

Review / Reseña

Rivera Mir, Sebastián. *Edición y comunismo: Cultura impresa, educación militante y prácticas políticas (México, 1930-1940)*. Raleigh, NC: Editorial A Contracorriente, 2020. 296 pp.

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In *Edición y comunismo*, the Colegio Mexiquense historian Sebastián Rivera Mir shows that for Marxists in 1930s Mexico, “books and revolution were in many respects part of the same process” (5). The publication of key Marxist texts and the experiences of the USSR were seen as fundamental to developing class consciousness and forging a proletarian movement to confront the bourgeoisie state in postrevolutionary Mexico. In this carefully conceived and well-researched book, Sebastián Rivera Mir focuses on the early formation of communist book publishers in Mexico during the late 1920s and 1930s. The result is a riveting intellectual history of the Partido Comunista Mexicano (PCM) and other Marxist currents during this fundamental period for the left in Mexico and Latin America.

The author of several previous studies, including *Militantes de la izquierda latinoamericana en México, 1920-1934* (Colegio de México, 2019), Rivera Mir has a deep understanding of the political and intellectual projects of the communist left in Latin America. *Edición y comunismo* contributes to the growing work on both the study of

communism and the history of political publishing. For México, this is a lively field of analysis that includes the works of leading scholars, such as Daniela Spenser, Carlos Illiades, Ricardo Melgor Bao, and Barry Carr.

While outside the scope of *Edición y comunismo*, these early Marxist publishing efforts should be seen within the context of previous revolutionary publishing projects. Over the past few decades there has been a growing body of work on anarchist movements and their intellectual and cultural projects. Mexico has been an important focus of this literature, beginning with the publication of studies on the Flores Magón movement in the 1960s and early 1970s by Lowell Blaisdell, James Cockcroft, Juan Gómez-Quíñonez, Armando Bartra, and John Hart, and more recent work by Claudio Lomnitz, Devra Weber, and Nicole Guidotti-Hernandez. In the introduction to his now classic 1972 compilation of *Regeneración*, Bartra characterizes the newspaper as the principle arm of the Magonista revolutionaries. For other Latin American movements, Oswaldo Bayer, Angel Cappelletti, Juan Suriano, and Kerwin Shafer have demonstrated the revolutionary significance of anarchist intellectuals and their publications. Despite this rich historiography, studies of communist movements have tended to focus on political struggles often devoid of the intellectual and educational work in which parties and activists were engaged.

Edición y comunismo marks a crucial shift in the scholarship on communism in Latin America. Rivera Mira turns our attention to the intellectual projects of the PCM and their efforts to provide Marxist educational material for party cadre and rank and file. Following an introduction that grounds the study in the literature of the history of publishing projects of the Latin American left, *Edición y comunismo* is organized into seven chapters and an epilogue. Chapter 1 sets the context of revolutionary internationalism, the Communist International, and Socorro Rojo (International Red Aid) in the 1920s and 1930s and the ways that shifts in internationalist strategy shaped parties in Latin America and affected “local initiatives of the transnational company, that was the communist party” (19). Particularly interesting in this chapter is Rivera Mir’s discussion of the list of reading material for party cadre developed by the Chilean communist party in 1933. After analyzing the party’s syllabus, he shows that most of the required reading was comprised of translations of the writings of Lenin, Stalin, and Bukharin; few works addressed Latin America specifically. Rivera Mir argues that this absence reflects the precarity of publishing operations that suffered from scant financial resources and government repression. Chapter 2 focuses specifically on how government repression hindered the growth of the PCM and its publishing operations

throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. Nevertheless, the legacy of the Mexican revolution and the regime's ostensible anti-imperialism helped make Mexico a center for revolutionary exiles throughout Latin America.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Rivera Mir analyzes two of Mexico's early revolutionary publishers, Ediciones Frente Cultural and Ediciones Popular. Beginning in the late 1920s, Ediciones Frente Cultural was published by the Navarro Orejel brothers who owned *Liberería Navarro*. Using the slogan "Theory and Action for a Better World," they published Marxist theoretical works—mainly translations of Marx and Engels and Lenin—that were low cost and accessible to party militants and a broader audience. While not a project of the PCM, it was promoted in *El Machete*, the party's newspaper. Ediciones Frente Cultural maintained its autonomy and tried not to appear "too red," given the government repression that forced the PCM to operate clandestinely until the mid-1930s. The presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40) provided openings for left-wing publishers and the PCM, such that by the end of the decade Mexico would become a leading producer of Marxist literature in Spanish. The Cárdenas government subsidized newsprint, developed socialist education programs, and sponsored publishing projects such as the Secretaría de Educación Pública's series *La Biblioteca del Obrero y Campesino* (75). Many of these organizing projects would include PCM members and other Marxists.

Throughout the study, Rivera Mir underscores the crucial role of the translators of Marxist literature in Mexico. Translators were interpreters of key works and served as intellectual and cultural brokers. Many were exiled in Mexico and were bridges to international movements. Among the translators Rivera Mir introduces us to include Armen Ohanian, an Armenian writer and artist who came to Mexico in 1934 and translated texts from Russian; Spanish exiled intellectuals, such as Wenceslao Roces and Diego Rosado de la Espada; and Mexican translators J.D. Sobrino Trejo and Manuel Díaz Ramírez. He also focuses on Pedro Geoffroy Rivas and Rodolfo Jimenez Barrios, two Salvadoran intellectuals and translators living and studying in Mexico. Rivas translated at least 5 works of Marxist theory between 1935 and 1939 and wrote his UNAM Licenciatura thesis analyzing Engels' *Origen of the Family, Private property, and the State*. Rodolfo Jimenez Barrios was a poet, revolutionary, and law student who translated several works and authored the 1935 pamphlet, *Misión de las masas estudiantiles en Centro America*.

As Mexican politics opened under Cárdenas, the PCM called on publishers to increase their publications of Marxist theory and revolutionary movements. In 1937,

Editorial Popular was founded as a project of the PCM and with the support of the Comintern. Editorial Popular published the writings of PCM leaders Hernán Laborde and Miguel A. Velasco and, unlike Ediciones Frente Cultural, did not shy away from publishing about the class struggle in Mexico. Between 1937 and 1940, it had published 65 books, which reflected the growth of the party and radicalism in Mexico.

PCM leaders began to realize that to build a truly working-class party, they should be publishing works specifically written for workers and campesinos. One party official argued that new formats were needed, “using large posters made understandable to them, making pamphlets and literature with large print, and if they can’t understand that, using photographs; we have to publish literature that reflects all topics of interest to the masses. Until now, we have done little of this” (124-125). It seems that the PCM did not heed this call through Editorial Popular, however other revolutionary publishers, such as Talleres Gráficas Populares, created broad sheets and graphics to reach campesinos and workers. Rivera Mir’s discussion of the intention and reception of publications is particularly interesting, though it provides source and methodological challenges.

In Chapter 5, Rivera Mir argues that one way to gauge the significance of Marxism and communism in Mexican intellectual, working class, and political circles is to examine the publications of the right-wing. The 1930s also saw the growth of right-wing parties and publishers, representing a range of tendencies including social Catholicism, nationalism, and fascism. Former communist Rubén Sánchez Mallén and anti-reelection nationalist politician Luis Cabrera each penned several tracts purporting to expose the growing influence of communism and the USSR in Mexico. The Acción Cívica Nacional published a pamphlet series titled *Socialism and Communism and Common Sense*. Three separate pamphlets (6-8) focused on *The Horrors of Socialist Atheism* in Spain, Russia, and Mexico (1937). Another pamphlet, titled *The Bad Results of Socialism and Communism*, had a cover with an illustration of a female vampire sucking the blood of a priest, with the subtitle “The Heroine of the Popular Front.” The trope of the vampiress underscored rightwing fears of the loss of private property and proprietary control over women’s bodies. The threat of women’s bodily autonomy was also the subject of a pamphlet by the Asociación Nacional de Pequeños Proprietarios that pronounced, “we will not permit the evil communists to preach what they call *free love*, that is, the freedom of our women, our sisters, our daughters, to be delivered when it best suits the seducers. We campesinos are men who know how to guard the honor

of our homes.” (144). Rivera Mir’s suggestive chapter contextualizes the communist publishing boom with the broader political struggle.

Chapter 6 examines Editorial America, a Marxist press founded by Rodrigo García Treviño a former PCM member, confidant of labor leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano, and a member of the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (CTM). Editorial America sought to diversify the publications of Marxist works and to loosen the grip that the PCM and Stalinism had on Marxist analysis. They published 21 books and pamphlets, many of which were translations, but several were written by Latin American revolutionaries. For examples Editorial America published two books by Anibal Ponce, the Argentine intellectual in exile in Mexico, *Educación y luchas de clases* and *Humanismo burgués y humanismo proletario*. In this chapter, Rodríguez Mir demonstrates that Editorial America was crucial in fostering transnational Latin American radical thought.

In the final suggestive chapter, *Edición y comunismo* explores the transmission of ideas and works between communists in the U.S. and Mexico and the limits of these exchanges. The epilogue concludes the work by emphasizing the role of both local political conditions and shifts in the USSR that brought an end to this period during which creative Marxist and revolutionary thought flourished in Mexico.

Edición y comunismo is an outstanding study that provides important insights into the intellectual history of the left during the heyday of the 1930s. By emphasizing the importance of the understanding the origins of these publications and the role that national and international factors played in shaping the publishing process, Rivera Mir makes a significant contribution to our understanding of both the PCM and the emergence of radical print culture.