

A Page of History Under the Brushstroke Of the Opposition

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*Scarce and happy are those times
when one can freely say what one feels.*

Benito Juárez

In Mexico, political cartoons had their origin in censorship and the need to convey criticism of society and government through grotesque images. The era of Mexican President Benito Juárez (1857-1872) was generally characterized by freedom of the press, and cartoons were employed as ink weapons against political rivals, but also to orient the general public regarding the nation's destinies and its rulers' attitudes.

The pictorial language of cartoons tends to exaggerate the physical characteristics of public figures to convey a sense of moral disorder, using drawings to communicate ideas. Nineteenth-century Mexican cartoons also had the intention of transmitting a dual comic effect to readers when accompanied by satirical verses.

President Juárez could not escape the pen of leading cartoonists: Constantino Escalante, Santiago Hernández and Alejandro Casarín, without a doubt the most insistent and ingenious artists of this genre. Each left an endur-



Constantino Escalante "A Page of History under the Brushstroke of the Opposition," *La Orquesta*, October 12, 1867, facsimile.

ing mark on the press of their day, in publications like *La Orquesta* (The Orchestra), *La Tarántula* (The Tarantula) and *El Padre Cobos* (Father Cobos). None of them was trained at the nation's leading art school, the San Carlos Academy, but instead learned from leading newspaper's cartoons drawn in France and England.

The first of the cartoons depicting Benito Juárez in *La Orquesta* was drawn by Constanti-

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no Escalante (under the pseudonym of Tolín) on March 9, 1861, just two months after his triumphal return to Mexico City. By that time Mexico was undergoing a difficult economic crisis resulting from the political instability that had affected the country since the war for independence and intensified by the recent civil war during the period of the Reform (referring to the anti-clerical and land reforms promoted by the Liberals under Juárez's leadership, beginning in 1855). Juárez and his finance minister, Guillermo Prieto, decided to levy taxes that immediately sparked a harsh response from the Liberal press. Escalante contributed with numerous cartoons depicting the government's contempt for the people together with a portrayal of Juárez at best as out of touch with popular sentiments.

This crisis was further deepened by the results of the June 11 presidential elections, won by Juárez, who had previously ruled by decree. Some papers were indignant, but *La Orquesta* granted the president-elect the benefit of the doubt. Escalante appealed to the people's conscience in a cartoon published just days before the election.

The storm was gathering. Juárez declared the suspension of payments on Mexico's foreign debt to England, France and Spain, which in turn responded by breaking off diplomatic relations with Mexico and threatening to declare war.

Between December 1861 and January 1862, British, Spanish and French fleets disembarked in Veracruz to demand payment. Eventually the British and the Spanish reached a settlement with the Mexican government involving the temporary suspension of debt payments, but France refused a similar arrangement and went to war against Mexico.

La Orquesta, for its part, set aside its differences with the Juárez administration and called upon all Mexicans to join together

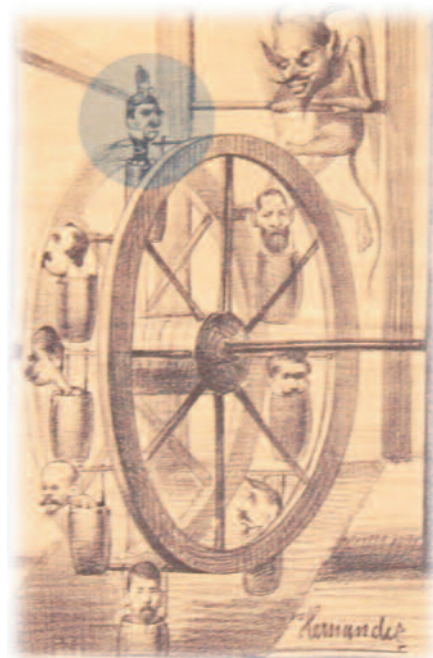
against the invaders. Constantino Escalante followed the path of Mexican troops to Puebla with his pen and riotously depicted the French defeat in the battle of May 5, 1862 in his drawings.

The echo of French bayonets could still be heard when longstanding Mexican monarchists like José María Gutiérrez de Estrada and Juan Nepomuceno Almonte offered Habsburg Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian a supposed throne as emperor of Mexico. Maximilian and his wife Carlota of Belgium arrived in Mexico in early 1864, to set up the country's Second Empire (the first had been installed briefly under Agustín de Iturbide in 1823) after he accepted the throne upon the erroneous assumption that his coronation had widespread popular support. But, to the dismay of his Conservative backers, Maximilian adopted policies supported by the Liberals and named several moderate Liberals to his cabinet. *La Orquesta* portrays these surprising twists in the story, with Escalante depicting Juárez as strangely intertwined with the Empire, in order to definitively obliterate the country's most reactionary sectors, and at the same time to celebrate the growing patriotic resistance movement against the invaders.

In order to restore constitutional rule, Benito Juárez called elections on August 18, 1867. These included a plebiscite on proposals to amend the 1857 Constitution, to re-establish the Senate, grant the president veto power on congressional measures and restore political rights to members of the clergy. These were part of Juárez's emerging political platform, but according to *La Orquesta*—and to opposition sectors in general—these measures had authoritarian and opportunistic intentions revealed by the combination of presidential elections and the plebiscite regarding these specific measures.



▲ "Juárez's Reelections," based on the original cartoon by Santiago Hernández, "The Plan of Noria [the well]," *La Orquesta*, December 2, 1871.



▲ Santiago Hernández, "The Plan of Noria [the well]," *La Orquesta*, December 2, 1871.



Constantino Escalante, "The Empire Is Peace," "Respect For the Rights of Others Is Peace," *La Orquesta*, August 3, 1867.

Escalante specifically expressed the idea that Juárez's dual call for the presidential elections and the plebiscite sought to cloak his authoritarian intentions in his drawing of a cat standing on a vessel full of oil, which symbolized political trickery and the president's demand for veto powers over Congress, protected by the "umbrella of extraordinary powers" which cast a shadow over the Constitution.

During the era of triumphant Liberalism, the 1857 Constitution had become the "sacred book" of the Conservative opposition which accused the Juárez administration of having betrayed its spirit. *La Orquesta* incessantly accused him of having transformed the presidency into a "constitutional dictatorship."

Following the sudden death of Constantino Escalante in 1868, Santiago Hernández became *La Orquesta's* cartoonist. He soon measured up to the legacy of his predecessor in terms of political and satirical humor. It was Hernández who first depicted the vices of Juárez's authoritarianism and that of his cabinet ministers as they strode toward dictatorship.

But Don Benito himself appeared to be immune to such attacks. The glory he had earned during the civil wars of the Reform period and of the French intervention had already placed him in the realm of patriotic history. As a result, the satirical press tended to direct its pens against the ministers around him, such as, most notably, Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada, who had headed several different ministries and had served as chief justice of the Supreme Court, but who above all enjoyed Juárez's full confidence, supposedly had undue influence over the president and was accused of having secret ambitions to power.

The cartoons of Santiago Hernández in *La Orquesta* and of Alejandro Casarín in *La Tarántula* portrayed a perverse asso-

ciation between Juárez and Lerdo de Tejada, motivated by their desire to perpetuate power over the nation.

Presidential re-election was tacitly forbidden by the 1824 Constitution but not by that of 1857. In fact, on occasions when constitutional order had been suspended during the civil war in the Reform period and by the French intervention, Juárez had concentrated its powers in his person and carried it with him in his carriage during his internal exile. Once republican rule had been re-established in 1861, the itinerant president called for elections to restore the constitutional order, first in 1861 and again in 1867. Nonetheless both electoral processes were surrounded by political scandals.

Juárez ran in both elections, opposed by Jesús González Ortega and Porfirio Díaz, respectively. His prestige was a decisive factor in the defeat of his rivals, but these electoral processes left behind them a full measure of suspicions in the opposition press, reconfirmed by the 1871 elections which reaffirmed Juárez's possession of the presidency for the remainder of his life.

Santiago Hernández and Alejandro Casarín, who by 1871 was a cartoonist with *El Padre Cobos*, were implacable: the presidential chair was the functional equivalent of a royal throne and had not only poisoned Juárez but his political rivals.

Although Juárez had been a defender and promoter of freedom of the press, the opposition press was alert to the most minimal sign of any limits that he might impose on free expression. They had good reason to be, based on measures adopted by Congress in May 1868 and then in January 1870, which granted extraordinary powers to Juárez in response to the political violence that was shaking the country, and which Juárez took advantage of in order to briefly suspend press freedoms.



Santiago Hernández, "Because She Wasn't Vaccinated," *La Orquesta*, January 17, 1872, facsimile.

These were exceptional measures, however, which did not usher in an era of generalized repression and which helped stimulate a vigorous defense and exercise by the press of its own rights. In the face of overwhelming criticism, the government attempted to defend itself by subsidizing publications aligned with its views, but the opposition press was merciless: Santiago Hernández and Alejandro Casarín incessantly insisted on depicting the government's machinations.

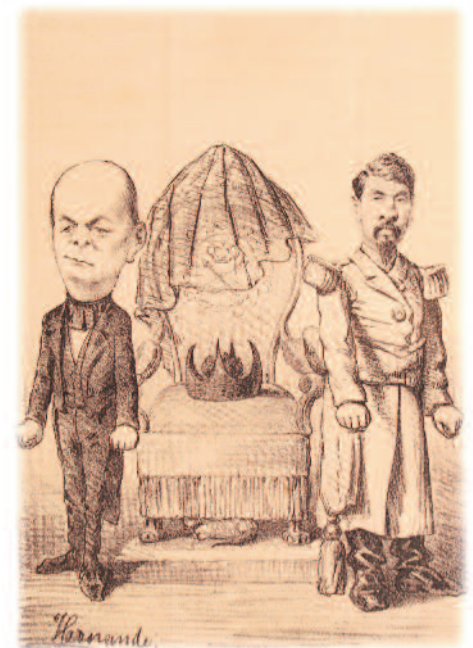
The peace briefly ushered in by the Juárez regime was broken by armed rebellions which erupted in several different regions of the country, and which were harshly repressed. Juárez's minister of war, Ignacio Mejía, and his most faithful generals, Ignacio Alatorre, Sóstenes Rocha and Mariano Escobedo, squelched these rebellions. The threats to the government were considered so serious that they led to the creation of a rural police force on April 13, 1869, intended to repress both rural criminality and agrarian rebels. The country's crisis was further deepened by Porfirio Díaz's decision to rise up in rebellion under the banner of the Plan of Noria against the government after Juárez's reelection in 1871. This rebellion was also extinguished, but it further stoked the fires of the opposition press. Santiago Hernández, in *La Orquesta*, for example, depicted the supposed glories of Juárez's "pacification" of the country as resting on the dual weaponry of wealth and bayonets.

By the beginning of the fateful year of 1872 Juárez's regime was deteriorating in the whole country. His prolonged and obstinate presidency had gradually ceded space to the printed and armed opposition, to the point that he sought to obtain extraordinary powers and the suspension of individual rights from Congress, with related limits on press freedoms. Santiago Hernández, whose pen had become



crueler, depicted Juárez's political allies as smallpox pustules scarring the face of an afflicted nation whose nose was represented by Benito Juárez's portrait.

Don Benito's health was deteriorating, too. In March he had a heart attack, and another on July 8. Although he seemed to recover by the July 18, he was plagued again by severe chest pains which finally culminated in his death, which resonated deeply throughout the country. The opposition press joined in mourning for him, and it was none other than Santiago Hernández, who in his cartoon entitled "Glory to Juárez" on July 24 dedicated the first historical monument to him, under headings reflecting the ideals of the Liberal reforms he had promoted, including freedom of the press. In effect, by the time of Juárez's death, Mexico was a sovereign nation that undoubtedly enjoyed freedom of the press. The presidential chair was bedecked with ribbons of mourning, but Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada and Porfirio Díaz stood close by, ready to occupy it. **MM**



Santiago Hernández, "God Save our Homeland!!!" *La Orquesta*, July 20, 1872, facsimile.