

## The Posthumous Career of Emiliano Zapata: Myth, Memory, and Mexico's Twentieth Century

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Keith Brewster

'Look into his eyes: could you ever say "no" to a man like that?' We were standing before a portrait of Emiliano Zapata; the woman who would have found it hard to say 'no' was a young, middle-class professional from Mexico City who had generously taken up the task of introducing her nation's language and history to me. Such was my ignorance back in 1987 that for all I knew the eyes could have been those of a film star. To learn that Zapata was, in fact, a revolutionary leader who had died in 1919 was quite unsettling. To place the situation within a more familiar context, it would have been tantamount to a London-based 'yuppie' in Thatcher's Britain drooling over a picture of Lord Kitchener. Utterly absurd, of course. So why did my friend feel so much affection for Zapata and was she unusual in doing so; how could someone who died so long ago still stir the emotions of an intelligent, seemingly rational person?

The reason why I remember the incident so well is because, when introducing my own students to the history of post-revolutionary Mexico, it provides the perfect starting point for raising awareness of what the Revolution means to many Mexicans. For some years my efforts in this regard have been helped by the work of Samuel Brunk. Steadily he has become one of the world's leading authorities on the revolutionary leader, his life, his death, and his life after death. Indeed, one fleeting concern I had as I began to read *The Posthumous Career of Emiliano Zapata* was that it might be little more than a compilation of the various articles that Brunk has already published. These fears were soon allayed, however, as the perspective of the book's analysis became clear. Deftly side-stepping discussions conducted elsewhere, the underlying intention of this book is to apply a wealth of primary source evidence to the task of understanding the complex, and always contested, ways in which diverse groups have sought to use and abuse Zapata's image

and legacy.

While always placing his analysis within the context of post-revolutionary state-building, Brunk's focus on culture locates his work firmly within the current historiographical debate concerning cultural politics and hegemonic discourse. More specifically, this book seeks to understand how a regional leader who was ambushed and killed by government forces in 1919, could subsequently be celebrated as a national hero by politicians who were implicated in his death. Arguing that previous treatment of Zapata has placed undue emphasis on the ability of the state to direct the thoughts, emotions and memories of its people, Brunk seeks to understand how popular discourse has been essential in constructing the Zapata myth. As he readily admits, his findings do not represent a significant departure from an already established consensus that subaltern groups played a major role in helping to shape, refine, and sometimes to contest and reject, centrally-driven policies. Brunk is justified, however, in stressing that the unique contribution of his analysis comes from the depth and richness of the material he brings to the table.

The main body of Brunk's study offers a fundamentally empirical history based around the trajectory of the Zapata myth from the Revolution (1910–7) to the end of the 20th century. His evidence is indeed rich, benefiting from painstaking research in local, regional, and national archives, newspapers, political speeches, oral history, studies by previous generations of chroniclers and historians, as well as a trawl of literary and visual representations of his subject. Given Mexico's fascination with Zapata, this is no mean feat and Brunk deserves great credit for the diligence and patience with which he has gone about this task. It may be slightly churlish to suggest that the sheer weight of evidence occasionally hampers a more thorough engagement with the analytical framework outlined in the introduction. There is scope in each chapter, perhaps, to develop further the argument pertaining to the ways in which historical context and politics played into the equation concerning ownership of Zapata's image. The book's concluding section, however, does a fine job in drawing these empirical strands together and thereby substantiating the author's underlying thesis.

The basic argument that Brunk offers is one that, as he acknowledges, has already been explored. Zapata's assassination effectively brought an end to a violent civil war. While Zapata may have been out of the way, it left a bitterly divided nation and a weak central state that lacked any degree of legitimacy. From the 1920s onwards, the national government's priority was to unify the nation and convince rival factions that they had, in fact, all been fighting for the same values and reforms that the government promised to deliver. Yet in the immediate post-revolutionary period, partisan loyalties took precedence over national unity: piecemeal reforms, patronage, and repression only partially reversed this tendency. During the 1930s, the strengthening central state recognised the potential of deploying cultural tools to supplement propaganda and political rhetoric. As such, it engaged in an increasingly coordinated attempt to reify the Revolution and its leaders, especially Zapata, as part of a broader effort to achieve unity and political conformity. The crucial issue addressed in the book is the nature and the extent to which the state enjoyed success in this quest and the ways that popular elements contributed and/or contested the process.

What is clear is that the battle over the Zapata myth began before his death, in the form of negative propaganda issued by his enemies in an attempt to counteract the growing popularity with which Zapata was viewed within his own bailiwick in the state of Morelos. A particularly crucial element in this battle was the importance of disconnection. Negative portrayals of Zapata and his peasant followers were more easily embraced by those who had never come into physical contact with them (especially those living in Mexico City). When, however, Zapata's troops occupied the capital in 1914, their general demeanour ran contrary to an image that depicted them as barbaric and violent. Conversely, peasant communities that may have been influenced by the many positive rumours of Zapata's bravery and struggle for justice would have found it hard to reconcile this with the arbitrary violence visited upon them by bandits calling themselves Zapatistas. As such it seems that the life-blood of myth-making depends upon an absence; a measure of 'unknown' or 'misunderstanding' that creates a void in the story. This void then becomes the contested space within which alternative portrayals compete for the ascendancy.

The battle over Zapata's legacy can be reduced down to the question of ownership. Any group that could claim legitimate inheritance of his image became better placed to further its objectives. While much of the

debate concerning cultural hegemony and state-building emphasises the state's ability to overcome local resistance and establish its own legitimacy, Brunk's evidence demonstrates that the power struggle in Mexico was far more complicated. Rather than sustain a top-down, or even bottom-up, analytical perspective, he probes deeper into localities to analyse how memory and myth are formed and embraced beyond the control of the state. Far from producing a unified rear-guard action against outside interference, Brunk suggests that even within Zapata's home constituency different interests fought for the right to determine his legacy. Similarly, at various stages in Mexico's 20th century political history, regional and national factions also contested the role, if any, that Zapata should play in national discourse.

The fascinating aspect of cultural politics and, in particular, the creation and use of iconic imagery is that it is an extremely delicate tool of manipulation. In order for the state to make the best use of an icon, it has to allow its people to believe that it is an intrinsic part of their own place within society. Too tight a control can expose the true nature of state intentions and render an icon illegitimate; too loose a control, and the state surrenders the icon's potential to manipulate and opens up the possibility of alternative, oppositional, interpretations. In the case of Zapata's posthumous career, Brunk traces this tussle for control and the consequences of getting the balance wrong. In the immediate post-revolutionary period, the main contestation over Zapata's legacy was, indeed, local versus national. In many respects, legitimacy lay with those who had known Zapata and had shared his specific experiences. Certainly, a weak national government that was implicated in his assassination could not and, indeed, did not try to orchestrate his appropriation. While this basic contestation has never quite disappeared, throughout the 1930s and 1940s an increasingly strong and confident central government began to wrest control of Zapata. Through education, propaganda and civic ceremony it began to solidify a version of Zapata's struggle that simultaneously reinforced the state's self-portrayal as the legitimate guarantor of the values that Zapata held dear. It was precisely this phase in Zapata's career that laid the grounds for middle-class professionals in 1980s Mexico City to speak of Zapata with a mix of passion, emotion and patriotic fervour.

It was also precisely this phase of Zapata's career that convinced more critical sections of Mexican society that Zapata had become little more than a puppet of government manipulation. As Brunk points out, when students took to the streets of Mexico City in 1968, Che Guevara, rather than Emiliano Zapata, was their preferred symbol of resistance. Only belatedly, when faced with accusations of being 'anti-Mexican', did the students underline their patriotic credentials by recruiting images of past national heroes, including Zapata, to accompany Guevara on protest marches. Ironically, this most vivid example of cultural pressure reveals the extent to which the process of nationalising Zapata had been achieved. Opponents of the state could only rescue their legitimacy by demonstrating their faith in a state-produced version of a national icon.

While reading *The Posthumous Career of Emiliano Zapata* I found myself drawing comparisons between the trajectory of Zapata's image and that of José Martí; the Cuban intellectual and near contemporary of Zapata who articulated the struggle for independence from Spain in the late 19th century and who was killed in the struggle to achieve it. As with Zapata, the significance of Martí's life and death has long been contested. Most recently, Tony Kapcia has argued that the enduring utility of José Martí lies in the fact that his life story appeared to reflect that of his country: a process of struggle, self-sacrifice, betrayal, and future hope. As such, the storyline offers a continuous strand of legitimacy; a legitimacy that might be claimed by diverse, often opposing factions. Such was the abundance of Martí's writings, that he provided interpreters with a wealth of material with which to reinvent his role within Cuban history. For the pro-US republican government (1902–59), Martí's admiration for US democratic values lent legitimacy to their reliance on their northern neighbour. Simultaneously, Martí's words of social and racial equality provided hope for a subjugated Afro-Cuban population; even though Republican racism forced this alternative vision of Martí underground, awaiting a more propitious moment to come to the fore. Martí's writings on national self-determination were embraced by the revolutionary government from 1959 onwards: Fidel Castro's struggle was merely the triumphant conclusion of a struggle for which Martí had given his life. As with the case of Zapata, contestation over Martí's image continues. While his image adorns every school playground and park square in Cuba, *Televisión Martí* continues to broadcast anti-Castro propaganda on behalf of the exile community in Florida.

In many ways, Kapcia's concept of national myth making would appear to apply to Zapata. It allows for multiple, often opposing, interpretations of the myth to coexist. It recognises different forms of ownership – some personal, others more public. Importantly, it recognises that evolving contemporary circumstances determine the extent to which a particular interpretation gains the ascendancy. So, for example, when indigenous rebels rose up in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas in 1994 bearing the name of Zapata (the Zapatista National Liberation Front), the movement needed to be understood from a specific political context. As Brunk points out, by 1994, the national government's claim to uphold Zapata's principles had been severely compromised. In effect, the state had lost control of the image and the time was propitious for opposing groups to inherit the legitimacy that came from association with the revolutionary leader. It was merely the latest tussle in a century-long battle for Zapata's legacy which, in *The Posthumous Career of Emiliano Zapata*, Brunk presents in exquisite detail.

The author thanks Professor Brewster for the kind review and does not wish to comment further.

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