

Lomnitz, Claudio. *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón*. New York: Zone Books, 2014. Print. 640 pp.

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The indeterminate ideology, or rather the competing ideologies, of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 is a critical issue that still poses intricate sets of questions for cultural historians, anthropologists and political scientists. Whether the Revolution was driven by personal interests and opposing leaderships or by popular unrest; whether agrarian reform or anarchist revolution were the fulcrum of the political debate and of its bloody military struggle; whether its intellectual and ideological framings were loose or coherent; whether it was a national or a transnational experience; whether it was *indigenista*, liberal, anarchist, socialist, chaotic, opportunistic or eclectic; whether its popular demands were coopted by the very elites whose brutalities had elicited them; whether it dismantled the Díaz regime or it contained many of its remnants; whether indeed it created the modern Mexican state and on what principles; whether in sum the Revolution achieved permanent social and cultural change or it simply reshuffled power structures are all fundamental issues that have been amply addressed and studied, debated and illustrated in the abundant bibliography on *la Revolución*. Setting off from this central point of departure—what he calls the “sacred (and spectral) character” (xxxix) of revolutionary ideology—cultural historian and anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz has produced a brilliantly detailed collective biography of a group of collaborators whose work in and around the Partido Liberal Mexicano (PLM) was pivotal for something as pragmatic as the articulation of public opinion in Mexico, the US, and Europe during the last years of the *porfiriato*, and as abstract as the conceptualization of the utopian horizons of the impending Mexican Revolution.

Concise in its vast research, well designed and elegant in its style, *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón* opens up some of the old debates about the Mexican Revolution with a waft of fresh air and an infusion of new views and materials by focusing on a transborder network of intellectuals who transformed the stolid consensus about Mexican economic progress under Díaz into increasing public indignation north of the border and beyond. Perhaps the best homage the book pays to this important group of anarchist revolutionaries is to painstakingly investigate, understand, and relate the extent of their collaborations, the impact and depth of their actions and

debates while deferring the emergence of a leader. Despite its title, this is prominently not a book just on “Magonismo,” at the very least not on Ricardo Flores Magón as a leader: it explicitly eschews the push to insert itself in the hagiographic repertoire, or to locate its heroes in the dusty pantheon of revolutionary leaders, and yet it sits snugly next to the definitive monumental biographies of Zapata (John Womack) or Villa (Friedrich Katz). Instead of the romantic hero-worship approach, Lomnitz adopts an ambitious methodological line, one that is committed to both historiography and to the anti-individualistic principles that infused the Liberal movement as a “transnational revolutionary network” (xiii). Its unraveling of a wealth of archival materials—including an ample photographic collection from the vaults of the recently reopened Casa de *El Hijo del Abuzote* in Mexico City – offers new insights into the extent of US-Mexican transnational collaboration to researchers and to readers interested in the hemispheric ramifications of the Mexican Revolution. From its opening Lomnitz’s book sets up the need to revisit this archive in order to retrace its historical relevance, reinstate its international scope, and relocate it within the history of proletarian cosmopolitanism rather than within Mexico’s national(ist) grand-narrative of the Revolution:

In short, while in the United States the group is but the vaguely recalled fringe of a dimly remembered margin, in Mexico, the group was hallowed in national history, but only after being placed safely outside-“prior to” and “above”-mainstream revolutionary history, and then only after being “brownwashed,” that is, made Mexican, with its foreign ties expunged. Only thus could Ricardo Flores Magón be safely placed in the hallowed niche of the sacred ancestor” (xiv-xv).

At odds also with the conspicuous place of the Magón brothers in Chicano accounts of the Mexican Revolution –notably Juan Gómez-Quiñones’s monograph *Sembradores: Ricardo Flores Magón y el Partido Liberal Mexicano* (1973)–, Lomnitz denies their role as *sembradores* of a new Mexican American identity, but instead chronicles their tribulations as journalists and organizers, as migrant precursors and embattled contemporaries, of an unsuccessful internationalist Revolution ultimately incarcerated north of the border, dispersed and forever displaced. As he does in relation to the Chicano nationalist rendering of the PLM, Lomnitz makes constant, careful and explicit references to the fraught relations between nationalist ideologies on both sides of the border and international anarchism. The group’s ill-seated response to the rise of patriotic rhetoric in the mid 1910s, their “uneasy relation to nation” (xvi), appears as an implicit key reason for their historiographical marginality.

The ambitious scope of *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón* makes it tower over most accounts of the Mexican Revolution: the still image(s) of this vigorous group of revolutionaries

produces an essential negative frame—Porfirio Díaz’s draconian regime in the act of attending to and policing transnational interests, enslaving vagrants and indigenous peoples under the cover of debt-peonage, while actively prosecuting and silencing political activists on both sides of the Río Grande. Couched in the biographic narrative of the transnational network of collaborators, and dovetailing with the protracted fight against Porfirian villainy orchestrated from the pages of *Regeneración*, the story of Ethel and John Kenneth Turner and their militancy in the “Mexican Cause” becomes one of the central contributions of Lomnitz’s investigations. Of particular importance for our understanding of the Porfiriato’s waning international reputation is the collaborative work carried out by John Turner with Lázaro Gutiérrez de Lara for his series of articles in the *American Magazine* under the title “Barbarous Mexico,” a critical exposé in the years leading up to Díaz’s downfall. Here, Edgar Allan Poe’s image of the purloined letter hiding in plain sight is a beautiful metaphor to account for the lack of international visibility of existing Mexican forms of slavery in the henequen, tobacco, and rubber plantations. Turner, with the irreplaceable help of his guide Lázaro, was able to reveal this unhidden truth and the “paternalist racism” (124) that had until then encrypted modern Mexican slavery in the American media and elsewhere. This is a potent, resonant story about the networks of exploitation created by “free-trade” markets, their abstract arguments and market logics, and the impact on the northern consumer public as their everyday collaboration with actual slavery is disclosed. The crucial involvement of the British press, in particular the antislavery league there, and the pressure of British public opinion which “forced the British consul in Merida to produce an account” (252) becomes a pivotal triangulation in Lomnitz’s compelling narrative of this effervescent cross-border collaboration. It illustrates well the concerted effort that made the Mexican Liberal Party “internationally famous” by the second half of 1910, as the anti-reelectionist Revolution of Madero was being set in motion. Lomnitz describes with gusto the busy months between August and December of that year as a “brief and golden moment” in the history of *Regeneración*: “It was a time when all forces, Socialist and anarchist, American and Mexican, worked together under their natural leaders, the freed men of the Junta Organ[i]zadora” (250).

This is an inspired hybrid work of political history and of cultural anthropology and as such it combines wisely the archeological disclosure of archival evidence with a sensitive eye to cultural and linguistic difference: it intelligently locates these historical actors within their diverse socio-economic and cultural networks to elucidate their portentous if misunderstood contribution to the collapse of the Díaz regime and the ventures of its international clientele. Its necessarily lengthy plan is devised as a chronological study of their transnational collaborations from their origin until the

memorialized reification of the movement with the actual return of the physical remains of Ricardo Flores Magón, a figure that remains both aloof and essential to the overall narrative as purportedly “the purest living example of uncompromising commitment to the ideal” (xxix).

Five parts effectively articulate this multilayered history: “Cultural Origin of the ‘Mexican Cause,’” “Changing American Opinion (1908-1909),” “Eve of Revolution,” “High Tide (1909-1912),” “Lost Love.” Each section follows the gradual development of friendships and rivalries, synergies and disparities among this well-defined set of characters to evoke and reconstruct the partially vanished picture of the radical movement. As Lomnitz posits from the outset, this group of idealists and revolutionaries incepted an ethos rather than a movement or an actual political party in the modern sense of the term. The first section, “Cultural Origin of the ‘Mexican Cause,’” sets the stage for the emergence of interest in Mexico on the part of the Turners after their graduation from UC Berkeley. It starts by evoking a book never finished by Ethel Turner on which she was still allegedly at work at age eighty-three: “an account of the participation of Americans in the preparation for and execution of the Mexican Revolution.” (6) This opening reference is an elegant homage to her important role within the group—Lomnitz’s text is conspicuously fascinated by that participation. The choice of protagonists here is not coincidental, it encourages a Northern perspective through a focalization on their increasing awareness of the Mexican situation: as Ethel and John Turner arrive in LA we are introduced to the group of Mexican Liberals (Ricardo Flores Magón, Antonio Villarreal, Librado Rivera, and Manuel Sarabia) imprisoned after their failed 1906 revolutionary attempt charged with the “curious crime of trying to invade their own country” (19). Later chapters do offer a series of “flash-backs” into the origins of that struggle and the early period of *Regeneración*. Lomnitz’s narrative choice literally enlists a wide non-specialist readership to explore this territory of Mexican history first from the North to show the compelling reasons that US leftist intellectuals would have encountered at the time. The parallelisms between Porfirian Mexico and Tolstoy’s Zarist Russia, the trampling of American rights and assurances, the politics of unionization, and women’s suffrage are cited among the resonating features that made the Mexican cause both compelling and familiar. This expanding set of US characters (Elizabeth Trowbridge, John Murray, Job Harriman, Frances Noel, and P.D. Noel) contours an “American circle” of socialists and freethinkers who embraced the cause of the captive Mexicans while laboring under persistent cultural and linguistic challenges: lapses into Italian, a rudimentary use of Spanish after years of political commitment with the southern neighbor, and even “indulging in national stereotypes” (25) in their published works. In the remaining chapters of this section Lomnitz moves

on to offer one of the most in-depth studies of the origins, early educational and publishing experiences, and the period of “concientización política” of the Flores Magón brothers and the Generation of 1892 in Mexico culminating in their publication of the weekly journal *Regeneración* in August of 1900 which landed Jesús and Ricardo Flores Magón in prison by May of the following year (83). Lomnitz offers here a cogent account of “Liberalism” as a potent signifier with a variety of competing significations as he finds the ideological roots of Sarabia, Rivera, the Magones and others in a “pure” form of nineteenth century liberalism (95), prominently an anticlerical stance in contrast with the swelling drift toward traditionalism by the Díaz “liberals.” Indeed the disparate evolution on the one hand of the liberal establishment in power – toward a socially conservative transnational capitalism – and on the other of the self-appointed pure liberals who would go on to found the PLM – toward a socially utopian classless world without private property – commands a great deal of these chapters and of Parts Three (“Eve of Revolution”) and Four (“High Tide, 1909-1912”).

Part Two “Changing American Opinion (1908-1909)” returns to the American circle to document the writing of the series “Barbarous Mexico” by John Kenneth Turner prominently aided by Lázaro Gutiérrez de Lara. The publication of this series of articles elicited a great deal of interest and alarm first among the general public and then by the US Congress, which by June of 1910 hosted an investigation into the persecution of Mexican political refugees (189). As I pointed out earlier, the central notion that Mexican autocrats were in fact fostering slavery is offered here as the basis for the implosion of Porfirio Díaz’s image in the US as people started to “call a slave a slave” (159).

When the third section returns to Mexico on the “Eve of Revolution,” the constant presence of *Regeneración* in the face of censure and imprisonment reiterates the prominence of the printing press in the preparatory stages of the war over political and social emancipation waged throughout Mexico in the following decade. Lomnitz’s book places thus a central emphasis on the power of the written word showing the parallel work of *Regeneración* among the Mexican readership, including its lasting public influence through orality in the face of rampant levels of illiteracy—“the magnification of print culture by oral transmission was at the very heart of revolutionary popular culture” (240)—and the several outlets where Turner and also John Murray published their exposés of American capitalist collusion with Díaz’s abuses. The significance for this group of the written word and of writing the revolution culminates in two different moments. In Part four “High Tide (1909-1912)” Ricardo Flores Magón is portrayed in the midst of the armed struggle for control of Baja California at the beginning of 1911 as an energetically engaged revolutionary devoted to eight hours of daily

correspondence who was then “writing the articles for *Regeneración*, participating in meetings, and doing other work to further the cause” (345). In Part Five “Lost Love” John Turner who was back in Mexico in the middle of the *decena trágica* of February 1913 became an accidental witness to American collaboration with the putschist authorities in the midst of overthrowing the Madero presidency. Imprisoned by the Huertistas with the ominous complicity of US ambassador Henry Lane Wilson, John still managed to smuggle a note and telegraph a message to Ethel in Carmel, which in turn elicited a bombardment of the State Department with letters (410). Astonishingly, this functional network of public and private communications saved John’s life and he was later able to reveal the American ambassador’s intervention in Madero’s downfall as well as the intricate ballet of betrayals staged by high-ranking officers in the Federal army to subdue the president and the public.

Lomnitz’s masterful reconstruction of such seemingly isolated episodes to summon the spirit of collaboration, solidarity networks, and international communication conduits that were required for the undoing of the analogously transnational business conglomerates is his most durable contribution to our understanding of the cosmopolitan libertarian camp. This is not a history of epic deeds nor of larger than life heroes, but instead a comprehensive and humane account of daily commitment to ideals and steadfast life-long pursuit of antihegemonic beliefs. Correspondingly, Lomnitz’s rendering of the early stages of the Revolution in Baja California is dominated by an exciting description of the difficult but intense military collaboration of US Wobblies and Mexican Liberals in what amounted to an international anarchist army who despite their progressive methods and outlook seemed doomed to fail outnumbered as they were by nationalist revolutionaries and a rehabilitated federal state under Madero.

While he has penned an extensive and lively story of some of history’s seeming losers, Lomnitz has succeeded in reinstating their relentless commitment to progressive writing, their persistent defiance of injustice and abuse, and their understated suffering to vindicate their central role in the configuration of something like a revolutionary ideology for Mexico. Lomnitz announces “the return” of comrade Ricardo Flores Magón, and indeed of his comrades, not because the book seeks to study a specific historical journey of many, least of all the return of Magón’s bodily remains to Mexico with which the book closes. Instead, the title points to the resurgence performed by the book itself: the return of a previously obfuscated chronicle, a history now masterfully retold and rewritten to accomplish an outstanding ideological resurrection.