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### How to Make Revolution

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## How to Make Revolution

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**Abstract:** Christina Heatherton reflects on lessons from her new book, *Arise! Global Radicalism in the Era of the Mexican Revolution* (University of California Press, 2022) to describe how to avoid the traps of revolutionary nostalgia and engage in the collective process of making radical struggle.

**Keywords:** internationalism; nostalgia; radicalism; solidarity

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In September 2022, two hundred years after her birth, a statue of Harriet Tubman was installed at the entrance to CIA headquarters. The statue was meant to celebrate Tubman's history as a spy for the Union army during the U.S. Civil War. It also reflected CIA ambitions to develop greater "minority representation" in its ranks, a goal less likely hindered by a lack of Black statues and more likely by the agency's record of coups, torture, assassinations, racist violence, and sabotage. A similar irony imbues Treasury Department plans to place Tubman's face on the twenty-dollar bill. The transformation of Tubman—a formerly enslaved woman—into legal tender is a jarring way to commemorate her subversion of the slave economy, to say the least. Tubman, of course, freed herself from slavery and then courageously enabled others to do the same. Her name graces parks, museums, landmarks, and street signs along routes of the Underground Railroad, paths she forged to freedom and from bondage. In upstate New York, where she lived for over half a century, her name now unironically adorns a state prison. During the Civil War, Tubman facilitated movements of "contraband," the name given to fugitive slaves who crossed over Union lines and "stole themselves" into freedom. In 2020, George Floyd lost his life for possession of a different

kind of contraband, an allegedly forged twenty-dollar bill. Had the bill in question possessed Tubman's face, it would have represented contraband twice over: first in the state's murderous classification and second in the grim enlistment of its radical legacy (Sernett 2007, 85–86; House 2017; Brockell 2022).

The year 2022 also marked a century since the death of Ricardo Flores Magón, an unrepentant anarchist and key agitator of the Mexican Revolution. Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador declared this centennial the “Year of Ricardo Flores Magón.” The commemorative banner unfurled at his January press conference depicts Flores Magón in a brown suit, looking rumpled but studious against a royal maroon backdrop. Glasses perched above his nose, the tips of his mustache slightly twirled, he looks up expectantly, pen in hand. Next to him is his name and a title announcing him as “precursor to the Mexican Revolution.” Below him is the seal of the Mexican government, the very state he had devoted his life to overthrowing (Contreras 2022).

Flores Magón's first arrest came in 1892, during a student protest against President Porfirio Díaz's increasingly dictatorial regime. There, he gave his first political speech to fellow students, igniting his life's work of radical agitation and incurring a lifetime of state repression. Were Flores Magón able to peer out into the present world from within the banner, he would see an increasingly militarized Mexican state. A recent leak of government documents confirms a vast expansion of military power in domestic arenas, ramped-up surveillance against journalists, repression against dissidents, and scandalous state complicity with drug cartels. It further implicates government officials in the 2014 murder and disappearance of forty-three students from the rural town of Ayotzinapa. Those students had been headed to Mexico City to commemorate the Tlatelolco massacre, a 1968 event where protesting students had been viciously murdered by government forces. On their way to the commemoration, students were stopped and kidnapped by local state forces and later disappeared. Seeking justice, the classmates of the forty-three have organized alongside the parents into a “Ricardo Flores Magón Committee.” As an official investigation declares the loss of the Ayotzinapa students a “crime of the state,” the Ricardo Flores Magón of the official government banner awkwardly confronts his namesake in a radical anti-government organizing effort (Lomnitz 2014, 57–59; Abi-Habib 2022; Lopez 2022; Pinto 2022; Kitroeff, Bergman, and Lopez 2022).

Revolutionary enemies of the state are often quaintly refashioned into its gentle mascots. Tubman and Flores Magón offer two recent examples of how radical nostalgia can be deployed toward reactionary aims. “Not even the dead,” wrote Walter Benjamin, “will be safe from the enemy if he is victorious.” As Benjamin depressingly rejoined, “This enemy has not ceased to be victorious” (2007, 255). Nostalgia often reveals less about the era it recalls and more about the longings of the moment in which it is invoked. In the uncertainty of our present era, glutted as it is with radical nostalgia, revolutionary heroes of the past seem to be tapped for an otherwise unavailable moral authority. How does such refashioning impair our conceptions of history and struggle? How might we wrest revolutionary traditions from such antithetical fates? Can such reckoning afford us alternative approaches to the questions of state power and revolution? In what follows, I reflect on these questions and on my experience grappling with them in my new book, *Arise! Global Radicalism in the Era of the Mexican Revolution* (University of California Press, 2022).

*Arise!* is a study of internationalism, a recognition of the ways that people have been unevenly waylaid by the global capitalist system and developed forms of revolutionary solidarity in spite of social and spatial divisions, including national boundaries, in order to confront it. The book takes its title from the first word of “The Internationale” (1888), the definitive anthem to internationalism. “Arise ye prisoners of starvation,” the song begins. In this way, *Arise!* self-consciously joins a long tradition of authors who have plumbed the song’s lyrics to grapple with the legacy of internationalism in their own times. Melvin Dubovsky borrowed the lyric “we have been naught, we shall be all,” to title his study of the anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World *We Shall Be All*. Famously, Frantz Fanon took the second line of the song, “Arise ye wretched of the earth,” to title his indictment of colonialism in and beyond French Algeria, *Wretched of the Earth*. After she left the Communist Party, Dorothy Healey wanted to title her memoir *Tradition’s Chains Have Bound Us*, a reconfiguration of the lyrics “No more tradition’s chains shall bind us.” Healey argued that unless a radical tradition was “able to constantly keep alive that challenging, questioning and probing of the real scene around it,” it would only ever be a mere shadow of itself, a snare of revolutionary nostalgia where hope is trapped and strangled, rather than a living, breathing tradition that might allow us to survive (Healey and Isserman 1993, 13–14). This is perhaps the central lesson of my book.

To make its case, *Arise!* approaches the question of internationalism from

a somewhat unusual route. It traces the legacy of internationalism related to the Mexican Revolution of 1910–1920 and its afterlives persisting into the 1940s. While the Mexican Revolution is often narrated as a contained nationalist event sparked by a revolt against President Díaz’s dictatorial reign and the vastly uneven forms of modernization and dispossession developed under his over three-decade-long rule, my book contends that the revolution was a decisively global event in its origins and influence. *Arise!* tracks the currents of abolition which influenced Mexico’s anti-colonial revolts and subsequently, its definition of freedom. It also considers the movement of global capital which inspired the uprising, noting, for example, that at the outbreak of the revolution, U.S. investors owned over one-quarter of Mexico’s surface and over 80 percent of its mineral rights. The book charts how the revolution became a crucible of internationalism for the world’s “rebels.” Some of the historical figures I highlight include Okinawan organizer Paul Kōchi, who discovered internationalism while crossing through revolutionary Mexico; Indian anticolonial activist M. N. Roy, who transformed a fight against British colonialism into an internationalist struggle and cofounded the Mexican Communist Party; and radical African American artist Elizabeth Catlett, who brought together internationalist traditions rooted in Black radicalism and the Mexican Revolution. The book tracks the making of radical thought through what I call “convergence spaces,” sites within which disparate revolutionary traditions were compressed together, producing new articulations of struggle. From farm worker strikes at the U.S.-Mexico border; art collectives in Chicago, Harlem, and Mexico City; and a prison “university” in Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary, where Ricardo Flores Magón would spend his final years among a motley crew of global radicals, the book observes how the Mexican Revolution staged a significant set of convergences within which internationalism was “made.”

To confront the nostalgia that often accompanies histories of revolution, the book emphasizes the open and contingent process of *making*. This process is reflected in the chapter titles, which include “How to Make a Flag,” “How to Make a University,” “How to Make Love,” and “How to Make a Dress.” The introduction, “How to Make a Rope,” explains the making of a lynch rope at the turn of the twentieth century. As a commodity-chain story, it first traces the cultivation of various component fibers, including manila from U.S. imperial control over the Philippines, cotton or domestically produced hemp from U.S. Jim Crow sharecropping regimes, and henequen or sisal from the southernmost Mexican state of Yucatán, a

product of dispossessed Indigenous Yaqui and Huastec people and indentured workers hailing from Spain, China, Cuba, the Canary Islands, and Korea. Such an exposition reveals coterminous regimes of accumulation, a world tied together in the production of the commodity and, subsequently, in the racist terror wrought through it. At the same time, by unbraiding the strands and tracing the forms of revolt found in each space, I contend, we can begin to observe a history of shared struggle. From the revolts of Mexican people during the revolution, to the rebellion of Filipinos to imperial rule and Chicago organizers against labor exploitation, to Indigenous resistance to dispossession, one gains a sense of a world connected in struggle through the making and unmaking of the rope. Such a charting illustrates how the movement of global capital has produced its own unintended negotiations. By beginning with these contradictions rather than with the more familiar history of the most well-known revolutionary heroes, I maintain that we can discover an overlooked form of internationalism from below.

I came to this study by accident. Many of my Okinawan relatives, including one great-uncle, came to the United States via Mexico. That relative, Morisei Yamashiro, became a farmworker and labor organizer in the fields of the Imperial Valley in Southern California. There, Okinawan, Japanese, Chinese, Black, Filipino, South Asian, Indigenous, poor white, and Mexican workers labored together. Before Okinawan and Japanese Americans were forcibly relocated to internment camps during World War II, there were early FBI raids on their communities. Labor organizers were among the first to be targeted. When federal agents showed up at Yamashiro's door in 1942, he allegedly fought back ("F.B.I. Removes" 1942). According to his son, Yamashiro "had been down in Mexico fighting with Pancho Villa, so he knew how to take care of business!" This reflection was provocative. Could the radical resistance of Okinawans and Japanese in the United States been forged through their affinity with Mexican peasants during the Mexican Revolution? To answer, I was forced to confront gaps in my own family's history as well as shibboleths I had inherited about Asian American and labor history.

I examined the reflections of another Okinawan migrant, Paul Shinsei Kōchi, who had known my relatives in Southern California and traveled a similar path at the same time. The second chapter of my book examines Kōchi through his memoir *Imin no Aiwa* (An Immigrant's Sorrowful Tale), which describes how he found internationalism in Mexico. It describes his escape from Okinawa and from the surveillance of imperialist Japan; his

solidarity with Indigenous Kanaka Maoli in Hawai‘i, with Tongva people in California, and with Yaqui in northern Mexico as well as with Indian, Chinese, and other Asian immigrants and with Mexican peasants in the revolution; and his subsequent position of internationalism. As I write:

Paul Kōchi’s story demonstrates how the uprooted, dispossessed, and despised of the world came to know each other in shadows, in the tangled spaces of expulsion, extraction, transportation, debt, exploitation, and destruction: the garroting circuits of modern capital. Whether crammed in tight ship quarters; knocking together over the rails; sweating and swaying in the relentless tempo of industrial agriculture; inhaling the dank air of mine shafts; hearing each other breathing, coughing, fighting, singing, snoring, and sighing through thin walls; or corralled like livestock in jails and prisons, the contradictions of modern capital were shared in its intimate spaces. Within such sites, people discovered that the circuits of revolution, like the countervailing circuits of capital, were realizable in motion, often through unplanned assemblages. Roaring at their backs were the revolutionary currents of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, currents that howled from the metropolitan hearts of empire and wailed across the peripheries of the global world system. Standing before them, in the middle of its own revolution, was Mexico. From the vantage point of these struggles, the new century did not simply portend the inevitability of urban revolts and insurgencies at the point of production, but an epoch of peasant wars, rural uprisings, anti-colonial movements, and, of course, the Mexican Revolution. Mexico, as both a real country and an imagined space of revolution, would become a crucible of internationalism for the world’s “rebels” like Paul Kōchi. (Heatherton 2022, 51–52)

In focusing less on individuals and more on the movements of poor, working-class, and marginalized people—those often excluded in official archives and nostalgic historical narratives—*Arise!* is inspired by the principles of social history, or history from below. This tradition is most firmly linked to E. P. Thompson’s (1963) *The Making of the English Working Class*. In my own trajectory, this tradition has been guided by the work of theorists like W. E. B. Du Bois (1962) and C. L. R. James (1989). Their work traces internationalist traditions cultivated along abolitionist routes, what historian Julius Scott has named *A Common Wind* (2020).

I came to this historical tradition through another unusual journey. In 2007, I was a member of the Bristol Radical History Group in Bristol, England. We were a random mix of elementary school teachers, cancan

dancers, contractors, painters, engineers, and one talented but underemployed web designer. That year the British government celebrated the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the British slave trade. Official events hailed politicians like William Wilberforce and the legislation that abolished the slave trade in order to contrive redemptive nationalist narratives of the British state. In response, our group highlighted an alternative history. In free lectures, we discussed the resistance of enslaved African people and global abolitionist currents whose actions made the trade untenable and impossible. In art exhibits, film screenings, and concerts we celebrated abolition as a jubilant history. We organized walking tours to show people where reparations had been dispensed; not to formerly enslaved people but to former slaveowners, who subsequently invested state compensation for their lost “property” into industries, transportation hubs, and Bristol’s built environment.

A statue in the city center, for example, commemorated Edward Colston, a town father of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Colston was a leader in the local Bristol Merchant Venturers Society and an executive of the Royal African Company who had massively profited from the slave trade. Our tours reconsidered Colston’s legacy, and the seeming amelioration of the past represented by his statue. Years later, in the global Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, while people in the United States were confronting the ties between racist violence and racist history by toppling statues of Confederate soldiers, the people of Bristol engaged in their own powerful reckoning. A jubilant crowd brought down the statue of Colston. With a dramatic collective heave, they threw it off a bridge into the waters of the River Avon, sinking the man into the same global waterways that had once ferried his own monstrous wealth.

Internationalism, as I argue in *Arise!*, is a practice that is collectively forged and never simply found. By casting off cynical nostalgia, I believe we can be emboldened by histories from below to critically engage the radical traditions we find we have inherited. Perhaps by enlivening these histories, we can topple the consecrated monuments that confine our political imaginations and arise together towards something more just.

**Christina Heatherton** is the Elting Associate Professor of American Studies and Human Rights at Trinity College. She is the author of *Arise! Global Radicalism in the Era of the Mexican Revolution*. She coedited *Policing the Planet: Why the Policing Crisis Led to Black Lives Matter* with Jordan T. Camp. She currently codirects the Trinity Social Justice Initiative. She can be reached at [christina.heatherton@trincoll.edu](mailto:christina.heatherton@trincoll.edu).

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