

Magonismo: An Overview

Chuck Morse

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Contents

The Magonist Challenge	3
1906 – 1908: Peak	4
Activity	5
Decline: 1911–1922	6
Outcomes	7
Magonismo Today?	9

Ricardo Flores Magón is one of the most important anarchists in the history of the Americas. The movement he led and inspired shook the Mexican state in the early 20th century and helped lay the foundations for the Mexican revolution of 1910. He was also a participant in radical movements in the United States and a security concern that reached the highest levels of the U.S. government.

The literature on Magón and the Magonists (as his comrades were known) has expanded considerably in recent decades and it is now possible to develop a fuller appreciation of the movement than at any previous time. One can explore the personal dilemmas of Magón and his co-conspirators through various scholarly biographies, read about the Magonists' impact on specific regions of the United States and Mexico, or study Magonist contributions to Mexican radicalism generally.¹

Anarchists should welcome this not only because our predecessors are finally receiving the historical recognition that they deserve but also because we now have the resources necessary to undertake a deep confrontation with the Magonist legacy. It is now possible to develop a very clear idea of how the Magonists tried to create an anarchist revolution, the consequences their activity yielded, as well as determine whether there are aspects of their activity that we should emulate today.

The books reviewed here are particularly useful. *El magonismo: historia de una pasión libertaria, 1900–1922* (*Magonism: History of a Libertarian Passion, 1900–1922*) by Salvador Hernández Padilla studies the entire history of Magonism from its emergence at the turn of the century to its disappearance from the political scene in the 1920s. *El fenómeno magonista en México y en Estados Unidos 1905–1908* (*The Magonist Phenomenon in Mexico and the United States, 1905–1908*) by Ricardo Cuauhtémoc Esparza Valdivia examines Magonist activity in Mexico and the United States in the years indicated by the title.

Together these works offer a comprehensive picture of the Magonist experience. They reveal a deeply radical social movement that nearly toppled the regime of Porfirio Díaz, the dictator who governed Mexico from 1884 until the 1910 Mexican Revolution. But they also reveal a movement that was beset by intractable problems in both conception and organization.

The Magonist Challenge

The Magonist revolutionary challenge can be divided into three categories: the years prior to 1906 (when the movement was taking shape), the uprisings of 1906 and 1908 (the movement's highpoint), and the period from 1911 to Magón's death in 1922 (the years of decline).

In the years prior to 1906, which are treated by both Esparza Valdivia and Hernández Padilla, the Magonists were little more than a minor irritant for the Mexican government and did not yet possess a coherent revolutionary strategy. However, three transformations occurred that would later have great significance. First, Magón grew from a reformist radical into a revolutionary, thanks to his exposure to anarchist ideas (and the political persecution he suffered).² Second,

¹ For example, see Ward S. Albro, *To Die on Your Feet: The Life, Times, and Writings of Praxedes G. Guerrero* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1996), Ward S. Albro, *Always a Rebel: Ricardo Flores Magón and the Mexican Revolution* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1992), and James A. Sandos, *Rebellion in the Borderlands: Anarchism and the Plan of San Diego, 1904–1923* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992).

² Esparza Valdivia asserts that Magón became an anarchist due to encounters with anarchists in St. Louis, although he does not substantiate this claim and it is not supported by other authors. It appears that Magón's an-

Magón left Mexico for the United States and established himself in the country that would be the Magonist movement's base and his home for the remainder of his life. And, finally, the Magonists' central organizational vehicle, the Partido Liberal de Mexico (Liberal Party of Mexico, PLM) was founded in September 5th, 1905 in St. Louis, Missouri.

1906 – 1908: Peak

It is from 1906 to 1908 that the Magonists acquired their fullest expression as a revolutionary movement. The Magonists, who were the most active opposition to the Díaz regime at the time, participated in strikes, launched militant uprisings, and tirelessly propagated their views. These years are the central concern of Hernández Padilla's Magonismo and essentially the sole focus of Esparza Valdivia's Fenómeno Magonista: the main difference between the two being that Hernández Padilla's broader perspective allows him to place this period in the context of Magonism's development as a whole whereas Esparza Valdivia compensates for his more limited purview with greater detail and more nuanced political commentary.

The Magonists were unambiguously revolutionary during these years, although the nature of their revolution was unclear and shaped by deeply contradictory aspirations. On the one hand, their goals were defined in the PLM's famous 1906 Program, which was essentially a social democratic document. The Program, which is reprinted in Hernández's Magonismo, called for constitutional reforms, such as the reduction of the president's term to four years and the elimination of military tribunals during peace time, and made various demands relating to the relationship between capital and labor, such as the eight hour day and the minimum wage, etc. This was certainly not an anarchist program. As Esparza Valdivia states, "one of the most important aspects of this program lay in the creation of a state with a social consciousness, that would intervene to improve the conditions of the worker...so that workers and peasants can enjoy their constitutional rights."³

The Magonist movement's social democratic aims were further articulated in a letter sent to U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt by Magón and his comrade Antonio Villarreal. "At the triumph of the revolution," they wrote, "the Junta [of the Liberal Party] will provisionally take over the government, and call the people to elections. The people will elect new leaders, and the citizens favored by the public vote will of course take possession of their charges, while the Junta will dissolve itself. The new government will have the obligation to carry out the program of the Liberal Party, which is precisely the object of the revolution."⁴

On the other hand, Magón's anarchism was maturing during this period and became an increasingly significant influence on PLM activity (although he did not publicly state his anarchist convictions until years later). He explained the rationale behind such concealment in a 1908 letter to his brother Enrique and Práxedes Guerrero (both of whom were active Magonists). He wrote:

archism developed from his exposure to anarchist literature that was circulating at the time. Ricardo Cuauhtémoc Esparza Valdivia, *El fenómeno magonista en México y en Estados Unidos 1905–1908* (Zacatecas: Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas, 2000), 44.

³ Ibid., 65.

⁴ Cited in Salvador Hernández Padilla, *El Magonismo: historia de una pasión libertaria, 1900–1922* (México, DF: Ediciones Era, 1984), 89.

“In order to obtain great benefits for the people, effective benefits, to work as anarchists would easily crush us...all is reduced to a conception of mere tactics. If from the first we had called ourselves anarchists no one, or not but a few, would have listened to us. Without calling ourselves anarchists we have gone on planting in mind ideas of hatred against the possessing class and against the governmental caste...this has been achieved without saying that we are anarchists...all, then, is a question of tactics.

We must give land to the people in the course of the revolution; so that the poor will not be deceived...in order not to turn the entire nation against us, we must follow the same tactics that we have practiced with such success: we will continue calling ourselves liberals in the course of the revolution but in reality we will be propagating anarchy and executing anarchistic acts.

Only the anarchists will know that we are anarchists. And we will advise them not to call us anarchists in order not to scare such imbeciles that in the depths of their consciousness harbor ideas like ours, but without knowing that they are anarchist ideals, therefore they are accustomed to hear talk about the anarchists in unfavorable terms.”⁵

Esparza Valdivia explains this contradictory approach by stating simply that “the Magonists took their public discourse from liberalism and their strategy from anarchism.”⁶

Activity

In practice, the PLM tried to link itself to the incipient industrial workers’ movement by radicalizing and supporting the miners’ strike in Cananea and also the workers’ rebellion among textile workers in Rio Blanco (at the beginning and end of 1906, respectively). PLM participation in both events lacked strongly articulated objectives and served primarily to make the Mexican government aware that they intended to become a genuine threat. This was the extent of Magonist engagement in the labor movement.

It was through the PLM’s military activity that the organization mounted the most serious challenge and achieved its greatest notoriety. The Magonists initiated uprising after uprising in a (vain) attempt to spark a generalized insurgency against the Díaz regime.

The flurry of uprisings began in the later months of 1906, shortly after the release of the PLM’s Program. The PLM had divided the Republic into five zones and structured its army hierarchically around the Junta of the PLM: in each zone a trusted Magonist served as a delegate to the Junta, which communicated orders through him to the leaders of regional guerilla groups who, in turn, commanded various sub leaders. As is typical of such cellular structures, only Magón and other members of the Junta knew the names of all combatants and the full scope of the organization’s activities.

Poor planning, inadequate communication, and the combined efforts of Mexican and American security forces doomed many of these uprisings to failure. For example, on September 6th a rebellion was thwarted in Douglas, Arizona when the Magonists were arrested by the police in

⁵ The first two paragraphs are from Ward S. Albro, *Always a Rebel: Ricardo Flores Magón and the Mexican Revolution* (Fort Worth, Texas: Christian University Press, 1992). The final paragraph is from Jacinto Barrera Basols, *Correspondencia 2: 1919–1922* (México, DF: Fondo Editorial Tierra Adentro, 2000), 468.

⁶ Esparza Valdivia, *El fenómeno magonista en México y en Estados Unidos 1905–1908*, 182.

the United States. Another attempted uprising in Cananea was foiled on September 15th as well as one planned in San Luis Potosí. An attempt to take the city of Juárez on October 21st was also destroyed by arrests as was another potential uprising in La Perla de la Laguna.

Other PLM campaigns were more successful. For example, on September 26th a group of guerillas successfully seized Jiménez, Coahuila, although they were scattered quickly due to a surprise attack by 80 Mexican soldiers. Numerous Magonists died in the conflict and others fled to the U.S. border, where they were apprehended by police from the United States. On September 30th three hundred Magonists attacked the town of Acayucan in the southern state of Veracruz. The group's leader, Hilario Salas, was injured and his forces dispersed. Two days later the Magonists repeated the attack and were dispersed once again. On October 4th, in the mountain range of Sotepan, approximately 350 largely indigenous Magonists from the region waged a fierce battle against federal troops, upon whom they inflicted great losses. They fled into the forest after the attack and were pursued by troops under the direct orders of Porfirio Díaz.

Thus, writes Esparza Valdivia, ended the "first wave of Magonist attempts to build an insurrection in the country," which unfolded "while the Mexican and American government acted more and more jointly to extinguish a conflict that involved both countries in its connections and consequences."⁷

In 1908, after a short period of reflection and reorganization, the Magonists launched a new insurrectionary wave from the cities of Los Angeles, El Paso, and Austin.

Although an attack planned for June 23rd in the city of Juárez was foiled by arrests and three more were thwarted in the state of Sonora, others were more successful. On June 24th an uprising occurred in Viesca, Coahuila. Twenty rebels killed the police commander and three of his staff, attacked the house of the municipal president, took money found in public offices as well as arms and other items from stores. After a battle, the guerrillas cut the telegraph line and tore up railroad tracks while fleeing and, two days later, killed a member of an advance team sent to search for them. The rebels were defeated only when confronted by a force of approximately 500 men. Four days later, on June 28th, fifty Magonists attacked the town of Las Vacas and a customs building on the border of Texas and Mexico. The offices of the Mexican officials and a troop barracks were both set on fire. The Magonists suffered losses during the ensuing battle. On June 30th Magonists threw two bombs at an empty customs office in Palomas and, before fleeing, lost one comrade in the ensuing combat.⁸

Decline: 1911–1922

In 1911 the Magonists entered a decline that would continue until the movement was fully extinguished with Magón's death in 1922. Although this was a period of eclipse, the Magonists did carry out some important interventions in the final months of 1910 and the beginning of 1911.

At the end of 1910 a group of Magonists rebelled with Francisco Madero's forces, while remaining organizationally separate, in Bachiniva, Chihuahua. Madero, who assumed the Mexican presidency after the collapse of the Díaz regime, was the leader of the moderate, overtly reformist tendency within the Mexican revolutionary movement. This collaboration with Madero was soon followed by the crippling defection of numerous Magonists to Madero's camp.

⁷ Ibid., 75.

⁸ Ibid., 158.

However, “in the months of December 1910 and January of 1911, small nuclei of Magonists continued fighting in an independent form,” notes Hernández Padilla.⁹ For example, Práxedes Guerrero, one of the most active and talented Magonists, led an attack upon and captured the town of Janos, Chihuahua on December 30th. He died in this assault (at the age of 28) and became one of the movement’s martyrs.

The Magonists biggest military campaign unfolded in the first half of 1911. On January 29th a handful of Magonists seized Mexicali in the state of Baja, California and on May 8th and 9th seized Tijuana. Magonist forces also occupied San Quintín, Santo Tomás, San Elmo and Santa Catarina in the eastern part of the peninsula. The occupation of Baja, California descended into a comedy of errors and, in mid June, the Magonists were defeated by Mexican government troops (now under Madero’s control). Numerous Magonist soldiers were apprehended and savagely executed at a “rate of six per day.”¹⁰

In 1911 the PLM also released its Manifiesto, which contained an explicitly anarchist content and superseded the reformist 1906 Program as the organization’s main statement of principal. Although this ended the ideological ambiguity that had haunted the movement for years, its release coincided with the decline of the Magonist presence in national affairs and thus produced no great effect. Indeed, while Magón “continued telling of the existence of groups of PLM guerillas that were acting in some regions of northern Mexico, concretely in the Sierra de Burro.... everything seems to indicate...that the guerilla groups had no real influence.”¹¹

Ricardo Flores Magón died in Leavenworth Penitentiary in 1922, at the age of forty nine, while serving a twenty year sentence for violating the Espionage Act and various postal regulations. Although some claim that he was assassinated, evidence seems to suggest that prison authorities murdered him indirectly by denying him needed medical care for his diabetes.

Outcomes

The Magonists mounted a formidable challenge to the Mexican state and it is hard not to be impressed by the quantity and geographic spread of the uprisings that they launched, the material damage they inflicted upon the Mexican state, and the sheer numbers of people that they mobilized. This is especially remarkable when one considers that most of this unfolded over the course of five short years and was organized from various cities in the United States. However, Magón clearly failed to reach his genuine objective (social revolution), his stated objective (seizure of state power by the Liberal Party), or to build a radical movement that could survive beyond his death.

Why? In *El fenómeno magonista* Esparza Valdivia argues the Magonists were doomed by their inability to appeal to the truly disenfranchised classes. He notes that while the Magonists tried to agitate and lead the workers in the principal industries, Magonism only resonated with the middle classes who were, he asserts, “the principle support of the Magonist ideal.”¹² Hernández Padilla makes a more specific claim in *Magonismo*. He points out that the Liberal Party’s social base was “comprised of small groups of workers, sectors of the urban middle class, and

⁹ Hernández Padilla, *El magonismo: historia de una pasión libertaria, 1900–1922*, 137.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹² Esparza Valdivia, *El fenómeno magonista en México y en Estados Unidos 1905–1908*, 180.

some landowners—principally from the northern states—[who were] discontented with the central government.”¹³ And, while the “program of the Liberal Party included the defense of peasant interests among its principal demands, in practice the Junta gave priority to the task of linking itself to, influencing, and organizing the industrial proletariat” and thus did not make significant gains among peasants (among whom the Zapatistas, for example, had great support).¹⁴ He claims that the failure to make the peasantry an organizational focus became “one of the principle weaknesses of the PLM as an oppositional organization of the Left.... Without this support, it was less than impossible to successfully carry out a social revolution in Mexico.”¹⁵ Both authors also assert that the PLM was debilitated by unresolved ideological contradictions between the party’s more moderate, reformist wing and the anarchist wing led by Magón.

Esparza Valdivia and Hernández Padilla’s comments help explain why the Magonists did not build a more broad-based revolutionary movement. However, neither author asks what would have happened had the Magonists actually ignited the generalized uprising that they hoped to set off. Would they have seized power and called elections, as demanded by their Program, or would they have abolished the state as demanded by Magón’s anarchist convictions? The failure to entertain this question suggests that the authors do not take the PLM’s most ambitious objectives very seriously. And perhaps rightly so: everything seems to indicate that the PLM would have been immobilized by the irreconcilable contradictions in its aims had it genuinely confronted the question of power.

Despite the movement’s failure to reach its most far reaching goals, it did produce several important secondary consequences. In *El fenómeno magonista*, Esparza Valdivia argues that the Magonists bear significant responsibility for prompting Porfirio Díaz to give an interview that is widely seen as a key factor in the eruption of the Mexican revolution. In this interview, which he conducted with American journalist James Creelman, Díaz stated that he supported the emergence of opposition parties and would not seek reelection. This encouraged the development of opposition forces that, in the end, he could not contain. Esparza Valdivia asserts that Díaz made these statements in an effort to assure American readers of his democratic credentials and needed to do so because his repressive campaigns against the Magonists had severely compromised his image in the United States. If this were the case, one could justly claim that the Magonists were responsible for the final collapse of the Díaz regime, but the argument is not compelling because it depends upon an assertion about Díaz’s motives, which are impossible to ascertain.

The Magonists also constructed a radical legacy that has not only enriched anarchism but also Mexican national consciousness. Esparza Valdivia points out that the Magonists radicalized the discourse of the Mexican Revolution by showing “that it was not enough to conserve the Constitution of 1857 and the ideas of the Reform, [but] that it was necessary to take up the social question... This demand, the points that they stressed to resolve [this question] and the actions that they carried out in accordance with the anarchist project to make it a reality, were [their] most important contribution to national history.”¹⁶ This legacy, Esparza Valdivia continues, was embodied in the Mexican Constitution of 1917, which was considered the full realization of the

¹³ Hernández Padilla, *El magonismo: historia de una pasión libertaria, 1900–1922*, 167.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁶ Esparza Valdivia, *El fenómeno magonista en México y en Estados Unidos 1905–1908*, 184–185.

aims of the Mexican Revolution and which took its most original features and orientation toward the social from the Program of the Mexican Liberal Party.¹⁷

Magonismo Today?

I think it is easy to see why the Magonist movement would be attractive to historians, but what aspects of their activity would contemporary anarchists want to emulate?

Clearly the movement's courage, militancy, and insistence upon raising "the social question" are commendable and should be taken to heart by activists today. Although such an observation may seem platitudinal, the importance of such qualities for dissidents cannot be overstated.

However, beyond that, I think there is little in Magon's politics that one would want to replicate today. Magón's ideological duplicity—the fact that he concealed his anarchism beneath the Liberal banner—was a form of *realpolitik* that must be held in contempt by anyone who values the frank discussion of ideals and convictions. Likewise, the organizational structure of the Liberal Party was hierarchical and did not permit internal democracy. Indeed, organizationally, the PLM has more in common with a Marxist-Leninist vanguard party than the decentralized forms commonly associated with anarchism. Finally, the Magonists, like so many anarchists, held the naïve belief that social discontent merely needed to be sparked in order to erupt into a revolutionary explosion, and this short-cut to the creation of a genuinely informed and empowered revolutionary movement is deeply untenable. Social change is far more complex than that and such a perspective accords far too much importance to the acts of small groups and individuals.

Although anarchists should welcome the growing literature on Magonism and avail ourselves of the opportunity to study the movement deeply, no towering heroes emerge from the legacy that the Magonists have bequeathed to us. It is imperative that we explore the contributions of our predecessors and also imperative that we remember that the foundations of a truly revolutionary politics for the Americas have yet to be fashioned.

¹⁷ Op cit.

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