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Review

Mexico: A Revolutionary Ride

- Reviews section -



Publication date: Friday 11 September 2026

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Riding with the Revolution: The American Left in the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1925

By Dan La Botz

Leiden: Brill, Historical Materialism 313, 2024, 574 pages,

Haymarket paperback 2025, \$27.

Image: Las Adelitas, women fighters in the revolution.

RIDING WITH THE Revolution: The American Left in the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1925 ties a divergent set of characters to a well-explained narrative of the Mexican Revolution and of its different currents.

Dan La Botz, the author of several books on Mexican history and labor, recounts the stories of the various Americans, such as John Reed, Lincoln Steffens, and Bertram Wolfe who entered a fractious Mexican political scene which the book clearly explains.

Particularly impressive is the way the author is able to do justice to a variety of viewpoints, allowing the reader to see political choices through the eyes of those who were making them. Splits among Mexican revolutionaries also divided U.S. leftists.

Riding with the Revolution covers two historical periods. The first analyzes the interactions between U.S. radicals and the Mexican Revolution (1910-1919).

La Botz manages to tell vignettes about the key players while always reminding readers of the significance of the global context: the growth of socialist, anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movements and theories in the United States and Europe, the coming of World War I, and the Russian Revolution.

After the overthrow of the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz in 1911 most U.S. leftists identified with the Mexican revolutionary leadership of Francisco I. Madero and the anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón. U.S. Socialist Party figures often viewed the Mexican Revolution as a "bourgeois democratic" movement that could develop the country and prepare for a future socialist transition.

Global interactions between Mexican leftists and labor organizers began long before the revolutionary overthrow of the Díaz dictatorship. Flores Magón, for example, was heavily influenced by the 19th century Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. The Bakuninist philosophy of a small anarchist group taking exemplary actions to trigger a mass uprising shaped the strategies of Magón's Mexican Liberal Party (PLM) and the House of the World's Worker (Casa del Obrero Mundial).

Anarchist ideas had crossed the ocean with European seamen at the beginning of the 20th century and influenced Mexican leftists as they had many others in Latin America. As Flores Magón and various PLM members spent time in exile in the United States they made contact with U.S. anarchists such as Emma Goldman. (46-74)

Populist and trade unionist ideas had also traversed the U.S.-Mexico border and influenced the development of organized labor in Mexico at the beginning of the 20th century.

Fractured Revolution

However, the Mexican Revolutionary coalition fractured right at the beginning of the revolt against Díaz. In 1910 the bourgeois Madero, who represented wealthy capitalists excluded from the Díaz administration, broke from the anarchist PLM. The latter had a strong base in the labor movement, having played key roles in mining and textile strikes. To the further left, the Industrial Workers of the World identified with the magonistas. The Socialist Party leadership, even including Eugene V. Debs, tended to support the maderistas.

In subsequent years radical Socialist John Reed identified with Pancho Villa, and the anarchist Emma Goldman supported Emiliano Zapata and his southern revolutionary peasant movement.

Part of the reason for the Socialists' refusal to support the more radical anarchist labor activists was the party's belief that capitalism still had a progressive role to play in Mexico. Consequently, like American Federation of Labor leader Samuel Gompers, Debs opposed property seizures and believed the new revolutionary state could launch a period of democratic capitalist development.

La Botz explains, "One could argue that they [Debs and Gompers] represent the first manifestation of what would be the unfortunate tendency of American labor leftists to be drawn into relations with the state in Mexico and with the state-supported unions, a policy that continued until the end of the twentieth century." (99).

Socialists who tended to oppose the Mexican anarchists' strategies, however, generally defended the civil liberties of Mexican anarchists imprisoned in the United States and supported labor organizing across the southern border.

A State-Union Alliance

Although it is a book about the roles of political immigrants to *Mexico*, *Riding with the Revolution* never strays far from the Mexican political context.

La Botz, for example, assesses the break between the more radical revolutionary forces led by Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata after 1914 and the more conservative forces of Venustiano Carranza and Álvaro Obregón. As leaders of radical peasant movements, Villa and Zapata were disconnected from the industrial labor movement.

That opened space for Obregón to form an alliance with Magón and the anarcho-syndicalists. Historically, this proved decisive because it both provided an urban base for the Carranza-Obregón faction and established a link between leaders of the revolutionary state and the labor movement, which would become a critical base of support for Mexico's ruling party up until 2000.*

Finally, the alliance between the state and union leaders was reflected in the revolutionary Constitution of 1917, which channeled labor-management conflicts into state-controlled arbitration boards.

Post-Revolutionary Mexico

The second part of the book addresses radicals who arrived in Mexico between 1922 and 1925. In the post-revolutionary period of the 1920s radicals from around the world, particularly from the United States, traveled to Mexico and played critical roles in the development of left-wing and feminist movements.

The Indian Marxist M.N. Roy, once a delegate to the Communist International, lived briefly in Mexico. Other visitors and participants included U.S. Communist Louis Fraina, Bertram Wolfe and Lincoln Steffens.

Riding with the Revolution also draws our attention to the role of U.S. war resisters during World War I, also known as the “slackers.” Many of them fled the United States to Mexico to avoid criminal prosecution for draft evasion.

Carranza often welcomed these refugees because he believed they could be of use in mounting resistance to threats of U.S. military intervention in Mexico. While in Mexico several of the slackers played important roles in the formation of the Communist Party of Mexico and contributed to the ongoing feminist movements there as well.

La Botz explains that slackers and other immigrant radicals helped shape the Mexican communists. However, the party was also closely tied to militant peasant movements. At the same time these peasant movements had close links to one or more of the revolutionary factions vying for control of the new revolutionary state in the 1920s.

“The slackers’ Communist Party, precisely because it attempted to relate to real radical forces for change in Mexico was never far from the left-wing nationalist establishment, and the new state.” (392)

Riding with the Revolution also discusses the interesting interactions between U.S. and Mexican feminists who worked together in the National Council of Women in Mexico.

The council mobilized for women’s civil and economic rights. Its influence on the Mexican socialist left was notable as demands for women’s rights to choose their own husbands and for birth control became widely- shared leftwing demands.

One of the book’s great strengths is that it offers an empathetic look at the various political currents swirling through revolutionary and post-revolutionary Mexico.

Even the more corrupt and compromised historic personalities are complex characters in this telling. There are no denunciations or caricatures. The author painstakingly attempts to show the reader how and why different activists made different political choices.

This is a welcome method. It allows us to develop a rich understanding of broadly different historical currents without lumping disparate forces into simplistic categories.

Consequently, it enables the reader to understand in greater detail why different political actors in both the United States and Mexico made the political choices they made.

*For more detailed analyses of the relationship between Mexican labor and the state see Adolfo Gilly, *La Revolución Interrumpida* (Mexico City: Era, 1994); Dan La Botz, *Mask of Democracy: Labor Suppression in Mexico Today* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1992); Manuel Aguilar Mora, *El Escándalo del Estado: Una Teoría del Poder Político en México* (Mexico City: Fontamara, 2000); Aguilar Mora, *El Bonapartismo Mexicano v.1,2*. (Mexico City: Juan Pablos Editor, 1982); Max Ortega and Ana Alicia Solís de Alba, *Estado, Crisis y Reorganización Sindical* (Mexico City: Editorial Itaca, 2005).

Source: September-October 2026, [ATC 244](#).

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