

Censored: Persons Die, Ideals are Eternal

Mitchell Cowen Verter

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Censored Selections

Thanks to everyone at Anarchy for printing the sections of my new AK Press volume, *Dreams of Freedom: A Ricardo Flores Magon Reader*, that have been censored by my collaborator, Chaz Bufo.

I hope that AK Press will agree to restore my work if this book should go into a second printing.

Because he was an already-published author, Chaz was granted total supervisory authority over the volume by AK Press. After I had been working on the book for several months, Chaz slandered one of my earlier translations, encouraging AK Press to remove me from the project. I had to beg AK to allow me to resume my endeavors. This initial experience taught me the clear lesson that Chaz's control over the project would be complete.

As Chaz himself admits in his dedication, I did most of the work on the volume, selecting and organizing the essays, contacting prominent Flores Magon scholars such as Benjamin Maldonado, writing the historical overview, compiling the bibliography and chronology, and so forth.

Chaz delegated himself the role of an editor, giving himself the ultimate authority to censor my work.

After reading my introductory preface "Persons Die: Noble Ideals are Eternal," Chaz sent me a highly abusive letter attacking, among other things, my references to the prophet Amos and to the ethical philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. Rather than trying to discuss and reach a compromise about our philosophical and stylistic differences (as book collaborators and anarchists are supposed to do), Chaz made a simple threat: "If you're adamant on this, this is the end of the project because there's no way on earth that I'll put my name to this."

Eventually, Chaz and I came to an agreement: I would modify the preface to take into account his objections. Furthermore, I would sign the piece myself, thereby absolving him of any responsibility for the ideas expressed therein.

With this, I thought the matter was settled.

Unfortunately, I underestimated Chaz's treachery.

Once my work on the book had been completed, I was never given an opportunity to review it. Typically, authors are allowed to see the page proofs of their text so that they can make any last minute edits. In contrast, I was never shown what was being done to my writing. When I asked AK Press about this, I was told to talk to Chaz. Chaz told me not to worry; he would be doing all the editing himself.

I finally received images of the book after it had already been sent to the printers, thereby preventing me from making any changes and from seeing how Chaz had changed it.

To my horror, Chaz mauled my writing beyond recognition. Either forgetting our earlier agreement, willfully ignoring it, or just sloppily overlooking it, Chaz eviscerated my introductory preface. Nevertheless, he signed my name to this piece that he clumsily rewrote. Worse yet, Chaz stripped away half of my acknowledgements section. While I can perhaps comprehend an overzealous editor ravaging a writer's work, what could be more sacrosanct than an author's opportunity to thank the people he wants to thank?

One could argue endlessly about who is the better writer, but these aesthetic issues are beside the point. What has been appalling to me is the manner in which I was systematically, deliberately, and deceptively excluded from making decisions about my own work.

I had once harbored the notion that we anarchists were supposed to arrive together at mutually agreeable solutions to conflicts.

In contrast, Chaz has thoroughly abused his authority, utterly disrespecting me—his collaborator—by sabotaging my work behind his back.

Ironically, the next book being published by Chaz is about consensus decision making.

What utter hypocrisy.

- Mitchell Cowen Verier

Persons Die, but Noble Ideals are Eternal

by Mitchell Cowen Verter

[The Mexican anarchists teach us “*Las personas mueran, pero los ideales buenas son eternos*”: Persons die, but noble ideals are eternal. This romantic notion contains within it a profound insight into the limits of personhood and a profound awareness of the infinite regeneration of hope. In this volume, the first anarchist remembrance of Ricardo Flores Magon published in the nation of his exile, we must carefully consider how to understand his legacy. In particular, we must guard against the myth that Flores Magon himself always warned about: that of *personalismo*, of identifying the struggle for human liberation with a certain leader. One can point towards the example of the authoritarian revolutionary figure Ernesto “Che” Guevara as an object lesson in the perils of a cult of personality.¹ When one identifies a hope with a personal leader, one condemns the struggle for liberation to be something that can be easily represented and repeated; co-opting a revolutionary dream into an icon that capitalism can easily turn into a commodity to sell alcohol or pop music.²]

In Ricardo Flores Magon’s 1917 play *Victimas y Verdugos* (Victims and Executioners), the [sincere] worker Jose defends his companion Isabel from a judge who arrives with a group of gendarmes to throw her and her sick, dying mother out on to the street. After Jose proclaims that the bourgeoisie have prostituted the concepts of “justice” and “rights” to forward their own interests and to whip down the poor, the judge furiously demands, “Are you an anarchist?” Jose responds, “I am a friend of justice, of human justice, of the justice that is not written in the codes, of the justice that prescribes that all human beings have the right to live without exploiting and without being exploited, without ordering and without being ordered.” Falsely believing that he has finally uncovered the [personality that directs] Jose’s revolutionary awareness, the judge shouts to his gendarmes, “This man is a *magonista*” - a follower of Ricardo Flores Magon - “Search him!” However, Jose, restrained and patted down by authorities, indignantly responds “I am not a *magonista*: I am an anarchist. An anarchist does not have idols.”³

[Even though certain scholars and some radicals use “*magonista*” as shorthand to refer to those who have been inspired by the profound dream of Ricardo Flores Magon, one must immediately realize that this term is a misnomer. Indeed, Flores Magon warned the US socialist leader Eugene V. Debs that concerning oneself with “isms” would only obscure the great task of human liberation. However, certain historians have consistently described the course of Mexico as determined

¹ For details of Che’s authoritarianism during and after the Cuban Revolution, see “Che Guevara: Myths and Legends,” <http://www.spunk.org>.

² Even Madonna, the artist best known for the way she manipulates her own image, has cast herself in a Che beret to market her newest album. Susan Smith Nash’s article, “Madonna in Che Guevara’s Beret. First Vodka, now Madonna: Che Guevara Image Still Sells” discusses how both Smirnoff Vodka and Madonna have utilized the Che icon, <http://www.xplana.com/articles/archives/Beret/>

³ Ricardo Flores Magon, *Verdugos y Victimas*, Act I, Scene VII. My translation.

by a succession of “great men.”⁴ Such writers have reduced the struggle of Emiliano Zapata, the indefatigable fighter for the dispossessed peasants of his state Morelos and all of Mexico, to the facile doctrine “*zapatismo*.” By simply identifying this movement with a leader, this word thereby mutes the call of justice that provoked Zapata and his cohorts.⁵

An anarchist not only refuses to recognize a leader in the political or a military sphere, but also in the intellectual realm. From the outset, anarchists have always opposed the totalitarian Marxist-Leninist vision of a dictatorship of the proletariat. They also renounce the elitism of a Trotskyist vanguard party that leads the ignorant masses to a correct ideology, compelling them all to accept their “party line.” Believing in a certain basic decency and intelligence among all humanity, anarchism proclaims that one need not coerce others to accept any viewpoint. In the earliest document clearly attesting to his political commitments, Flores Magon distinguished his principles from authoritarian ones.] A prison letter to his brother Enrique and his comrade Praxedis Guerrero explained that they must work as “anarchists, *even from those who take us as their leaders.*”⁶ Rejecting all forms of coercion, Flores Magon believed that a true anarchist would neither order others around nor prescribe a doctrine for others to follow. Rather than leading a set of followers, true revolutionaries [must] inspire others to action. Flores Magon explained, “Let us then, those who are conscious, prepare the popular mentality for when the moment arrives.”⁷ This notion of the anarchist intellectual as the one who [guides] rather than commands echoes the classical, Socratic idea of the philosopher as the one who frees the shackled slaves from false ideas, [conducting them towards the Good beyond Being.⁸ In his denunciations of the rapacity of the rich and the ruthlessness of the powerful, Flores Magon also evokes the biblical prophets’ exhortations for justice.⁹)

⁴ For example, Enrique Krauze’s history *Mexico: Biography of Power* (Translated by Hank Heifetz. New York: Harper Collins, 1997) applies the “great man” approach to tell the story of the Mexican people, focusing on its leaders at the expense of the populace they dominated. Similarly, Ramon Eduardo Ruiz’s *The Great Rebellion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982) relates the history of the Mexican Revolution through the biographies of the so-called “leaders” of this uprising.

⁵ In contrast to the *personalismo* of historians, today’s Zapatistas, or EZLN, who fight for the liberation of the *campesinos* of Chiapas, have always remained careful in their usage of Emiliano Zapata. They venerate “Zapata” more as a prophetic hope for human freedom than as a historical figure: “... And the very oldest among the old people in the villages tell of a man named Zapata who rose up for his own people and in a voice more like a song than a shout, said Land and Freedom.’ And these .old folks say that Zapata is not dead, that he is going to return. And the oldest of the old also say that the wind and the rain and the sun tell the *campesinos* when they should prepare the soil, when they should plant, and when they should harvest. They say that hope also must be planted and harvested. And the old people say that now the wind, the rain, and the sun are talking to the earth in a new way, and that the poor should not continue to harvest death, now it is time to harvest rebellion. So say the old people. The powerful don’t listen; the words don’t reach them, as they are made deaf by the witchery that the imperialists shout in their ears. ‘Zapata,’ repeat the youth of the poor, ‘Zapata,’ insists the wind, the wind from below, our wind ...” Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos in *Shadows of Tender Fury* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995) pp. 45-6.

⁶ Letter from L.A. County Jail, June 13, 1908, p. *infra*.

⁷ Manifesto to the Anarchists of the Entire World and the Workers in General, p. *infra*.

⁸ Plato, *The Republic*, §514a-517a, §509a-c.

⁹ The religious tone of Ricardo Flores Magon’s writing requires close inspection and contemplation. As an anarchist, he saw religion as one of the forces that, along with capitalism and government, preserve unjust hierarchies. Like most Mexican liberals, socialists, and anarchists, Flores Magon railed against the Catholic Church’s dominion over the Mexican peasant and proletariat. By 1907, Flores Magon had developed a general view that the “death of god,” the overthrow of all religion and metaphysical belief, was necessary for the end of social inequality. Nevertheless, Flores Magon frequently used theological terminology throughout his writing. For example, he repeatedly discussed the necessity of “holy rebellion” against Porfirio Diaz to bring “redemption” to the Mexican populace. Flores Magon’s

Throughout his writing, Ricardo Flores Magon repeatedly described himself as a prophet of emancipation. Traditionally, a prophet does not merely call others to justice; his own prophecy is also a response to a calling from [an Other] beyond himself. Flores Magon described his own inspiration in a similar manner: “‘Onwards!’ says a mysterious voice that appears, uprooting the innermost core of our being. It spurs on all those who are weary, spiritually burdened; whose swollen feet have been bled dry by the long, hard road; we who intend to rest for a while. ... ‘Onwards, onwards!’ the voice orders us.”¹⁰ Similarly, Flores Magon asserted his prophetic role in human history in the essay “Utopians.” “Nevertheless, at all times, the progress of humanity is indebted to the dreamers and the Utopians. This thing called civilization: what is it if not the result of utopian efforts? The visionaries, the poets, the dreamers, the Utopians, so disdained by ‘serious’ people, so persecuted by the ‘paternalism’ of governments: lynched here, shot down there, burnt to death, tortured, imprisoned, tom to pieces in all epochs and all countries, nevertheless, have been the engines of all movements forward, the prophets who have pointed the blind masses towards luminous paths leading to glorious summits.”¹¹

Those who knew or observed Ricardo Flores Magon [also] attested to his spiritual force. Their descriptions of him tend not to focus on his personal qualities, but rather on his ability to beckon others to the struggle for human liberation. On hearing of his death, Flores Magon’s old Liberal Party comrade, Antonio Diaz Soto y Gama, eulogized him by saying “he was the inspiration, the clear vision that impelled the people to revolution ... Ricardo Flores Magon saw the Revolution totally, integrally, with the vision of a prophet.”¹² Similarly, Flores Magon’s closest comrade for over half his life, Librado Rivera, praised him because “his great steadfastness and heroic courage even transformed a people enslaved, downtrodden, and humiliated by the greatest of despots into a proud, valiant, and respected people, resplendently uplifting faces imbued with terror and horror towards their exploiters and torturers. Indeed, Ricardo Flores Magon was the soul of that great libertarian epic who, in the manner of Prometheus of mythological legend, infused that divine fire that impelled the people to rebellion; rebellion, the creative well of all liberties.”¹³ Even Thomas Furlong, the detective who made a career out of pursuing Flores Magon and other members of the *Partido Liberal Mexicano*, described him in spiritual terms. In his 1906 report to the Mexican government, he stated that Flores Magon had “a very resolute and energetic character and is fanatical about the cause he pursues ... Ricardo is the soul of all, and without him the other people would do nothing.”¹⁴ *

As a revolutionary prophet, Ricardo Flores Magon attempted to awaken the enslaved masses of the world from their nightmares through a dream of social, economic, and political justice. As in Flores Magon’s time, most people [today have been taught to accept] their degradation as part of the normal order of the universe. As an apostle of anarchism, Flores Magon taught

critique of government and capitalism can certainly be compared with the biblical prophet Amos, who caustically attacked the violence of power-hungry rulers and the barbarity of the rich. It is unclear whether any particular religious influence affected Flores Magon’s writing style or whether his vocabulary and metaphors merely reflect the degree to which the Spanish language and Mexican culture have been influenced by Catholicism.

¹⁰ “Adelante,” *Regeneration*, November 25, 1911. My translation.

¹¹ “Utopians,” p. *infra*.

¹² Antonio Diaz Soto y Gama, “Eulogy to Ricardo Flores Magon.” In Ethel Duffy Turner, *Revolution in Baja California* (Edited and annotated by Rey Devis. Detroit: Blaine Ethridge, 1981), p. 98.

¹³ Librado Flores Magon, prologue to *Ricardo Flores Magon, el apostol de la revolution social mexicana* by Diego Abad de Santillan (Mexico: Ediciones Antorcha, 1988), p. 11. My translation.

¹⁴ Quoted in Abad de Santillan, p. 43. My translation.

that this misery and [this suffering] are produced by the thievery of the rich, the manipulation of religion [and ideology], and the repression of the government. These three forces conspire to uphold the very basis of injustice: the institution of private property. One can look at the history of Mexico as one example, among countless many, of how private property rights have enslaved millions. In 1511, Fernando Cortes and his [army of] conquistadors invaded Central America, irrevocably disrupting the life of the populace [by declaring this] land to be the property of Spain and subjecting the natives to foreign domination. Although Mexico eventually cast off the Spanish yoke, the powerful continued to steal the land from beneath the feet of the people. Plantation owners seized the *ejidos*, native communal holdings, as their personal property, forcing the masses who had lived on them into perpetual debt slavery. [Capitalists claimed ownership over the natural resources of Mexico such as its vast copper and gold mines.

In order to steal the common goods to benefit the few as their private property, aristocrats and capitalists utilize the coercion of government and ideology. The government creates laws protecting the dominion of the wealthy and employs its police to enforce obedience. Those of us who rose up in 1999 against the WTO in Seattle and around the world against global capitalism know well that officers will beat, gas, and shoot the people to protect the property of the few. In Mexico, the Catholic Church traditionally taught the masses to submit to their degradation. It upheld the hierarchy of wealth and power as divinely ordained, preaching obedience and humility to the masses. As society has transformed from a hierarchical, feudal order to a bourgeois, capitalist one, more sophisticated ideological manipulation has largely replaced these ecclesiastical doctrines. Modern systems of control employ scientists who claim that the disparity between the oppressors and the oppressed is caused by normal social distributions and by certain personality traits and perhaps even by particular genetic factors. Television and the culture of consumerism further encourage people to wallow lazily in the pit of greed where the powerful have cast them. The anarchist prophet awakens individuals from this haze, provoking their minds to question the misery around them. The revolutionary apostle beckons them to rise up against this degradation. He does not exhort them to follow a personal leader, but rather for each and all to fight for liberation themselves.

This anarchist critique of private property further underlines Flores Magon's objection to *personalismo*. The thing that a person calls its "Self" is perhaps the most private property it can own. If we anarchists take Flores Magon's analysis of private property seriously, we must further question our approach to individualism. Whereas the libertarian capitalism of Ayn Rand and the egoist anarchism of Max Stirner assert the individual's right to dominate everything, the communist anarchism of Flores Magon stresses the importance of well-being for all. In this way, Flores Magon's thought finds an echo in] the [contemporary] philosopher [of "anarchy,"] Emmanuel Levinas.¹⁵ [Throughout his work, Levinas explores how each everyday encounter with an Other person confronts us with a perspective that lies beyond our own consciousness, with a life that lies beyond our power to possess and control.¹⁶ Challenging our sovereign ownership of property, the Other beckons us to take responsibility for its destitution in the world. According to Levinas, prophecy is this veiy witness of suffering and this very demand for justice.]

¹⁵ See the section "Principle and Anarch?" in Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alfonso Lingis. (Pittsburgh: Duquense University Press, 1998), pp. 99-102.

¹⁶ Levinas states, "A thing does not resist acquisition; the other possessors - those whom one can not possess contest and therefore can sanction possession itself." Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*. Translated by Alfonso Lingis. (Pittsburgh: Duquense University Press, 1969), p. 162.

A scene in *The Fourth World War*, a recent film, profoundly explores this idea of [Otherness] as a call to justice. In it, an Argentine[an] grandmother passionately [declaims] the government that has so savagely murdered so many young political dissidents, saying, “We must fight so that more children do not die. It can not be a thing of pity. It can not be that, in this country, 100 children die every day. We can not allow it. We must accompany the struggles. Each of us must feel, at last, that I am ‘the Other.’ I am ‘the Other.’ I am ‘the Other.’ I am ‘the Other.’ [I am ‘the Other.’ I am ‘the Other.’] I am the unemployed worker. I am the revolutionary. I am those who take over the factory. I am those who do not eat. I am all of us.” At the end of the film, the *Zapatista* thinker Subcomandante Marcos likewise urges, [“Make yourself our hearing in order to] listen to the word of the Other. You shall no longer be you; now you are us.”¹⁷

[The Other does not only present me with a challenge, but also offers me a chance for Regeneration.] A person may die, yet his noble ideals shall still live on in the minds and hearts of others. Even though Ricardo Flores Magon, the apostle of anarchism, was martyred for his prophecy, he spread [the fecund seed of] his dreams of freedom through his writing and his action. Across the infinity of time, hope shall spring eternally from his [grave].

Acknowledgments

The Russian anarchist Petr Kropotkin explains that no work can be considered the “intellectual property” of one author or set of authors. In *The Conquest of Bread*, he proclaims, “There is not even a thought, or an invention, which is not common property, bom of the past and the present” [(p. 15)]. Before an author can express himself, he must first recognize the authority of others, acknowledging his allegiance to those who have guided him towards knowledge.

I first learned about Ricardo Flores Magon on a Oaxacan beach from the [*chilango*] anarcho-punk Luis Cardenas who, decked out in his *Revolution X* t-shirt, urged me to seek out this great “poet, philosopher, and prophet.” I unfortunately lost Luis’ contact information in the Cleveland Greyhound terminal years ago, so if anyone ever meets him, please tell him I say thanks.

I am also indebted to the numerous scholars who have given their advice and support. My thanks go out to Lillian Castillo-Speed, Ward S. Albro, Colin McLachlan, Richard Swartz, Lyle Brown, Reggie Rodriguez, Juan Gomez Quinones, Dana Ward, George Salzman, Eric Rauchway, Fermin Rojas, [John Hammett,] Omar Cortes, Chantal Lopez, and Alfonso Torua Cienfuegos.

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In *The Conquest of Bread*, Kropotkin teaches that the revolution must first supply adequate food and shelter before it can progress any further. In that spirit, I would like to thank Wade and Lewis Jones and Hiroko and Koichi Tamano for granting me refuge during the writing of this book.

Most especially, I would like to express my gratitude to two individuals who aided and abetted me throughout this project, supporting me materially, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually through its darkest hours. Without reservation, I can safely state that this volume would not

¹⁷ *The Fourth World War*. Big Noise Films: 2004.

have been possible without the comradeship of Barry Pateman (and the whole gang at the Emma Goldman Papers Project) and my golden palamino Benjamin Ehrenreich.

[Thanks to Ben and to Mona Cowen for giving this work more flow than a diner waitress and more polish than Leon Czogolz.

Salutations to the heart of my land, for bearing with me during the writing of this volume.

This one's for all the kids, yeah, yeah, of every age and in every corner of the globe, first and foremost probably even fivemost - for all my old TADPOLE/] HNJ/FNB/LPC [cronies. This one's for all the kids who chopped the vegetables and all the kids who served the meal, for all the kids who broke the lock and all the kids who emptied the piss bucket. This one's for everyone who gave me a place to crash when, run ragged by the road, I sought asylum: for Binky, Sarah, Omar, for Simone Levinas and Georges Hansel, for CAF-FAC, for Godolinko Antivarium and ABB, for Count Alexandru, for the Ciceu family, for the Manchin family, for Olga, for Misha Tsovma, for Elias, Gilberto, Pepe, Benjamin, Humberto, Chiccate, Oscar, Karla, Gaby, Cesar, y todos los ajenos oaxaquenos.

Going faster miles an hour, I remain

Your pal,

- Mitchell Cowen Verter

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