

*Lo más seguro es que ¿Quién sabe?*

Ambiguity and Doubt in Legitimizing a Revolutionary System:  
The Red Revolutionary Tenants Union of the Port of Veracruz  
versus  
President Alvaro Obregón  
1922

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The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, I wish to propose a somewhat distinct perspective to recent discussions of Mexican Revolutionary state formation and “the negotiation of rule” as it has been put, utilizing a case study involving the Red Revolutionary Tenants Union and the rent strike it initiated in the port of Veracruz in 1922.<sup>1</sup> Second, since this particular working-class association relied on anarchist ideology for its effectiveness, it offers the opportunity to continue to explore the meaning and role of anarchist thought and action among the organized working classes in the revolutionary/post-revolutionary era.<sup>2</sup>

As for the first proposition, I would like to suggest the possibility of moving the center of discussion away from dichotomies of elite authority versus popular contestation as the primary factors behind post-revolutionary social relations and state formation.<sup>3</sup> Rather than focus on the contention I would like to suggest exploring the ways in which various levels of actors (local, regional and national) found ways to agree to maintain a system in the making. This idea I take from Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo’s book, Ciudadanos Imaginarios, which presents the premise of a social and political system with its own logic unique to Mexico that developed during the transition from colonialism to independence. Escalante argues that despite elite attempts to create a Republic of individuals/citizens, laws and electoral processes throughout the nineteenth century, what developed in independent Mexico were networks based not on individuals but on corporations which sought mediation through personal relationships with key individuals (intermediaries). This

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<sup>1</sup>I refer, of course, to the collection of works found in Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, eds., Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico. Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1994.

<sup>2</sup>The most well-known works on anarchism and the Mexican working classes are John Mason Hart, Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class, 1860-1931. University of Texas Press, Austin, 1987 and Paco Ignacio Taibo II, Los Bolshevikis. Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, México, 1986. Anarchism among the Mexican working classes continues to perplex scholars of Mexican working class history as it is ambiguous. Hart shows quite convincingly that anarchist ideology set well with Mexican workers and was widespread and that direct action flowed easily from its principles. Yet, most worker organizations, even anarchist ones, never completely severed ties with the government.

<sup>3</sup>While I certainly do not deny or ignore the existence of conflict between popular classes, elites and “Revolutionary” authorities from the local through to the national levels during this period, particularly in

system, Escalante argues, developed in response to the break down of the official mediating networks provided by the crown during colonialism to deal with the consistent meeting of two contradictory worlds in New Spain. The system that developed after independence did so outside official spheres and was at once hierarchical and inclusive: Everyone from *comunidades de indios* to *hacendados*, the clergy, merchants, etc. participated in it, each group negotiating its own local power networks through intermediaries (*caciques*, municipal presidents, governors, etc.). The state in this system was at once honored, respected and feared for its power at the pinnacle of a hierarchical society and at the same time distrusted, disrespected and deprecated as inept and incapable of managing the country as well as for its arbitrary use of power.<sup>4</sup> To “make politics” was considered distasteful and little respected. In addition, no one ever expected the laws made by the state to be applied to everyone equally. If that were the case there would be no reason to negotiate. What intermediaries negotiated for their clients, then, was disobedience to the government and its laws, a way of getting around a “formal” system written into constitutions.<sup>5</sup>

My research on class formation and social relations in the port of Veracruz from the mid-nineteenth century through the early 1920s suggests that this system of corporations/groups and personal networks survived the Revolution of 1910 in tact. Class hierarchies had shifted from 1910 to 1920, however, and the Revolution had increased the power of “popular” intermediaries. Much had changed and much had remained the same. For the moment, I want simply to illustrate the ways in which very opposing groups (the Red Revolutionary Tenants Union and the Property Owners Associations of Veracruz and Mexico City) through their intermediaries (Governor

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the early 1920s, I do argue at least in the case of the Red Revolutionary Tenants Union, that all actors no matter what their social status acted in both offensive and defensive ways for their particular interests.

<sup>4</sup>Throughout the nineteenth century (until the rise of Porfirio Díaz and the railroad) the government was characterized by mismanagement of the economy and often forced the upper classes to loan it money and the lower classes to fight its battles through impressment. See Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo, *Ciudadanos Imaginarios*. El Colegio de México, México 1992, especially the chapters titled *Patrimonio de Pillos I and Patrimonio de Pillos II*.

<sup>5</sup>Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo, *Ciudadanos Imaginarios*.

Adalberto Tejeda and President Alvaro Obregón, respectively) negotiated from March to July 1922 and in the process reproduced the Revolutionary system in formation. As Escalante points out, the simple act of negotiation, the interchange or give and take among parties, validates or gives legitimacy to the entire process as well as to the groups and intermediaries involved.<sup>6</sup> In 1922 each group, in the midst of violent conflict, negotiated in both defense of its own interests and of the developing Revolutionary government and system. This they did by allowing doubts to exist surrounding actual events and through the invention of an undefined “enemy” of all sides. Rather than simply accusing one another or taking responsibility for hostile actions against one another, each side was willing to doubt or to leave dubious incidents of aggression. At the same time, each side was willing to lay the guilt of violence upon a “common enemy” of the Revolution in general which all parties supported. This allowed negotiations to continue and the relative power of all parties to go on with them as well as the disobedience of the Tenants Union members whose rent strike endured into the early 1930s.

As for the secondary issue, that of anarchism and working class participation in the making of the Revolutionary system, a discussion of the Red Revolutionary Tenants Union is in order. The Red Revolutionary Tenants Union was made up of all levels of the working classes in the city from the economically and politically powerful maritime workers to the less influential artisans and city services workers (bakers, waiters, public transport workers, etc.) to the more marginalized such as prostitutes, housewives and the poor in general. Prostitutes, housewives and the unskilled poor were among its most active and militantly anarchist members. These diverse groups found their point of solidarity in the wretched, over-crowded housing situations they shared.<sup>7</sup> While conflict existed between each of these groups of workers, personal social networks

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid. p.135 Escalante writes, “The elemental sense of political exchange is moral: Its purpose is to define a relationship.

<sup>7</sup>The rental situation in Veracruz was as follows: Veracruz merchants, mostly Spanish in origin, had invested in urban property since the colonial era. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as

among them and with local authorities allowed them to find sufficient common ground to unite under the red banner of the Red Revolutionary Tenants Union.<sup>8</sup> Among these networks connecting the heterogeneous working classes, existed the urban *pueblo* within which workers of whatever institutional affiliation or relative social status might blend into the unruly crowd in public protest. One must keep in mind that even politically connected workers distrusted the federal government to a certain extent, thus it was important to keep these links to the unruly *pueblo* as another option for power and influence.<sup>9</sup> For the Red Revolutionary Tenants Union, taking on the name anarchist was a means of separating it from the other working class organizations, particularly the League of Maritime Zone Workers (even though individual members overlapped with the Tenants Union). At the same time, the anti-state attitudes of anarchism together with the direct action techniques encouraged by anarchist ideology and rhetoric increased the power of the tenants by making them unpredictable and unruly, exactly the power of the urban *pueblo*.<sup>10</sup> Anarchism gave the tenants more power with which to negotiate. It was not an attempt by some working-class people to take themselves out of the “system.” A look at the leader and foundation of the Tenants Union helps to illustrate:

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the city expanded with commercial activity and working class immigration, this trend continued and expanded as elites bought up even more urban land such that by 1921 only 3.5% of the port’s population owned urban real estate, leaving 96.5% as renters. (García Mundo, *El movimiento inquilinario de Veracruz, 1922*. SEP, México, D.F., 1976, p.25) Taking advantage of a 65% increase in the population from 1910 to 1920, landlords raised rents during that time period by 500% (García Mundo, *El movimiento* p.10) Living conditions in the patios were often unsanitary and over-crowded. Each patio consisted of about twenty-five or so two-room dwellings facing a center patio. The one hundred and fifty or so tenants of each patio shared common wash sinks and bathrooms, usually only two per patio.

<sup>8</sup>See Elizabeth Norvell, “Women of Revolution: A Struggle for Civic Participation, Home and Dignity in the Port of Veracruz, 1922-23,” presented at the IX Conference of the Latin American Studies Association, Washington D.C., 1995 for details on local level social networks that allowed for such a violent movement.

<sup>9</sup>John Hart, in *Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class* makes the connection between general urban protest and anarchism. See also Escalante, *Ciudadanos Imaginarios*, 259-268 and Frederick Shaw, “Poverty and Politics in Mexico City, 1824-1854,” Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Florida, 1975 on the the *pueblo* in urban social and political relations.

<sup>10</sup>The direct action techniques of the Tenants Union were also rooted in customary social relations within the patios. Disputes within the patios were often resolved with violence. See Norvell, “Women of Revolution”.

The story of Herón Proal, founder and leader of the Red Revolutionary Tenants Union, suggests the reasons for which workers who had supported Constitutionalism in 1915 and 1916 called themselves anarchists by 1917 and 1918. Proal was born in Tulancingo, Hidalgo in 1881. He began to work at age thirteen in a money exchange. In 1897 he enlisted in the *Armada Nacional*. Five years later, in 1903, he retired from the *Armada*, took up residence in the Port of Veracruz and began to work as a tailor. In 1906, he became active in working class issues and struggles. In 1915 he took on the cause of Constitutionalism. In 1916 he was elected president of the Executive Committee of the *Primer Congreso Preliminar de Sindicatos Obreros* which took place in the port of Veracruz.<sup>11</sup> From 1916 to 1917 he held the position of vice-president of the local Workers' Party. This experience with local politics resulted unpleasant, unproductive and disillusioning such that by late 1917 Proal proclaimed himself an anarchist. Proal then announced publicly that he would work toward the liberation of the proletariat and the fulfillment of Revolutionary principles outside of all political and authoritative entanglements.<sup>12</sup> This proclamation distinguished Proal and those who began to follow his example from the more powerful maritime workers who had made alliances with the national government. At the same time, Proal did not take himself out of political discussions and movements. Rather, by labeling himself an anarchist Proal kept himself in the social system, but separated himself from the maritime workers whose leaders "made politics." At the same time, Proal connected himself to the less (officially) politically influential *pueblo*.

On February 5, 1922, the day Herón Proal and his followers formed the Red Revolutionary Tenants Union, they did so in response to official attempts to create a tenants union allied with the state. Rafael García, a stevedore who had just been elected mayor of the city, had

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<sup>11</sup>Octavio García Mundo, *El movimiento*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>12</sup>This information was gathered from the port newspaper *el Dictamen* from 1917 to 1918. Proal, like many other working class leaders, had been influenced by Spanish anarchists who arrived to Mexico, especially to Veracruz, in the early 1900s.

proposed a tenants union just a few days earlier in the public library. He wished to form a union based on reformist, socialist principles. Some present agreed with the idea, others were skeptical of state co-optation of the movement. Proal caused a ruckus at that meeting, was asked to leave by García and others like him, and as he left, half the crowd went with him. These were the people who founded the Red Revolutionary Tenants Union and agreed to meet every night in Juárez Park, to establish committees in all parts of the city, to pay rents as they were in 1910 or to pay nothing at all and to neither deal with authorities nor request permission for public meetings. They further concurred that in the case of attempted evictions, neighbors would be called to action, women and children first, to impede the eviction at the door of the dwelling, and that they would first act peacefully and later with violence if necessary.<sup>13</sup> This would be a movement of the disorderly *pueblo* and from here the Union would express its power. The only part of the pact that was strategically ignored was that which stated that they would not deal with authorities.

In order to galvanize the *pueblo* behind the burgeoning tenants' movement, Proal took his message first to its lowest levels, to the prostitutes who paid even higher rents than working class families for smaller quarters. When Proal addressed this sector of the *pueblo* he did so with the intention of inciting them to direct, immediate, violent if necessary, action against local elites and authorities:

Are you not afraid that you will drop dead paying such excessive rents? Courage and fight! Set these *acesorias* on fire immediately and infuriate the bourgeoisie; death to the bourgeoisie until there is not one bourgeois left in this vile world....Who would dare stop you from doing justice? The authorities perhaps? The mayor? No, *compañeras*, you are very dearly wrong (*equivocaditas*).<sup>14</sup>

Not only did Proal call for violent rebellion against local elites, a message that alone would have made him the enemy of landlords, merchants and the new Revolutionary state, but he went even

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<sup>13</sup>*El Dictamen* February 3, 1922

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.* February 28, 1922

further and called upon the *pueblo* to break the social hierarchies of the present social system. His words were strong and vibrant, designed to open the imaginations of those who never before had contemplated the possibility of tearing down a social hierarchy which seemed as solid as the forces of nature itself:

All must be done away with here, and if the mayor refuses to do justice, pay no attention; take it. Throw bombs, but many bombs; let social revolution break out such that the world quakes, that humanity trembles, that Niagara Falls tumbles down, that the seas stir in rebellion, that the pipes burst, that the lights go out, that the street cars stop, that the automobiles explode, that the earth is destroyed, that justice is done.<sup>15</sup>

Proal was both revolutionary and intermediary between the *pueblo* and the state.<sup>16</sup> Such a combination was possible at this moment as the Revolutionary government, headed by Alvaro Obregón at the time, was just beginning to stabilize its regime and its legitimacy among Mexican society at large was still questionable. It was also necessary, as landlords were some of the wealthiest and most influential elites in the country. The *pueblo*'s strategy had to reach straight through the social structures in formation, to disrupt them and to call them into question as much as possible for the movement to succeed.

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid. February 28, 1922

<sup>16</sup>Once Proal had brought the prostitutes into action against their landlords and his movement took off, he gained the support of both labor federations operating in the city as the rent strike in general was a popular idea and quickly took on grand proportions. Once begun, the rent strike took on great momentum. One month after the foundation of the Red Revolutionary Tenants Union, or by March 9, the tenants of twelve patios had refused to pay rent, by March 12, sixty-one patios had struck and by March 17 the number had risen to one hundred and twenty-six. (*El Dictamen* March 9, 12 and 17, 1922. See also Octavio García Mundo, *El movimiento*, 1976, pp.86-87) On May 21, 1922, the League of Maritime Zone Workers of the Port of Veracruz and the Local Federation of Workers of the Port of Veracruz sent a message to President Obregón informing him that the directors and delegates from both organizations had met the evening of the 19th to agree that "without discredit [to his/her reputation], each worker may or may not belong to the Red Revolutionary Tenants Union," in essence assuring the president that membership in the Tenants Union was not obligatory for members of the League and the FLTV. At the same time, the document proclaimed that both confederations would "officially give all their moral and material support to the referred to union so that it may obtain the triumph of the just aspirations that it pursues." Finally, this letter to the president advised that "it is commonly accepted that if for some unfortunate incident, the current negotiations of the Tenants Union fail, the above mentioned Unions are willing to take over the Direction in question." (Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Ramo de Presidentes, Obregón/Calles, Expediente 407--17)



This anarchism was a negotiating technique. At the same time that Proal refused to give any information regarding the Red Revolutionary Tenants Union to the *Secretaria de Industria y Comercio*, stating that the “Union does not recognize any authority,” and that “if the Union went by the procedures designated by the law, it would not achieve its objective as it would have to subject itself to practices that give absolutely no results for the cause it defends,” the Union did negotiate with property owners and authorities.<sup>17</sup> This tactic of publicly stating that the Tenants Union would neither recognize official authority nor procedures added to the power of the *pueblo* as something unpredictable and uncontrollable. Further, it allowed the Tenants go beyond resistance (their refusal to pay rent), to take offensive action, and to put landlords in a position of having to resist that offensive action. Direct actions against neighbors reluctant to join the strike, against rent collectors, the local police and officials sent to evict, as well as their disorderly nightly demonstrations in Juárez Park, were both defensive and offensive actions. For instance, the Tenants defended their neighbors from evictions by blowing police whistles and calling all to action to prevent the official from carrying out his orders. By the same token, they also formed recruiting brigades and visited patios not on strike to convince their inhabitants to stop paying rent, at times under threat of violence should they not join the Union. In response to such actions, the wealthiest of the city’s landlords, the Cangas family, took on a stance of resistance. On March 17 when Mayor García reminded landlords that they must obey police and sanitary codes, landlords ignored him (resistance).<sup>18</sup> In early April, the neighbors of the patios *La Industria* and *La Angelita* presented the Cangas with a declaration from the *Regidor de Agua y Saneamiento*, requesting the supplies needed to make the repairs for which the declaration called. Furious at the audacity of the

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<sup>17</sup>*El Dictamen* April 14, 1922

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.* March 18, 1922

tenants' requests, the Cangas immediately solicited a court order (*amparo*) to halt the repairs.<sup>19</sup> The *pueblo* indeed had put the city's wealthiest landlords on the defensive.

At the same time, the Red Revolutionary Tenants Union negotiated with those landlords who had agreed to enter into negotiations with the local government as intermediary. The local government, however was not prepared to negotiate a solution.<sup>20</sup> By mid-May, Governor Adalberto Tejeda entered as mediator in negotiations among bickering local players. On May 11, he listened to the landlords' complaints. On May 17, the Proal and the Tenants presented their demands to the city's landlords.<sup>21</sup> The Tenants insisted upon "dominion over tenancy" and a postponement of rental costs. Landlords demanded that first there had to be an agreement on how much money they would receive for current and past rents.<sup>22</sup> The tenants, then insisted that they would not pay rents until an evaluation of land values was conducted, arguing that they would not keep the houses they now occupied, but requesting that they not pay rent until the real value of the dwellings had been assessed so that rent prices could be adjusted accordingly.<sup>23</sup> Landlords did not want to go through a land valuations process. In one negotiating session, the mayor accused the property owners of prolonging the problem in order to create difficulties for the new city council while the city Treasurer laid the blame for the entire situation upon them for having charged so much rent in the first place. By the end of May and the beginning of June, it was clear that the city's landlords did not form a solid block. In a five hour meeting with landlords, Proal had declared that any agreement would have to be based on landlord recognition of the Red

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid. April 12, 1922

<sup>20</sup>The city council members at this moment had been stevedores up until a month or so before the rent strike began. They were therefore limited in political experience. The mayor of the city, Rafael García, demonstrated his political immaturity on several occasions, particularly when confronted with the politically savvy and intelligent Herón Proal.

<sup>21</sup>*El Dictmaen* May 18, 1922

<sup>22</sup>Ibid. May 19, 1922

<sup>23</sup>Ibid. May 20, 1922

Revolutionary Tenants Union. Some agreed with the condition, wanting to settle the issue.<sup>24</sup> Many were even willing to go through the process of land valuations.<sup>25</sup> Many others, however, refused to accept the agreement.<sup>26</sup> The city's wealthiest landlords, the Cangas did not even show up to the negotiations.<sup>27</sup>

With negotiations going nowhere and the Red Revolutionary Tenants Union's direct actions creating what elites and authorities viewed as havoc and disorder within the city's patios and in public spaces, sides divided up into governor Tejeda and the Tenants Union on one side and elite landlords and the President Obregón on the other. Tejeda was an important regional figure and intermediary, a colonel in the eastern division of the Constitutionalist army who, through his array of connections/networks with regional actors, from merchants to hacienda owners to peasants and workers, had made his way to the governorship by 1922.<sup>28</sup> As a regional rather than a national revolutionary figure, Tejeda felt the pressure and viewed the injustice from below to a much greater extent than the president. In fact, as Obregón was attempting to convince both national and foreign capitalists of the country's stability and his own government's legitimacy, Tejeda was trying to keep local and regional class conflicts from exploding and thus undermining both his regional power and the entire national government's legitimacy at the lower levels of society and thus his own power as a regional intermediary.

A report directed to President Obregón on June 7, 1922 by Governor Tejeda detailing the wretched conditions in which his investigating committee had found the patios of Veracruz, helps

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid. May 28, 1922

<sup>25</sup>Ibid. June 1, 1922

<sup>26</sup>Ibid. June 2, 1922

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>On Tejeda, see Romana Falcón and Soledad García, La semilla en el surco: Adalberto Tejeda y el radicalismo en Veracruz, 1883-1960. El Colegio de México/Gobierno del estado de Veracruz, México, 1986. This work illustrates well the sorts of social and political networks that Tejeda fostered and utilized in making himself and influential regional figure.

illustrate the above. Disgusted by what he had witnessed, Tejeda came down firmly against the city's landlords. The governor wrote:

There is no doubt in the conscience of public opinion about the moral justice of the petitions formulated Port tenants. Nevertheless, the landlords, in the majority arrogant and rude Spaniards, do not seem to have noticed the sin against humanity that they have committed, and they refuse to satisfy even the most rudimentary necessities of the petitioners, aspiring to assure in their favor conditions inappropriate with the nature of the difficulties that are being dealt with and with the historical moment through which we are passing.<sup>29</sup>

The governor emphasized that the greatest obstacle to a timely solution to the problem was the intransigence of the property owners who refused to deal with the Tenants Union. He also warned the president that "the cohesion of the Tenants Union is so strong that whatever agreement made behind its back, that is, without its direct intervention, would be null because there would be no way to carry it out due to the powerful opposition of that Union."<sup>30</sup> Tejeda assured Obregón, however, that if at the beginning, the Tenants Union had made absurd requests, such as paying no more than 2% over registered land values, he had been assured by the Union that it would be willing to accept paying the same as 1910 rents, as a provisional agreement while a formal law was drawn up.<sup>31</sup>

The leadership of the Red Revolutionary Tenants Union was well aware that Tejeda had sided with them. This fact is illustrated in a letter sent by the Union to President Obregón who had recently been informed of the "state of chaos" in the port by a national congressman named Cerdán. The leaders referred to Cerdán's point of view as "reactionary" and stated that what the congressman was witnessing in the city was not "chaos," but "general phenomena of the socialist struggle that one may currently observe in various parts of the world."<sup>32</sup> They stated that the rent

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<sup>29</sup>AGN, Ramo de Presidentes, Obregón/Calles, Expediente 407-v-17, June 7, 1922

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid. Expediente 407-v-17, Anexo II, June 1, 1922

strike was not only “just,” but also a necessary response to “the truly intransigent and inhuman property owners that demand fabulous rents for uninhabitable houses.”<sup>33</sup> The Union reiterated its power of the *pueblo* stating that the issue would have to be resolved “with the cooperation and good will of all affected parties” since “whatever intervention by authorities will be null while they do not agree on equitable terms that satisfy the aspirations of the *pueblo*, oppressed and tired of the attitude that landlords have always assumed in Veracruz.”<sup>34</sup> Most importantly, the union leadership insinuated that it wished to avoid the intervention of the federal government in the issue as requested by Congressman Cerdán.<sup>35</sup> Rather, the Union stated that the “issue would no doubt be resolved in just terms and within the postulates of the revolution by this State,” meaning the state of Veracruz.<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, it seems clear from correspondence from the newly-formed Union of Property Owners of the City of Veracruz directed to President Obregón, that the federal government had sided with them. A June 12, 1922 letter from the president of the Union of Property Owners informed President Obregón that it had been attempting to make individual agreements with tenants, exactly what Tejeda had warned against. The letter complained that Mayor García had refused the association’s request for the formation of committees to aid the property owners in this endeavor. The letter also announced that “a campaign of threats had begun by the so-called Red Revolutionary Tenants Union against the residents that accept the [rent] decreases and some abstain from making a deal for fear of personal attacks.”<sup>37</sup> The Union of Property Owners then approved of increasing repression of the movement by the military and requested more of the same:

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid. Expediente 407-v-17, June 22, 1922

We have confidence that you will prevent and punish these attacks incited by the agitator Herón Proal...As the military authorities in these days impeded the disorder of this gravely injured civilization (*lesa civilización*) committed by said individual, there have been slanders against the Military Chiefs of the city who with prudence have fulfilled their obligation.<sup>38</sup>

It is important to note that the property owners attacked the person of Herón Proal and not the *pueblo*. In their eyes, the *pueblo* itself was not the real threat to the social hierarchy. Proal, however, they viewed as dangerous and Obregón agreed. It was Proal's anarchist ideas that the *pueblo* soaked up and utilized to find its strength through disorder. Proal, not the *pueblo*, was viewed as the enemy to the "revolutionary system" in formation. Proal was an "anarchist" intermediary.

In early July 1922, a dispute within the Tenants Union between José Olmos, secretary of the association, and Herón Proal over union finances turned violent and gave the federal government the opportunity to imprison Proal along with some of its most militant members. It seems that Olmos had questioned Proal's leadership publicly and trouble began as five patios sided with Olmos. On the evening of July 5, 1922, the Tenants gathered in Ferrer Park where Proal spoke out against the "traitor," Olmos. According to *El Dictamen*, Proal announced the need to punish Olmos, for the *pueblo* to "do justice," to "do away with Olmos."<sup>39</sup> As Proal spoke, a group of women and men left the park to find Olmos. After finding his house empty and locked up, they made their way to Olmos' sister's house where they found him sitting outside chatting with two women. Seeing the crowd coming their way, Olmos and the women quickly locked themselves inside the house. Those in pursuit entered the dwelling from the patio. As Olmos tried to hide behind a bed, some present beat him on the head with rocks and stabbed him twice in the neck with a knife. The police arrived and fired shots into the air, freeing Olmos. The scuffle made its way into the street. Just then, federal forces from the 32nd Regimen arrived and most of the tenants

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

scattered. A group of tenants approached the truck carrying the troops. Behind the truck, Colonel López Manzano arrived in a car with other officials from the *Jefatura*. As the soldiers descended from the truck, the tenants slowed their march, but seeing that the soldiers did not immediately take the offensive, they continued on. As they approached, the soldiers cocked the hammers of their rifles. One tenant grabbed a soldier's mauser. The soldier pulled back and hit him with the butt of the rifle. As the tenants ran away, the soldier fired, but missed. As another tenant attempted to disarm a soldier, he received a rifle butt to the head. The tenants still did not disperse. Another truck load of soldiers arrived. Shots were fired. Two individuals attempted to attack Colonel Manzano with knives. One lieutenant was killed. The crowd yelled, "Long Live Social Revolution! Down With the Army! Long Live the Revolution!"<sup>40</sup> Many taunted the soldiers with shouts of "Kill Us! Shoot!"<sup>41</sup> The colonel told his troops to lower their weapons. Soon after, Proal arrived and quietly led the masses away from the scene. They made their way to the main plaza where Proal spoke out against Olmos, the police and the army. The tenants then marched through the streets to their local.<sup>42</sup> Later that evening, as the Tenants Union's most militant activists danced outside Proal's shop, federal forces accompanied by local police, surrounded the local and Colonel Mateos announced that he held an order for Proal's arrest. Proal refused to go with the army and remained inside the building. The forces opened fire on the tenants outside. As they dispersed, the federal forces entered. Proal defended himself with a 32 caliber pistol. The firing continued until the tenants gave up. Proal, along with 50 men and 91 women were taken to the city jail, Allende.<sup>43</sup> The following day, the city was under martial law.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>*El Dictamen* July 6, 1922

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.* The following morning small groups of women gathered in front of the *Guarnición*, looking for family members who had not arrived home the night before while Colonel Manzano dictated orders to prohibit the gathering of groups in public, the setting off fire crackers and the blowing of whistles. That

Both the president and the Property Owners Association were in agreement that proper action had been taken. Directly after the incident President Obregón publicly supported Manzano's direction of federal forces on July 6. A July 8 letter from the Union of Property Owners of Mexico City congratulated Obregón for the "conduct of the *Jefe Militar* of Veracruz and of his subalterns" in "dominating the disorders of the so-called Tenants Union headed by HERON PROAL, whose attitude, contrary to all legal precepts, disrespects the constituted Authorities, individual rights and life itself."<sup>45</sup> The letter stated that "actions of such magnitude and transcendence" as those taken by Colonel Manzano and his men "must not pass unnoticed by Groups like ours formed by cultured people, conscious of their rights and obligations."<sup>46</sup> The letter then congratulated Obregón: "[T]he Directing Committee of this UNION unanimously agreed to direct to you, as Chief of the Army an enthusiastic and sincere congratulation, for counting on that respectable Institution" to prevent the propagation of the "dimwitted and injurious ideas of the above-mentioned H. Proal."<sup>47</sup> Such ideas, the Union punctuated, cause "serious upheavals in Society, knowledge of which might arrive to the United States and Europe, harming our national prestige and the good relations that the Nation wishes to maintain with FOREIGN nations."<sup>48</sup> In closing, the Secretary of the Union of Property Owners of Mexico City assured Obregón, in the name of the president of the Union, a continuation of his "respectful and distinguished consideration."<sup>49</sup>

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day, the president of the Bakers Union was arrested for attempting to incite a group of workers to try to free the prisoners. Various women were also arrested for setting off fire crackers in Juárez Park in an attempt to call a meeting. While the newspaper did not mention the number of dead, it did recount that in the morning an "enormous" crowd had gathered outside the Serdán Hospital where the dead and wounded were located

<sup>45</sup>AGN, Ramo Presidentes Obregón/Calles, 407-v-17, July 10, 1922

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.



That the above letter came from Mexico City landlords illustrates that the movement had taken on national significance.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the Union of Property Owners of Mexico City believed and openly acknowledged that Obregón, as chief of the armed forces, had called upon the army to violently repress the Red Revolutionary Tenants Union and most importantly to arrest Herón Proal. Such a notion, however, no one further down the social and political hierarchy would dare mention. For instance, Governor Tejeda, informed the president on July 9 that he had been informed that “spirits are in a state of excitement in Veracruz due to the events between the tenants and the federal forces.”<sup>51</sup> The governor suggested, therefore, that “[e]xcepting the better and respected opinion” of the president, it seemed “urgent that the Federal Government send an impartial Committee to make inquiries into the conduct of the *Jefe de Guarnición*, which would cause great satisfaction among the *pueblo*.”<sup>52</sup> In another telegram to the president sent that same day, the governor informed him that the city’s workers were planning a one-day strike in protest of the actions taken against the Tenants Union. The governor begged of the president that he “convince the [labor] leaders of the convenience of dispensing with this position since they should not call into question the commitment of the President in clearing up the events and in punishing those responsible as an interest of this Government. Tejeda warned that “a general strike could complicate the situation allowing for unjust accusations against the working classes that must have faith in the rectitude of the Federal Government as well as the Local.”<sup>53</sup> Tejeda was clearly concerned with local-level legitimacy of the revolutionary state. It is not clear whether Tejeda did not know whether the president had ordered the attack on Tenants Union local or whether he was simply letting the issue remain ambiguous. The president’s response was short and terse. His return telegram simply stated that his administration “would much lament that the worker unions of

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<sup>50</sup>In fact, similar movements were beginning in the Veracruz state capital of Xalapa and in the city of Córdoba, Puebla and Mexico City.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid. July 9, 1922

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

Veracruz seek to make solidarities with the crimes against the government committed by an individual like Proal, who by his acts completely adulterates the noble cause of the proletariat.”<sup>54</sup>

At the same time that Obregón let Tejeda know that Proal was an enemy of the government and that anyone who gathered with him was likewise, he did take the governor’s advice and sent a Sr. Bay to investigate the events of July 5. A letter from Tejeda to Obregón indicates that perhaps Tejeda had argued with and/or questioned the “neutrality” of Sr. Bay. The governor began his letter of July 19 by begging forgiveness for this lengthy amplification of his last message dealing with the “events in Veracruz in relation to the reports sent by Sr. Bay, an esteemed friend whose veracity I do not doubt for one minute.”<sup>55</sup> The governor first made it clear that his request for an “impartial committee to investigate the happenings of the night that Proal was apprehended and blood was spilt” should not be interpreted “as a defense of the Tenants Union and an accusation against the *Jefe de la Guarnición*.”<sup>56</sup> The governor assured the president that his intentions “had been very far from trying to justify the excesses” incurred by the tenants and “much further still from approving of the anarchist sermons of Proal” who, he assured the president, he did “not know personally.”<sup>57</sup>

Tejeda clearly felt the weight of the political hierarchy as he acted as intermediary between the furious *pueblo* below and the indignant president above him. While Tejeda knew as well as the property owners that Obregón had (probably) called upon the federal forces to arrest Proal, he could not admit this to the president and certainly not to the *pueblo*. To do so would be to risk another revolution and/or even more severe repression. In minimum, it would have damaged the revolutionary state’s fragile legitimacy at the local level. In response then, Tejeda invented a certain, undefined sector of society which was enemy of both *pueblo* and the government so that

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid. July 10, 1922

<sup>55</sup>Ibid. Anexo I, July 19, 1922

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

negotiations and the system itself may continue. Tejeda informed Obregón that his intention simply had been “to thwart the labor of certain enemies of the Government and of the *pueblo* that have tried to create an unfavorable opinion among the masses, giving a character very distinct from the true attitude of the Federal Government, which they want to make appear as proceeding against popular interests by making use of its first resource which is the army.”<sup>58</sup> In the following paragraph, Tejeda states that while it was clear to him that “this painful incident in Veracruz has nothing to do with the criteria of the dignified Government” of Obregón, certain people had taken advantage of the situation to “seek conflicts before public opinion and to distance the *pueblo* at the same time that they now comment on a supposed violation of State and Municipal sovereignty.”<sup>59</sup> Tejeda went on to say that he worried that such enemies of the government, particularly journalists, were trying to destroy the “solidarity that must be between the Governments of the Federation and of the States....solidarity,” he assured the president, “that I pledge to you not only as Governor but as a friend and revolutionary.”<sup>60</sup> At the same time, Tejeda insisted that the federal government must demonstrate support for the tenants’ cause, writing that these above reasons had motivated him to request a commission “to demonstrate to the *pueblo* that the Government considers the tenants’ cause just, but disapproves of the excesses” and that “the procedures for repressing them were justified by the necessity of a difficult moment that required urgent attention.”<sup>61</sup> Within this framework, the *pueblo* still held negotiating power while the “enemies” were Proal and some undefined sector of society.

In addition to the fabrication of an undefined sector of society in order to keep the current political/negotiating system in operation, each side created doubts about what had actually taken place. That Obregón had sent Sr. Bay to investigate left the possibility open that Manzano had

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

acted alone in repressing the Tenants Union and that the president had not been a party to what the *pueblo* viewed as a heinous act (even though Obregón had already publicly approved of Manzano's actions). Similarly, Tejeda defended the *pueblo*, the Tenants, as not being anti-government. He stated that the tenants with whom he had spoken denied being opposed to the Government in general and in particular to Obregón. Further, Tejeda stated that "while they do admit that in their last demonstration there were perhaps shouts of 'Down with the government,' they say that all the demonstrators must not be held responsible" for the actions of a few who may, indeed, have been sent by "enemies of the *pueblo* to discredit the movement."<sup>62</sup> As for the use of federal forces, Tejeda continued, the tenants simply requested that the innocent be freed from the city jail and that the impartial investigation take place. As long as the negotiation continued, there was room to negotiate disobedience, or to not pay rent and at the same time to not feel the heat of repression.

A letter to the president from the women of the patio *San Francisco* contains all the elements of hierarchy, doubt and the creation of an undefined enemy as a way of allowing negotiations to continue even as the federal government and the Veracruz *pueblo* seem to have been in open feud. In one paragraph, the women offered the president the benefit of the doubt, that he was not the originator of the repression:

*Señor Presidente:* we understand that, while you are not faithfully informed of the events happening in this port, more or less you now will form an idea of who were the originators of the scandals, of the attacks and of the victims in these movements for common improvement....<sup>63</sup>

In another paragraph, the women acceded to Obregón's hierarchical position at the same time that they insinuated that president's stance vis-à-vis the *pueblo* guarantees that position.

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid. July 11, 1922

Attentive to the justice with which you have proceeded in previous conflicts, we hope that your benevolence and interest of which you have always given proof, will restore us the leading man and sustain our aspirations, understood that in extending us this favor, one rivet more, this assures your position [with] one practical act that crystallizes the desire to save the true *pueblo* from repression.<sup>64</sup>

In other words, the women humbly requested the presidents' "benevolence" while reminding the president that the *pueblo* did have the power to call his "position," or the legitimacy of his government, into question. The letter went on to defend Proal, their intermediary, as "the only one we consider capable of taking on the ideal that we pursue" and argued that he should not be held responsible for the acts of others, especially not the undefined "enemies" who create social discord and chaos:

*Señor Presidente:* The enemy has deceived you, those who promote the disturbances and divisions among the proletariat are the bourgeoisie and our political enemies, the latter slither out at the moment of whatever demonstration, enter among the proletariat and once inside its compact nucleus initiate their work. Proal is not guilty...In ending, we repeat that the events that occurred the night of the fifth and the morning of the sixth of this month is the work of the bourgeoisie, of our political enemies and in large part this has to do with the intemperance of the *Jefe de la Guarnición*.<sup>65</sup>

The women then requested the release of Proal, "the man who has always preoccupied himself with obtaining for the proletariat of Veracruz that which no other has risked himself for," from the city jail.<sup>66</sup>

And thus, negotiations continued and with them the Revolutionary state and system in formation. In 1922 Governor Tejeda had proposed a Tenants Law. It was not passed for many years due to resistance by the wealthiest property owners. Proal was out of jail by the middle of 1923. Tenants in Veracruz did not pay rent for almost ten years. When they did begin to pay rent

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

again, they dealt with their landlords on an individual basis. In an oral interview conducted with Don Enrique Arredondo, born in 1918, he stated that throughout his entire childhood his patio did not pay rent and anyone who did try to make an individual deal with a landlord was reprimanded by the community.<sup>67</sup> As long as negotiations continued, so did the opportunity for disobedience, that is for tenants to abstain from paying rent and for landlords to avoid the constraints of a Tenants Law. The Revolutionary system was up and operating, even if it was propped up with imaginary enemies, doubts and ambiguities.

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<sup>67</sup>Oral interview with Don Enrique Arredondo Aguilar, conducted by Elizabeth Norvell on May 22, 1997 in Veracruz, Ver.