

# Magonismo Hits the Mainstream

## The Magon Brothers, Anarchism, & the Mexican Revolution

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a review of

*Bad Mexicans: Race, Empire, and Revolution in the Borderlands* by Kelly Lytle Hernández. WW Norton, New York, 2022

It is definitely a hopeful sign that a briskly selling book from a mainstream publisher (one long-listed for the National Book Award) not only features anarchists, but actually treats them with seriousness and presents them as the good guys—even heroes.

The eponymous “Bad Mexicans” of Kelly Lytle Hernández’s sarcastic title are the Magonistas—followers of the notorious Magón brothers, early progenitors of the 1910–1920 Mexican Revolution, who first raised a cry for the overthrow of the decades-long, ultra-oppressive dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. Bad Mexicans was the epithet used by both Mexican and US authorities for this network of subversives who organized on both sides of the border.

*Bad Mexicans* is also significant in its focus on the role of the borderlands in the changes that swept both Mexico and the United States in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—centering a region that has been marginalized by traditional histories of both countries. In Hernández’s view, not only were the Magonistas critical in sparking the Mexican Revolution, but the crackdown on them by US authorities was instrumental in the formation of the FBI and much of the police-state apparatus still with us today.

This bi-national crackdown, undertaken at the behest of gringo captains of industry with economic interests on either side of the line (primarily railroads and minerals), involved President Díaz’s dreaded *Guardia Rurales* and the nascent US Bureau of Investigation (later the FBI) as well as the Texas and Arizona Rangers, private police forces like the Pinkertons, and local sheriffs and bounty-hunters.

Hernández calls this a counterinsurgency effort, somewhat hyperbolically. The Magonista campaign was at this time one of agitation and organizing. The three brothers were, most famously, Ricardo Flores Magón, his collaborator Enrique Flores Magón, and the less enthusiastic Jesus Flores Magón, who started out as a supporter of the cause, but grew somewhat alienated as the other two siblings became radicalized. Democratic dissidents, but not yet anarchists, they launched their newspaper, *Regeneracion*, in Mexico City in 1901, but by 1904 were openly calling for revolution against Díaz. The following year, they launched the Mexican Liberal Party (PLM) to advance this aim.

Repeated raids on their offices by Díaz’s authorities soon forced them into exile in the United States—first to San Antonio, later to St. Louis and Los Angeles. From there, they continued to publish, and had copies of *Regeneracion* smuggled into Mexico, winning a following among both Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

Hernández details the abuses that fueled popular discontent on either side of the line. In Mexico, the ongoing harsh oppression of the Indigenous people, peasants, and the poor was punctuated by massive atrocities. An example was the forced relocation of the Yaqui indigenous people far from their homeland in northern Mexico to slave labor on the plantations of Yucatan after they had the temerity to rise up against encroachments on their lands in the 1890s. Also critical was the deadly repression of strikers at the US-owned Cananea copper mine in 1906.

On the US side, the period saw repeated instances of lynch-mob terror against Mexican Americans in the so-called Brown Belt of southern Texas, where a white supremacist system of Juan Crow was enforced.

Hernández also brings to light information on lesser-known figures in the same network of dissent such as the anarcha-feminist Belen Gutierrez de Mendoza, publisher of the journal *Vesper*.

Acquiring guns and organizing armed cells (*focos*), the Magonistas launched sporadic raids across the border from US territory—most significantly, on Jimenez and, less successfully on Ciudad Juarez, both in 1906. This increased the pressure on US authorities to break up their network. Intense surveillance and police raids on the *Regeneración* offices in exile followed, forcing the Magonistas from city to city in the US. Ricardo for a while even took refuge in Canada. His followers in the southern border zone were meanwhile subject to what Hernández anachronistically calls “extraordinary rendition”—abduction across the frontier to be turned over to the Rurales.

But the transformation of the Magon brothers into anarchists was gradual and somewhat equivocal. As the name of the PLM implies, they were originally motivated by fealty to the ideals of Mexico’s great Liberal leader Benito Juarez and his Constitution of 1857 that guaranteed basic freedoms, and which Diaz had betrayed. It was only in Los Angeles exile, late in his career, that Ricardo Flores Magon, influenced by figures such as Emma Goldman, declared himself an anarchist, calling not only for overthrow of the Diaz dictatorship, but abolition of the state altogether. In a rather blatant contradiction, even after this he would put himself forth as a candidate to challenge Díaz for the presidency of Mexico.

It’s to Hernández’s credit that she avoids hagiography. These contradictions are acknowledged, as is Ricardo Flores Magón’s unfortunate sexism. Even after being befriended by Emma Goldman in St. Louis, his writings revealed that he viewed women in the revolutionary struggle as mere auxiliaries and cheerleaders for the male protagonists. When he got into a faction fight with Belen Gutierrez de Mendoza, he outed her (accurately or not) as a lesbian in the pages of *Regeneración*. This was not the only time he resorted to the homosexual stigma against political rivals.

The embrace of anarchism also inflamed factionalism in the Magonista organization, with the liberals and socialists ultimately defecting. Ironically, by the time the Mexican Revolution broke out, the Magonista star was setting. The last, disastrous hurrah was the northern Mexico campaign in Baja California of early 1911. It was debilitated by the factionalism and, ultimately, a complete paucity of military discipline. Most embarrassingly, gringo filibusters tried to piggy-back on the Magonista expedition, hoping to seize pieces of Mexican territory, allowing Diaz to stigmatize the campaign as a neo-colonial venture. Hernández gives this episode somewhat short shrift, detailing the attempted taking of Mexicali, but not Tijuana or Ensenada.

By this time, the more patrician, mild and reformist opposition figure, Francisco Madero, had more plausibly challenged Díaz for the presidency, and, denied it by fraud, organized an insurrectionist campaign to successfully take Ciudad Juarez—the first real battle of the Revolution. Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, the two great peasant revolutionaries of Mexico’s north and south, respectively, launched true insurgencies that won broad support and persisted for years. Yet Magonista influence could be seen in these new movements. Zapata had been a reader of *Regeneracion*, and there was clearly a strong stamp of anarchism on the Zapatista insurgency.

Ricardo Flores Magón, in failing health, disappeared into the US prison system. Having been unsuccessfully prosecuted for violating the Neutrality Act in the attempted Magonista raid on Juarez, in 1918 he would be successfully convicted under the Espionage Act for encouraging draft resistance in the pages of *Regeneracion* amid World War I and the attendant Red Scare. He died in Leavenworth federal penitentiary in 1922 at the age of 48.

He would, however, be posthumously lionized as a hero of the Mexican Revolution, and his remains have been reinterred at the Rotunda of Distinguished Persons in Mexico City.

While generally unflinching, Hernández does sometimes try to sanitize her material. She writes that the Mexican Revolution restored democratic rule, without mentioning that, once victorious, it shortly degenerated into an authoritarian one-party state with the agrarian and autonomist vision of Villa and Zapata largely betrayed—as the two peasant leaders themselves were, to their deaths.

She also mentions that the Magonistas were petitioned by some of their followers to adopt exclusion of Chinese immigrants from Mexico as a platform plank, but perhaps too readily exculpates Ricardo Flores Magón of sympathy with this position. She discusses the Chinese Exclusion Act and deadly attacks on Chinese immigrants in the US as indicative of the xenophobic climate at the time. However, she does not mention the deadly pogrom unleashed

on the Chinese community of the Mexican city of Torreon when it was taken by revolutionary forces in 1911, with more than 300 killed. Some historians, most notably Carlos Castañón, author of a study of the Chinese of Torreon, have blamed local Magonistas for stirring up anti-Chinese sentiment.

Hernández calls herself a rebel historian. We need more of these, but also those with the fortitude to be ruthless even in treatment of their own heroes. All told, Hernández gets high marks here. Hopefully her work, almost certainly the most in-depth yet on *magonismo*, will spur further explorations of this formative period both for Mexico and Gringolandia, and the largely overlooked role of anarchism.

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