

It Would Be Fine to Help Make Mexico a Happy Place: The Thirty-Seventh Newsletter (2025)



Dear friends,

Greetings from the desk of **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**

When I was in graduate school, I audited a class taught by Friedrich Katz (1927–2010), one of the great historians of Mexico of his generation. During the Second World War, Katz’s father Leo was a journalist who

was part of the anti-Nazi resistance in Berlin and later smuggled weapons from France to the Spanish Republic in its time of dire need. When the Nazis invaded France, Leo and his wife Bronia Rein – both Jewish communists – fled to Mexico, where President Lázaro Cárdenas’s government had opened its doors to anyone fleeing from fascism or who had fought for the Spanish Republic.

Friedrich Katz grew up in Mexico and remained grateful to the country for the rest of his life. In his seminar on the Mexican Revolution, he would regale us with remarkable tales about the ordinary people who overthrew the Porfiriato, the military dictatorship of General Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911). One of my favourite anecdotes was of the day Emiliano Zapata’s Ejército Libertador del Sur (Liberation Army of the South) rode into Mexico City with Pancho Villa’s División del Norte (Division of the North). Both men went into the National Palace on the Zócalo, found it uncomfortable, and wanted to return home to their rural Morelos (for Zapata) and Durango (for Villa) to continue the agrarian revolution. Katz would laugh and say, ‘I too would have followed them back to the countryside’.

It was Professor Katz who first gave me a copy of John Reed’s *Insurgent Mexico* (1914), one of the great feats of revolutionary reportage, bested only by Reed himself five years later with *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1919), about the Bolshevik Revolution. Reed, who spent time with both Villa and Zapata, included a beautiful chapter on Pancho Villa’s dream for Mexico:

We will put the army to work. In all parts of the Republic, we will establish military colonies composed of the veterans of the Revolution. The State will give them grants of agricultural lands and establish big industrial enterprises to give them work. Three days a week they will work and work hard, because honest work is more important than fighting, and only honest work makes good citizens. And the other three days they will receive military instruction and go out and teach all the people how to fight. Then, when the Patria is invaded, we will just have to telephone from the palace at Mexico City, and in half a day all the Mexican people will rise from their fields and factories, fully armed, equipped and organised to defend their children and their homes.

My ambition is to live my life in one of those military colonies among my *compañeros* whom I love, who have suffered so long and so deeply with me. I think I would like the government to establish a leather factory there where we could make good saddles and bridles, because I know how to do that; and the rest of the time I would like to work on my little farm, raising cattle and corn. It would be fine, I think, to help make Mexico a happy place.

What a wonderful dream.



Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821. Since then it has struggled to break first from the Spanish post-colonial system, which kept it as an exporter of cheap raw materials, and then the US-driven imperial system, in whose neo-colonial clutches it remains through its subordinate role in the international division of labour. In 2017, the former Head of Government of Mexico City and two-time presidential candidate (2006 and 2012) Andrés Manuel López Obrador – or AMLO – published *2018 La salida: Decadencia y renacimiento de México* (2018 The Exit: Mexico's Decline and Rebirth). The book, which became a kind of campaign text

for AMLO's successful 2018 presidential run, set out the claim that his National Regeneration Movement (Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional, Morena) would lead Mexico's Fourth Transformation (the '4T'). The first three transformations, AMLO wrote, were the War of Independence (1810–1821), the War of Reform (1858–1861), and the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917). He maintained that it would be useless for Mexico to undergo a reform presidency that was merely going to enact cosmetic alterations when what the country needed was a deeper, more fundamental correction.

AMLO rooted his agenda in the most dramatic periods of Mexican history and suggested that the promise of the Mexican Revolution had been almost entirely erased by the decades of subordination to the United States, the corruption of Mexico's plutocracy, and a state bureaucracy that had lost the political will to defend the Constitution of 1917.

From Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research comes dossier no. 92, *Mexico and the Fourth Transformation (September 2025)*, researched and written by Stephanie Weatherbee Brito (of the **International Peoples' Assembly**) and Alina Duarte (of Morena's **National Institute for Political Education**). To my mind, this is the first text of its kind to properly set the Morena movement in historical context and explain the social process of the 4T. It shows how the protagonists of the Morena movement took thirty years to build a political project out of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas's long journey to reform Mexican politics and return to the policies and promises of the presidency of his father, Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940) – the most left-wing of Mexico's sixty-four presidents before AMLO and now Claudia Sheinbaum. These policies – known as *cardenismo* – included independence from US interference, control of Mexico's resources (including the 1938 nationalisation of oil), agrarian reform (including the creation of rural schools to dent landlord power and introducing collective units of family agricultural production known as *ejidos*), and social advancement (through expanded access to education, support for trade unions, and respect for Mexico's rich indigenous cultures). Morena's 4T is built on cardenismo's principles of sovereignty and dignity, now renewed for the twenty-first century. The dossier provides a readable and teachable text for people interested in Mexico's journey: so far from God and so close to the United States (*¡Pobre México! Tan lejos de Dios, y tan cerca de los Estados Unidos*) – the phrase uttered by Porfirio Díaz before he was overthrown by the Mexican Revolution.



Each of Mexico's periods of transformation also produced remarkable art and culture, and the 4T is no different. The artworks in this dossier are from the mural series *Los Nadies*, created by **Colectivo Subterráneos** in Oaxaca, Mexico. Founded in 2021 to democratise art as a tool for social transformation, the collective draws on Mexico's graphic tradition – from the Taller de Gráfica Popular (People's Graphic Workshop) to Mexican muralism – as well as the 2006 Popular Teachers' Movement of Oaxaca. Inspired by Eduardo Galeano's poem of the same name, the series includes prints and murals that highlight indigenous

and mestizo peoples forgotten under colonial rule and modern capitalism, confronting the historical debt to the marginalised and amplifying voices that demand justice in a Mexico under transformation.

While new movements produce new kinds of art, there are also artists whose work gives voice to those movements. The poet Enrique Márquez Jaramillo (born in 1950) developed an acerbic, surrealistic style that mirrored the uprisings that shook Mexico during his lifetime and the entrenched bureaucratic corruption of successive governments. In 1996, he wrote *Breve diccionario para mexicanos furiosos* (Brief Dictionary for Furious Mexicans), which carried the pulse of a population that was living under the misery of the neoliberal onslaught. This mischievous spirit returned in 2012, when Márquez Jaramillo organised the Cumbre Mundial de Indignados, Disidentes e Insurgentes (Summit of the Indignant, Dissidents, and Insurgents) in Mexico City. That coalition of dissident and indignant currents came together to elect AMLO in 2018. It is therefore worth going back to one of Márquez Jaramillo's most hopeful poems – 'Barco a la deriva' (Boat Adrift), part of his 1982 collection *En el caño del mundo que recaña uyuyuy* (roughly translated as, In the Gutter of the World That Goes Uyuyuy):

We must save the ship,
its crew,
its cargo.
Save it, you who know the craft,
who can calm the disorder
of the engines and the roar of the waves
with the simple touch of your fingers,
with the balm of a smile.
Do not allow this stubborn boat adrift
to sink.
Offer it your harbour at last,
guide it
to its damp pier,
and you will see how it quiets
this voracious fire
that consumes me.

Warmly,

Vijay