



Peruvian Rebel: The World of Magda Portal, with a Selection of Her Poems

Kathleen Weaver

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As the Left reawakens in Latin America following widespread disillusionment with neoliberal efforts to apply “shock therapy” to local economies, this story of the exemplary life of a major Peruvian activist and literary figure of an earlier era is particularly timely. Magda Portal (1900–1989) played a historic role in the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA), which began as a Marxist-inspired but non-Communist radical movement with cells based in both Europe and Latin America in the 1920s before it became a full-fledged political party in Peru in 1931. Often in exile abroad, in prison, or in hiding in Peru to escape arrest, Portal was the leading female organizer for the Apristas until her break with the increasingly Right-leaning party after World War II. As APRA’s national secretary for women’s affairs, Portal worked tirelessly for women’s rights within the framework of a broader fight for social justice. A close colleague of revolutionary leaders José Carlos Mariátegui and Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, she sided with the latter in the schism that erupted between the two in 1928, but ended up denouncing Haya de la Torre in 1950, accusing him of compromised relationships with the powers of neocolonial capitalism.

Already an acclaimed poet by the age of twenty-three, Portal struggled throughout her life to balance her artistic with her political ambitions, at times abandoning her literary pursuits. This conflict is itself a fascinating part of this biography of a woman now regarded as one of the pioneer feminists of Latin America. A substantial selection of Portal’s poetry is offered, with accompanying translations.

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