

This is what Francisco I. Madero did in Mexico in the beginning and Venustiano Carranza more recently; although here the workers have already come out of their error and now understand perfectly well that they were victims of Carranza’s perfidy.”

Emiliano Zapata. Headquarters of the Liberating Army, Tlaltizapán, Morelos. February 14, 1918. Translated by taller ahuehuete.

*a scientific discipline it offers nothing to the bourgeoisie. And yet, as an alternative to the discredited bourgeois social theory, it may serve the latter by providing it with some ideas useful for its rejuvenation.*

**It must be noted that for Revueltas, author of theoretical and narrative works, literature does not take place in a pneumatic bell, isolated. For him, “it takes place in life, in society, and among people. The commitment of the writer is with literature, understood in its highest meaning, in deep connection with people and for people.”**

### ***Essay About a Headless Proletariat (1962), an excerpt by José Revueltas***

The social structure adopted in Mexico by the State attains, under “*the revolution-made-government*”, such a particular nature that the ruling class, the bourgeoisie, can immediately brand as dangerous, as subversive, and “contrary to the interests of the revolution”, or as “a social disintegration”, any political competition with a class character.

The “*revolution-made-government*” always responds with the necessary energy, promptness, and brutality when it comes to fighting this type of rivalry, every time the proletariat dares to launch itself into the struggle in an independent manner.

It is exactly what results, for the proletariat, in the policies pursued by the governments of the bourgeoisie — since the pact between Carranza<sup>2</sup> and the *House of the Global Worker*<sup>3</sup> — what makes the trap, what alienates the working class. These

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<sup>2</sup> The Red Battalions were urban workers who were recruited by the Constitutionalist forces of the Mexican Revolution to fight against the Zapatistas and Pancho Villa’s army. The Red Battalions belonged largely to the Casa del Obrero Mundial, an alleged anarcho-sindicalist organization. The battalions were deployed by Carranza in exchange for various labour rights, to defeat the “peasant counterrevolutionaries”.

<sup>3</sup> (*Casa del Obrero Mundial*)

policies by the State do not allow any proletarian autonomous activity.

According to the ideologues, the desideratum of the working class is resolved, each time, by the working masses “supporting” progressive governments or “fighting” reactionary regimes, but without the working class itself at any time being in a position where it can become aware of its historical perspective as an autonomous class, which ought to place itself, by the imperative unfolding, at the head of its social process.

While the seductive Marxism of the opportunists conceals the fact that class relations exist between the proletariat and the “*governments of the revolution*”, this opportunism disguises how the existing class relationships are nothing but tactical relations. These relations, disguised, are presented as those between “allies”.

While the outraged and also seductive Marxism of the sectarians circumscribes all class relations to the *single struggle against a government* where, it claims, the national bourgeoisie is not represented or is in a sad minority, they position themselves as standing next to the dominant “reactionary big bourgeoisie”.

Thus, when it is a question of the stance that the proletariat should assume before a progressive government, the independent action of the working class is then presented as if it were a struggle against the said government, and as if the proletariat lacked other means of exercising its independence than through violence which, according to the social-bourgeois political economists, would necessarily be in the form of frontal struggles against the State.

As far as the working class is concerned, the attitude of “*the revolution made government*” never offers, from the beginning, the least doubt or hesitation: there is not a single “revolutionary” government – as could be seen even before the triumph of the revolution, with Carranza’s decree against the strikes –

that fails to lash out, in the most fulminating manner, against the independent proletarian struggles and crush them without stopping at any means.

Testimony to this are the railroad, tramway, and textile strikes under the governments of Obregón and Calles; and after 1929, the material impossibility in which the working class, led almost completely by the reformist leaders at the service of the government, finds itself unable to conduct large independent strikes.

Let it be well understood: it is not that “the governments emanating from the revolution” are intolerant and adverse to each and every one of the workers’ struggles; no, the governments of the national bourgeoisie have fought, fight and will always fight that which they have fought. It is necessary above all not to fall into the methodological trap that bourgeois-democratic ideology itself has set for us concerning “the reactionary” and “the revolutionary”: Zapata was also called reactionary by Carranza and, as reactionary, all the governments of the revolution have repressed the great independent workers’ strikes. What is being discussed here is the phenomenon of the *immediatist* tactic that the bourgeoisie needs to perform to remain in power, but which is always carried out – and it is of essential importance to understand this – *with* the support of the masses.

## II

Lenin<sup>4</sup> said that each cause must always derive from the set of peculiar factors that form a given political situation. But there is more to that.

Neither is it a question of mobilizing and agitating the masses just for the sake of doing so since such a thing would not be thinking *for* the working class; that is to say, *for* and in favor of its historical, social, and political interests.

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<sup>4</sup> And the audience gasps.