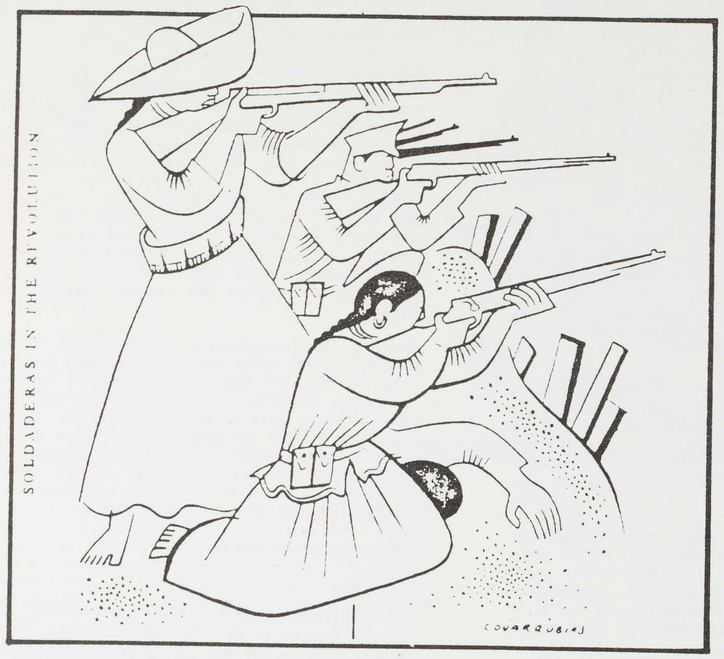
ANARCHIST HISTORY NOTES



Librado Rivera and Flores Magon

The Mexican revolution of the early 20th century is long forgotten within the United States, though at the time, the American government and our big time capitalists were much involved with its process -- chiefly in an effort to undercut Mexican radical and libertarian forces and to sponsor reactionary and counter-revolutionary efforts.

Two influential Mexican anarchists who were deeply committed to true social revolution in Mexico and who suffered heavily at the hands of reactionary forces and American officialdom were Librado Rivera (1864-1932) and Ricardo Flores Magon (1874-1922). Though known today outside of Mexico only by history specialists, the writings both men left behind are still highly relevant to the struggles for land liberty and labor rights that continues to engage concerned people throughout the world.

Mexico, having thrown off the burden of Spanish colonialism by 1810 (Mexican Independence Day is celebrated on the sixteenth of September every year) was subjected to a series of unenlightened regimes. Then in 1861, the country was invaded by England, Spain and France, ostensibly to force payment of Mexico's debts. As a result of this invasion, France's Napoleon III set up the Austrian Archduke Maximilian as Emporer. A nationalist revolt led by Juarez ended this episode. Juarez was followed by Porfirio Diaz, who consolidated his control of the gentry at the expense of the poverty-stricken peasants and Indians in 1877. This long period of forced "peace" was finally broken when, in 1910, armed rebellion by the mass of the Mexican people broke out.

Librado and Flores Magon were active politically long before the revolt. From the end of the 19th century they had been enthusiastic supporters of liberal reform, and both suffered abuse from the Diaz regime as their opposition to political repression grew. Flores Magon had started a radical newspaper, "Regeneracion," and was put in prison as early as 1901 for his outspoken attacks on the Diaz dictatorship. Librado was firs imprisoned in Mexico in 1902.

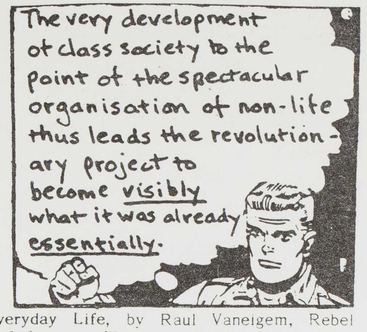
By 1904, following the closing of a new newspaper and a second stint in prison, both men crossed into the United States. They went to St. Louis, Mo., where they re-started "Regeneracion". They also met and were influenced by Emma Goldman and the Spanish anarchist Florencio Bazora. These experiences solidified their lasting commitment to anarchism.

For many years the lives of these two men were devoted to propaganda and educational efforts, broken up by the harrassment of U.S. and Pinkerton agents and periods in American jails. In March of 1918, Librado and Flores Magon were arrested on an espionage charge after publishing a manifesto addressed to the anarchists and the workers of the world. Librado was sentenced to 15 years in prison, Flores Magon to 20 years. The health of the latter began to decline and on Nov. 22, 1922, he died in Kansas' Leavenworth prison. Librado was released from Leavenworth in 1923, after an international protest campaign by anarchist supporters, and deported to Mexico.

During the last nine years of his life, Librado founded publications, waged unceasing propaganda efforts, involved himself in labor disputes, and served brief periods in Mexican jails. Following an automobile accident in 1932, he contracted tetenus and died.

The writings of both men may be found today in an English-language edition, Land & Liberty: Anarchist Influences in the Mexican Revolution, by Ricardo Flores Magon, published in paperback by Cienfuegos Press.

Commodity, Spectacle and Revolt



The Revolution of Everyday Life, by Raul Vaneigem, Rebel Press/Left Bank Books. 216 pages. $7.00 paperback.

All valuable writers write chiefly about themselves. Even the seemingly most impartial are largely producing autobiography.

This was (or is) particularly true of the Situationists, that band of acutely perceptive social revolutionaries who felt strongly the inauthenticity of the lives they were led to live. From their position of personal suffering and outrage came -- in the fifties and sixties -- a steady production of jarring periodicals and books, of declarations and insulting acts.

One of the better and most typical of their products was Raul Vaneigem's **"Traite de savoir-vivre a l'usage des jeunes generations"**, now in a new english translation as The Revolution of Everyday Life, by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Some readers will find it incomprehensible, but those who share the Situationists' silightly oblique manner of seeing social existence will find it inspiring indeed. Here at last, many will say, is a technique or psychology of political perception, so lacking in familiar Left ideologies.

Vaneigem is very difficult to review. He packs his material in little star-burst paragraphs. His method is that of revelation, as in the following random quotes:

(1) "Religious beliefs concealed man from himself....Behind the rent veil of superstition appeared, not naked truth....but the birdlime of ideologies. The prisoners of fragmentary power have no refuge from tyranny but the shadow of freedom."

(2) "The economy of daily life is based on a continual exchange of humiliations and aggressive attitudes. It conceals a technique of attrition itself prey to the gift of destruction which paradoxically it invites."

(3) "Docility is no longer ensured by means of priestly magic, it results from a mass of minor hypnoses: news, culture, city planning, advertising, mechanisms of conditioning and suggestion ready to serve any order, established or to come."

(4) "People who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life, without understanding what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have a corpse in thier mouths."

And then there are sentences and parpgraphs that would cause English professors to cut their own throats, as on page 208: "The red dawn of riots cannot banish the monstrous creatures of the night. It clothes them in light and fire, strewing them across town and countryside. The new innocence is baleful dreams becoming reality. Subjectivity cannot construct itself without destroying whatever stands in its way; the violence necessary for this is drawn from the interworld. The new innocence is the clearsighted construction of an annihilation." Understandible, yes; but necessary in such boozy form? Vaneigem admits the book was written between conversations at sidewalk cafes.

The Situationists sought to show the individual in what manner he or she had become part of the commodity process, in what way each was being used within "the spectacle," how inauthenticity and consumption were replacing actual human living. The way out for the Situationists, the way to combat those enemies of love who were busy cooking up the man of the future, was through self-realization and acts of refusal, by way of the self-united person, the artist of absolute negation of the artificial.

The Situationists were correct in noting that the new culture and comfort does damage to the imagination; that the new "socialist" countries were busy organizing life along bourgeois lines; that the worker council was probably the only natural and beneficial form of organization for a revolutionary world. But all Situationist writing has a shocking lack: their declarations are without a shadow of compassion, without a hint of sympathetic joy. They were brilliant, hurt, and angry -- but that has never been enough. They were without a plan and they lacked the necessary touch of self-forgiveness which allows the individual to live life as it is rather than how it should be according to a theory of history.

The Situationists often stated (and Vaneigem restates it in this book) that their organized movement did end with strong purpose. The Situationist International claimed to have laid down the method by which ideas would shape the events in the May, 1968 student revolt in Paris. It is true that the '68 eruption was packed to the brim with imagination and daring -- and that its general beneficial influence can never now be unmade -- but it was not a revolution. It was instead an energetic and sincere spasm that demonstrated how little we are prepared for the human and organizational conflicts that come forth with every possibility of genuine change.

One meets many self-described "situationists" today. They are characterized by their overuse of the jargon of Debord and Vaneigem, by their anger, emotional uneveness, and by regular cries of "bourgeois self-indulgence!" They remind one of Marxist-Leninists, only less dull and smug. I understand Situationists and Vaneigem as separate individuals; I know they are wrong to say that in the workday world all we have in common as humans is the illusion of being together.

I see the Situationists seeking a grounding for intimacy and love. Although they never say so, I see them seeking ecstacy, for there is great yearning in their paragraphs and cartoons. What they found was a world empty of meaning, its surface decorated with games and self-delusion. They judged conditioned thought and conditioned reality as life itself. They noted the false play of ego in society, the creating of unceasing entertainment, the fabrication of significance for production.

But this tendency toward an almost shrill view of existence is part of the building materials of extremism, ideologies, and the "secular relligions" that lead people to imagine themselves in possession of absolute truth. It is such a mind-set -- once again under the control of conditioned thought -- that destroys the possibilities for real revolutionary transformation. Had the Situationists based their manifestoes of judgement and revolt on a deeper measuring of the human mind and of Nature, they might well have left us with much more valuable insights to help in the reconstruction of our confused and battered society.

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