



Left-wing Exile in Mexico, 1934-60



Aribert Reimann, Elena Díaz Silva, Randal Sheppard (University of Cologne)

<http://www.ihila.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/871.html?&L=1>

During the mid-20th century, Mexico (and above all its capital city) represented one of the most prominent and productive geographical locations for international networks of leftwing politics, literature and arts outside the Soviet Union. The objective of this project is to establish the history of left-wing political exile in Mexico from the post-revolutionary period of Cardenismo into the Mexican “golden age” during the height of the Cold War as a prominent transnational arena for left-wing politics during the mid-20th century.

The aim of the project will be to cut across national perspectives and disciplinary limitations to establish the politics and imagination of the Mexican arena of exile while, at the same time, introducing new material from the perspective of interfering outside agencies to explore and develop a framework of transnational politics that will elevate this field of scholarship to the level of current methodological sophistication. As a general observation, the scholarly treatment of the context of left-wing exile in Mexico often suffers from national fragmentation as well as disciplinary specialization, and has so far struggled to incorporate a transdisciplinary perspective or a transnational treatment across the range of national sub-communities of exile. What is needed is a more comprehensive approach to explore and develop the international framework of political and cultural networks which ultimately determined and shaped more specific national experiences.

The periodization of the project reflects, on the one hand, both the election of Lázaro Cárdenas del Río to the Mexican presidency in 1934, which ushered in a period of radical post-revolutionary policies at home and abroad, and the onset of the Comintern’s “popular front” strategy of 1934/35 which had a profound impact on the centre-left politics of exile on a global level and beyond the Communist fold. On the other hand, the scope of investigation needs to be extended across several distinct phases of left-wing international politics of the 1930s and 40s into the Cold War, as the post-war years saw the arrival of U.S.-American left-wing exiles anxious to escape the anti-Communist zeal of McCarthyism, while the late 1950s also marked the eventual end of any political and cultural influence of German exiles having returned from Mexico to the GDR. Around the same time, the Mexican exile of the Spanish veterans of the Civil War continued but slowly changed its character towards assimilation. As far as the continuing presence of exiles in Mexico and corresponding international networks are concerned, the transformation of left-wing anti-fascism of the 1930s and ’40s into the ideological confrontation of the Cold War remains a particularly under-researched area. This research will therefore not only transcend national perspectives but will also go beyond conventional periodizations of more Eurocentric approaches in 20th-century history.

The dimension of transnational experience of exile in Mexico needs to be understood on three different analytical levels:

1. Interaction between exiled sub-communities: The historiography of exile in Mexico has produced a wide range of national perspectives with regard to the Spanish, German, Austrian etc. sub-communities of exile. In the Spanish case, the politics of memory has even tended to differentiate the experience of exile further into regional narratives of exile. What has rarely come into focus is the way in which Mexico provided an opportunity for transnational encounter, interaction, and cooperation between different national communities in exile. This does not mean to take the rhetoric of left-wing internationalism at face value, but to explore the potential as well as the limitations of transnational sociability and political conflicts in exile.

2. Relationship with Mexican society, individuals and institutions: Mexican authorities not only actively facilitated the arrival of refugees from Europe, the exiled communities also maintained close relations to their institutional, social, and political host environment. Some areas (e.g. the academic legacy of the Spanish community of exiles) have already been extensively covered. This project, however, aims to understand such areas of interaction in the widest possible way. Beyond the institutional level, there existed a multitude of opportunities to engage with Mexican society, politics, and culture in different places, media, and social contexts. A transdisciplinary approach is needed to establish the full spectrum of transnational left-wing politics and culture in Mexico.

3. Interference of outside forces: The transnational arena of left-wing exile in Mexico did not operate in isolation. Outside agencies such as Soviet Stalinism, the fascist powers in Europe, and U.S.-American agencies not only eagerly observed but also occasionally interfered with the social and political fabric of exile. Exile in Mexico must, thus, be understood in its global context, too. Even if the long-term effects of the legacy of political exile in Mexico on the wider world should not be overestimated, the nervous hostility that some outside agencies displayed towards the activities of exiled communities in Mexico at the time may be taken as indicative of its relative perceived importance and potential.

In terms of methodological approaches, the project takes inspiration from social and cultural anthropology, cultural history, gender studies, network analysis, and visual history. Areas of empirical research include the urban topography of exile in Mexico City, the history of masculinity in exile, and the impact of exiles on ideas and production of modern design. The innovative potential of this research will thereby consist of: a) bringing together archival materials relevant to the transnational experience of left-wing exile in Mexico from European and North-American / Mexican archives, and: b) the implementation of coherently transnational and transdisciplinary approaches that will contribute new ideas and methods to the scholarship of the field.

Project 1: The urban topography of left-wing political exile in Mexico, 1934-60

Investigator: Aribert Reimann

This project aims to explore the urban topography and spatial experience of exile in Mexico between the 1930s and the 1950s. Cutting across national sub-communities of exile the lived experience of exile is followed from street level up: places of residence, political and cultural activities, internal and external conflict as well as sites of politicized and private sociability will be explored from the microscopic focus on buildings and neighbourhoods up to the metropolitan

level of networks of transnational interactions. In this way, the metropolitan context of the lived experience of exile will inform a detailed analysis of urban space, but also its relationship with peripheral arenas of the experience of exile, e.g. the smaller centres of Morelia and Cuernavaca and the curiosity expressed by many for indigenous communities in the provinces. The metropolitan fabric of left-wing political exile will thus be approached with a sharper sense of its complex construction out of European notions of urban life-styles, the encounter with the social and cultural complexity of Mexican society and the politicized imagination of the wider geographical context of exiled life in an urban setting.

Empirical research thereby focuses on distinct, but interconnected aspects of the spatial experience: the social geography of private life and sociability, spatial patterns of political activism and cultural interaction, perceptions and engagement of exiles with the politics and practices of urban life vis-à-vis the Mexican host society, its institutions and cultural texture, the politicization and zoning of urban space, symbolic and physical conflicts over urban space, the cultural coding of spaces in terms of class, gender, and ethnicity. Finally, the urban experience of exile must be seen against the background of the protagonists' engagement with the imaginary of post-revolutionary Mexico, particularly with regard to perceptions of ethnicity across the city as well as the nation as a whole. The transnational fabric of the experience of exile was also influenced by the interference of outside actors such as foreign governments, their political and cultural activities, and foreign clandestine agencies. Special attention to the different sites of interaction, exchange and conflict will link these levels of empirical research with political, social and symbolic performance in private homes, cafés, bars, restaurants, as well as institutionalized meeting places, centres of culture and education, theatres, cinemas, and hotels, their situation within the geographic fabric of the city as well as in relation to one another. The aim, therefore, is to reconstruct the lived experience of exile in its urban and pragmatic context.

Project 2: Men and masculinities in exile: Mexico, 1930-1960.

Investigator: Elena Díaz Silva

This project proposes a different line of research to that adopted by most of the literature about exile in post-revolutionary Mexico and transnational networks of refuges and revolutionaries from the 1930s to the 1960s. This project explores gender identities (masculinity or masculinities in particular) of left-wing exiles in connection with the “mosaic of discourses, actions and realities” that represent Mexico as the host country. The activities, discourse and political practices of refugees through their organizations reflect the influence of the modern model of masculinity as well as heteronormativity in social (personal and family) relations in the exile community. I propose to research the ways in which exiles rejected the model of masculinity imposed (e.g. through official propaganda, education or mechanisms of socialization) by fascism or other forms of totalitarianism as a form of cultural resistance.

This project highlights President Cardenas' policies of refuge for Spanish Republicans, with regard to the process of modernization (e.g. education), and to the family and gender politics adopted by the postrevolutionary Government. It analyzes the tensions between Spanish refugees, the most important colony of refugees in México (around 20,000), and the Mexican host society. These tensions include problems of adaptation and integration for Spanish exiles in

Mexico stemming from the colonial past, and the survival of negative stereotypes of gender (e.g. Hernán Cortés, the Conqueror or the *gachupines*). In this way, my research will address many of the silences that remain in the official history of Spanish exile in Mexico.

This project aims to include men in gender studies and to analyze masculinity and masculinities as a cultural and political construction which has historically defined relations of power with women and between men. Memory and subjectivity will be necessary to this exploration of the *intrahistoria* of exile. Through this approach, I will explore the possibilities offered by the historiography of emotions, (originating with the “histories of emotions” of Febrve in the 1940s), and the most recent concept of “Emotional Communities” of Barbara Rosenwein (2006).

Project 3: Clara Porset’s Mexico

Investigator: Randal Sheppard

In this project, I explore the creation of new visions of modernity in post-revolutionary Mexico that shaped the places people lived and worked as well as the objects they used in daily life. The discussion is structured around the Mexico encountered and translated into household objects such as furniture by Cuban designer Clara Porset, who arrived in Mexico in 1936 as a political exile and collaborated with many of Mexico’s most important functionalist architects and designers. Porset was also an active participant in Mexican radical political, educational and artistic associations until her death in 1981. Designers as well as architects and urban planners played a central role and often collaborated with the post-revolutionary state in the search for solutions to the needs of post-revolutionary Mexico’s increasingly urbanized, proletarianized and middle class masses. Their role was both practical in the sense of satisfying material needs as well as political in the way designers and architects reinforced, challenged or promoted political values, identities and lifestyles through their work. Political exiles who identified with modernist and functionalist ideals and had trained at foreign institutions such as the Bauhaus played a central role in this process, providing both intellectual and professional guidance to their Mexican counterparts and collaborating with the government on major public works projects. In their work, these figures sought to mediate universalist political and technical discourses such as Communism and functionalism with a national intellectual and political climate in which the promotion of a distinct Mexican cultural and ethnic identity was identified as important to promoting social cohesion and resisting U.S. imperialism.

Rather than the biography or discussion of an individual’s work, this project uses the experiences of Clara Porset as a window on broader interactions between cosmopolitanism, capitalism, consumerism and revolutionary nationalism during Mexico’s “Golden Age.” In this spirit, I am exploring the extensive personal and political networks of Porset to gain an insight into the creative, political and intellectual milieu of the Mexico City from the 1930s to 1960 in a way that crosses the boundaries of “national” or narrowly sectarian political communities. The designs of Porset will be further discussed within the context of broader cultural, political and economic developments in Mexico. This includes the development of modernism and functionalism in Mexico through an examination of her collaboration on public works projects with major architects, artists and the state, as well as how such projects were visually represented in print. I will also explore how economic forces and technology shaped the development of design and

architecture in Mexico. Alternative visions of Mexico - such as those promoted by Spanish exile designers who promoted European and Hispanicist styles of household design over functionalism - will also be discussed to shed light on how ways of consuming and living reflected different forms of identity. Finally, I hope to situate this analysis in the transnational context of cultural and political relations between the U.S. and Mexico, particularly during the early decades of the Cold War.