



Vol. 8, No. 1, Fall 2010, 453-458
www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

Samuel Brunk, *The Posthumous Career of Emiliano Zapata: Myth, Memory, and Mexico's Twentieth Century*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.

Zapata vive

Paul Hart

Texas State University

Samuel Brunk's *The Posthumous Career of Emiliano Zapata* explores how the memory and meaning of Zapata has been contested for almost a century and why, as a symbol at least, Zapata lives. The most obvious reason is that, despite the real accomplishments of the Revolution, the injustices he fought against continue. The author, a recognized expert on the life and times of Zapata, is more concerned in this book with the ways in which Zapata has been remembered than with what he did when alive. The story of Zapata's posthumous career is fascinating and very well told. Readers not already familiar with Zapata, however, may want to know

more about what he did in real life, as well as more about the accomplishments and complexities of *zapatismo*. The heart of the book, and its major contribution, is the way it uses the struggle over Zapata's image to explore how official history is created, how master narratives are manufactured and disseminated, how symbols are manipulated, how identity is constructed, how patriotism gets defined, and how all of those elite-inspired efforts are continually being absorbed and challenged by unofficial popular meanings and memories. The approach leads to a book that provides a valuable perspective on Zapata, and on twentieth century Mexico.

Zapata participated in the Revolution of 1910 that overthrew the dictatorship of President Porfirio Díaz, who ruled Mexico almost continuously from 1876-1910. Zapata's real significance though was earned in the civil war that followed. During that bloody decade-long conflict he established himself as the most steadfast and uncompromising revolutionary leader advocating for the Mexican peasantry. Zapata's social platform, which this book does not fully explore, evolved over time. It was promulgated early in the Plan de Ayala (1911), which called for the redistribution of landed wealth in Mexico from the private holdings of *hacendados* to the communal ownership of the pueblos with their indigenous roots. Rather than harkening back to an idealized vision of the past, though, Zapata was both an agrarian radical and a Mexican nationalist because he not only recognized pre-Colombian patterns of land use, but demanded that estate land be given to the landless rural working class in an age of privatization, heavy foreign investment, and the commodification of land and labor. As the war dragged on he instructed field commanders to confiscate land from the large estates and divide it amongst the pueblos and landless rural workers in private plots or as common lands, depending on historic precedent in the areas in question. His grassroots approach and belief in local autonomy put village elders and local knowledge before centralized Statist projects. It helped win him a fervent following in and around his home state of Morelos.

Zapata was gunned down in 1919. His stature, though, was not diminished by his defeat. What he fought for, the land and the poor, made

him a hero. The way he fought, heavily outgunned, outnumbered, and without any reliable source of weapons or ammunition, and without much likelihood of victory, made him a legend. The way he died made him a martyr. Zapata was murdered in a famous episode where he never even had the chance to draw his gun, and where he and his small escort were outnumbered by a few hundred to 10. Where he died mattered too; he went down in a hail of bullets at the hacienda Chinameca, a vast sugar estate that symbolized the inequality he sacrificed his life trying to change. It is not hard to see how he became, and remains, a heroic and romantic figure to those seeking greater social justice against overwhelming odds. This book only peripherally discusses what he did, how he did it, and why people would idolize him and grant him a 'posthumous career,' in the first place. The treatment of how the 'revolutionary' government that killed him would successfully incorporate him into its pantheon of great men and founding fathers, though, is well told and compelling. Brunk explores the psychological and patriotic gymnastics that constitute part of the art of State formation and the creation of shared national identity, and he does it well. The work is presented in nine roughly chronological chapters that have the virtue of showing different aspects of the dynamic between popular and official remembrances of Zapata, and how they changed over time. In that sense, Brunk's efforts go beyond Zapata and speak to larger issues of how symbols and heroes are created and used, how national identities are shaped and debated, and how unifying national stories are assembled, in this case out of chaos.

During the years immediately following his death it was crucial for the government to placate those who fought alongside Zapata, as well as those who thought like him. After rehashing the well-worn stories about whether it was really Zapata or someone else who got killed that day at Chinameca, or whether he fled to Arabia, the author turns his attention back to the more significant issues of the book. Those revolve around the government's efforts to appropriate Zapata, create an official history of the Revolution, whitewash the major differences between the competing revolutionary factions, and legitimize the emergence of a one-party State by

promoting the idea that it represented one big revolutionary family, of which Zapata was a part.

Making former Zapatistas feel that they had won the Revolution was important for social stability. It was doable in the 1920s because the hacienda system in Morelos was largely destroyed. A large amount of land was distributed to people in established pueblos, as well as to landless workers living in informal settlements with no previous legal rights to land. Therefore, government commemorations on the anniversary of Zapata's death claiming that the Zapatista agenda was being lived up to by the revolutionary government could find sympathetic audiences in rural Morelos. When the Lázaro Cárdenas administration (1934-1940) began the largest land reform program in the nation's history, those claims gained legitimacy nationwide. That record of agrarian reform was important when some former Zapatistas objected to the top-down nature of the land reform and the centralization of power, because it allowed labor leader Lombardo Toledano to retort that Cardenas was "the best Zapatista in Mexico." As Brunk demonstrates, however, the real test of the success of the appropriation of Zapata by the State would come later, when material benefits, particularly land reform, no longer reinforced the government's rhetorical efforts.

Regardless of what the government said, Zapatistas in Morelos refused to hand Zapata over, either symbolically or literally. As late as 1979, old men with old rifles sat up through the night guarding Zapata's bones where they lay in Cuautla, Morelos. They kept up that vigilance until the government gave up on its announced decision to move his remains to the Monument to the Revolution in Mexico City. The government intended to bury Zapata alongside other leaders, including bitter enemies like former President Venustiano Carranza, who had colluded in his murder. While the official machinery moved in one direction, other voices rose against the emerging disconnect between revolutionary rhetoric and rural reality. Rubén Jaramillo, for example, was a former Zapatista who objected to the marginalization of worker control in the government-run sugar mill at Zacatepec, Morelos, from the forties to 1962. He also protested the unfair prices for cane offered to the rural workers who supplied it, and the

corruption of the mill administrator and local officials. Jaramillo sought a voice first through the electoral system and then through armed rebellion, declaring that the corruption and exploitation in Morelos was not what Zapata had fought for. After failing to intimidate or co-opt him, the government eventually murdered Jaramillo, his wife, and three of their sons near the ruins of Xochicalco. Not ironically, Norberto López Avelar, the governor of Morelos at the time of Jaramillo's death, was a former *carrancista*. His face appears in the famous photograph of young government soldiers gathered around Zapata's dead body, propping up his head like a hunting trophy. So, more than forty years after his death, Zapata was still a figure in the ongoing fight over the issues he had taken a stand on when alive.

The author explores a variety of official efforts to control the meaning of Zapata throughout the twentieth century. They included typical efforts at socialization through schoolbooks, or through State-sponsored commemorations held in honor of Zapata on the day of his death. As the Mexican government turned its attention away from agrarian reform and towards industrialization, however, its power to persuade people that the government carried forward Zapata's legacy waned markedly. Brunk captures that shifting ground citing, for example, a 1966 article in the Cuautla paper *Poligrafo*, which lampooned the annual commemoration of his murder. The writer noted that the public was kept waiting in the sweltering sun as the orators spoke from the shade. He then stated sarcastically that when that "demagogic" display ended a party with plentiful food and drink was held for the governor and his friends which produced "many drunks...due to sorrow over the death of Zapata." Given the diminished commitment to agrarian reform in evidence by the mid sixties, and the rising government repression directed at rural advocates for change, at least some people, including writers and readers of *Poligrafo*, were beginning to perceive these kinds of official commemorations as frauds.

When Mexican President Carlos Salinas stood in front of a large picture of Zapata in 1992 and declared that the goals of the great agrarian rebel had been met, announced the end of Agrarian Reform, and said it was

what Zapata would have wanted, the fraud was so brazen as to be cartoonish. As usual though, Mexico produced other voices. Brunk demonstrates multiple ways in which popular memories of Zapata existed alongside orchestrated ones. The most obvious example, of course, is the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), a rebel group made up mainly of rural Maya, who emerged out of the mountains and forests of Chiapas only two years after Salinas' infamous speech. They rebelled, invoking Zapata's name, protesting the end of the Agrarian Reform, the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and the nation's lack of concern for its indigenous and rural poor. Official efforts to appropriate Zapata and obscure the fact that he was fighting against the side that won the Revolution and ruled Mexico for about eighty years, stretch across most of the twentieth century. Yet, Zapata the rebel fighting for social change continues to reappear because a variety of people and groups associate his name with their cause. They scrawl it on walls from Chiapas to Los Angeles, and have reproduced his image on t-shirts, Chicano wall murals, and *ejido* and farm-worker meeting halls.

This review has focused on the material aspects in the battle for Zapata's legacy, but Brunk's work does more than that. Those interested in a well-researched and nuanced discussion of ethnicity and race, gender and masculinity, local storytelling, the creation of official and popular history, and the search for a unique Mexican national identity, should read the book.