

Book Review

Sonia Hernández (2021) *For a Just and Better World: Engendering Anarchism in the Mexican Borderlands, 1900–1938*. Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Illinois Press. 248 pp. ISBN 9780252086106. Hardcover US\$110, softcover US\$28.

Reviewed by
Joshua Savala, Rollins College, USA

Anyone working on the first few decades of twentieth century Mexican history has a vast body of scholarship with which to contend. There is still much to explore, as any of the numerous new works on the time period show. But there is a fine balance between writing a new history and building on previous works. And to this reviewer, Sonia Hernández's book, *For a Just and Better World*, does precisely that.

Perhaps the best way to approach the book is through the framework Hernández establishes. *For a Just and Better World* is a transnational history, and this method is the basis for much of the analysis and narrative. Focusing on the Tampico–Villa Cecilia area of the Gulf of Mexico, Hernández builds a transnational world in which people and ideas circulated across the region and well into the United States. Hernández is careful, though, not to create a world in which most people are transitory, often moving before they learn about and engage with local struggles. Transnational movement *is* central, but it should “not obscure this important local history” (p. 8; see also p. 157n16). Here Hernández builds on recent transnational history trends and utilises the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) to think through the transnational framework along the border. This also reminds me of the point that Raymond Craib (2017) makes on anarchists in early twentieth-century Chile: yes, some anarchists did move far and wide and spread their ideas, but some also remained in one city for years, building strong ties across different sectors, and were better organisers precisely because of their familiarity with the local. By combining the local and the transnational, Hernández creates an anarchist world that is both tied into the local and concerned with political process elsewhere.

A central element of this history is that of anarchism. But not just anarchism: anarcho-feminism is the main subject, and it helps to set Hernández apart from many other works that focus on men. Through the chapters, the reader learns about a number of women who saw in anarchist politics and organisations an opening for thinking through and acting upon inequalities of various sorts (pp. 38–39). Caritina Piña Montalva's life begins and closes the book, and is a central subject throughout, most prominently in Chapter 3. Piña grew up in the vibrant political atmosphere of Villa Cecilia, where people learned about anarchism through reading newspapers and theory and taking part in radical theatre. She served as the corresponding secretary for the Comité Internacional Pro-Presos Sociales (International Committee in Support of Social Prisoners), where she sent letters about local politics and helped raise funds for prisoners and their legal counsel (pp. 82–85). This type of labour placed Piña at the centre of the anarchist movement locally and connected her to anarchists in other areas. Indeed, as Hernández details in Chapter 4,

Piña saw a clear connection between her own political organising and that of striking textile workers in Gastonia, North Carolina in 1929. Some of the workers arrested in Gastonia were women, and some were Mexican women with their children. This national and gendered component created an immediate connection for Piña and many others. And while the book is centrally concerned with women, Hernández sharply draws out what anarchism meant for men as well. For Hernández, if anarchism opened up a space for women to organise and critique gendered hierarchies, it also produced a vision for masculinity: “Men who violated the tenets of anarcho-syndicalism lacked the capacity to be fully realised, or real men, as only real men exhibited and promoted the ‘right’ ideas” (p. 78).

In one of the most fascinating chapters (Chapter 5), Hernández uses motherhood to think through anarchism and labour. Piña was drawn into organising around the Gastonia strike partly because mothers and children were involved in the labour action. In the hands of Piña and other women, motherhood was politicised and became part of the “empowerment” of women; they raised their children to be “true fighters without the usual state blindfold that drove Mexicans to serve the new government” (pp. 104, 109). This chapter adds to how we think about anarchism and labour by centring motherhood and what it means to raise children. Even if the source base in the chapter is limited, which is probably due in large part to a lack of sources, it opens up possibilities for future research into the topic. It also makes me think about what it was like for these children to grow up in radical homes, surrounded by politics; one historian thinking about this in a different context is Alfonso Salgado (2019).

Labour studies scholars interested in labour–state relations will also find much in the fifth chapter of the book. As the Mexican Revolution progressed, Article 123 of the new constitution of 1917 offered many labour benefits. But, as Hernández points out, many anarchists saw this as the state becoming stronger and unnecessarily involved in their lives. Even the Unión de Empleados de Restaurantes y Similares (UERS), which was affiliated with the anarcho-syndicalist Confederación General de Trabajadores (CGT), found common cause with the state in regulating waitresses (*meseras*). They were now forbidden from “acting immorally” on the job, with the possibility of fines as a penalty (p. 119). In 1925, Carmen Aranda, a *mesera*, in turn, organised a large-scale abandonment of the union – “Let the men stay with the union” – and pushed for women to join together “around ideas of mutual respect and understanding” (p. 122). Here Hernández puts her finger on the changing role of the state, radical conceptualisations of that state, and how gender informs that understanding. This chapter is also useful in that it analyses the limits of specific types of union organising, and how some might have found a more useful form of organising outside of unions.

This all leads into Chapter 6 of the book, which examines anarcho-feminism in the post-revolutionary decades. Hernández emphasises how nationalism was mobilised by the state in order to “secure confidence in the new revolutionary government” while basing the idea of women and motherhood on housework and taking care of rural men (p. 133). Chapter 7 (the conclusion) traces Piña’s life until her death in 1981, while also summarising some of the main points of the book. Significantly, Hernández argues that although many of the women she discusses in the book have not featured significantly in the scholarship on modern Mexican politics, their actions as transnational labour organisers serve as a central part of twentieth-century Mexican history.

For a Just and Better World is a smart book based on a wide range of sources, as well as creative readings of those sources. At times the narrative can become confusing due to the multiple trajectories in each chapter, but this may also be a product of weaving together scant sources. Although the book covers the era of the Mexican Revolution, Hernández only includes the overarching view of the revolution when necessary for the arguments she makes for specific people,

organisations or regions. If one has a general idea of the revolution, this is not a problem, and for many it will be refreshing not to be overwhelmed with the traditional Mexican Revolution narrative. Hernández's book is essential reading for anyone working on anarchism, feminism, labour organising and the northern Mexican borderlands.

References

- Anzaldúa, G. (1987) *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute.
- Craib, R. (2017) Sedentary Anarchists. In *Reassessing the Transnational Turn: Scales of Analysis in Anarchist and Syndicalist Studies*, edited by Constance Bantman and Bert Altena. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Salgado, A. (2019) Making Friends and Making Out: The Social and Romantic Lives of Young Communists in Chile (1985–1973). *The Americas*, 76(2): 299–326.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

JOSHUA SAVALA is an assistant professor in the Department of History at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. He recently published *Beyond Patriotic Phobias: Connections, Cooperation, and Solidarity in the Peruvian-Chilean Pacific World* (University of California Press, 2022), and his articles have been awarded the José María Arguedas Prize and Best Graduate Student Paper by the Peru and Labor Sections of the Latin American Studies Association. [Email: jsavala@rollins.edu]