

Land and Liberty

Ricardo Flores Magón

Like any great social movement, the Mexican revolution had many precursors. None was quite so radical or influential as Ricardo Flores Magón. Born in 1874 in a small village in the impoverished southern state of Oaxaca, Flores Magón studied law before settling into a career in journalism. In 1900, together with his brother Enrique, he founded the journal Regeneración, which frontally criticized the Díaz dictatorship. Within the year, Flores Magón was in prison, and by the end of 1903 he was forced into exile in the United States. In 1905 Flores Magón helped to found the Mexican Liberal Party in St. Louis, Missouri. He spent most of the remainder of his life in exile, agitating constantly against the Porfirian regime through the pages of several journals, including Regeneración, El Hijo del Ahuizote, and Revolución. In the United States, he was repeatedly incarcerated on charges of violating the neutrality and espionage laws. In 1918 he was sent to Leavenworth prison in Kansas, where he died in November 1922.

Despite the name of his party, Flores Magón's politics were the antithesis of turn-of-the-century liberalism. He was, in fact, a staunch partisan of the international anarchist movement, which declared private property to be theft, denounced governments of all stripes, and advocated "direct action" in place of political participation. His writings envision self-governing, self-reliant, socialistic communities. It is not surprising, therefore, that Flores Magón's relations were poor with most of the revolutionary factions, which tended, to a greater or lesser degree, to cleave to nineteenth-century liberal traditions (note his disdain for Madero expressed in his dismissal of the anti-reelectionists). Ultimately, his work found its greatest resonance in the agrarian movement of Emiliano Zapata, which adopted the slogan "Land and Liberty" as its own. The essay reproduced below appeared in Regeneración on November 19, 1910, one day before the Mexican revolution officially broke out.

The fruit, well-ripened by ardent revolt, is about to fall—fruit bitter to all who have become flushed with pride, thanks to a situation which brings honour, wealth and distinction to those who make the sorrows and slavery of humanity the foundation of their pleasures; but fruit sweet and pleasant to all

who have regarded as beneath their dignity the filthinesses of the beasts who, through a night that has lasted thirty-four years, have robbed, violated, slain, cheated and played the traitor, while hiding their crimes beneath the mantle of the law and using official position to shield them from punishment.

Who are they that fear the Revolution? They who have provoked it; they who, by oppression and exploitation of the masses, have sought to bring the victims of their infamies despairingly into their power; they who, by injustice and rapine, have awakened sleeping consciences and made honourable men throughout the world turn pale with indignation.

The Revolution is now about to break out at any moment. We, who during so many years have followed attentively the social and political life of Mexico, cannot deceive ourselves. The symptoms of a formidable cataclysm leave no room for doubt that we are on the eve of an uplift and a crash, a rising and a fall. At last, after four and thirty years of shame, the Mexican people is about to raise its head, and at last, after this long night the black edifice, which has been strangling us beneath its weight, is about to crumble into dust.

It is timely that we should here repeat what already we have said so often; that this movement, springing from despair, must not be a blind effort to free ourselves from an enormous burden, but a movement in which instinct must be dominated almost completely by reason. We [Liberals] must try to bring it about that this movement shall be guided by the light of Science. If we fail to do this, the Revolution now on the point of coming to the surface will serve merely to substitute one President for another, one master for another. We must bear in mind that the necessary thing is that the people shall have bread, shelter, land to cultivate; we must bear in mind that no government, however honourable, can decree the abolition of misery. The people themselves—the hungry and disinherited—are they who must abolish misery, by taking into their possession, as the very first step, the land which by natural right should not be monopolized by a few but must be the property of every human being.

No one can foretell the lengths to which the impending Revolution's task of recovery will go; but, if we fighters undertake in good faith [to help] it as far as possible along the road; if, when we pick up the Winchester, we go forth decided not to elevate to power another master but redeem the proletariat's rights; if we take the field pledged to conquer that economic liberty which is the foundation on which all liberties rest, and the condition without which no liberties can exist; if we make this our purpose, we shall start it on a road worthy of this epoch. But if we are carried away by the desire for easy triumph; if, seeking to make the struggle shorter, we desert our own radicalism and aims, so incompatible with those of the purely bourgeois and conservative parties—then we shall have done only the work of bandits and

assassins; for the blood spilled will serve merely to increase the power of the bourgeoisie and the caste that today possesses wealth, and, after the triumph, that caste will fasten anew on the proletariat the chain forged with the proletariat's own blood, its own sacrifices, its own martyrdom, which will have conquered power for the bourgeoisie.

It is necessary, therefore, proletarians; it is necessary therefore, disinherited, that your thought be not confused. The conservative and bourgeois parties speak to you of liberty, of justice, of law, of honourable government; and they tell you that when you replace with others those who are now in power, you will have that liberty, justice, law and honourable government. Be not deceived! What you need is to secure the well-being of your families—their daily bread—and this no government can give you. You yourselves must conquer these good things, and you must do it by taking immediate possession of the land, which is the original source of all wealth. Understand this well; no government will be able to give you that, for the law defends the "right" of those who are withholding wealth. You yourselves must take it, despite the law, despite the government, despite the pretended right of property. You yourselves must take it in the name of natural justice; in the name of the right of every human being to life and the development of his physical and intellectual powers.

When you are in possession of the land you will have liberty and justice, for liberty and justice are not decreed but are the result of economic independence. They spring from the fact that the individual is able to live without depending on a master, and to enjoy, for himself and his family, the product of his toil.

Take, then, the land! The law tells you that you must not take it, since it is private property; but the law which so instructs you was a law written by those who are holding you in slavery and a law that needs to be supported by force is a law that does not respond to general needs. If the law were the result of general agreement it would not need upholding by the policeman, the jailer, the judge, the hangman, the soldier and the official. The law has been imposed on you, and these arbitrary impositions we, as men of dignity, must answer with rebellion.

Therefore, to the struggle! Imperious, unrestrainable, the Revolution will not tarry. If you would be really free, group yourselves beneath the [Liberal] Party's banner of freedom; but, if you merely want the strange pleasure of shedding blood, and shedding your own by "playing at soldiers," group yourselves under other banners—that of the Anti-reelectionists, for example, which, after you have done "playing at soldiers," will put you anew under the yoke of the employer and government. In that case you will enjoy the

great pleasure of changing the old President, with whom already you were becoming disgusted, for a spick and span new one, fresh from the mint.

Comrades, the question is a grave one. I understand that you are ready for the fight; but fight so that it shall be of benefit to the poor. Hitherto all your revolutions have profited the classes in power, because you have no clear conception of your rights and interests, which, as you now know, are completely opposed to the rights and interests of the intellectual and wealthy classes. It is to the interest of the rich that the poor shall be poor eternally, for the poverty of the masses guarantees their wealth. If there were not men who found themselves compelled to work for other men, the rich would be under the necessity of doing something useful, of producing something of general utility, that they might be able to exist. No longer would there be slaves they could exploit.

I repeat, it is not possible to foretell the lengths in which the approaching Revolution's task of recovery will go; what we must do is to endeavour to get all we can. It would be a great step in advance if the land were to become the property of all; and if among the revolutionists there should . . . be the strength, the conscious strength, sufficient to gain more than that, the basis would be laid for further recoveries which the proletariat by force of circumstances would conquer.

Forward, comrades! Soon you will hear the first shots; soon the shout of rebellion will thunder from the throats of the oppressed. Let not a single one of you fail to second this movement, launching, with all the power of conviction, that supremest of cries, Land and Liberty!