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A debate on the Mexican Revolution in Temps nouveaux

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Jean Grave, Peter Kropotkin, William C. Owen
and Michel Petit

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If I have been unfair with them, I offer them my apologies, but the tone of your letter, as well as the contradictions within it, were scarcely calculated to dispel misunderstandings.

I have no motive, no interest when it comes to wanting there to be no revolution in Mexico; my only inspiration was to take care lest I be the reason why comrades might embark upon an affair which, it seemed to me, was not clear.

J. GRAVE

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charges and all the warlike accoutrements of the Expedition of the Thousand.

However, now that we have a detailed account of that movement – about which social democrats and anarchists were clueless and which *none of them* supported, by a long chalk (“Wait for the signal for a general uprising”, these intellectuals were telling them), now that we have documented inquiries into that movement, we can see how *immensely important* it was for the spread of the revolutionary movement of 1905 and 1906.

So? Would they not have been equally let down had they turned up in Siberia just when 3,000 kilometres of the Trans-Siberian were on strike and when the Strike Committee, negotiating on equal terms with Linevitch, the commander of a five hundred thousand-strong army, made a superb effort to bring one-hundred-and-fifty thousand men back home in one month.

And – as far as we were concerned – that unarmed strike, that expropriation of the State (which owned the railways), that spontaneous organizing on the part of thousands of railway workers across several thousand kilometres’ distance, was not a formidable lesson in matters – to this very day no anarchist has ever set it out before the French workers in all its simplicity and prophetic significance – just as nobody has yet told the story of 1789–1793 as it affected the peasant, in all its innermost simplicity, with no cocked kepis, red sashes, but so much more effective than kepis and sashes.

P. KROPOTKIN

I thank friend Kropotkin for setting matters straight.

If, after I had asked for them, I had had these reports, I would have been less fierce in my response to the Magón brothers.

the ones in July-August 1789, not to see that the movement in northern Mexico displays the character that all peasant movements always have.

Which, for me, explains why some friends have been disillusioned by the “Mexican revolution”.

Like so many other Italian, Russian, etc., etc., friends, they have probably dreamt of Garibaldian campaigns and found nothing of the sort. Plains and peaceable countryside, mistrustful (with good reason) of foreigners and – from time to time –

sometimes here and sometimes twenty leagues to the east, south or north of that point, some seven or eight days away, another village drives out the exploiters and takes over the land.

And then, twenty, thirty days after that, a detachment of soldiers shows up “to enforce order”; they execute the rebels, torch the village and just as they are marching off

“victorious”, they walk into an ambush from which the only way they can escape is leave half the detachment behind them, dead or wounded.

This is the stuff of peasant upheaval. And it is plain that if young folk turn up with their dreams of Garibaldian campaigning and brimful of military zeal, all they found there was disappointment. And they quickly realized that they were redundant.

Unfortunately, nine tenths (or perhaps ninety-nine per cent) of anarchists cannot conceive of “revolution” other than in terms of fighting on the barricades or triumphant Garibaldian expeditions.

I can just imagine how let down young Italians of French whose knowledge of

“revolution” comes from the books and poems of bourgeois revolutionaries would have been, had they turned up in 1904 at the time of the peasant uprisings in Russia. They would have gone home “disgusted”, with their dreams of battles, bayonet

1. Michel Petit “In Mexico” (*Temps nouveaux* 17:4 (May 27 1911):1

In the appeal calling for international revolutionary solidarity and reprinted in the last edition of *Les Temps nouveaux*, our comrades from Mexico ask for two things, with the broadest possible publicity accorded to current developments: “emancipated workers and funding.”

The first of those demands may come as a surprise, as it conflicts with the communications coming from southern Latin America, and Argentina in particular, cautioning European workers against the fallacious promises of all manner of agents promoting emigration in competition with the proletarians already having difficulties in defending themselves down there.

The situation in Mexico is quite different. Here we have an entire country wide open to modern life and whose progress is hampered only by an autocratic government playing along with a tiny gang of speculators whose sole aim is to monopolize the land, trade and industry.

Plainly, the success of Madero and his party will have no impact beyond replacing the gang of Porfirio Díaz, the current president, with a different gang whose appetites and actions will be identical; unless, and this looks more likely, both gangs amalgamate and share the cake between them.

But behind this sham revolution, like the one that has just occurred in Portugal, the real revolution, the social revolution rumbles on.

No matter what happens, farmers are not about to let themselves be stripped of their land without a fight and the mine-workers who have already served their apprenticeship in violent strikes will be insisting on acceptable living conditions; from one end to the other of the vast swathe of land that links the United States and Central America, an Indian and mestizo

population whose human sentiments it was believed had been extinguished by means of impoverishment, fire and alcohol, is proving ready to set about organizing free production.

Given those conditions, we can readily understand the help that skilled workers from every trade might offer them, steering them down the parallel paths of social struggle and industrial improvement.

As to the climate, a factor of such importance in any emigrant venture, it offers the finest conditions Frenchmen could ask for outside of their homeland.

It is hot and unhealthy only on the coast, especially around Vera Cruz, the main port for landfall coming from Europe.

A few hours' train ride brings one to more elevated terrain, the so-called temperate zone where the average temperature is +18° and which is universally regarded as a delightful location. The town of Orizaba and Jalapa, which lie within this zone, are regarded as the healthiest and pleasantest places in the world to live.

Above the temperate zone lies the cold earth, as the traveller who continues his train journey from Vera Cruz to Mexico City soon discerns. But what is meant by "cold" over there is just the temperature of Paris's three summer months. The differences between the seasons are a lot less than in Europe. In winter, in Mexico City, the average temperature is 13° to 14°, and, in summer, does not exceed 26° in the shade.

The finest proof that Mexico's climate suits French people is that a large number of our countrymen are living there. I do not have any recent figures, but in 1897, they numbered over 15,000. Their numbers must have doubled since then.

In most of the larger towns they run the jewellery, restaurant, confectionery, perfumery trades and, above all, everything relating to the garment and novelty trades.

Since back in 1821 when an adventurer from Barcelonnette established the very first French drapery store in Mexico, natives of that location in the Lower Pyrenees have been coming

oneself, if one speaks the language, or through some reliable friend thanks to whom one might dispense with interpreters.

In the meantime, insults offer us no sort of proof.

And let me close on this thought:

In time of revolution, the pen can be a great aid to the rifle (there is no denying that) but I have always believed that in time of revolution the place of those who preach it and above all the promoters of a movement, was alongside those who are fighting.

If Mexico really is in the throes of revolutionary struggle, how come Messrs Magón are I know not how many hundreds of kilometres removed from the theatre of struggle?

J. GRAVE

5. P. Kropotkin "Correction" *Les Temps Nouveaux* 17:52 (April 27 1912):1 (followed by J. Grave's reply)

CORRECTION

Friend Kropotkin has sent us the following letter.

In northern Mexico there is a quite serious revolutionary movement among the peasants and the republican government is not capable of bringing it to heel.

Landlords have been expropriated by the Indian farmers there. From time to time there have been battles fought and *Regeneración* is not alone in mentioning these battles.

From Los Angeles I have been sent several Mexican newspapers of varying persuasions with the passages marked that relate to these clashes between government troops and the "insurgents" and this is happening all the time and it is not always the former who come off best in the fighting.

"Skirmishing" might well be the most appropriate term for these encounters as the word "battle" should be used for encounters between larger forces. But it would be an utterly false understanding of what *all* agrarian movements are, including

bility there that overrides sensibilities, even Messrs Magón's sensibilities.

Besides, other comrades forwarded to us a manifesto from a party that purports to be anarchist and that manifesto is quite bluntly political and we are within our rights to say so.

Are the signatories to the letter telling us that they did not publish it because they had it in stock and did not have the cash to publish a better one?

I shall refrain from passing any comment on that pearl.

Finally, we were told: if you want to know if there really is a social revolution under way in Mexico, read the newspapers, read the revolutionary press and you will learn of the battles, struggles and uprisings to recapture ownership.

We did read:

In the daily newspapers, we did indeed find dispatches announcing uprisings, and battles, but we also read that most of those uprisings are led by generals, colonels or other ranks. All of the Spanish republics in the Americas have known such military uprisings that have nothing revolutionary about them, to our way of thinking.

Lastly, as to the revolutionary press, the tone is quite different there. There are popular uprisings designed to take back the land, to carry out the social revolution; all of these accounts however derive from a single source: *Regeneración*.

Now, whilst not wishing to query the personnel from *Regeneración* whom we do not know and on whom we are in no position to pass judgement, allow us to express surprise that they alone are being kept abreast of this famous Mexican revolution and to wonder if they have not mistaken their dreams for realities. Especially when all those who have the slightest knowledge of Mexico are telling us that, right now, a social revolution there is wholly improbable.

What we are trying to do is inform ourselves. There would be only one way of doing that, going to Mexico and finding out for

over annually in ever greater numbers in search of their relatives and their country, which has use for them, places them, helps them and will let them prosper as their forebears did. One of them, M E Chabrand, estimated back in 1892 that the number of Barcelonette-ans who have made their fortunes there at around 480. But that is a matter of little concern to us; the point is not to go over and exploit the Mexicans, but the chance that those of us who find life here too tough and who have a trade behind us, can go and live over yonder in easier circumstances, whilst continuing to serve the cause of the worldwide social revolution.

By my reckoning, that chance truly does exist.

Michel PETIT

The *Revolutionary Communist Federation* intends to mount a fervent campaign on behalf of the Mexican socialist insurgents, by means of posters, manifestoes, meetings, etc.

The funds that it will raise are to be forwarded to Los Angeles.

We associate ourselves with this campaign and hope that it will be mounted with vigour.

Our comrade Michel Petit has committed himself to 5 francs.

2. *Les Temps nouveaux* 17:44 (March 2 1912) :8

This prospectus, distributed in Mexico, arrived after a lot of newspaper articles wherein Magón stated that he had washed his hands of the Liberal Party programme.

“Some excellent comrades – the ones from *Le Libertaire*, among others – have often taken us to task for not paying enough attention to what has come to be referred to as the

Mexican revolution. But it has hitherto been impossible for us to secure any *detailed* information on the current position in that country.

On the one hand there actually are comrades who argue emphatically that there is a social revolution under way there, but, on the other there are comrades whose sincerity we know, who argue no less emphatically than the former that the Mexican Liberal Party is just a political party competing for power with those who have divested Díaz of it.

And since our role is to leave it to our readers themselves to sit in judgement of the facts, we need merely make them aware of the documents reaching us or the reports passed to us by comrades whose bona fides are above suspicion. Without detriment, however, to any comments that we reserve our right to pass on said documents or reports which the comrades too are at liberty to accept or reject.

Among those reports, here are some that we have just received:

“There is still quite a lot to be said about the Mexican question, but I reckon it might be better to wait. *Cronaca* was able to come by several copies of a prospectus issued by R F

Magón of *Regeneración*; I am sending you one so that you can see how the so-called libertarians from the Mexican Liberal Party are gulling people who are silly enough to believe them to be genuine revolutionaries. This prospectus, distributed in Mexico, comes in the wake of lots of newspaper articles in which Magón claims to have washed his hands of the Liberal Party’s program.

But there is better yet. For the past six months Magón has been singing the praises to us of “comrade” Zapata; and lots of anarchists believed that “General Zapata” is genuinely an anarchist. Well! In a proclamation issued a fortnight ago, Zapata states openly that he and his men are fighting to implement the Liberal Party’s program in Mexico, that he is for “Liberty,

W.C. OWEN, R. FLORES MAGÓN, E.S. FLORES MAGÓN,
Publishers of *Regeneración*

I shall not dwell upon the friendly tone of Messrs Magón and Owen.

In respect of their letter, I shall make do with highlighting this:

1. We have never accused them of bad faith, we have never queried whether they were or were not good anarchists.

We are told that there is a social revolution in Mexico. Knowing nothing of that country, we went along with this from the outset, to the extent that we have received, from a variety of quarters, a number of letters from comrades asking how they should go about preparing to go to Mexico to enlist with the revolutionaries. We gave the address of *Regeneración* and when we put questions to that paper, the response we received was that the need was not so much for personnel as for money.

Yes, even in the case of revolution, money is one thing and personnel quite another.

Moving on.

But, after a time, we received letters from the United States, from comrades of our acquaintance, whose revolutionary sincerity is beyond question, telling us: “The Mexican Revolution is a joke” and recounting to us the misadventure of those comrades who had also set off to join the revolutionaries, and found none.

Of course the sensibilities of Messrs Magón and others are hurt when they are not taken at their word, but when it comes to peddling news that may prompt comrades to leave everything behind in order to head off, quite possibly, to disappointment, then it will be admitted that there is a moral responsi-

Regeneración is there to testify that on many an occasion we have said that if Zapata were to turn his role authoritarian or ambitious, we would have to combat him with the very same vigour as we have invested in fighting any personal ambition that the struggle has, of necessity, brought forth.

3. If you wish to talk your way out of the charge of monstrous unfairness, you have to judge our movement and ourselves, not on the basis of some particular fraction of an abundant literature, but in terms of the movement's overall trend and on foot of all our writings. We have no hesitation in stating that the movement and our writings both have their eyes directly on the prize, the recovery by the disinherited of their patrimony. Maybe our writings do not feel as polished as those of the intellectuals, but no one should dare call their sincerity or bona fides into question.

We imagine too that it is not for you, nor for *T.N.* to sit in judgement and determine if the publishers of *Regeneración* are or are not all anarchists, judging by your standards.

Your business is quite different, as it is your supreme obligation to take the trouble to find out whether there is not an economic revolution under way in Mexico, whether the people is in revolt against privilege and power and currently poised to do away with them. Which is what you preach in theoretical terms. It is through the preaching of it that you earn your wage and through preaching that that your newspaper reaches out to revolutionaries for their support. When something is happening, you should at least not turn a blind eye to it. Much less deprecate it, denigrating it because you cannot be bothered to scrutinize it. We at least can append our signatures with a clear conscience as being some of those who are for social revolution!

Justice and Law" and that, for righteousness's sake, he hopes for the triumph of the Revolution."

And, among those documents, here are the main passages from the program of which our comrade speaks!

.....
"The Mexican Liberal Party aims to wrest from the capitalists the land that they have

[program text not given here].

3. "International Movement: Mexico", *Les Temps Nouveaux* 17:48 (March 30, 1912): 7

Comrade Jules Fontaine has sent us the translation of a manifesto from the "Liberal Party" bearing the signatures of the two Magóns, Ricardo and Flores, plus Figueroa, Rivera and Aranjo.

This manifesto calls Mexicans to arms in order to carry out the expropriation of those in possession of social wealth, to be placed at the disposal of free workers.

This manifesto is wholly anarchist, from beginning to end.

But it is only one element, and a contradictory one at that, that we are happy to include and all we ask is that we be persuaded; but there is one thing that we are utterly obliged to point out, that all the anarchist assertions and press reports, etc., all derive from the same source, from the Los Angeles-based *Regeneración*.

We have no reason to call into question the honesty of the comrades from *Regeneración*. But the contradictory reports that we have received from various quarters come from comrades with whom we are familiar and of whose bona fides we are pretty certain. So where does the truth lie?

It is very often easy to mistake wishes for facts.

Yet again, we do not know. We are making no pronouncements. And it is for the very reason that we are keen to know that we are asking for precise reports and facts.

4. J. Grave “On Mexico” *Les Temps Nouveaux* 17:51 (April 20 1912): 5

We have received the letter below!

To the editor of *Temps Nouveaux*

Sir,

Your edition of 2 March carried a letter on the revolution in Mexico by R. Froment. In our view, that letter is very unfair on the revolution, the Mexican Liberal Party and *Regeneración*, of which we are the publishers. Which is why we protest and mean to make our protest through the international revolutionary press. We think ourselves justified in so doing because the revolutionary movement should not be kept in ignorance on a matter as important as the Mexican revolution and because the letter in question is only the latest stab in the back in the attacks that have been directed over a period of months, by means such as cowardly innuendo and suspicions cast upon the bona fides of a vast movement into which, as is clear from the pages of *T.N.*, no one has taken the trouble to inquire.

With a sham gesture of good faith, declaring that “it is your role to leave it up to the readers themselves to sit in judgement of the facts”, the letter in question sets out ...what? Certainly not the major facts one ought to consider before reaching an adequate judgement, but one or two meaningless episodes in a struggle that has been long and bitter. And even these are presented in a half-light which is still misleading.

One third of the communication consists of quotations from a private letter penned by someone whose name is not given,

repeating the charge levelled in *Cronaca Sovversiva*, that R F Magón had issued a reactionary prospectus, accompanied by this remark “I am sending you a copy so that you can see how the so-called libertarians of the Mexican Liberal Party are gulling those silly enough to take them for genuine revolutionaries”.

Then the letter passes hostile comment on the alleged fact that Magón has written about Zapata and called him “comrade”.

Having reprinted that anonymous letter and having thereby – thanks to your friendly actions – put all your readers on their guard against our cause, Mr. Froment moves on to banal considerations, explaining how “once the Mexicans get the land there will be no more need to fret about wages or working hours”. Plainly he does not know enough about our movement to know that that is what we have long been teaching and we think it will be hard to come up with an edition of *Regeneración* in which that lesson is not stressed regarding the strikers of whom there have hitherto been so many in Mexico.

As for the other criticisms raised in that letter, we venture to state:

1. We have long been explaining already and ad nauseam that the Mexican Liberal Party has evolved, and that the manifesto concerned is very old and has long since been dropped. Moreover, we have explained that copies of it were distributed because, at that point, we were short of funds and had no other means of propaganda available.
2. We cannot recall any of us having written of Zapata that he was a “comrade”; but if that is the case, we are not ashamed of it. When Zapata incites the peasant to dispossess the land monopolists and helps him go about it, we find him closer to a comrade than the blathering drawing-room revolutionaries. Besides, the collection of