On the Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón

“He Died for Anarchy”

by CLAUDIO LOMNITZ and JAVIER SETHNESS CASTRO

Part I of II

Javier Sethness Castro: Professor Lomnitz, I am most grateful to you for being so kind as to discuss your new collective biography The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón (Zone Books, 2014) with me. I wish also to thank my friend Allen Kim for bringing my attention to this marvelous work, which provides an intimate and far-reaching examination of the life of the renowned Mexican anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón (1874-1922) and of those closest to him—principally, his brothers Jesús (elder) and Enrique (junior), Librado Rivera, and Práxedis G. Guerrero, all of whom were associates of the Junta Organizadora of the Mexican Liberal Party (PLM). As a result of his lifelong commitment to social revolution, Ricardo was a political prisoner for much of his life: he spent over a fifth of his lifespan incarcerated, in fact. He died in November 1922 after two years’ imprisonment in Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary in Kansas for having called on his fellow Mexicans to take up arms against both white-supremacists in Texas and Venustiano Carranza’s reactionary army. The life of Magón, like those of his comrades, then, was full of Eros and Thanatos, or revolution and repression.

First things first: please speak to the title you chose for your work, if you would. Do you mean to refer to the processional “return” of Magón’s physical body to Mexico City in the weeks after his death in Leavenworth Prison, or do you perhaps mean to suggest that a resurgence or regeneration of the spirit of the Mexican Liberal Party’s (PLM) anarchist-communist alternative is taking place in our own day, like a Shakespearean or Hegelian apparition—le revenant (“the ghost,” or literally “the returning”) discussed by Jacques Derrida in Specters of Marx?1

Claudio Lomnitz: I would like to begin by thanking you for having taken the work and trouble to read The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón. The work of readers is critical and precious, and never easy. So thank you, especially for that.
The title is, as you imply, freighted with meaning. It does, in the first instance, refer to the return of Ricardo to Mexico (as a corpse), and thus implicitly raises the question of the significance of his exile: why did Ricardo return as a (venerated) corpse? Why the disjoint between physical absence and spiritual presence in Mexico? At that level, the title is a nod to the central historical question in the book, which is the relationship between ideology and exile in the Mexican Revolution.

But there is also a second aspect, one you summarized in your question better than I could. And this is the currency of the movement’s concern with mutual aid as both political project and as a biological imperative. Because of this currency—because forms of communistic organization and anarchy are today on the horizon of possibility—the figure of Ricardo has that phantasmic power that you refer to. Yes, of a Shakespearean apparition.

**Javier Sethness Castro:** The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón is an important study of the specifically transnational dimensions of the Mexican Revolution—a point you stress explicitly in the introduction to the book, where you point to the revolutionary organizational efforts of the anarchists in the PLM’s Junta Organizadora and their fellow socialists, both Mexican and U.S., as amounting to the “first major grassroots Mexican-American solidarity network.” You describe this history as “the story of a transnational revolutionary network that thought of itself collectively as the servant of an ideal [that] could be told in the mold of Don Quijote—the story of a group of men and women who read books and acted on them […]. Their acts were seen as wild. Like Don Quijote, they seemed to be out of place—utopian—or more precisely, out of time.” Please explain how this unique cast of characters was wild, quixotic, and utopian.

**Claudio Lomnitz:** Their acts were seen as wild, as I said, in large part because they were. There is in this milieu an element of sexual revolution and of familial transformation that was wild, for example. This manifests itself in different ways. Elizabeth Trowbridge, a wealthy Bostonian, married Manuel Sarabia, an imprisoned Mexican revoltoso, not before having paid his bail, and she then convinced him to jump bail and flee with her to England in order to escape conviction. Ricardo Flores
Magón lived in sin with María Brousse and regarded her daughter as his. Enrique Flores Magón wrote pieces about the ignominy of husbands brutalizing and commanding their wives. Emma Goldman, of course, was a great advocate of birth control, and this was also a position supported explicitly by Enrique and Ricardo in Regeneración. Naturally, too, the members of the Partido Liberal Mexicano were not allowed to marry by the Church. In the United States, many of the Mexican radicals created homes that were composite dwellings, that included both kin and non-kin. So there was also some “wildness” there—the dwelling that was occupied by Enrique and Ricardo and their families, along with a number of other families, outside of Los Angeles can be appropriately described as a commune, and indeed some of the group’s old U.S. and European allies, like socialist Job Harriman, for instance, created agricultural communes in the United States. In addition to this intimate level of “wildness,” there was of course also the political level of wildness—clandestinity, propaganda work, striking, supporting armed revolt, and so on.

I don’t believe that this group saw itself as utopian—they believed that there were real and very immediate possibilities for their ideas, especially once the Mexican Revolution began, during World War I, and in the immediate aftermath of the Russian Revolution. This sense of immanent possibilities declined later. Ricardo did not live that moment, but Enrique certainly did. By the 1940s and 50s, Enrique saw their old ideas as not attainable in the present.

Of course, many contemporaries did believe that the anarchist ideas were utopian. This included some prominent members of the Mexican Liberal Party, and even former members of the Junta. Militants like Juan Sarabia and Antonio Villarreal, who participated actively in the Mexican Revolution, but believed in a kind of gradualism, and in participation in Mexican democratic politics. So the question of whether their strategy was utopian or attainable was very much a matter of debate.

As for being quixotic, this too is complex. Certainly everyone who labels this group “precursors of the Mexican Revolution” thinks of them as quixotic, in the sense of anachronistic—prior to their time, fighting a fight that could not yet be won. This, of course, was not this group’s own sense. But there was another way in which its members might well have seen themselves as quixotic: they spent their lives reading, and acted on what they read. They were not passive readers. Moreover, they invested everything, gave everything up, for the world that they were imagining and creating. In this sense, I think that many of these militants would willingly have identified with Quijote.
Javier Sethness Castro: You observe that none of the principal U.S. militants affiliated with the “Mexican Cause” were attracted or connected to Mexico—its people, history, or politics—in any special way before coalescing in 1908 to support the PLM’s struggle to overthrow Porfirio Díaz, and that none of them even knew Spanish before that time! Considering the PLM’s denunciations in Regeneración of the outright slavery instituted and overseen by the Porfiriato together with the feminist, proletarian, Christian, and cosmopolitan-internationalist dimensions that would seem to have contributed to the Norteños’ collaboration with the cause— including that of the International Workers of the World (IWW), Emma Goldman, and Alexander Berkman—would you say their participation in the struggle to have reflected a particular manifestation of the universal struggle for justice?

Claudio Lomnitz: I certainly would say that, and all of them would have said it, too. Probably without a single exception.

Javier Sethness Castro: As you explain, one key parallel the PLM group and U.S. supporters of the “Mexican Cause” were wont to draw was between Díaz and the ossified Russian autocracy, headed by the Romanov Tsar Nicholas II. One of the most momentous such parallels came to light through John Kenneth Turner’s investigation of Mexico’s “tropical Siberia,” the Yucatán Peninsula, where hundreds of thousands of Mayas, Yaquis, and Koreans were enslaved. Turner’s exposé, first published as two reports in American Magazine in 1909 and thereafter as Barbarous Mexico (1910), resonated importantly with U.S. audiences, as it illuminated, in your words, “America’s reactionary slaving tradition pushing yet farther south under the shadowy cover of a dictatorship that [the U.S. government and capital] enthusiastically supported” while also bringing to light yet another manifestation of the extermination of Native America—another Trail of Tears, as seen in the lamentable fate of the deported, displaced, and massacred Yaquis. To be honest, when reading this chapter of the text, “The People Were the Sacrifice,” I was reminded of Mike Davis’ Late Victorian Holocaus ts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World (2000). Could you speak to the significance of Turner’s work in terms of changing international public opinion about Mexico amidst the hegemonic narrative then advanced by media outlets like the San Francisco Chronicle and the Los Angeles Times—owned at that time by William Randolph Hearst and Harrison Gray Otis, respectively, who in turn were the respective beneficiaries of two and one-half million acres of land in Chihuahua and Baja California which Díaz had sold them—toward an analysis that affirmed the Porfiriato as effectively facilitating a “capitalist slave colony”?
Claudio Lomnitz: Porfirio Díaz had really excellent press in the United States. In part, this was due to the undeniable success of the early years of his dictatorship, when Díaz cobbled together a coalition that allowed the Mexican federal government to quash highway banditry, pay its foreign debt, succeed in importing massive capital, build railways, and consolidate a national market. In part this was due to the incredible influx of U.S. foreign direct investment into Mexico during his long mandate. Historian John Hart has documented that Mexico absorbed more than 60% of the US’s investments abroad, so to defend Díaz was to defend American investments. But there was also a deliberate and very active courting of opinion by Díaz, including, as you say, by giving exceedingly juicy concessions to a couple of prominent moguls: Hearst and Otis.

Changing U.S. opinion on Díaz and Mexico was a pretty tall order. Some of that transformation was beginning to happen thanks to the work of Mexicans in the United States including the members of the PLM, but not only them. Some of the transformation was happening because of Americans’ own sentiments regarding justice and injustice in Mexico—for example, there was some turn of opinion in favor of the Yaqui Indians in Arizona border towns. But John Kenneth Turner deserves a lot of credit for his work—a lot!

First of all, John was able to get his pieces into the mainstream press—the muckraking American Magazine—rather than in the socialist press, which had quite large runs in those days, but to some degree implied preaching to the choir. He was able to do this because he focused so clearly and poignantly on the problem of slavery, and on the extermination of the Indians. And because he was able to do this through first-hand, direct reporting. These are major accomplishments. He had others, too, but this was key to his role in making a scandal out of Mexico.
Javier Sethness Castro: In discussing the family background of the Flores Magón brothers, you relate how Enrique in his memoir attempts to portray his ancestral paternal line of Aztec nobles as instituting a form of “primitive communism” among the Mazatec-speaking indigenous peasants of Oaxaca they had conquered as a means of alleviating his anxiety over hailing from relative class privilege. This point notwithstanding, it does not seem that Teodoro Flores was as wealthy as Práxedes’ family of origin, for example, considering Ricardo’s teenage compulsion to enter the workforce as a domestic servant in the early 1890’s, following Teodoro’s death and Jesús’ imprisonment for writing articles critical of the Porfiriato. You also show that Enrique papers over his father’s closeness with Díaz and the latter’s participation—indeed!—in the 1876 “Tuxtepec Revolution” which installed Díaz as dictator, preferring instead to recall Teodoro’s previous military service in defense of Mexican sovereignty and Liberalism, as embodied in Benito Juárez’s person and the 1857 Constitution, against the imperialist French invasion forces and their reactionary Mexican affiliates, who avenged Flores’ heroic resistance by murdering his father, mother-in-law, and wife in a cowardly attack on the family ranch in 1865. To what degree do you see Enrique’s selective memory as a normal expression of socio-psychological repression within families—one that is accentuated in this case, to accord with the revolutionism of the Flores Magón brothers? A similar example—if more disturbing for its opportunism—is seen in the credit Enrique takes in his memoirs for commanding the PLM’s 1908 revolt, which in point of fact was led by Práxedes and Francisco Manríque, with Enrique being nowhere remotely near the site of battle.

Claudio Lomnitz: A complicated question. The question of false Aztec genealogy was not unusual among these militants, and not peculiar to Enrique. Lázaro Gutiérrez de Lara also had it, for instance, and I think that it is related to Mexican self-narration in the United States, which tended to take a radically Indianist turn, because American opinion agreed that Spaniards were disgusting and tended to see the Indians as noble. In the case of the Flores Magón brothers, there was also some impetus from within Mexico to present their father as member of an indigenous elite, rather than as an hacendado. As you say, Teodoro was not an hacendado in the way that Práxedis Guerrero or Francisco Manríque’s parents had been.

The rest of the question, though, pertains to the problem of memory within Mexico, and after the Revolution. Enrique survived most of his main peers, and he can be said to have been swallowed by the Revolutionary State and its logic. In the 1930s he was actively involved in shaping an organization of “Precursors of the Mexican Revolution” that received government pensions for services rendered, and he and his wife Teresa...
Arteaga were amongst those charged with certifying and authenticating who was and who was not a precursor. In the 1940s Enrique wrote weekly for El Nacional, telling the tales of that revolutionary group.

In a context of this kind, the contradictions of the history of the revolution, of the history of the PLM, and of their own family history were not easy to admit to. His break with Ricardo, for instance, was virtually impossible to admit, let alone to explain to a general Mexican audience. So that part of Enrique’s distortions are not simply the typical family distortion. Finally, Enrique in his later years was very prone to somewhat wild story-telling. As I show in the book, though, there was method to his madness.

**Javier Sethness Castro:** With reference to Ricardo’s youthful “bohemian” period in Mexico City, you present historian José Valadés’ stress on the importance of this life-stage, when Magón came to know “the reality in which the Mexican people lived”: that “there was no peace, light, or health for the poor.” As Ricardo would write later, “only [ze] who suffers can understand the suffering of others.” Would you say there is a direct line between the experiences Ricardo had during his bohemian phase and the public declaration he would make at the First Liberal Congress in San Luis Potosí (February 1901)—the statement which would make him so famous, and that would echo the definitive shift made by the editors of Regeneración from “independent juridical journalism” to “combative journalism” in late 1900—that “the Díaz administration is a den of thieves”?

**Claudio Lomnitz:** Although that portion of the family history is the most difficult to reconstruct—during the 1890s, I mean—I do have the impression that it was formative, as José Valadés claimed. Valadés emphasizes the role that sexual initiation with prostitutes and in the low-class dives that the students frequented had in Ricardo. According to Valadés, Ricardo got some sort of venereal disease then, and it was for this reason that he was unable later to have children. He also believes that intimate knowledge of the miserable lives of Mexico’s prostitutes and their families was important for Ricardo’s political sensibility and education. Valadés had direct conversations with Ricardo’s contemporaries that were not available to me, and I tend to believe his account. If anything, Valadés falls a bit short in his analysis of the influence of the bohemian period on the early Regeneración, for what is obvious is that during that decade, these young men actively fashioned themselves not only after French Revolutionaries, but also after Mexican Liberals. To my mind, Ricardo’s “The Díaz administration is a den of thieves!”, repeated thrice in San Luis Potosí, was a re-enactment of Ignacio Ramírez’s 1836 “God does not exist” (also repeated thrice, in
Toluca). The self-fashioning and theatrics of the 1900-01 effervescence was crafted in the Bohemian period.

**Javier Sethness Castro:** Pathos certainly grips the story you relate of how Doña Margarita Magón died while her sons Ricardo and Jesús were incarcerated in Belem Prison in Mexico City (1901-2) on the charge of libel for factual claims they had made in Regeneración. In their reports on her death, as you relate, the media of the time claimed Margarita's anguish over her sons' ordeal to have precipitated her end—much in the way that Anticleia of The Odyssey expresses that it was "only my loneliness and the force of my affection for you, dear Odysseus, that took my own life away." In your estimation, how did the reactions of the three brothers differ to this tragedy—the sacrifice "of their most sacred relationship [...] for political life," one which echoed the misfortune visited on Teodoro for his military service opposing the French invaders—especially in the case of Ricardo?

**Claudio Lomnitz:** This is a crucial question for understanding the decisions, and some of the psychological make-up, of the three brothers, which is an issue that concerns me in the book because I find that one tends to impute motivations on actors, regardless of whether or not one claims to have an interest in their psychology. So it's best to make one's views on motivations more, rather than less, explicit, if only for the purpose of facilitating debate and the development of alternative views.

Briefly, then, my sense is that Margarita’s death led the eldest of the brothers, Jesús, to abandon the alternative of clandestine politics and any political practice that would land him in jail again. For Jesús, Margarita's death was in some regards a replay, since Jesús was the first of the brothers to have landed in prison, and the first time that this had happened to him was but four days after Teodoro, the boys' father, had died. Jesús's first imprisonment left his mother and his younger brothers unprotected economically—they had to leave their home and change address for lack of resources, and Ricardo briefly took on a job as a servant. After Margarita's death and Jesús and Ricardo's release from prison, Jesús married his girlfriend, Clara Wong, worked as a well-established lawyer, and had a prominent political career under both Madero and Victoriano Huerta (as a member of Congress).

Ricardo's reaction was to continue in the fight to overthrow Díaz to the bitter end. Ricardo came to be known as an ascetic, single-mindedly committed revolutionary amongst his group of friends, and it was this dedication that gained him the leadership of the Junta Organizadora when that group left Mexico in exile. Ricardo never renounced that position. He also never married, and when he did develop an intensely
romantic relationship, it was to a woman, María Brousse, who was equally committed
to revolution, and who had in fact even volunteered to assassinate a prominent
Mexican politician, Enrique Creel, so that Ricardo could be with her and not feel that
he was tearing his family asunder.

Finally, Enrique is in some ways the most complex, because of his ambiguous
situation. Enrique was not in prison when his mother Margarita died, but, on the
contrary, had been in charge of her during her final period, despite his young age.
Thus he felt neither the guilt nor the regret of Ricardo or Jesús. However, neither did
he benefit from the popular idolization that his brothers got, precise due to their
sacrifice. This situation made him oscillate between imitating Jesús’s choices and
imitating Ricardo’s. I think that Enrique was a youth that wanted very much to
demonstrate that he, too, was capable of any sacrifice—and in fact, later in life, he lost
contact with his daughter and son because of an ideological rift with their mother’s
father. On the other hand, for some time Enrique harbored the ideal of marriage and
return to Mexico. It was the experience of exile, and its practical consequences, that
leaned him so decisively in Ricardo’s direction. But after the revolution, I think that he
again found a situation that tended more to Jesús’s position.

“The Constitution has died…” (Librado Rivera) On Constitution Day, 4
February 1904, the staff of the radical newspaper El Hijo del Ahuizote
gathered to commemorate the death of the 1857 Constitution under Porfirio Díaz.

**Javier Sethness Castro:** Let us now please turn to discussing the philosophical and ideological precursors of the anarchist alternative advanced by the PLM and Regeneración. You emphasize the thought of Peter Kropotkin, the “Anarchist Prince”—particularly his scientific investigations of mutual aid—as influencing the theory and practice of the Junta Organizadora. As a reflection of this, writing to María Brousse from Leavenworth in 1920, Magón would argue naturalistically along Kropotkinian lines that selfishness “is the outcome of century upon century of individualistic education and training for the masses,” and that the “primordial human instinct of cooperation and mutual aid has been suppressed in favor of an individualistic education.” Práxedes, for his part, favored the foundation in Mexico of a counter-system of rationalist education for children, following the example of the Spanish anarchist Francisco Ferrer. Additionally, you show that the PLM took from the Jacobin example and the Liberal Mexican political tradition it nominally adhered to a strong sense of anticlericalism and a championing of popular democracy. With reference to the Liberal Constitution of 1857, in point of fact, Librado Rivera wrote that “The Constitution has died…”

Another critical precursor of the resurgent Liberal Mexican movement, of course, was the experiences of the so-called “generation of 1892” to which Magón and the other principal Liberals belong. 1892 was the year in which Díaz “won” his third consecutive reelection, leading to student protests that openly defied the Porfiriato, with one action in May organized by students crying “Death to Centralism!” and “Down with Reelection!” Such youthful militancy was repressed in turn, with dozens arrested and threatened with execution—until Magón and several other young comrades were saved from this fate by an “indignant mob […] that] threatened to attack Mexico City’s Municipal Palace, where we were being held as a result of our demonstration against the dictatorship.” As a telling sidenote, Ricardo discloses that that was his “first experience in the struggle”!

As you explain, moreover, those who gravitated toward the PLM in the early 1900’s openly resisted the technocratic group of “científicos” (“scientists”) who had been empowered by Díaz’s reelection, and they sought to wield Liberalism against its observed corruption into an institutionalized positivism that was friendly to the Porfiriato. Save for Ricardo, in addition, most of the central figures in the PLM were committed Masons, as you detail. Now, it is known that the Junta did not come out openly as anarchist until the manifesto it released on September 23, 1911, following
the military defeat of its Baja California campaign and the emergence of dramatic fissures within the PLM itself, as we shall explore in the second part of our conversation. So how did anarchist thought, Jacobinism, and Mexican Liberalism combine to inspire the most radical group within the PLM: that of the libertarian communists Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magón, Librado Rivera, and Práxedes Guerrero? In addition, do you not think that the anarchist and Jacobin influences contradict themselves in terms of political philosophy, particularly in light of the centralized dictatorship instituted by the Jacobin Committee of Public Safety during the Reign of Terror of 1793-4?

**Claudio Lomnitz:** This is a very difficult question. Let me give it a try—but only briefly. Mexican Liberalism, anarchism, and Jacobinism all share the anti-clerical element, and that was one important commonality. The sense that religion—I mean organized religion—was a source of repression and backwardness was common to all three strands; in addition, anarchists felt strongly that religious authority served to reinforce capital, the exploitation of women, the State, and was at the root of the false morality of their society. The three strands also shared in their cult of liberty, and in their deep rejection of slavery and servitude. The slogan “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” was very important to all three strands, even if it was interpreted differently by each. That is why the Marseillaise was also an anarchist hymn.

Naturally, there were fundamental differences beneath these points in common. Mexican Liberals favored private property and were adamantly against corporate property—not only the corporate property of the Church, but also of indigenous communities, whereas the anarchists were very much in favor of corporate communal property. Jacobins shared with anarchists the belief in unmediated and direct popular sovereignty, but Jacobins believed that sovereignty was materialized in control of the State. So that State terror was in some ways a natural consequence of Jacobinism: they used the State against the backward elements of society. Anarchists believed in unmediated popular sovereignty, but not in the State. They favored direct action—taking the means of production and placing them in communitarian control.

**Javier Sethness Castro:** Historically speaking, the Porfiriato is known for the economic “progress” it brought, in terms of the growth of industry, the burgeoning of extractivism, and the “opening up” of the Mexican economy (or its outright selling off), with clear parallels to the present situation, ruled over by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Of course, under Díaz, this economic expansion depended critically on widespread chattel slavery alongside the brutal exploitation of putatively “free” labor, as in the case of the striking workers at the Cananea mine in
the Sonoran Desert who were violently suppressed by the Mexican Army in summer 1906, leading the PLM to plan and attempt to execute its first revolutionary uprising shortly thereafter. Would you say that the social alternative favored by Ricardo and his comrades represented a true mirror-opposite to the “dark and satanic Mexico” for which Díaz was responsible, in terms of counterposing an agrarian anarcho-communist vision, à la Lev Tolstoy in a way? It would seem that Ricardo’s stress on a strategy of collective direct action separated him radically from the analysis shared by many of his socialist counterparts, who held against Magón that Mexico was not yet “ready” for communism. Plus, you show us that, while imprisoned in Leavenworth in 1919, Enrique defines a “life worth living” as one consisting of the universally egalitarian distribution “of the comforts and scientific advances of today,” as integrated with the purportedly tranquil lives enjoyed by his indigenous grandparents, “working on their communal lands [...] free of the master’s yoke.”

Claudio Lomnitz: The short answer to your question is yes. A more nuanced response would have to include changes in Ricardo’s position. In 1906, the program that the Junta developed, and to which Ricardo also subscribed, was pretty much that of the socialist group—promoting land reform, political and electoral reform, social and political rights for workers, but not the destruction of the state. By 1910, however, and throughout the Mexican Revolution, Ricardo favored direct action and an anarcho-communist vision.

Javier Sethness Castro: To close this first part of our conversation, let us shift to considering the “rather peculiar” social conditions you identify as necessary for “imagining” and “striving for” the prospect of anarchist revolution advanced by the PLM, which for you is “the most radical revolution that the Enlightenment spawned.” The key factors to which you point are labor mobility, migration, exile, and proletarian internationalism, in addition to living-in-common (which you refer to as the “Liberal Joint Family System,” as evinced for example in the Regeneración offices, which were said to resemble a commune, or one of Thomas More’s “hospitals”), as well as a profoundly passionate love for “the people” (el pueblo) and for comrades in the struggle. This latter dynamic is reflected well in the dyadic connections forged between Práxedes and Francisco Manrique and Magón and Librado Rivera. You observe that, in the daily lives of these militant revolutionists, communism was not a utopia but rather “an everyday reality, created by the need to pool resources, [...] to explode traditional family structures so as to admit perfect strangers to the most intimate situations, and [...] to build transcendental goals in the face of the breakdown of traditional morality, customs, and habits.” You emphasize this dual sense of platonic and conjugal love to have been “much more
important to [the anarchists], both as an ideal and as a daily practice, than it was for the Villas and Zapatas, the Obregons and Pascual Orozcos.” Why do you suppose this was the case?

Claudio Lomnitz: I’ll speak to the significance of love in this movement, and its contrast with revolutionary armies in Mexico. There are ideological reasons for favoring love amongst the anarchists which I won’t get into. What I found more interesting is that the actual social conditions of militancy of the PLM led to developing love relationships—amongst men and women and amongst same-sex friends (whether or not the latter developed into fully erotic relationships).

The PLM developed in clandestinity, and was always subjected to persecution and infiltration by spies and traitors. This meant that trust, deep personal trust, was of critical significance, since you were placing your life and the future of the movement in the hands of another. That is one factor favoring the development of deep personal ties, including love. A second is that the members of the PLM had to rely on enormous self-discipline. They were ascetics, in the sense that they had to work by day and mobilize by night. They needed to save their earnings and invest savings in the cause. They needed to read and to reflect. Reading and writing—which was so important to the anarchists—tended to foment love, in that it was a practice of correspondence. One might say that the movement fostered deep investments in the self and in self-fashioning, and that this favored the development of love. Finally, the communities that the exiles built were based to a large degree on affinity. Because of the intense mobility of this group, it relied on affinity in order, for instance, to find lodging when an individual arrived in a new city, or to find work, or to organize. Solidarity was needed in the everyday, and it was solidarity based on affinity—a factor that also fomented the flourishing of love.

For revolutionaries in Mexico, by contrast, the experience of revolution was like a gale that swept everything in its path. The revolution was popularly represented as la bola—sort of like tumble-weed. Revolutionary armies passed through villages like locusts. Individuals joined the revolutionary army as it passed through. Sometimes they were abducted into armies, either as soldiers or as soldaderas. Connections between men and women were therefore fragile. The lack of marriage bonds was not the product of some deep ideological rejection of the church or of the family as an institution of oppression, but simply a product of displacement and everyday life in the army. Revolutionary leaders tended to have multiple wives—dozens, sometimes. A few of them—Zapata is an example—tended to cement ties to villages by having a local wife or lover. One is hard-put to find relationships comparable, say, to Ricardo and María’s or
Enrique and Teresa’s or Librado and Conchita’s or Práxedis’s and Francisco Manrique’s in Mexico’s revolutionary movements. Perhaps the homosocial or homoerotic romantic relationships may have been a little more similar—insofar as you had “war buddies,” and deep reliance and trust amongst close comrades in Mexico, but it is not clear that these involved the sort of deep soul commitments and ideological commonalities that we see in a relationship like that of Práxedis and Manrique, a relationship that was not governed so much by circumstance as by mutual commitment.

Claudio Lomnitz is an anthropologist and historian. His books include Evolución de una sociedad rural (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982); Exits from the Labyrinth: Culture and Ideology in Mexican National Space (University of California Press, 1992); Modernidad Indiana: nación y mediación en México (Planeta, 1999); Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism (University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Death and the Idea of Mexico (Zone Books, 2005); El antisemitismo y la ideología de la Revolución Mexicana (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2010) and, with Friedrich Katz, Una conversación sobre México, su revolución y su historia (Ediciones Era, 2011). Lomnitz also writes a bi-monthly column for the Mexico City newspaper La Jornada. He is Campbell Family Professor of Anthropology and the Director of the Center for Mexican Studies at Columbia University. Currently, he is a visiting professor at CIDE in Mexico City.