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The Legacy of Emiliano Zapata

by Kotryna Staputyte

(English 1101)

In the early 20th century, the Mexican government was plagued with corruption, greed, injustice and violence. Although the Mexican Revolution, which started in 1910, resulted in the end of dictatorship in Mexico and the drafting of a constitution in 1917, periodic violence continued throughout the nation well into the 1930's. A number of revolutionaries rose from the Revolution, including Francisco Madero, Pascual Orozco, Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata.

Among them, Zapata is considered one of the most significant figures in Mexican history (Brunk). Zapata was a tenant farmer, from Anenecuilco, Morelos, who had strong resentment against the injustices suffered by his people. In 1911, along with a group of campesinos from Morelos, he joined a rebellion against the regime Mexico's long-time president Porfirio Diaz. This rebellion was fought for the return of land to the indigenous people, as well as the resources lost due to the infringement of their rights.

One of the biggest challenges faced by native groups and farmers, throughout Mexican history, is government and private developers encroaching on ancestral lands to exploit energy and other natural resources (Beary). Zapata and his followers "fought, in sum, for conditions crucial to the preservation of their rural culture" (Brunk).

There exists a long history of the indigenous people of Mexico fighting against their government to gain more rights such as access to education, health services, fair wages, protection of local environments and official recognition of their languages and traditional skills as healers ("World Directory of Minorities"). Many violent wars have broken out in attempt to gain these rights, include the 1821 War for Independence, which freed Mexico from Spain, and then the Mexican Revolution, which helped gain land rights for the large population of indigenous people. Zapata, who fought in guerrilla actions and helped lead the Revolution, still remains a key cultural and historical symbol in the fight for social reform. To the indigenous peoples, "Zapata was a savior and the hero of the Revolution" ("Emiliano Zapata").

To understand the legacy of Zapata, it is crucial to understand his role in the Mexican Revolution. In order to understand the history of the Mexican Revolution, it is important to note "the complicated nature of the twists and turns in Mexican politics from 1910 on" (Hadley). Although dictator Porfirio Diaz was overthrown, a series of internal conflicts arose among revolutionary factions. Also, there is a "lack of unified interpretation of events [due to] the massive bulk of ballads, legends, oral tradition and blatant propaganda that the Mexican Revolution generated, which greatly outweighs official contemporary documents of the time" (Hadley). With these aspects in mind, it is still possible to understand and interpret the succession of events during the Mexican Revolution, starting with the story of Zapata.

Zapata, born in 1879, was a revolutionary from an early age. In his hometown, Anenecuilco, he was known as a man of the people ("Emiliano Zapata"). After leading smaller groups of peasants in the fight for land rights, Zapata saw more opportunity in Francisco Madero, who was seeking to challenge of the decades-old rule of President Diaz. Madero, a reformist writer and politician, had lost the election of 1910 to Diaz, who refused to allow for fair and clean elections. As a result of Zapata's and Madero's alliance, Zapata was declared general of the Liberation Army of the South and joined the campaign and armed rebellion against Diaz. With muleteer Pascual Orozco and bandit chieftain Pancho Villa in charge in the north, and Zapata in the South, Diaz eventually fled the

country in 1911 ("The Mexican Revolution"). Zapata and his army attacked *haciendas*, or large ranches, and gave back the land which had been illegally stolen from peasant farmers under Diaz' rule. Madero's victory over Diaz was short-lived, as Zapata, Orozco and Villa realized the promises made to them in return for Madero's presidency, were not going to be fulfilled. Zapata began writing his Plan of Ayala after it was clear that Madero has no real interest in land reform. His Plan called for Madero's removal and the demand for land reform. As a result, Madero was eventually assassinated in 1913 ("The Mexican Revolution").

As the corruption and uncertainty within the government continued, an iconic photo was later captured of Zapata and Villa in 1914 at a banquet at the National Palace. The photo captured Zapata, with his family behind him, and Villa, with his elite troops, as they jointly occupied Mexico City on December 6th, 1914. Faced once again with empty promises over land rights and reform, Zapata left Mexico City three days later to start his campaign. On April 10th, 1919, Zapata was ambushed and killed by federal forces working with Coronel Jesus Guajardo, the newest power in Mexican government at that time.

Zapata's legacy became that of a myth among communities who ritually observe his death and continue to use his ideals to challenge the state's legitimacy. Zapata also became an object of a hero cult and gave the Revolution a single human face. Even his death was of question among his followers. Some denied that he was killed, while others accepted his death and began the tradition of gathering at this grave on the anniversary of his murder. Denying the death of a hero is a central part of what makes his image and life a long lasting cultural myth (Brunk).

Although Zapata was killed early in his military career, his lasting power continued through the century. His movement, *zapatismo*, the Mexican agrarian movement, became synonymous with *agrarismo* and *indianismo*, the native cultural movement. These movements have had lasting impact on people of Mexico, and to this day are still the basis of nationalism in among them (Columbia Encyclopedia). Zapata's legacy lived on in two distinctive ways. Mexican government officials manipulated his image and message as an attempt to gain legitimacy with the angered and rebellious land owning peoples of Mexico, while at the same time, the people of Mexico still see Zapata as a symbol of rebellion and agrarian movement. His legend continues not only because of who Zapata was, but also because of the way in which memories of him have developed within Mexico's political cultures since his passing.

As a result of the 1910 Revolution and Zapata's efforts, Article 27 was adopted into the Mexican Constitution. It proclaimed the Mexican people as owners of the lands and waters of the nation, established an agrarian reform to redistribute land and to provide communal ownership of that land. Further reform in the 1930's provided for the distribution of 20 million hectares of land to indigenous communities (Vargas).

Once Zapata died, the manipulation of his image by politicians began. In 1924, in an effort to gain the confidence of the people by the government, the fifth anniversary of Zapata's death was observed with a commemoration funded by the national government. Promises were made to implement Zapata's program without corruption and Pluarco Elias Calles, the next picked presidential successor of the time, stated, "the agrarian program of Zapata is mine" as well as, "the hero rests in peace, his work is over, and from today on present and future generation of campesinos will follow the path that he blazed through the heart of humanity." Zapata was used to justify political policies and served as the driving force for a symbolic occupation of areas in Mexico that were previously difficult for the national government to control. To the followers of Zapata, this recognition served as having the state admit that the struggle faced by the peasants was right all along. Many critics argued the political motives behind the commemoration and debated that Zapata would be better remembered as what newspapers described him when he was alive- a bloodthirsty bandit- instead of a revolutionary hero (Brunk). The irony of Zapata's image being used by the government was in the mere fact that the government held virtually no ideals similar to that of

Zapata's. While Zapata stood for peasant rights, Mexico's government was headed for capitalism and empowerment of corporations. According to an article from Social Justice, "The Mexican Revolution finished what late-nineteenth century dictator Porfirio Diaz had begun: the capitalistic modernization of the country" (Rodriguez).

The irony surrounding Zapata's image continued throughout the century. In 1950, the Cuautla commemoration of Zapata's death included speeches by politicians about Zapata and his efforts. They spoke of him in an honorary light, stating how he had most contributed to the progress of the nation and that if Zapata were alive, water and irrigation, the interest of the president of that time, would be his main priority. The memory of Zapata was dedicated to serve as a source of national unity as the federal government began encouraging the commemoration of Zapata's death throughout the nation. This resulted in ceremonies being held even 1,500 kilometers to the north of Zapata's hometown (Brunk).

By the 1950's, the cult of Zapata had become a key element in post revolutionary political culture at the national level. It was asserted by government officials that the Revolution was a unified process, that the ones who fought are getting their condolences and that the process of the Revolution and Zapata's work was ongoing. The state used ritual to create a feeling of national community through the Zapata cult. Although there was a sense of patriotism felt after each commencement, it always seemed to dissipate and the skepticism by the peasants continued.

In 1994, Chiapan rebels rose up against the regime of Salinas, under the name Zapatistas, clearly inspired by the heroic man, Zapata, himself (Harvey). Zapata's demands had been the inspiration for Article 27 in the Mexican Constitution, which addressed the redistribution of land and protected communal landholding (Brunk). Article 27 was being threatened when Mexico became a part of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Canada. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) declared a war against the Mexican state in 1994 in defense of military and corporate incursions into Chiapas as well as in protest against the reforms being made to Article 27. Today, EZLN focuses on strategies of civil resistance. EZLN is named after Zapata, frequently uses his image in matters of protest and seeks to draw attention to the real image of Zapata, not the one used and manipulated by politicians (Harvey).

Zapata's legacy even lives on well into the 21st century. Felipe Calderon, Mexico's president from 2006-2012, visited Morelos to attend the ceremony to mark the Centenary of the Passage of Zapata's Plan of Ayala and inaugurated the Museum of the Agrarian Reform Movement (States News Service). During his address while on the tour of Morelos, Calderon recalled the Plan of Ayala, Zapata and his followers that asserted peasant's land rights. He also stated that "Zapata's struggle, which took place under dictatorial regime, sought social justice and legality" has resulted in "social justice being a constitutional mandate, as a result of which government is obliged to ensure equal opportunities for those less fortunate" (States News Service).

Zapata has remained a "commanding historical personage" and the "key spokesman for the Revolution's most fundamental social issue" (Brunk). Octavio Paz has said that Zapata's image is "made up of patience and fecundity, silence and hope, death and resurrection" and that "Zapata dies at every popular fair". Zapata was honored as one of the founding fathers of the new revolutionary state and became an element of national identity through propagation in Mexico.

The Zapatista struggle and Zapata's image have stood for indigenous territory, the right to work the land that they consider historically to be theirs and an overall fight for the Earth. Although Mexican politicians manipulated his image immediately following his death, Zapata's true revolutionary legacy still continues to live on. His ideals have sparked modern rebellion for further social reform for the indigenous people of Mexico as well as the impoverished and suppressed people worldwide.

Annotated Bibliography

Beary, Brian. "Saving Indigenous Peoples." *CQ Researcher*, 20 Sept. 2011. Web.

This source gave an overview of indigenous people around the world and their struggles. It addressed questions such as: should indigenous people control their natural resources and should they have more autonomy? This source also gave background about the conquest, settlement, post-colonial assimilation, self-determination and current dilemmas of many native groups. This helped give my paper more insight on the variety of struggles faced by indigenous people in general, as well as in Chiapas specifically. This source was found through a COD Library credible database.

Brunk, Samuel. "Remembering Emiliano Zapata: Three Moments In The Posthumous Career Of The Martyr Of Chinameca." *Hispanic American Historical Review* 78.3 (1998): 457. *Academic Search Complete*. Web.

This article focuses on Zapata as one of the most significant persons in Mexican history as well as the Martyr of Chinameca. It includes information on his posthumous career, the examination of the myth of Zapata as well as the Cuautla commemoration of his death in 1950. The *Hispanic American Historical Review*, a credible source found through a College of DuPage research database, wrote the article. The detailed and well researched information about Zapata's influence on Mexico's people and politics after his death helped me understand his legacy as well as the impact.

Brunk, Samuel. *The Posthumous Career of Emiliano Zapata: Myth, Memory, and Mexico's Twentieth Century*. 2010. Print.

This book explores the revolutionary who left indelible marks on Mexican politics and society. I could use parts of this book to better understand who Zapata was, his revolution as well as his modern influence. This would in turn, influence my writing for my argument. I would be better able to understand the long-lasting impact Zapata has made. Reviews of this book suggest that the author has done extensive research in local, regional and nation archives, newspapers, political speeches and studies by previous generations of chroniclers and historians on the topic. It also explores the idea that Zapata's assassination effectively brought an end to a violent civil war- a topic I am interested in learning more about.

"Emiliano Zapata." *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6Th Edition* (2013): 1. *Academic Search Complete*. Web

This source gave me a basic overview of who Zapata was. The *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia* is an accredited source and its bibliography on Zapata helped shape my paper. I needed a brief introduction to Zapata in my paper, and this source was very useful for that task. It addressed that he was of pure native descent and a tenant farm who felt keenly the injustices suffered by his people, as well as his experiences in the military and as a general.

Hadley, Scott. "Review essay: Retrieving Pancho Villa from Legend and Revolutionary Women from obscurity: New Perspectives on the Mexican Revolution." *Chasqui* 33.2 (2004): 150+. *Academic OneFile*. Web.

This article was extremely useful in its approach to the Mexican Revolution and looking at it from a novel perspective. It really helped me see how truly complicated the Revolution was and explained why my research was at times difficult to collect. Although most of the article focused on Villa, it still gave great insight to the effects of the Revolution. Scott Hadley is an accredited author who has written many articles on indigenous culture, literature, and key figures of the Revolution.

Harvey, Neil. "Zapatista Rebellion in Chiapas". In *Oxford Bibliographies Online: Latin American Studies*.

This source gave an introduction and general overview of the Zapatista Rebellion, which gave me a sound basis for more specific research on the topic. Several sources of the rebellions starts are examined, including NAFTA, previous issues with landholding policy and the indigenous peoples dire need for national attention. Oxford Bibliographies was developed cooperatively with scholars and librarian worldwide and offers exclusive, authoritative research guides.

Rodriguez, Job Hernandez. "Mexico: economic change without democracy." *Social Justice* 40.4 (2014): 52+. Academic OneFile. Web.

This article addressed the Mexican Revolution, it's causes, roots and most importantly it's effects. It was very beneficial to read about underlying goal of most presidents of Mexico at that time, which was to instill capitalistic values into the nation. This political viewpoint was critical in my analysis of the key figure of the Revolution, Zapata himself. This article provided the irony that was necessary to mention in my paper in order to better distinguish between the two varying images of Zapata that were born after his death. *Social Justice* is a peer-reviewed educational journal that seeks to inform theory on issues of equality and justice. This credible source was found using COD's library databases.

"The Mexican Revolution: November 20th, 1910 | EDSITEment." *The Mexican Revolution: November 20th, 1910 | EDSITEment*. N.p., n.d. Web.

This source provided background on an important historical event, the Mexican Revolution. Understanding the previous efforts of the indigenous people helped me develop a more concise understanding of the Zapatista Rebellion and the progress made by the Native Mexicans. EDSITEment is a partnership among the National Endowment for the Humanities, Verizon Foundation and the National Trust for the Humanities, making it a highly credible and reviewed source.

"Working Tour of Morelos." *States News Service* 28 Nov. 2011. Academic OneFile. Web. 12 May 2015.

This report came directly from a release by the former President of Mexico, Calderon. In this report, I found information about Calderon's recognition of Zapata and his efforts throughout the Mexican Revolution. This source gave me more information to use in support of Zapata's influence in modern Mexican politics as well as the establishment of more irony in the use of his image by politicians. *States News Service* is a credible source found by COD's library databases.

Vargas, Jorge A. "NAFTA, The Chiapas Rebellion, and the Emergence of Mexican Ethnic Law." 25 (1994): n. pag. *Scholarly Commons*. California Western International Law Journal, Fall 1994. Web

This California Western International Law Journal was written in the Fall of the 1994, the same year that NAFTA came into effect and the year of the Zapatista Rebellion. It gives details on the reasons for the rebellion, the demands of the indigenous people and the state of the nation a few months after negotiations. Vargas is a Professor of Law who teaches and writes in the areas of international and comparative law, with specialties in Mexican law and law of the sea. He has also served as a consultant on Mexican law before federal and state courts.

Annotated Bibliography
Additional Source

Viva Zapata! Dir. Elia Kazan. 1952. DVD

This film explores the story of rancher Emiliano Zapata who becomes a revolutionary leader as President Porfirio Diaz ignores the needs of the Mexican people. Author John Steinbeck teamed up with director Elia Kazan to create the film expressing the idea that revolutionary movements tend to become as corrupt and oppressive as the established orders they overthrow. They were able to capture Zapata as a determined yet unique figure, who gained power through rebellion and then walked away from that power. Watching this film in the beginning of my research really helped put a clearer image of who Zapata was, or at least how he was portrayed by in a medium of media. It helped guide the rest of my research and probe any unanswered questions left by the film. It is interesting to note that the cast of this movie had a mostly non-Mexican cast and was produced at a time of anti-Communist hysteria in Hollywood. This film, about a peasant revolutionary hero serves as an exciting action film, a political study and heroic biopic. This is a credible source because it is made based on a true figure and produced by Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, a well-known production company.