

MEXICO

Radicals, Revolutionaries and Exiles: Mexico City in the 1920s

by Barry Carr

In the interwar era, cities across the Americas became hubs in transnational networks that linked radicals and revolutionaries of all kinds: anarchists, Wobblies, Socialists, Communists, Garveyites, political exiles and vanguard intellectuals. While there were a number of these urban hubs — New York, Tampa, New Orleans and Havana all played a role — the largest by far was Mexico City.

Academics have long been interested in the ways in which foreigners were attracted to Mexico and Mexico City in the years after the revolution. Most of their work, though, has centered on the interest shown by North Americans. I'm thinking here of the work by Helen Delpar on the U.S. artists and intellectuals who were attracted by *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican* (the title of her splendid book). More recently, the University of Chicago historian, Mauricio Tenorio has been exploring this phenomenon, employing the term "Brown Atlantis" to describe the appeal of Mexico City to these U.S. cultural and academic constituencies. In using the term "Brown Atlantis," and the same is true of Helen Delpar's work, the emphasis has been very firmly on Mexico as the center of indigenous politics, art and philosophy. I have suggested to Mauricio, somewhat cheekily, that Havana played a similar role, albeit rather less substantial than Mexico City, and that the label in this case might be "The Black Atlantis" — given the passion shown by U.S. and European intellectuals, musicians



Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

The bustling streets of Mexico City.

and artists for things African or African-descended in Cuba in the 1920s and 1930s.

Particular attention has been paid to the U.S. artists, writers, folklorists and intellectuals who were captured in some ways by Mexico City. Some examples would include: the silver pioneer and Taxco jewelry designer, William Spratling; Anita Brenner and Frances Toor, two American women who mingled with and wrote about the artists and radical political practitioners of the 1920s Mexican artistic Renaissance; the Italian-American photographer, Tina Modotti, who also mixed with the radical left in Mexico City and fell in love with one of the Latin American exiles discussed later in this article, the handsome Cuban athlete, student leader and revolutionary, Julio Antonio Mella; Carleton Beals,

the American journalist and prolific writer on Mexico and Latin America throughout the period 1920-60; and several U.S. Communists, such as Ella and Bertram Wolfe who combined radical politics and friendship with muralist Diego Rivera. From the late 1920s onwards — and especially in the 1940s and early 1950s — there was also a less well-known group of sexual pilgrims and outlaws who were attracted by Mexico's allegedly more open and tolerant atmosphere for same-sex relations. These border-crossers joined at some points with U.S. Beats like William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Finally, there were the U.S. political refugees who fled to Mexico during the Macarthyite period of the late 1940s and 1950s, finding safety in Mexico City and in towns like Cuernavaca; their

experiences have been studied recently by several U.S. scholars including Diana Anhalt in her wonderful *A Gathering of Fugitives* and Rebecca Schreiber in *Cold War Exiles in Mexico: U.S. Dissidents and the Culture of Critical Resistance*.

The presence of non-Americans, however, whether Europeans or Latin Americans, has been much less well-registered and studied, although there has been some work on, for example, the arrival of an impressive group of anti-fascist intellectuals and politicians during World War II — such as the family of the prominent Austrian historian of Mexico, Friedrich Katz — which turned Mexico into by far the most dynamic and cosmopolitan cultural center in the Americas.

Mexico City: Emporium of Revolution

Push-pull factors brought exiles, émigrés, refugees, revolutionaries and dreamers to Mexico City throughout the 1920s. The Alvaro Obregón (1920-24) government's embrace of literacy campaigns and educational and artistic vanguardism was part of this magnet's attractive powers. No one was more powerfully instrumental in creating this pull than José Vasconcelos, Obregón's Minister of Education. Modeling himself in part on the Soviet Union's cultural czar, Anatoly Lunacharsky, Vasconcelos used his position to make the Ministry of Education a cultural patron of muralists and educators from all over the Americas. Most of the clients recruited into the muralism and education endeavor were Mexicans, but there was also a steady stream of Latin American cultural vanguardists and activists, too.

The Chilean poet and educator, Gabriela Mistral, was one of those; she arrived in Mexico in 1923. A somewhat less well-known member of the emporium was the Nicaraguan writer Salomón de la Selva, who became a supporter of Augusto César Sandino's cause in Nicaragua later in the 1920s. Vasconcelos himself at this phase in his career embraced nationalist and anti-imperialist struggles in the Caribbean as well — especially those in Haiti and Puerto Rico. He was a delegate to the Communist International-organized Anti-Imperialist Congress in Brussels in February 1927, for example.

Another of the cultural figures who found their way to Mexico City and to Vasconcelos' network was the young Peruvian intellectual and anti-imperialist, Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, who was exiled in 1923 by the repressive regime of Augusto Leguía. Haya embraced Vasconcelos' cultural project, became his de facto private secretary for several months and borrowed key concepts such as "Indo-America" from Vasconcelos' unfolding nationalist cosmology that later became one of the cornerstones of Haya's own anti-imperialist project founded in Mexico as the APRA movement (Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana, American Popular Revolutionary Alliance).

The ongoing repression of the Leguía regime would produce a steady stream of political refugees from Peru



Photo in the public domain.

The young poet and future Nobel laureate, Gabriela Mistral.

over the next five years (1924-29), most of them involved politically with Haya de la Torre or with the young Marxist intellectual, José Carlos Mariátegui. Among these later Peruvian arrivals was Magda Portal, a poet nicknamed "La Pasionaria Peruana." Portal would become a powerful advocate of women's political agency in the Peruvian APRA movement in the 1930s and 1940s. Then, there was the Peruvian Jewish activist and sometime APRA member, Jacobo Hurwitz. Esteban Pavletich was another Aprista who spent a year fighting alongside the Nicaraguan guerilla leader and anti-imperialist Augusto César Sandino in 1928.

The repression unleashed by the Leguía government in Peru is a reminder of one of the push factors involved in this "in gathering" of radicals in Mexico, and especially Mexico City, in the 1920s. Some exiles and refugees were certainly semi-voluntary in nature, but there were plenty of examples of involuntary movements as well, such as the writer Tristan Maroff who fled Bolivia for Mexico. But the most important sources of exiles generated by repressive governments were north of the Andes — in Venezuela and Cuba.

A group of daring young Venezuelan freedom fighters, many of them students who had been exiled after their involvement in struggles against the bloody dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez (1908-35), made their way to Mexico — sometimes after intermediate stops in Central America or Cuba. This Venezuelan group included figures such as Salvador de la Plaza, Carlos Aponte and the Machado brothers, Gustavo and his sibling Eduardo. For these

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Photo by Johan Hagemeyer/Bancroft Library.

Photo by Tina Modotti. Courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Art.

American expatriate Tina Modotti and her lover, Cuban exile Julio Antonio Mella.

young Venezuelans, the ongoing armed conflict in the still youthful and undisciplined revolutionary Mexican state offered unique opportunities to acquire arms for the fight back home as well as the chance to enlist support from sympathetic Mexican military officers and high political officials who were prepared to support uprisings against dictatorial and reactionary regimes in the Americas.

The Venezuelans embraced armed struggle in their native country and later in Cuba, giving a 20th-century inflection to a much older Garibaldian tradition of heroic, armed action. They were aided in this endeavor by the preparedness of elements in the government of President Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-28) to provide quiet financial — and sometimes military — support to liberation struggles that could be seen as promoting regional Mexican interests, or at the very least a willingness to turn a blind eye, and give a nod and a wink, to the activities and plans of the exiles.

From Cuba, the best-known immigrant revolutionary was Julio Antonio Mella. He sought refuge in Mexico along with many other opponents of the increasingly autocratic government of Gerardo Machado. Mella fled Cuba in early 1926 after a highly publicized hunger strike. After some weeks in Honduras and Guatemala, he made his way to Mexico where he quickly entered the world of Mexican Communism and the burgeoning networks of Latin American political refugees. There, Mella built a network of exiled Cubans gathered around a project to mount an armed expedition to Cuba — 30 years before a young

Argentinian doctor, Che Guevara, and a group of Cuban exiles around Fidel Castro launched a similar expedition to liberate their Cuban homeland. The plans for the military expedition to Cuba involved using arms left over from an earlier, frustrated plan to mount action against the Gómez dictatorship in Venezuela. Mella's ultimately unsuccessful project was another example of radical Garibaldianism in Latin America. After his plans for an invasion were discovered, Mella was murdered in Mexico City in January of 1929 by agents of the Machado regime.

The revolutionary diaspora in Mexico City was enriched by a further wave of revolutionary activists coming from Central America. By far the best known of these was the Nicaraguan, Augusto César Sandino. Sandino had already spent three years in the steamy petroleum districts of Tampico on the Mexican Gulf coast during 1923-26 before he returned to Nicaragua to take up the fight in a civil war that eventually morphed into a national liberation movement directed against the occupation by U.S. Marines. In 1929 and 1930, Sandino returned to Mexico to seek help, unsuccessfully, from the government of Emilio Portes Gil. Nevertheless, from early 1928, Mexico City had become one of the nerve centers of the Sandinista movement, a center from which Central and South American activists travelled to join Sandino's struggle, and the most important source of financial and political support raised by ordinary Mexicans as well as sympathizers in high office. The campaign mounted by the Hands Off Nicaragua Committee (Comité

Manos Fuera de Nicaragua, Mafuenic) was an early example of the solidarity movements that would proliferate all over the Americas in later decades.

It was no accident then that Mexico City became a major hub of exiled revolutionaries in the 1920s, bound together by membership in common networks of politics and sociability. In the process, a new geography of resistance and agitation was created in downtown Mexico City. There were some obvious, important inner-city hubs on this new map. They included the offices of organizations and magazines that supported the exiles' plans and disseminated their news — including the offices of the newspaper of the Mexican Communist Party, *El Machete*, and of the party headquarters itself on Mesones Street. There were magazines galore at the heart of this new political dreaming and agitation — *El Libertador*, the organ of the Anti-Imperialist League of the Americas, which began to circulate in Mexico in early 1925 and whose pages (illustrated by the Communist mural painter Diego Rivera) chronicled popular struggles throughout the Americas. The choice of the magazine's title, *The Liberator* with its clear echoes of Bolívar, was very telling.

There were smaller, less-ambitious bulletins and newsletters targeted at particular countries: these included *Cuba Libre*, the organ of the Association of Newly Emigrated Cuban Revolutionaries (*Asociación de Nuevos*

Emigrados Revolucionarios Cubanos, *Anerc*) founded by Julio Antonio Mella in January 1928 and which had branches in other radical Cuban diasporas — in New York and Paris, for example. Magazines and newspapers, often small in size and circulation, many of them enjoying an irregular existence, played an enormously important role in sustaining these transnational networks, binding Mexico to many other sites in the Americas and beyond. This radical print culture provided channels for communication among scattered activists and intellectuals as well as networks that were used to supply moral and material solidarity for popular struggles.

The reference to Cuban exile cells in Paris and New York is a reminder that the revolutionary diaspora gathered together in Mexico was one link, albeit a very important one, in an expanding transnational network of radical activists and insurgent intellectuals — “deracinated mobile identities,” to use Antoinette Burton's phrase — who practiced a mobile form of contentious politics in which they slid or, more often, were pushed, across national boundaries, driven by economic need, ideological fervor, the desire for revolutionary adventure and, usually, the repressive actions of police and armies. These peripatetic individuals were animated by the radical ideas that they disseminated through articles, pamphlets and manifestos and via public meetings, demonstrations and activist conferences as well as

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The Nicaraguan revolutionary Augusto César Sandino (center) en route to Mexico.



Photo from Wikimedia Commons.

by founding new political parties and organizations. Their behaviors constitute what the Argentinian scholar Martin Bergel has felicitously called “a militant travelling culture.” The new cartography of resistance in Mexico City revolved around more than the politics of publication and public gathering. Many of the young men and women I’ve already mentioned (the Venezuelans, Mella, several Peruvian revolutionaries) came to share a house in central Mexico City that they soon discovered had historical associations with the life of “The Liberator,” Simón Bolívar. The Peruvian historian, Ricardo Melgar Bao, has noted that:

Chance allowed these exiles to sacralize one of the settings in the utopia which they had chosen as their country of residence. It happened that in Mexico City they discovered a large old colonial house where Simón Bolívar, the Liberator, had lived for a short while and which bore the name of the hero. The impact of this discovery was enormous for the Venezuelan exiles who, according to Eduardo Machado, decided to move to the house, together with exiles from other countries, thereby latinamericanizing Bolívar’s home in the middle of the 1920s.

And from another source: “Salvador de la Plaza, Gustavo Machado and I occupied the first floor along with the Peruvian Jacobo Hurwitz. On the second floor were Julio Antonio Mella, [his wife] Oliva Zandivar, Carlos Aponte Hernández and Bartolomé Ferrer (more Venezuelans).”

Reconstructing this long-forgotten world of exiled radical networks reminds us of how transnational a phenomenon the Mexican Revolution was. If we limit our engagement with Mexican history to developments unfolding within the borders of the nation state we will be missing all kinds of fascinating, and often unexpected, ways in which Mexican history was shaped by connections and border crossings that linked the country to the Americas as a whole.

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Campeños reading El Machete.



Photo by Tina Modotti. Courtesy of Throdormorton Fine Art.