

“The Triumphal March of the Revolution”: The Travels of Lázaro Cárdenas as President of Mexico, 1934–1940

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RESÜMEE

Der Artikel unternimmt eine Analyse der innermexikanischen Besuchs-, Erkundungs- und Kontrollreisen, die Lázaro Cárdenas zwischen 1934 und 1940 in seiner Eigenschaft als Präsident von Mexiko unternommen hat. Grundlage der Untersuchung sind die Darstellungen der präsidentiellen Reisetätigkeit in der mexikanischen Presse. Die Reisen werden sowohl unter Gesichtspunkten der Repräsentation der persönlichen und institutionellen Macht des Präsidenten als auch im Hinblick auf die Konstruktion von Herrschaft untersucht. Im Ergebnis schälen sich drei Aspekte heraus, die mit den Präsidentenreisen politisch und symbolisch aufs Engste verknüpft waren: Zum einen waren es Intentionen der nationalen Integration, die – nicht anders als im Fall der Reisetätigkeit des japanischen Tennō zum Beginn der Meiji-Ära – beim Arrangement der zum Teil landesweiten Reisen im Vordergrund standen. Zum anderen erzeugten diese Reisen, gerade weil sie mit direkten Interventionen eines moralisch unanfechtbaren Präsidenten in lokale Angelegenheiten verknüpft waren, eine Aura charismatischer Führungsstärke und Autorität. Und schließlich wirkte insbesondere die Presseberichterstattung über diese Reisen daran mit, die Menschenmengen, die der Präsident traf und mit denen er interagierte, als „Massen“ zu konstruieren. Der Artikel endet mit dem Befund, dass diese Reisen, auch wenn sie für die Stärkung von Cárdenas' Herrschaft ungemein erfolgreich waren, gleichwohl nicht-intendierte Folgen hatten. Denn in eben dem Maße, wie Cárdenas nachgerade zur „personifizierten Repräsentation“ der Revolution avancierte, wurden die post-revolutionären Institutionen, welche seine Regierung zum Zwecke der weiteren politischen Konsolidierung aufgebaut hatte, wiederum unterminiert.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Mexican state advanced a wide range of significant social, political and economic reforms that were intended to “institutionalize” the revolution of the previous decade. Although the struggles that formed the revolutionary movement had mobilized large sections of the population all over Mexico, the implementation of the post-revolutionary reforms was set up in such a way as to signify that the Revolution itself was being mobilized from the capital outwards, especially towards the rural areas. A number of salient social and cultural projects indicative of this mobility were then carried out: the *misiones culturales* (“cultural missions”, expeditions of teachers that spent short periods of time in rural communities teaching handicraft skills), the *brigadas médicas* (“medical brigades”, expeditions of medical doctors and nurses aimed at vaccinating and instilling basic notions of hygiene), the *bibliotecas ambulantes* (“itinerant libraries”), and the *carros escuela* (“railway schoolrooms”, moving schools set up in railway wagons for the families of the railway workers). It is thus not surprising that the 1930s, the decade when this process of institutionalisation reached its peak, produced also the most itinerant president that Mexico has seen in peaceful times – Lázaro Cárdenas del Río.

1. The Travelling President

In what follows, we shall analyse in greater detail the travels Lázaro Cárdenas undertook during the period he held the office of President of Mexico, i.e. between 1934 and 1940. Having been a highly-mobile general during the revolution, an active traveller during his term of office as governor of the state of Michoacán, and having won the presidency after an intense electoral campaign throughout the whole of the country, travelling was a central component of Cárdenas’ governing style. During his presidency, he was on tour at least thirty times for periods of one to six weeks in all regions of the country and took short trips (one to three days), once or more per month, to locations around Mexico City (excluding his leisure trips).

In previous scholarly literature about Cárdenas, little attention has been paid to the nature of his travels and to the ways in which the presidential power was constructed throughout them.¹ We stand from the premise that this power was constructed both through the pragmatic political dimensions and surrounding symbolic elements of the trips. With Clifford Geertz’s investigation on the symbolics of power in mind, we aim to show in our study how the symbolic aspects of these travels shaped and gave sense to the trips as a form of exercising rule and consolidating power.² We explore some of

1 Among the most influential studies about Lázaro Cárdenas are those of A. Córdova: *La política de masas del cardenismo*, México 1974, and A. Gilly, *El cardenismo: una utopía mexicana*, México, D. F. 2001. An overview of recent scholarly literature and current debates around the figure of Cárdenas and his government can be found in D. Spenser/B. A. Levinson, *Linking State and Society in Discourse and Action: Political and Cultural Studies of the Cárdenas Era in Mexico*, in: *Latin American Research Review* 34 (1999) 2, pp. 227-245.

2 Cf. C. Geertz, *Centers, Kings, and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power*, in: C. Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, New York 1983, pp. 121-146.

the following questions: How were Cárdenas' travels staged *in situ* and reported in the daily press? What did this staging mean for the style of political negotiation and conflict resolution developed in Cárdenas' time (and after)? What kinds of bonds were created between the president and the people throughout these travels? Our study is largely based upon the reports and visual materials of two daily national newspapers, namely the *Excelsior* – largely of commercial orientation – and *El Nacional* – mouthpiece of Mexico's united party, the highly official *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (PNR). In addition, we analyse the personal diary of Lázaro Cárdenas himself, and a handful of personal memoirs and municipal official history records.

The president's travels had a particular educational function both for those who travelled and for those being visited. Cárdenas himself wrote in his personal diary (1933) about the educational value of a journey on an excursion to a nearby volcano with some members of the Ministry of War (which he headed at the time):

Talking [with a number of generals] about the country's topography and landscapes, we decided to make an excursion to the Ixtlacihuatl the first Saturday of next month. It will be extended to the military men of the War Ministry. I will make use of this excursion to make evident to the compañeros the need for more spiritual and material exercise. That is, more spiritual exercise that leads them to organize collectively, and more material exercise that teaches them what their effort might accomplish... Collective organisation gives impulse and forms the character; on the contrary, isolation weakens the person, killing his individual strength".³

If travelling taught travellers lessons in "collective organisation" and formed "character" (the probable reason why Cárdenas always took a number of ministers and governors with him in his extended travels as president), those travels were also educational for those who witnessed and welcomed the travellers. Indeed, as Jürgen Schriewer has pointed out in the introductory article to this volume, in this period the social environment was perceived to have a powerful educational influence over the people – an influence that was much greater than that of any school – and the state had taken upon itself the obligation of giving some "direction" to that influence as part of Cárdenas' task of social reform.⁴ In this sense, the presidential travels were "educational" for both those who interacted with the travellers and for those who read about the travels in the newspapers. Participants, direct witnesses, and readers of the president's travels experienced a par-

3 L. Cárdenas, *Apuntes 1913–1940*, in: *Obras*, vol. 1, México 1972, Note on 5 May 1933, p. 222.

4 A report from the Ministry of Education in 1934 expressed clearly: "[In contrast to schools as such] social life at large is the school without walls which relies on indirect and yet effective means. Accordingly, the state, heavily committed to educating the people, must – and indeed does – take care to have an impact, without neglecting the fundamental role of schooling proper, on the educational forces of the social environment so as to move beyond prejudice or ideology all those potentially seductive institutions – such as taken-for-granted habit, spectacle or fashion – that impinge on the spirit of a nation [...] In this sense, the Mexican State pays great heed to its duties as an educator." Cf. *Memoria de la Secretaría de Educación Pública 1934* [1934 Report of the Public Education Ministry], vol. II, México, D. F. 1934, pp. 539 f., quoted in greater detail in the introductory article by Jürgen Schriewer in this volume, pp. 23, footnote 43.

ticular form of government that would shape the future relationship between state and society in post-revolutionary Mexico.

Travelling as a practice of state rule has a long history and has received a good deal of attention by the European scholarly literature. Itinerant courts were common in Europe and in the Islamic world prior to the centralisation of the nation-states, primarily as a means to maintain the bonds of allegiance and consolidate the authority of the king over other ruling lords. By contrast, the travels of European kings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, according to some authors, were meant to create a kind of emotional bond between the people and the royalty, a bond that enabled the identification of the abstract concept of nation with the physical figure of the king. This was an association typical of constitutional monarchies in which the monarch held the role of a political mediator with a remnant of divine charisma. This political form was characteristic of periods of consolidation of the nation-states, when the end of the estate society and the development of differentiated bureaucratic institutions had dissolved or softened the formal political links between the people and their local and regional lords, and when the feelings of national belonging could be fostered with regard to a central authority.⁵

But what was the function of Cárdenas' travels in republican, post-revolutionary Mexico? Although the scholarly literature about the function of travelling heads of state in Europe is rather comprehensive, this topic has been rarely researched in Mexican historiography and not at all in the context of the post-revolutionary period. In this first attempt to analyse this phenomenon, let us begin by considering the purposes and characteristics of Cárdenas' trips.

During his travels Cárdenas carried out a number of different tasks. Some of them were related to boosting infrastructure works: he inaugurated roads, railways, dams or schools – sometimes he visited them while they were still under construction in order to accelerate the works – and he opened agricultural and industrial exhibitions. Other activities were clearly political and organisational, such as presiding over meetings of the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (PNR), the official party which had been founded in 1929 as a consensus body to unite all political factions throughout the country (predecessor of the later *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*). He also held regular meetings with state governors, regional leaders of the PNR, local authorities, representatives of labour unions,

5 Cf., among others, J. Paulmann, *Pomp und Politik. Monarchenbegegnungen in Europa zwischen Ancien Régime und Erstem Weltkrieg*, Paderborn 2000; J. Paulmann, *Peripatetische Herrschaft, Deutungskontrolle und Konsum: zur Theatralität in der europäischen Politik vor 1914*, in: *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 53 (2002), pp. 444-461; B. Preisendörfer, *Staatsbildung als Königskunst. Ästhetik und Herrschaft im preußischen Absolutismus*, Berlin 2000; R. Wortmann, *Rule by Sentiment: Alexander II's Journeys through the Russian Empire*, in: *American Historical Review* 95 (1990), pp. 745-771. The symbolic functions of the travels of the Tennō have also been widely studied in the case of Meiji Japan, see, among others, J. Traganou, *The Tokaido Road: Travelling and Representation in Edo and Meiji Japan*, London 2004; C. N. Vapori, *Breaking Barriers: Travel and State in Early Modern Japan*, Cambridge 1994. N. Hée, *Von der Inszenierung des Unsichtbaren zur Repräsentation der Nation: Herrscherreisen im Japan des 19. Jahrhunderts*, in: S. Baller/M. Pesek/R. Schilling/Stolpe (eds), *Die Ankunft des Anderen: Repräsentationen sozialer und politischer Ordnungen in Empfangszeremonien*, Frankfurt a.M. 2008, pp. 64-81; S. Shizuko, *Meiji ten'nō gyōkō to chihō seiji* [The travels of the Meiji Emperor and provincial politics], Tokyo 2005. See also the chapter by Shin'ichi Suzuki and Kazuhiko Yamaki in this volume.

and commissions of peasants; in those meetings he often mediated in problems between local and state authorities. In some occasions Cárdenas' presence in a particular city was intended to solve a strike, for which he arbitrated between workers and employers. Some of what he did was directly related to the so-called "promises" of the revolution; for example, the highly symbolic bestowal of communal lands to peasants who had until then worked for the big landowners, speeches to landowners to convince them of complying with their "revolutionary duty" of giving up their properties, and sermons urging the workers and peasants to unite their various organisations into a single organization in order to better defend their rights and interests. However, regardless of the specific purpose of each trip, most of Cárdenas' travels were articulated in a "revolutionary" rhetoric and were loaded with the symbolism of the revolution: they were presented in such a way as though they were finally "delivering" the awaited promises established in the 1917 Constitution and subsequent post-revolutionary laws.

Most of the presidential journeys had a regular structure. A trip usually began with Cárdenas' departure in the early morning from his modest house near the former presidential palace of Chapultepec in Mexico City. He made his way to the train station, where the presidential train *El Olivo* (The olive tree), according to the press, was "always ready" for leaving. At the station the president was joined by the cabinet members who accompanied him during the trip and with whom Cárdenas handled the daily administrative work during the train journey. Reaching its destination, the train was welcomed by an official committee and a popular crowd, who, together with the sound of ringing bells of the local parish, walked with him to the building of the town council or of the official party. (However, when the president arrived too early in the morning there was occasionally no welcoming ceremony and he walked directly to meet with the local authorities). When he travelled to more difficult to reach destinations, Cárdenas combined railway or airplane journeys with travels by car; however, travelling on horseback between peasant villages with no roads for modern vehicles was also common in these trips.

The president usually entered the town passing through a rudimentary triumphal arch, made of branches and flowers, which gave his presence a connotation of sacredness and an implicit association with the welcoming ceremonies traditionally offered to victorious military leaders, the governors of the federal states, bishops – and, in a distant past, viceroys. This entrance was, therefore, a traditional ritual endowed with a new meaning created through the accent placed upon the material infrastructure that the president was to inaugurate (and that was attributed to "the revolution"), the close contact of the president with the population, and the government's attempt to organize the whole of the population into a homogeneous "mass". After meeting the local authorities, Cárdenas went with them to inaugurate works of infrastructure or see the progress in their construction. There he gave a speech, after which he talked with the workers, and closed the morning with a frugal meal with all. The afternoon and evening were filled with diverse meetings with officials and long hours in audiences with common people: standing up or sitting at a table, with his personal secretary on one side and a Cabinet member on the other, he talked to every individual queuing to see him – usually leaders of peasant or

workers' organisations, as well as people in general, including elderly and women. These petitions were of two kinds: material improvements such as schools, drinking water, roads, and electricity on the one hand, and conflict resolution on the other, especially related to the possession of the land, unfair treatment from entrepreneurs or mine owners to their workers, problems with local or state authorities, problems related to the administration of natural resources, or problems derived from the arbitrary implementation of an existing law. The government officials recorded everything that was said and Cárdenas promised to study and resolve the situation as soon as he got back to Mexico City, a promise that indeed he often fulfilled. Finally, the end of the day was marked by another speech addressed to the whole population, followed by fireworks and music. There was sometimes free food for everybody, but no alcohol. The president and his companions either spent the night in the town or in the presidential train, and it was often said that Cárdenas had little time to rest before starting a new journey.

As we can see, the presence of Lázaro Cárdenas in a particular place was not a mere interruption of daily life of the visited, but was a considerable event which involved a whole staging process and which had a definite impact upon the lives of the visited. Cárdenas' visits often had consequences for the city or community visited; as a result of them, a school was opened, communal lands were allocated or a power dispute was solved. Moreover, as we shall argue in the following sections of this article, at a more general level his travels gave shape to a distinct form of government. Thus, in the course of these travels, a certain form of national integration was constructed (section 2), a particular kind of leadership and authority was developed in which the direct intervention of a highly virtuous president was the primary method to implement reforms and resolve conflicts (section 3), and the people with whom the president interacted were constructed as "the masses" by the daily press (section 4). With focus in particular on these three aspects, we see president Cárdenas' travels as both representing and constructing his particular nature of governing style.

2. National integration

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mexico was still a conglomeration of poorly connected territories in which the geographic and economic differences underlined the political, cultural, and ethnic diversity. Through his travels Cárdenas had to deal with a country riddled by conflicting interests, personal affiliations, and divergent political cultures. Indeed, the Mexican revolution had been the sum of many different struggles with different purposes. The eventual creation of an official revolutionary party in 1929 – the aforementioned *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (PNR) – to which Cárdenas actively contributed, was meant to constitute a political body into and through which all divergent interests could be channelled. Thus, it is not surprising that even decades after the independence wars and the wars against the French and US invasions, the people's feelings of belonging were still not strongly connected even to their own state, let alone

the Mexican Federation. Rather, feelings of belonging were connected much more to minor geographical units like the own town or region, the so called *patria chica* (the little fatherland). As the iconographic representations of the president's travels in *El Nacional* suggest, one purpose of the visits of president Cárdenas was the fostering of the feelings of national belonging and national unity (cf. Figure 1). In this regard, the trips seemed to have had a high degree of success.

There is much evidence that suggests that the people visited by Cárdenas did develop a sense that their village or town was becoming part of the nation. A head of state travelling so much and visiting rural areas – particularly in peaceful times – was remarkable and without precedent, and made Cárdenas a very different president in the eyes of the people. As the mayor of Tetelcingo, Morelos, mentioned in an oral interview,

*no ruler of the whole of Mexico had visited the pueblos to see what needs they had... if one of them visited a state, he did so with a big escort because he did not trust the pueblos. By contrast, Cárdenas was different; he did not distrust the pueblos.*⁶



Figure 1: "36,801 km throughout Mexico".

Source: *El Nacional*, 12 September 1937 (Biblioteca Pública Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, México, D.F.)

6 M. N. Méndez Huacuatitla, *Āmatlapohualistli de Don Lázaro Cárdenas: Un relato de Don Lázaro Cárdenas* [A story about Lázaro Cárdenas], manuscript in mösiehual language, translated by the Instituto Lingüístico de Verano. In: <http://www.sil.org/~tuggyd/Tetel/F001e-Cardenas-NHG.htm#Visita1>.

In this utterance the mayor of Tetelcingo was using the old, monarchical concept of *pueblos* in the plural as the natural political and juridical units – villages, cities, states – which make up the nation but always have to be on guard *vis à vis* the central government against which the *pueblos* had often rebelled since independence. Morelos thus was pointing at a significant trust-based rapprochement between the *pueblos* and the central government embodied in the figure of the president.⁷

Other reports suggest that the presence of the president meant that some regions did indeed come to feel linked to other parts of the country – sometimes in the most literal sense. For example, in 1940, Cárdenas, while staying in Pátzcuaro, made an unexpected trip to the town of Tacámbaro in the state of Guanajuato, where he visited a local school. Pleased with the state of the institution, he donated 2000 pesos as “souvenir” for the improvement of its material conditions and promised the whole school a trip to the port of Veracruz so that the children could behold the sea.⁸

Moreover, through his travels Cárdenas involved *de facto* even the smallest towns in affairs of national and international policy, both by showing the towns with his presence that they were as important as the affairs he dealt with at the capital, and by politically using his absence from Mexico City to give strength to some decisions. For example, in April 1938, at the height of the international conflict provoked by Mexico’s nationalisation of the oil industry, Cárdenas organized a trip to the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca, and did not make an early return to the capital when the president of the USA – in defence of the North American oil companies affected – demanded an international arbitration on the issue. Instead, and contrary to the pleas of the official and non official press, Cárdenas extended his trip to visit small peasant communities in the state of Guerrero, cunningly delaying an answer to his North American counterpart and winning more popular support for his measure. He finally arrived back in Mexico City, in perfect time to lead a powerful demonstration in support of that nationalisation; by then a sense

7 The term *pueblos* in this case refers both to the Spanish word for “villages” and to the old concept of political and juridical units inherited from colonial times by opposition to a central government. The countless pronunciamientos (military revolts) that impeded any sort of political stability in Mexico during much of the nineteenth century were usually made in the name of the *pueblos* versus the national government, under the argument that the government had “betrayed” the sovereignty endowed to him by the *pueblos* – a sovereignty which, according to the old monarchical plural conception of the country as an association of natural political bodies, the *pueblos* were entitled to claim back for themselves. Cf. F. X. Guerra, *El pronunciamiento en México: prácticas e imaginarios*, in: *Traces* 37 (June 2000), pp. 15–26, and E. Roldán Vera, “Pueblo” y “pueblos” en México, 1750–1850: un ensayo de historia conceptual, in: *Araucaria: Revista Iberoamericana de Filosofía, Política y Humanidades* 17 (2007): http://www.institucional.us.es/araucaria/nro17/monogr17_13.htm. The term *pueblo* in the singular as a way to denote the whole of the population of the country, i.e., the idea of a nation made of equal individual citizens, began to be used in the liberal vocabulary of the nineteenth century, although the old plural usage of the term persisted. This transformation was similar to that experienced by the Japanese concept of *Kuni*, which, in the course of the Meiji restoration, changed from meaning an administrative unit or domain to meaning the entire country.

8 *El Nacional*, 21 April 1940. We do not know for sure whether the money was actually given and the trip actually carried out or not, but the president’s promises were usually fulfilled.

of "urgency" had built up in such a way that the president had to be backed by the whole of the population in his "struggle against imperialism".⁹

On the other hand, Cárdenas' travels also displayed the "modernity" of the government as a showcase of a promised (and soon to be realized) developed future. Not only was the figure of Cárdenas strongly associated with the inauguration of works of infrastructure, but his travels also highlighted the modern means of communication that linked the country, especially the railway. Trains had been a symbol of capitalist development of the late nineteenth century, and had been perceived as instruments of control by the foreign investors allied with the monopolistic elite of the pre-revolutionary government of the dictator Porfirio Díaz. Yet the railway lines had been built mainly for the transportation of raw materials to the sea ports, so they did not contribute to fostering an internal market and did not respond to any particular needs of the Mexican state and society. This image changed when railways became one of the most intensely used transportation means for the mobilisation of revolutionary troops in the 1910s; a photograph of a girl *soldadera*, a woman soldier, descending from a running locomotive is still one of the icons of the revolution, and Francisco Villa's contracts with Hollywood companies for the filming of the military operations on trains contributed to spread this motive.¹⁰

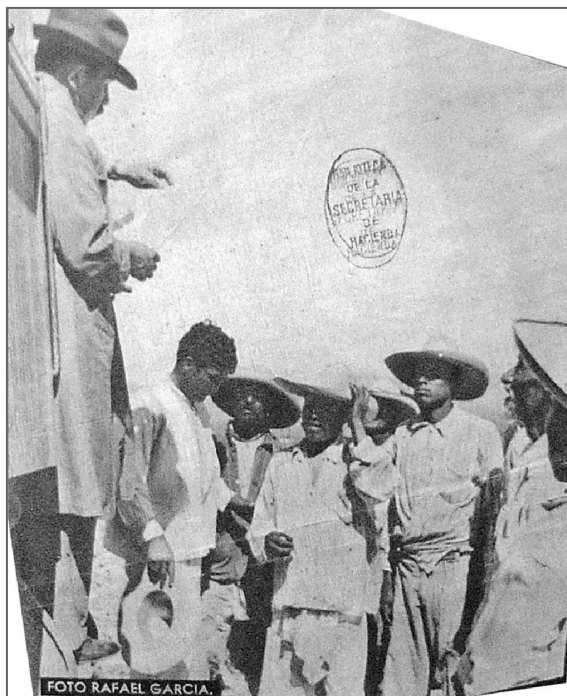


Figure 2: Cárdenas "preaching" to peasants from the rear of the presidential train.

Source: El Nacional, 17 January 1937 (Biblioteca Pública Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, México, D.F.).

⁹ El Nacional, 9 April 1938.

¹⁰ M. C. Anderson, *Pancho Villa's Revolution by Headlines: Mass Media in the Foreign Policy of Francisco "Pancho" Villa*, Norman 2000; M. de Orellana, *Filming Pancho Villa: How Hollywood Shaped the Mexican Revolution*, New York 2004.

Drawing upon these revolutionary associations, the official party press showed many photographs of the presidential train, so as to suggest that Cárdenas was “taking the revolution” to all corners of the country. Some of these photographs portrayed Cárdenas speaking to the people from the rear of his train, images that conspicuously resemble those of Lenin indoctrinating the revolutionary masses (see Figure 2).

The construction of new railway lines – together with the construction of roads – was prominently portrayed in the reports of Cárdenas’ travels as a means to unite the whole country, especially in the case of territories distant from the centre. The caption of a photograph of the construction of a railway line in Baja California published in *El Nacional* reads: “One of the many railway tracks which, crossing deserts and linking faraway locations of the Mexican Republic, have been built during the Government of Lázaro Cárdenas. [Baja] California and the South East are no longer faraway and forgotten territories.”¹¹

Although the construction of new lines did not considerably enlarge the existing railroad network, the symbolic elements associated to the railway journeys of the president served to reinforce Cárdenas’ project of national integration. The presidential train itself, for example, played a particular role as visible carrier of the central state to all regions of the country. *El Olivo* was clearly recognisable from the villages and towns it passed through, not only because of its distinct olive green colour, but also thanks to the big national flag hanging at the rear of the train. The train itself was a symbol of modernity, for it was rather new – built only in 1926 – and was fully-equipped with telegraph and telephone through which the president was always in touch with the capital and through which the reports of his journeys could reach the press.¹² Not surprisingly, in the official party press trains were also used to allegorically represent Cárdenas’ government as a link between the past and the present or between the past and the future. Thus, in more than one photomontage, the image of a locomotive appeared to represent this link by combining images from an ancient indigenous past and a characteristic element of modernity such as literacy (cf. Figure 3).¹³

11 *El Nacional*, 1 December 1939.

12 The presidential train, ‘El Olivo’ had been bought by president Plutarco Elías Calles in 1926 and was said to be extremely luxurious – “only second to the papal train”, according to vox populi. It was equipped with offices, dormitories, kitchen, dining room, radio and telephone. It remained in use until 1960. Cf. “Tren presidencial El Olivo” [“The Presidential train ‘The Olive’”], in: *México desconocido* [Unknown Mexico]: <http://www.mexicodesconocido.com.mx/notas/3837-Tren-presidencial-El-Olivo>.

13 The technique of photomontage, consisting in making a composite photograph by cutting and joining a number of other photographs, was developed by Dada artists Hannah Höch and John Hartfield. By taking photographic fragments out from their context to create something new, they wanted to challenge the alleged unity of the photographic space, thus stressing the symbolic character of photography. See R. E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Boston 1985. On the uses of photomontage in post-revolutionary Mexico, see R. González Mello, *Der Populismus des Anderen: Die politischen Bilder* [The populism of the other: political images], in: J. Baberowski/H. Kaelble/J. Schriewer (eds), *Selbstbilder und Fremdbilder: Repräsentationen sozialer Ordnungen im Wandel* [Self-images and images of the Other: Representations of Changing Patterns of Social Order], Frankfurt a.M. 2008, pp. 331–364.

As we can see, the symbolism associated with Cárdenas' travels, both *in situ* and in its representations in the press, suggested that through his government the revolution was moving outwards – from the centre to the peripheries – and forward – towards a better future. Cárdenas, embodying the centre of the national government, was both the carrier of the revolution and the fulfiller of its promises. On the occasion of his journey through the Mexican South East in 1939, the president's spokesman José Muñoz Cota summarized it in an enthusiastic speech: "The Revolution shall never stop its triumphal march as long as your children have not inherited its benefits".¹⁴

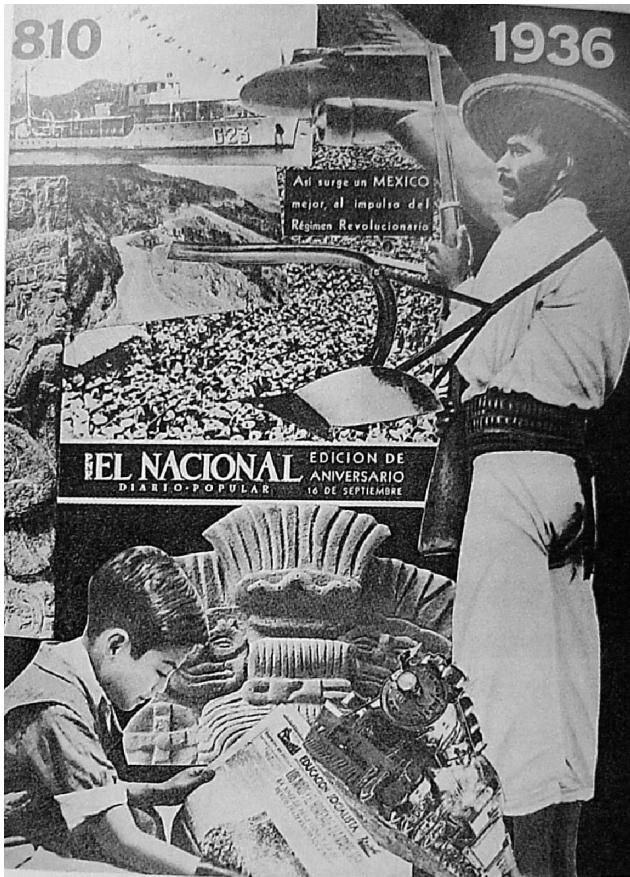


Figure 3: The train as link between the past (an ancient Aztec sculpture) and future (a literate child reading the section "Socialist education" of the newspaper *El Nacional*).

Source: *El Nacional*, 16 September 1936 (Biblioteca Pública Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, México, D.F.). The photomontage was published on the occasion of the Mexican Independence Day, and it was also to symbolize the progress achieved over more than a century, from the first struggles for independence in 1810 (the photo is cut due to the binding) up to the year 1936.

3. Charismatic leadership

But what did “the triumphal march of the Revolution” actually mean? As the official chronologies of hundreds of towns and villages show, the visit of the president was an enormous act of deference towards them.¹⁵ Furthermore, the physical presence of the head of state also meant the concrete realisation of some demands or the practical possibility to resolve certain political or social conflicts. Indeed, Cárdenas developed a form of government in which direct intervention of the President made a reform or the resolution of a problem possible, often bypassing the regular institutions or local authorities established for that purpose. For the beneficiaries of these policies, this was the best and fastest solution and such a direct style of governing contributed to creating a special bond between the president and the people with the simultaneous effect of reinforcing Cárdenas’ authority.

Wherever he went, Cárdenas solved particular contingencies and disputes. Sometimes they were problems of the workers with a particular law such as in the town of Mexicapa, state of Morelos, in December 1935; there he consulted with the small-scale wood cutters who saw their source of living threatened by new laws that prevented the exploitation of their lands and at that time promised them that they would not be affected. In other occasions he helped producers facing a difficult economic situation: In Soconusco, Chiapas, for instance, he listened to a group of banana producers who, facing unfavourable international market conditions, pleaded for a government subsidy for the export of their products.¹⁶ Cárdenas offered to help and one day after leaving the region, on 11 April 1940, the group of banana producers received a subsidy for their products given by “a resolution of the (Ministry of) Economy”. In other cases, Cárdenas was not able to offer an immediate solution but only a promise: the property titles of a piece of communal land, a water pump, an ox or a school. This promise was – at least in most of the testimonies read – usually fulfilled; sometimes the president returned to the same place months or years later to personally deliver what he had promised.¹⁷

In other cities the visit of the president was motivated by his intention to mediate in strikes. Thus, in Monterrey, in February 1936, the president exhorted the industrialists to accept the resolution of the strike-mediating organ, the *Junta Central de Conciliación y Arbitraje*,¹⁸ in favour of the workers so that they would put an end to their strike. According to the press, Cárdenas’ presence served to calm down the “fear of communism” of the

15 The websites of hundreds of municipios (town councils) list the visit of president Cárdenas as one of the remarkable facts of their history. These lists of historical facts also indicate that Cárdenas was in the majority of the cases the only head of state who ever visited those places.

16 *El Nacional* 5 April 1940, p. 1.

17 For example, he promised an ox and a cow to the town of Tetelcingo, and a few days later these two animals arrived; he promised a water pump for the communal lands of the town of Tequixquiaca, and one year later he went back there to hand in the pump. Cf. Méndez Huaxcatitla, Ámatlapohualistli de Don Lázaro Cárdenas (footnote 6).

18 The *Juntas de Conciliación y Arbitraje* were organs created after the revolution for the mediation in strikes; they were made up of representatives of workers, industrialists, and the state or national government.

city's upper classes, even though, in reality, the president's siding with the workers at first deepened the conflict.¹⁹ Cárdenas also visited Orizaba, in January 1938, during a violent conflict between two labour organizations and the following strike in the textile industry of Veracruz, with the purpose of assisting in the resolution of the dispute. And more than once the non-official press claimed that the return of the president from his journeys to Mexico City was the only way a number of workers' strikes and other problems affecting the capital could be solved. If it is true that in the post-revolutionary configuration of the different social groups the state had become a *de facto* referee in the structural conflicts between workers and industrialists, this mediating role was directly associated to the physical presence of president Cárdenas himself, a presence that no other president ever had, neither before nor after him.²⁰

Moreover, this referee role was not only active in the realm of strikes and economic protests of certain groups but also in place in the realm of regional and local politics. For example, in the state of Tamaulipas, in February 1936, Cárdenas mediated a political conflict of the local authorities, which had constituted two parallel municipal councils in two of the main cities of the state. In other occasions the direct intervention of the president in local affairs led to a conflict of political jurisdiction. For example, whereas Cárdenas himself orally handed in communal land in the Zapatista region of Anenecuilco and Villa Ayala in 1935, a year later the legal resolution of the state authority, which validated the presidential resolution, also included some changes which implied that one of the *municipios* had land that the president had given to the other. Protests followed and one of the parts refused to acknowledge the earlier presidential resolution.²¹

All, these cases show that problems and social demands were solved in a rather casuistic way through the presence and direct intervention of the president. Sometimes it appeared as if only through his initiative could an existing law be effectively enforced. In cases of controversy about a law, Cárdenas appeared to know better than state or local authorities how it should be applied, as the report of the encounter between the president and the wood cutters in Mexicapa illustrates:

LC: How many heads of family are there in this place?

— We are thirty-four.

LC: I am here to serve you. What are your needs, your problems?

— Sir, we don't want our Mountain taken away from us... At the entrance of the cities we're being charged for our small loads of coal and wood, which sometimes are even confiscated...

19 For more on this episode, see M. Snodgrass, *Deference and Defiance in Monterrey: Workers, Paternalism and Revolution in Mexico, 1890–1950*, Cambridge 2003, p. 1-2.

20 M. del R. Guadarrama, *Los sindicatos y la política en México: la CROM [Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana] (1918–1928)*, México 1981.

21 Mentioned in E. Krauze, *General misionero*, in: E. Krauze, *Biografía del poder: caudillos de la Revolución Mexicana (1910–1940)*, México 2006, pp. 111-112 and 389-483..

[Reporter:] *The law, that double-edged sword, usually wounds the poor and leaves the powerful intact. The complaint was unanimous: let the law be rigorously applied to the strong ones, let it protect the weak ones; the law shall not be fierce against the poor.*

[LC listens to several individual complaints, then he interrupts:]

– LC: *You will have your mountain. You will have the wood and the coal you need for your livelihood. You won't be charged any more taxes and your loads won't be confiscated.*

[Then, speaking to the Chief Officer of the Forest Department:] *It is not the communities who destroy the forests. They want to preserve them for they have lived off them since ancient times. It is the large sawmills which destroy the forests and don't replant them. Those are the ones that are to be controlled and made to comply with the law...*

[Back to the Indians:] *Take care of your forests, don't destroy them. The government does not want the forests for itself; it wants their wealth to be preserved so that you can have a patrimony, a means of subsistence. Make use of the 'dead wood', make all the coal you need, but don't cut down young trees and plant as many new ones as you can.*²²

From a position of moral superiority, Cárdenas was acting as a supreme judge, situating himself above the institutions that were supposed to decide about the application of a law. This was more obvious in individual justice cases, in a way that was reminiscent of the granting of indulgence as practised in the monarchico-colonial tradition.²³ In the same town of Mexicapa, an old woman approached the president and told him: “Sir, yesterday my son was taken to Ocuilan, allegedly because he cut some wood”, to which the president replied: “Within a few hours your son will be back here”.²⁴

The form of leadership and authority developed by Cárdenas throughout his journeys contained some elements of what Max Weber characterized as “charismatic”. By contrast with the “traditional” and the “legal” forms of rule, a charismatic leader governs neither through relations of patronage and patrimonialism (“traditional” rule) nor exclusively through the bureaucracy and power division of the modern state (“legal” rule); instead, he makes use of familial and religious associations to consolidate his power and authority, and his government must be constantly confirmed by his individual acts – otherwise he might lose his “charisma”. This charisma is, therefore, not an “image” portrayed by some media, but a virtue that must be continuously reaffirmed – constructed and re-constructed – in the experiences of the people.²⁵

Cárdenas’ charisma was thus constructed through his regular intervention in the lives of the people in the course of his travels and further reinforced through the highly symbolic elements that shaped his travels, elements that can be seen both as deliberate strate-

22 El Nacional, 13 December 1935.

23 Cf. G. López González, *Cultura jurídica e imaginario monárquico: las peticiones de indulto durante el Segundo Imperio*, in: *Historia Mexicana* 55/4 (2006), pp. 1289-1351.

24 El Nacional, 13 December 1935.

25 Cf. M. Weber, “The Types of Legitimate Domination”, chapter 3 of M. Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, New York 1968 [1925]; M. Weber, *The Three Types of Legitimate Rule*, Berkeley 1958. It should be noted that the original German expression *charismatische Herrschaft* has indistinctly been translated into English as “charismatic rule” or as “charismatic domination”.

gies of portrayal used by the press and as spontaneous associations emerging from the popular culture. One of these elements was his fashioning of Cárdenas' providing power. Wherever he inaugurated infrastructure works, even if they had been built by the local population or with the aid of the state government, the president was always portrayed by *El Nacional* as the source of the improvement, with expressions such as: "the president continues pouring benefits in the towns he visits", or "the president solves immediately the problems of the inhabitants of each of the places he visited during his journey".²⁶

Drawing a lineage between the figure of Cárdenas and the defunct leaders of the most popular wing of the revolution was another strategy that served to reinforce the president's authority. During the revolution Cárdenas had fought against the remnants of the government of Porfirio Díaz, to be sure, but he then had sided with the ultimately victorious faction of the northern Constitutionalists, who from some point onwards fought against the popular movements led by Emiliano Zapata and Francisco Villa. It was all the more conspicuous, then, that one of his first presidential travels was to the Zapatista region in the state of Morelos, which suggests he was trying to strengthen his legitimacy through the support of social groups that once had fought with Emiliano Zapata. Reporting that tour, the newspaper *El Nacional* compared the loyalty of the peasants of the region for their defunct revolutionary leader Zapata with the loyalty they displayed towards Cárdenas. Moreover, his arrival in Ocuilan was compared with a triumphal entry of Francisco Madero, the initiator of the revolution. "How much, indeed, this tour of the president is a full representation of the Mexican Revolution", wrote the reporter of *El Nacional* on December 13, 1935. And three weeks later, when Cárdenas went back to the region to hand in the property titles of the communal land, newspapers described his visit as the "fulfilment" of what Zapata had begun. These were the actions that reinforced the president's "revolutionary" charisma: His presence in those places gave way not only to an image that linked him to revolutionary leaders, but he was also delivering results that the people could interpret as "revolutionary".

Other representations of Cárdenas combined republican with quasi-religious symbols. Although the separation of state and church had been established in Mexico since the 1860s, and even though anticlerical reforms were reinforced in the late 1920s, the Mexican society remained deeply Catholic and the civic and religious referents were easily interchangeable. As already mentioned, Cárdenas was received in the Mexican countryside with events and celebrations that resembled those of the reception of Catholic bishops, virtually the only high ranking individuals that ever visited such rural communities. Moreover, Cárdenas enjoyed "preaching" about the future of the revolution and the necessity for everyone to work together to advance the reforms, and some of his gestures did have a resonance like those of a religious leader (see Figure 2 above). Popular acclamations such as "Long live Cárdenas!" and "Long live the father of the Indians!" suggest that Cárdenas was taken with a sort of missionary paternalism.²⁷ The title given to him

26 *El Nacional*, 7 April 1940.

27 *El Nacional*, 13 December 1935.

by the Indians, “Tata Lázaro” (father Lázaro), was reminiscent of another *Tata*, viz. “Tata Vasco”, i.e. Vasco de Quiroga, one of the first Spanish missionaries in the early colonial times, and it was a title that no other president before or after Cárdenas was ever given by the people.²⁸ Accordingly, one of Cárdenas’ biographers has called him “the missionary president”, making reference to two different meanings: the so called “cultural missionaries”, or ambulant teachers, of the twentieth century and the religious missionaries of the sixteenth century.²⁹

Moreover, the act of people physically touching the visiting president resembled the touching a sacred person or a sacred object – it was a means of obtaining a benefit from the sanctity of what was being touched. One mother is said to have told her young daughter: “Look at him! Touch him! He’s the one who gave us the land!” The fact that Cárdenas used to share simple meals with the locals meant much more than an idea of humility of the president coming down to eat what the common people ate, i.e. *tortillas*, chilli and beans. In a deeply Catholic country, this image drew an immediate association with Christ sharing the bread with his disciples; a kind of communion of the president with the people in their poverty. Such a religious overtone was emphasized in the newspaper articles that described “how little” the president rested after a long journey, how many hours he spent listening to the people, or “how long” the president managed to travel on horseback, as if the president had supernatural powers to be able to do such things. Here, one has to remember that self-denial was a virtue of Christ and of true clergymen. A man famously described the experience of Cárdenas’ visit in his town with the words: “it was as if Jesus walked on Earth”.³⁰

In the novel tradition of occupying churches for secular purposes and of carrying out secularising rituals in them, the moderate anticlerical Cárdenas used both churches and sacred rooms of a much older tradition, such as indigenous ceremonial sites to preach the new redemptory message of the revolution. He visited indigenous ruins in Michoacán, Oaxaca, and Yucatán, sites that represented the past splendour of the ancient Mexicans and became associated with the sacred symbols of indigenous mythology (see Figure 5). As mentioned above, other representations suggested that Cárdenas’ government – often symbolized as a steam locomotive – constituted the link between the indigenous glorious past and the prosperous future of Mexico (cf. Figure 3 above).

In short, Cárdenas’ charismatic role in the construction of the post-revolutionary Mexican state was more than just one more episode in the *caudillo* tradition of post-independent Latin America, i.e., a tradition of strong political-military leaders heading au-

28 *Tata* is an old Spanish, affectionate term for “father, sometimes also “grandfather”, adopted in various indigenous languages of Mexico (*tatli* in Náhuatl – the indigenous language of central Mexico – *tatic* in tzotzil und tzeltal – two of the indigenous languages of Chiapas – *tata* in Tarasco – the dominant indigenous language of Cárdenas’ home state Michoacán). The term is also used to refer to a person or a being of high rank who is also loved, for example Tatic Samuel Ruiz, Bishop of San Cristóbal de las Casas from 1959 to 2000, or *Tata Dios*, i.e. Father God.

29 E. Krauze, *General misionero* (footnote 21).

30 A. Gilly, *Cartas a Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas*, México: ERA, 1989, p. 238. See also A. Bantjes, *As If Jesus Walked on Earth*, Wilmington 1998.

thoritarian governments.³¹ Thanks to the constant construction and reaffirmation of his charisma, his style of government was a unique combination of the process of "taking the revolution" to large parts of the country and personally intervening in the application of laws for the advancement of social reform or in the resolution of social and economic problems. This course of action meant that Cárdenas was acting as a catalyser of the institutions that the revolution was said to have put into place; yet at the same time, by intervening so directly at the local level, Cárdenas bypassed the judiciary and regional authorities thus undermining the division of powers defended in the 1917 Constitution. This situation contributes to explain the lack of continuity of many of the "revolutionary" social reforms advanced by Cárdenas once he left the presidency.



Figure 4: Cárdenas' travels and indigenous symbolism. Photomontage about Cárdenas' travels in Yucatán. Source: *El Nacional*, 22 August 1937 (Biblioteca Pública Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, México, D.F.).

31 The cultural roots of the "*caudillismo*" tradition in Latin America have been exacerbated in the non-Mexican historiography; see, for example, the collection of essays edited by H. M. Hamill, *Caudillos: Dictators in Spanish America*, Norman/London 1992. A sounder historical approach to this topic, which considers the contingent power structures that gave way to this particular form of leadership, can be found in J. Lynch, *Caudillos in Spanish America, 1800–1859*, Oxford 1992.

4. The president and “the masses”

Beyond the contents of what was discussed and solved in the meetings between Cárdenas, local officials and the population, the physical encounters of the president with the people throughout his journeys constituted in themselves a visual performance, a public representation of a particular form of governing. These visits were not just a powerful experience for those who directly participated; their diffusion in the printed press to larger sections of the population also contributed to constructing the authority and leadership of president Cárdenas. The construction of “the mass” and its binding to the leader in the course of the president’s travels is the subject of this section.

From early on in his mandate, Cárdenas was represented as “the president of the masses”, a designation that would become stronger over time. Two things were referred to by this label. First, that he was close to the common people, i.e. to workers, peasants or Indians. “Everywhere he has established direct contact with the popular masses, so that they can present him their problems; he wants to reach out to the humblest workers, for they cannot always be near to him”, reported the *Excelsior* on 23 February 1935. Second, that Cárdenas was able to summon crowds of people who turned up at every public appearance, thus showing support for his government, as a number of photographs and photo-montages suggest. A good deal of the historiography about Cárdenas’ presidency has for a long time discussed this characterisation, seeking to establish either the “convergence” or the “divergence” between Cárdenas’ project and the social and political “demands” of those masses that emerged from the revolution.³² However, little attention has been paid at the ways in which the concept of “the masses” was given a new meaning during Cárdenas’ government. In the 1920s and early 1930s, under the mixed ideological influence of European social democracy, anticlericalism, fascism and bolshevism, “the masses” had been conceptualized as the social and political actor who had carried out the revolution, and in this protagonist role they were materialized in the post-revolutionary mural painting.³³ Yet this characterisation would change during the Cárdenas period, in part as a result of the president’s attempt at “organising the masses”, and in part due to the form in which “the masses” began to be represented in the printed press in the course of the president’s travels.

Cárdenas’ own ideas about how to “organize the masses” were interestingly stated in his diary some months before he became president. Visually impressed by a demonstration organized on the occasion of the *Día del Trabajo*, the Labour Day, on the central square of Mexico City, in 1933, in which the workers’ organisation CROM (*Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana*) marched while divided in three different groups, that evening he wrote a few lines about the manipulability of the people by factious leaders:

32 On the first of those positions, see for example the classic works of A. Córdova, *La política de masas* (footnote 1); among the works that point at the “divergence”, see R. Sosa, *Los códigos ocultos del cardenismo: un estudio de la violencia política, el cambio social y la continuidad institucional*, México 1996.

33 Cf. B. Urías Horcasitas, *Retórica, ficción y espejismo: tres imágenes de un México bolchevique (1920–1940)*, in: *Relaciones: estudios de historia y sociedad* 26/101 (2005), pp. 261–300.

*The division of the urban workers and the presence of a deeply divided League of Peasants indicate once again the need for the workers not to be subject to the passions of a handful of quarrelling individuals. For the good of the working class, its culture and economic improvement, a united workers' front is needed to prevent the local organisations from continuing to be divided by political interests. It is the revolutionary duty of the government to stimulate the formation of such a united front, supporting it so that it is created with positive autonomy and is not subject to the political ups and downs.*³⁴

Cárdenas' modernising ideology followed a *sui generis* way between different, and sometimes contradictory, political options ranging from communism and communalism to state corporatism and populism.³⁵ One of the ways in which he linked these disparate ideologies was the idea of the need to create new individual and collective identities that integrated "modern" social ascriptions. Thus, Cárdenas' government aimed to organize new social bodies in order to educate, mobilize, indoctrinate and socialize the Mexicans who were traditionally considered as "lazy" and "individualistic". In a mixture of revolutionary presidentialism, caciquism and state corporatism, Cárdenas' government intended the creation of intermediate social bodies or "corporations", in particular the integration of all agrarian and industrial workers in semi-official unions,³⁶ thus virtually reducing all social and cultural disparities of the Mexicans under the concept of "the masses". In practice this meant, in the first place, the promotion of a single workers' organisation with which the government could easily negotiate – and which it was able to better control – namely the *Confederación de Trabajadores de México* (CTM). This single strong organisation also proved to be a good support of the government in its policies of nationalisation and collectivisation of certain industries, such as railways, oil and electricity. However, as we will suggest here, the charismatic form of leadership and authority developed by Cárdenas impinged upon the ways in which the simple people felt related to the president and, in a way, undermined the corporatist ideal. Symbolically, the constitution of such a unified front of workers corresponded with the visual representations in the press which tended to portray the large crowds of people summoned by president Cárdenas in his travels (cf. Figures 1, 3 and 4); however, what these representations seem to stress is the unity and cohesion of the people around the presidential figure in the first place, but not the ideal of organized bodies of people working together for their rights and for the achievement of certain goals. Indeed, every time Cárdenas arrived in a new place, a large number of people turned up to cheer the president. The receptions given to him were a massive outpour of enthusiasm: crowds of people at the train stations, triumphal arches, ringing bells, the national anthem, confetti, flowers, parades, banquets, and

34 L. Cárdenas, Apuntes (footnote 3), p. 222.

35 Cf. F. Katz, Un intento único de modernización en México: el régimen de Lázaro Cárdenas, in: G. Maihold (ed.), Modernidades en México, México 2004, pp. 11-22.

36 Cf. I. Semo, El Cardenismo: gramática del sobreviviente, in: Historia y Grafía 3 (1994), pp. 77-95; F. J. Rodríguez Garza, Luces y sombras del corporativismo en el México de entreguerras, in: M. T. Águila M./A. Enríquez Perea, Perspectivas sobre el cardenismo: ensayos sobre economía, trabajo, política y cultura en los años treinta, México 1996, pp. 325-356.

dances were part of the welcoming ceremonial. To arrange that, certainly a good deal of organisation and preparation was needed. The PNR was in charge of organising the receptions and local party committees, and *agrarista* organisations – organisations formed to support the process of land distribution – were responsible for gathering the people and provide them with flags and banners in every place; state governors, local authorities and the local schools also participated in the arrangements of the different meetings. For all these actors, the visits of the president represented a huge organisational effort, which sometimes involved preparing free food for thousands of people who came for the occasion or arranging special train services to bring people from nearby towns.³⁷ In addition, at least by the end of his term, Cárdenas was accompanied by a “chief of ceremonial” in his journeys who made sure that everything in the organisation was in place.³⁸ However, even if the visits of the President virtually led the inhabitants into an exercise of collective organisation, the press seemed to portray the welcoming of the president as a highly spontaneous event, as something provoked by his mere physical presence in a certain place. That doesn’t mean either, though, that everything was staged; many people turned up also in the case of unexpected visits due to sudden itinerary changes.

An important element in these representations of the presidential visits was the absence of physical barriers between Cárdenas and the common people. Newspapers stressed the fact that the president travelled without any special security measures or bodyguards – a remarkable fact in a country that suffered armed revolts and disturbs well into Cárdenas’ term of office, the last military putsch being that of Saturnino Cedillo in 1938. Also, no kind of violent reaction against the presence of the president or attacks against him were mentioned in the press. Whether this was due to the fact that there was a continuous presence around the figure of the president or that the pacification of the country had come to a successful end, at any rate this lack of visible security measures contributed to create the sense of “trust” between Cárdenas and the *pueblos*, as the above-mentioned mayor of Tetelcingo put it. This also suggests that Cárdenas was perceived as the man who brought the end of violence to many regions; his figure represented a sense of safety, he was both a peacemaker and someone who irradiated security. Thus the president appeared as a man who was very close to “the masses”.

As a result of this apparently unhindered and direct relation between Cárdenas and the people, a particular bond between both actors was constructed in the course of the president’s travels. As hundreds of oral histories have testified, the people visited by Cárdenas developed a powerful emotional connection with their president, a connection that was particularly strong in Cárdenas’ home state and in those towns and villages he visited

37 In Pátzcuaro, for example, a special train was arranged to bring the loads of people from nearby Uruapan who wanted to see the president and his wife, and people queued for hours to stretch their hands; cf. *El Nacional*, 2 June 1935.

38 The “chief of ceremonial” Salvador Armendáriz del Castillo is mentioned in *El Nacional*, 3 April, 1939. The presence of such a figure might have been due to the fact that in this particular trip to the Southeast of the country Cárdenas visited the border with Guatemala.

more than once.³⁹ The bond was constructed not only in the experience of being part of a large crowd gathered to see the president in person, but also in the individual encounters and dialogues that the president had with the people. As already pointed out, Cárdenas was willing to talk face to face with every person who wanted to see him. It was customary for him to initiate the series of personal audiences with the following utterance:

*I am here for you. I am here to listen to your problems and needs. I will be here the whole afternoon to listen to the persons or to the commissions who may want to speak with me.*⁴⁰

The dialogue, however, was obviously not one set in equal terms. Cárdenas' attitude had a strong paternalistic overtone; although he asked and listened, he already seemed to have knowledge of the problems and he knew best what the best solution was as the above-mentioned example of the forest of Mexicapa shows. Moreover, and contrary to what other presidents would do in the future, Cárdenas always distinguished himself from the common people by means of his outfit; he was always wearing his three-piece suit, even in the hottest parts of the country (cf. Figure 5 above). These strategies served to reinforce the "other-worldliness" character of the charismatic president and to signal his role of leader. The official party press, using a rhetoric that was uncommon for post-revolutionary presidents but resembled a discourse of colonial times, insisted that these were moments of "intimacy" between the president and the people.⁴¹ These situations were described in highly emotional terms, with phrases such as "Morelos offers his heart" to the president, the town shows "sincere friendship" for Cárdenas, or with the following caption of a sheet showing photographs of Cárdenas' tour throughout the state of Mexico:

*This page full of photographs gives a testimony of the enthusiasm of the peasants. They, together with their wives and children, were leaving their poor homes to go in search for comfort and remedy from the Chief of the Nation. These moments of intimacy between a ruler and its people speak of the strength of a regime consolidated at the very heart of the masses.*⁴²

This should not be read as mere official propaganda, for personal witness accounts also refer to their encounter(s) with president Cárdenas in emotional terms.

39 Cf., for example, a series of personal testimonies in R. Ramírez Heredia, *Cárdenas en la Tierra Caliente: Historia Oral*, México 1997.

40 *El Nacional*, 13 December 1935.

41 See, for example, the study of the manifestations of "love" of the people for the Spanish King Ferdinand VII who was abducted by the French in 1808 in M. A. Landavazo, *La máscara de Fernando VII: discurso e imaginario monárquicos en una época de crisis*. Nueva España, 1808–1822, Morelia 2001.

42 Visit to Ocuilán, state of Mexico, in *El Nacional*, 13 December 1935.

*Cárdenas opened his heart to all his fellowmen [...] For his good heart, all peasants considered him a treasure [...] Cárdenas gave his heart to the people and the people gave their heart to Cárdenas.*⁴³

Certainly these expressions suggest an *a posteriori* elaboration of the people with respect to the president who gave them more material improvements than any other president after him. However, what is important to notice here is precisely the emotional framework within which the relationship between Cárdenas and “the masses” was conceptualized. And given that the bond was reinforced by the bestowal of practical improvements directly from the president and not through regular processes, it was a bond that *de facto* located the president above all other powers and almost above the law. Although former viceroys and other presidents had also developed practices of giving audiences to common people in their palaces, this was the first time that a president made travelling to reach the people in their towns and villages a government policy. For once, the people did not have to reach out to the power holder, as the power holder came to the people. On the other hand, the visual representation of crowds around the charismatic figure of the president served to reaffirm the unconditional support he had from his people and was amply used in the printed press in delicate political moments such as when the nationalisation of the oil industry was announced. These representations were further magnified thanks to the technique of photomontage, which often involved placing duplicates of the same photo of a group on the same page, thus creating the illusion of a much larger crowd (cf. Figures 1 and 4 above).

These visual representations are particularly telling when they are contrasted with the representations of parades such as those regularly organized on the 1st of May, on September 16th – the Mexican Independence Day – or November 20th – the anniversary of the Revolution. Whereas the photographs and paintings of these events tended to emphasize the order displayed by the participants, representations of the popular support for Cárdenas emphasized the sheer size of the crowd.⁴⁴ Whereas the iconographic and textual representation of parades pointed at a sense of self-discipline and restraint – both in the participants and in the spectators – the representations of Cárdenas’ “masses” seemed to stress the emotional bond that linked them with the president (cf. Figure 6). And instead of portraying the demonstration as a gathering of different groups coming from different places and representing different kinds of people, these photographs and photomontages showed the compact unity of the “mass”.⁴⁵ Moreover, the “masses” portrayed in *El Nacional* have a rather pacific, even submissive attitude – one sees mostly a sea of hats, as if the people were bowing their heads down – which makes them look far

43 Méndez Huacuatitla, *Āmatlapohualistli de Don Lázaro Cárdenas* (footnote 6).

44 See, for example, the photographs included in the article by Carlos Martínez Valle and Dafne Cruz Porchini on “New Bodies, New Order: Sport and Spectacle in the Institutionalisation of the Army and the Police in Post-Revolutionary Mexico, 1924–1931” in this volume.

45 For a study of the iconography of military parades in post-revolutionary Mexico, cf. E. Plasencia de la Parra, *Desfiles militares y política de masas*, in: *Discurso visual: revista digital Cenidiap*, May-August 2006: <http://discursovisual.cenart.gob.mx/antteriores/dwwebne06/entorno/entplasencia.htm>.

from the threatening popular forces who carried out the revolutionary struggle. In this way, the emotionally loaded direct link between the president and the people left the notion of the "organisation of the masses", at least symbolically, to a second plane. Instead, the "masses" were conceptualized in such a way that they lost some of the revolutionary force with which they had been characterized before and became the natural complement of the presidential figure.

5. Conclusion

The travels of Lázaro Cárdenas were central to his governing, not only in terms of pragmatic politics but also because of the surrounding symbolic elements that served to consolidate both his power and the myth of the Mexican Revolution. In this article we have shown how Cárdenas' leadership and authority were constructed and reaffirmed in the interaction of the symbolic with the political in the course of those travels. This articulation was in part deliberately sought by the president and by the official press; however, in some respects the travelling president evoked unintended traditions and crafted meaning that went beyond the control of the governmental actors.

As we have shown here, Cárdenas' travels were successful in conveying an identification of the people with the figure of the president and with the project – and the perceived achievements – of the revolution. The travels were a means and an instrument for the creation of feelings of national integration around the figure of the president and for the construction of a charismatic form of leadership and authority. This form of leadership and authority involved the development of an emotional bond between the president and "the masses", a bond that not only served to consolidate the charismatic power of the president but also led to a transformation of the "masses" as the social actors of the revolution. In being "visited" by the president and in being represented as the subject of the president's attention, the "masses" began to be portrayed as "tame" actors and not as the fierce crowds that had brought about the revolution. Moreover, the form of leadership and authority developed in the course of the president's travels suggested that the process of governing implied a constant negotiation between the president and the whole scale of political power in the entire country, while at the same time it concealed the difficulties of that negotiation. The elements here discussed were means for Cárdenas to form alliances with local power structures, to strengthen personal relationships with party leaders and governments, to reinforce one or the other side in places of conflict and to unify separate workers' and peasants' organisations.

If Cárdenas' travels were a representation of a particular form of government, this was a representation that, at least in the eyes of the president and of the editors of the official party press, had an educational function. For the local authorities and political and labour organisations of the places visited by Cárdenas, these travels were meant to show, among other things, their inclusion in the national policies and the power of collective organisation. The president's visits were an opportunity for people coming together to

meet the head of state, to form commissions to expose their needs, and show their support for him. This was what the editors of *El Nacional* called *voluntad de acción*, the definite intention to act. For indirectly involved newspaper readers, reading about the activities of the president supposedly developed a feeling of national unity. In the ideal view of *El Nacional*, which defined itself as “a teacher of the masses”, learning about “the moral and material progress of the country” would transform the readers’ minds in such a way that “the passivity of reading” similarly became “definite intention to act”.⁴⁶ The idea was that by developing an awareness of the progress of the country people would begin to realize the necessity to improve their lives and begin to search for the means to achieve such a task.

However, despite the strength with which this representation of government was imprinted in the collective memory of Mexico, the travels and their popularisation in the printed press reinforced the paradox of Cárdenas’ government. That is, his charismatic way of case-oriented problem solving contradicted the process of the “institutionalisation” of the revolution. The particular way in which Cárdenas consolidated his power in the course of his travels led him to become the personification of the revolution itself. This was such a powerful identification that, when the terms of his office had come to an end, in 1940, and the practice of reaching out to the people to “bring” them the promises of the Revolution ended, the perception of significant portions of the population – still present in the collective memory of many – was that the Revolution itself had come to a halt. Learning about the “moral and material progress” of the country and developing a feeling of national integration through the travels of the president and their representation in the press proved to be insufficient to realize the promises of the revolution.

46 On the educational concerns of *El Nacional*, cf. J. Covo, *El periódico al servicio del cardenismo: El Nacional, 1935*, in: *Historia mexicana* 46 (1996), 1, pp. 133-161.