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Zapata and Salinas, Mexico, 1911 and 1991

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Some news images have the power to circulate in manifold forms, living on as icons of pivotal events and/or being appropriated for new situations. One that provides a complex demonstration of this process is Elsa Medina's 1991 photograph of Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994), seated before a portrait of agrarian revolutionary Emiliano Zapata. Medina captured the juxtaposition between Zapata's image and President Salinas to criticize the party dictatorship that has been a persistent legacy of the Mexican Revolution (1910–17). A master at capturing spontaneous action in a fraction of a second, Medina also has the ability to provoke reactions in her subjects. Salinas was known among photojournalists to be particularly playful, and Medina—young and attractive—no doubt stimulated his roguishness. The collaboration between Medina and Salinas resulted in an image of the president gesturing grotesquely (perhaps making a face of derision) in front of a painting that replicates Zapata's famed photographic icon. This tableau issued from a meeting at the presidential residence whose purpose was the termination of agrarian reform, a cornerstone of Zapata's political program that became a pillar of the 1917 Mexican Constitution.

Photography is sometimes a dialectic between those who are being pictured and those who are doing the picturing. As seen from Medina's side of the camera, the photo is a penetrating critique of the ways that the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) has employed the revolutionary heritage—incarnated in the gigantic portrait—that has served to legitimate its party dictatorship, but which it has not respected. This contradiction was particularly pronounced in the case of Salinas, for his administration frequently utilized the figure of Zapata, both visually and verbally, in pushing its neoliberal, antiagrarian agenda. Although Medina pilloried Salinas, he was no doubt conscious of the backdrop and responded so as to create an image that was also an accurate representation of his position in relation to the Mexican Revolution. His policies broke fundamentally with the long-standing ideological subterfuge of pretending that the PRI was somehow an expression of revolutionary governance.

However, the publication that employed Medina, the leftist *La Jornada*, either did not want to spread that message or thought that the photo was too critical of Salinas, because it was censored. Instead, Medina's image has circulated in a left political pamphlet, a critical videotape, popular history books, and at expositions such as my 1996 Mexico City exhibit (and book) on the New Photojournalism of Mexico, *La Mirada Inquieta (An Unquiet Gaze)*. Medina and the other New Photojournalists of Mexico look beyond a press photograph's usual life expectancy of 24 hours by insisting that authors have a right to their



Figure 1.7 Elsa Medina, Presidente Carlos Salinas in meeting with campesino organizations to reform Article 27 of Constitution, presidential residence “Los Pinos,” Mexico City, 1991. © Elsa Medina, courtesy of Elsa Medina.

negatives, which they later employ widely in expositions, books, magazines, and other media that make them visible, even if periodicals refuse to publish them.

The photograph of Emiliano Zapata also had an untypical history of circulation. The picture of the revolutionary leader in Cuernavaca during May of 1911 has become an international icon, and one of the most reproduced photographs from Latin America. Although authorship of the image was claimed by the Casasola family in their massive picture histories, Zapata's suspicions of Agustín Víctor Casasola's ties to conservative periodicals would have made that difficult. Later, it was argued that Hugo Brehme, a German immigrant, took the photo, and still later claims were made in support of Fred Miller, a US photographer. The fact that an outsider (whoever it was) could get close to the fearsome warrior reinforces the idea of Zapata's concern for constructing his own image; he may have felt that someone from another country would be more neutral than the capital's photojournalists, and that the image would thus reach eyes outside Mexico.

Zapata had little trust in the Mexico City press, and rightly so, considering the eventual use it made of this picture. The icon did not appear in a periodical until 1913, two years after it had been made, when it was employed as a front-page illustration for an attack on Zapata by the reactionary newspaper, *El Imparcial*, that characterized him as "Attila of the South."

The photograph may represent a startlingly graphic depiction of Zapata's triumph. The leader is dressed with the general's sash and sword that the previous authority in Cuernavaca had worn as a symbol of his status. Putting them on was apparently a demonstration of the prerogative Zapata had evidently acquired to determine who would govern the city and Morelos State. The photograph was probably made when Zapata arrived in Cuernavaca, and the city filled with photographers, foreign and Mexican, to register his assumption of power. Zapata's wearing of these emblems could represent an attempt on his part to counteract the Mexico City press, which portrayed him and his *campesinos* as cruel bandits and ferocious savages. Zapata may have been attempting to oppose that mindset by presenting himself as a professional soldier, with the rank of general, and thus a man deserving of Francisco Madero's political recognition—an allegiance buttressed by the crossed cartridge belts, a trope of the Maderista rebellion in 1911.

Before it was published in the newspaper, the image no doubt circulated as a postcard, a medium of extraordinary importance in that period. José Guadalupe Posada, the most famous of Mexican lithographers, must have seen the postcard, and created an engraving of it. After Posada's death in 1913, his lithograph was distributed on broadsheets, some of which were critical and others laudatory of Zapata. Posada was an artisan, and his contribution would have to be considered a form of popular culture, although the widespread distribution of broadsheets would also make them a mass medium of the era.

In sum, powerful news photos such as Medina's and that of Zapata live on in ever-transfiguring forms, shaping and being shaped by the different functions they serve. Sometimes they evolve into icons related to great transformations, at other times they are reduced to the crassest of commercial purposes.