

# TINA MODOTTI AND THE IMAGE OF MEXICAN COMMUNISM IN 1928: *LA TÉCNICA*

Leonard Folgarait



Tina Modotti,  
*Máquina de escribir  
de Mella,*  
1928, blanco y  
negro.

Julio Antonio Mella (1904-1929) was the Ché Guevara and *Subcomandante Marcos* of his day in terms of owning the very image of the charismatic and uncorrupted revolutionary leader. Exiled from his native Cuba in 1926 for

activities dangerous to the regime of President Machado, Mella took up headquarters in Mexico City, galvanizing leftists there under his forceful oratory and writings. He occupied positions in several communist orga-

nizations and publications. It was as a journalist that he made his greatest reputation in Mexico, signing some articles as Cuauhtémoc Zapata, combining the two most legendary names of resistance against oppression in Mexican history.<sup>1</sup> Lone Robinson referred to him shortly after his death as "a symbol around which everyone I know in Mexico [the Tina Modotti-Diego Rivera circle] revolves".<sup>2</sup> By late 1928, Mella and the Italian-born photographer Tina Modotti (1896-1942), having met in the offices of the Mexican Communist Party organ *El Machete* as co-workers in June, were a public couple, striking for their commitment to the cause and for their attractive appearance. Because she had left a relationship with the painter and graphic artist Xavier Guerrero to join Mella, and because both men were members of the Executive Committee of the Mexican Communist Party (Partido Comunista Mexicano, PCM),<sup>3</sup> Modotti felt that she had to clear this relationship with the PCM. Baltasar Dromundo remembers that "What [Modotti and Mella] had they spent on the Party [or] on other people; they were truly magnanimous and as a result sometimes didn't have a cent ..."<sup>4</sup> In reference to this couple, Dromundo says of these years, "It was the romantic stage of communism".<sup>5</sup> Both Modotti and Mella were honored in the 1940s by the naming of Mexican communist cells after them, due to their status

"in the [Mexican] revolutionary socialist tradition".<sup>6</sup>

Rivera celebrated this photogenic pair in a mural painting on the walls of the Secretariat of Public Education in Mexico City in 1928-1929, in a section entitled *Distributing Arms*. Modotti seems to be handing Mella a bandolier in preparation for pitched class warfare. That Rivera included them in such a militant scene speaks of the place they both held in communist circles at this time. A portrait of Mella by Modotti of 1928 captures the heroically handsome features he was known for. In this year, Modotti produced what amounts to another portrait of Mella, this time in the form of his typewriter. This is titled *La Técnica*.

It seems disarmingly simple and artless at first. We look down at a

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Lowe, *Tina Modotti: Photographs*, New York: Harry N. Abrams and Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1995, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to her mother of July 4, 1929. Lone Robinson, *A Wall to Paint On*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1946, p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Hooks, *Tina Modotti: Photographer and Revolutionary*, London: Pandora, 1993, pp. 168, 169.

<sup>4</sup> Hooks, p. 159.

<sup>5</sup> Baltasar Dromundo, *Rescate del Tiempo*, Mexico City: self-published, 1980, p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> Barry Carr, "The Fate of the Vanguard under a Revolutionary State: Marxism's Contribution to the Construction of the Great Arch", in Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, Eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994, pp. 326-352, 341.

fragment of a typewriter and read the ends of four lines of writing on the paper. This is a machine that we can trust, because its workings are so straightforward and so much at the service of its human operator. The camera is also to be trusted because it records these qualities so clearly. By looking at such a partial view of the typewriter, we complete the machine by mentally imaging the whole keyboard, the second spool, the remainder of the written lines, and probably the missing writer himself. Perhaps we are looking over Mella's shoulder, which might explain our angled view, and perhaps his fingers are even now resting on keys just outside the frame of the image. Mella's implied presence gives a new dramatic quality to the subject, which is now perhaps not wholly mechanical. His missing but maybe present body further embodies the image and endows it with the narrative implications of the next key to be struck, driven by his politics. The typed lines are followed by a blank space, perhaps, because the writer has not finished typing.

Seeing fragments of the mechanical properties of the typewriter leads to a conceptual understanding of the complete machine as a metaphor for communication in general and activist rhetoric in particular. The keys produce words of revolutionary purpose which could inspire action at the barricades. Meaning is inherent and waiting in tools; one merely needs to understand the

technology of the production of meaning. The typewriter here is a machine of social change, a weapon of the revolution, as Mella himself congratulated Modotti on "this typewriter [that] you have socialized with your art".<sup>7</sup>

The typewriter is angled slightly away from our eye, so that although there is a clear recession into space, there is also the sense that the plane of the object is almost parallel to that of the photograph. The typewriter, although a squarish object with gridded internal arrangements, such as in the keys, is organized so that we see the composition mostly in terms of crossing diagonals joining opposite corners. The curved arrangement of the hammers and their armature and the large circle of the spool play counterpoints to this dominant rectilinearity. But even within explicitly squared grids, such as in the keyboard, irregularities can be seen. Because the rows of keys are offset, diagonal and sometimes curved diagonal lines appear, such as in the line that starts at P and goes left toward L and toward yet another key, whose curved frame is barely seen. The line connecting O to L and then to the accent marks key is a slightly curving diagonal. There is also the cylindrical platen, which is both round and straight, depending on the

<sup>7</sup> In a letter to Modotti published in *Excelsior*, January 16, 1929. Cited and translated in Patricia Albers, *Shadows, Fire, Snow: The Life of Tina Modotti*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1999, p. 229.

axis, around which the sheet of paper alternately goes from flat to curved and flat again. Even the typed lines are a mix of curves (in the letters) within a grid, with the occasional diagonal of the accent marks. The culmination of these combinations is in the ribbon itself, which goes from circular on the spool to flat as held in the frame ready to receive the hammer; in between these states quite irregularly curvilinear as it floats in space.

These formal devices add up for Modotti as a way of saying the following: A revolutionary subject is more a moment in flux, a dynamic movement, than an object or idea or event measurable in static, quantitative terms. This movement, then, is a performance of and among several possibilities. Activist political movement and performance can occur only between multiple and simultaneous possibilities. Revolution does not occur in a linear or measurable or predictable manner. Thus the angle of view in this image neither penetrates space forcefully nor rests only on the surface of the photograph. The person and instrument of action and propaganda fall into an order that is always highly pressured by contingencies that distort that order. The layering of visual information both enriches and confounds our reading, highlighting some details and obscuring others. The life of the leftist political activist, to Modotti, is about recognizing the constant instability of social relations and about the need to keep constant

vigilance of these shifting operations. The leftist vision, then, is a perpetual performance of the score provided by daily realities and agendas for the future, but a performance that is self-critical and capable of making the sort of adjustments in positions that allow it to keep a viable place in this endlessly revising score. A true revolutionary needs to remain a *constant* revolutionary by correctly understanding the context of transforming relations.

The typed lines on *La Técnica* are not authored by Mella and therefore complicate the reading of this as his typewriter and the image as a portrait of him.<sup>8</sup> This is a fragment of a text written by Leon Trotsky and which Modotti quoted in full in a brochure describing her one-person exhibit in Mexico City in 1929. The full Spanish text reads:

La técnica se convertirá en una inspiración mucho más poderosa de la producción artística; más tarde encontrará su solución en una síntesis más elevada, el contraste que existe entre la técnica y la naturaleza.

Which I translate as:

<sup>8</sup> The title *Mella's Typewriter*, was applied fifty years afterward by Vittorio Vidali, another Italian communist working in Mexico at this time. Vidali wrongly claimed that the text on the sheet of paper was from an essay that Mella had written on Modotti's photography. Lowe, p. 40.

Technique will convert itself into a much more powerful inspiration of artistic production: the contrast that exists between technique and nature will later find its solution in a higher synthesis.<sup>9</sup>

I depend on this statement to support my discussion of Modotti using her photographic technique as a most important inspiration for her art, that she depended on it to expand her subjects' inherent political purpose and revolutionary consciousness, seeking this "higher synthesis."

I want to take quite seriously the cropping of this statement as we see in the photograph. The translation of this fragmented edit is: "inspiration ... artistic ... a synthesis ... exists between". Creating a paraphrase, the sense now is: "Artistic inspiration. A synthesis exists between ..." Between what? Between many things. Between Modotti and Mella and Trotsky. Between the typewriter and the words it produces. Between a camera and the image it produces. Between two machines –the camera and the typewriter– and their methods of creating a product; the ribbon changing the touch of a human finger on a key into forms on a blank piece of paper and the film changing the pressing of a human finger on a shutter or removing a lens cap for a few seconds into forms on a blank piece of paper. Between 'seeing' the words as images and 'reading' them as we would on typewritten paper. Between accepting

a hybrid (word/image) form of propaganda and its implied hybrid form of political action (the hybrid here being Stalinism/Trotskyism, the first term championed by the PCM, of which Modotti was now a member, and the second seen as its enemy), to act across rather within political labels. Between an incomplete image of a machine and an incomplete phrase. Between a phrase that fits well inside a typed sheet of paper that is much too large for it alone and a typewriter that is too large to fit into the frame of this print. Between trust in the technologies of propaganda, such as camera and typewriter, and the propaganda itself, these incomplete phrases

<sup>9</sup> Andrea Noble has read this passage differently, and her translation has a different sense, especially the fragment "later it will find its solution in a higher synthesis, the contrast that exists between technique and nature", in *Tina Modotti: Image, Texture, Photography*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2000, p. 85. She bases her translation of the Trotsky quote as reproduced in Elena Poniatowska, *Tinísima*, Mexico City: Era, 1992, p.42. The Trotsky quote is from "Revolutionary and Socialist Art", the last chapter of *Literature and Revolution*, New York: Russell & Russell, 1957, p.253. The book was written in 1924. As I have translated from the Spanish version that was available to Modotti, the following is the English published translation, which was unavailable to her: "Technique will become a more powerful inspiration for artistic work, and later on the contradiction itself between technique and nature will be solved in a higher synthesis." For a very interesting account of this image from a strongly Trotskyite position, see Gen Doy, *Materializing Art History*, Oxford, New York: Berg, 1998, pp. 145-150.

and images. Between all the possibilities of revolutionary action; and between those possibilities and their impossibilities in the context of Mexico in the late 1920s.

In this photograph there is an implied narrative, a promise of agency leading to action. The keyboard waits for the next key to strike the next letter. But none of this seems overtly about to happen. All is *implied*. In this year, 1928, Modotti wrote to her teacher, the American photographer Edward Weston, of her growing appreciation for these sorts of implications, as opposed to spelling out content in too obvious terms. She takes as her example the mural painting of Rivera and of José Clemente Orozco.

As time goes by, I find myself liking Orozco's more and more, I feel the genius. His things overflow with an inner potentiality which one never feels in Diego's things. Diego comments too much, lately he paints details with an irritating precision, he leaves nothing for one's imagination. With Orozco's things, you feel that you can begin where he leaves off and that is very satisfying. With Orozco one also feels that he never says all he feels and knows, he is too impatient for that, he just suggests, and goes on, ..."<sup>10</sup>

Modotti was a leftist by upbringing, as her family in Italy had leftist associa-

tions. Her deceased husband of the early 1920s had contributed illustrations for the cover of Gale's, a well-known socialist magazine in the United States. In Mexico, she fell in with communist artists such as Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Frida Kahlo, and Guerrero. These relations led her to participation in PCM publications and conferences. Her fluency with English and Italian made her valuable as a translator for articles and for assisting foreign visitors. She was known to lead meetings with grace and discipline or deliver a speech with stirring content. Modotti became the very model of a PCM member and was trusted beyond any doubt. Her house was a regular site of entertainment and serious discussion, to the point that between 1926 and 1929 comrades from out of town or country gravitated to the Modotti address as the central meeting place.

However, there is no evidence, either written or anecdotal, that Modotti was an ideologue bound to specific leaders of communism. Especially at this time in Mexico, the lines between Stalinism and Trotskyism were well drawn indeed, to the point that Siqueiros was known as a committed Stalinist and would stage a dramatic armed attack in 1940 on the house of Trotsky in Mexico City, whose arri-

<sup>10</sup> A letter of September 18, 1928. Amy Stark, "The Letters from Tina Modotti to Edward Weston", *Archive*, January, 1986, Tucson, The University of Arizona Center for Creative Photography, p. 56.

val in Mexico in 1937 would be arranged by Diego Rivera. In general, the PCM in the mid-1920s had not yet felt the full force of the rift between these two claimants on the mantle of Lenin for leadership of international communism, but by the mid to late 1920s, when Mella had indicated leanings toward Trotsky, the PCM leaders became alarmed. Modotti never made any statement for or against either Stalin or Trotsky. Even the statement by Trotsky in *La Técnica*, when later used in support of her one-person exhibition of 1929, was reproduced without credit to him as the opening to her own manifesto, "On Photography". When this manifesto was published, the Trotsky quote was deleted.<sup>11</sup>

But a failed Mella mission to liberate Cuba put him and Modotti into a dangerously compromised position with their fellow Mexican communists. Shortly before his departure, he swore her to absolute secrecy: "You KNOW NOTHING, understand? When it comes to them [PCM leaders]". When these became aware of his plot, he was threatened with expulsion from the PCM.<sup>12</sup> In a 1927 visit to Moscow, he was known to have met with Trotskyites and possibly Trotsky himself. PCM officials suspected that "Mella has always had Trotskyist 'weaknesses'". In 1928 an emissary carried back from the Cuban Communist Party in Havana a resolution for "Mella's group

in Mexico to subordinate itself to the C[entral] C[ommittee] of the PCM", this specifically due to his suspected leanings toward Trotsky. Mella was furious at the Cuban resolution and temporarily resigned from the PCM.<sup>13</sup> *La Técnica* may remove incriminating 'evidence' that he was ever seated at the keyboard that reproduced these lines by Trotsky, but, on the other hand, who else within the PCM could have typed these words but him?

Having been both in front of (as a photographer's model in the early 1920s) and behind the camera, at the forefront and absorbed into the ranks of communist activity, committed to the Mexican cause yet a foreigner, Modotti operated between categories. The use of "between" here is meant to connect to the paragraph several pages past where the word is overused on purpose. Now I ask the reader to browse this image and apply these accumulated observations as reasons for its particular style and purpose. But by factoring Modotti's personal history into the photograph as the interested agency that gives it structure and emotive content, much has been left out of the wider political contexts she traveled in.

The Communist International, Comintern, was formed in 1919 in

<sup>11</sup> Hooks, p. 191.

<sup>12</sup> Hooks, p. 170.

<sup>13</sup> Hooks, p. 171.



Moscow with the intent of fostering world revolution by taking advantage of what it saw as an economic and military crisis in the West. The plan was to form communist groups as widely as possible to win the masses from the Socialists, who at this time were favoring non-violent and evolutionary conflict with the bourgeoisie. In 1919, the Comintern wanted immediate action to overthrow their class enemies. "Our task is ..., to mobilize the forces of all genuinely revolutionary parties of the world proletariat".<sup>14</sup> But by 1924, with Lenin dead and his followers struggling for his leadership position, with the failure of the communist revolution in Germany in 1923, and with the Soviet Union badly in need of capital from the West for its vast projects of industrialization of farming and manufacturing, the Comintern made a critical adjustment to its strategy, calling it Bolshevization. This meant a slower, more flexible preparation of the international proletariat toward assuming control of the state apparatus of capitalist nations, many of which were seen by Moscow to be on the verge of internal collapse. By 1925, however, it was clear that the capitalist West was not faltering and that world revolution seemed less and less a probable event, forcing the Comintern leadership, increasingly meaning only Joseph Stalin, to focus on internal Soviet developments with the doctrine of "Socialism in one country".

International communists loyal to Stalin were now to support the international standing of the Soviet Union, as it would seek extensive economic and political backing from the West for Stalin's plan of economic development. Central to these strategic shifts was to pose the Comintern fully on the side of Stalin and against Trotsky, who had moved toward a "leftist" position and was relentlessly attacking Stalin.<sup>15</sup>

International communism during the 1920s experienced its connection and obligations to the Comintern as a journey from full engagement with the propulsive principles and imminent success of world revolution to serving the stasis of "Socialism in one country". Rather than feeling the full force of Soviet commitment behind them to push forward with the dismantling of bourgeois capitalism in their own countries, world communists after 1925 felt this energy reversing and deflating. No longer at the vanguard of revolutionary purpose as the heroic shock troops of political liberation, they now became the managers of organization and discipline, attempting to maintain good

<sup>14</sup> "Manifesto of the Communist International to the Proletariat of the Entire World", 1919, quoted in Donald L. Herman, *The Comintern in Mexico*, Washington D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1974, p.5.

<sup>15</sup> This paragraph and in general the information on the Comintern is based on Herman, pp.13-19.



relations with their previous class enemies. The outward explosion of revolution was now imploding into a holding pattern of bureaucratic watchfulness.

What was the interest of the Comintern in Mexico? The Revolution of 1910 and its ten year civil war was not, until 1920, a ripe circumstance for international communism. The leaders of the Revolution came from firmly entrenched interests of social and economic privilege, seeking to loosen the monolithic political system of the dictator Díaz for opportunistic reasons. The masses of urban and rural workers involved in the fighting followed the orders of men not versed or interested in dissolving the class structure. Thus, until the 1920s, there was no strong presence of communism in Mexico.

The 1920s, however, presented a new picture. The masses had now settled into self-consciousness about their power and were organizing into large groups. With the fate of the government under constant threat of counter revolution and the working class flexing its muscles, the time seemed ripe for communists to organize. The Second World Congress of the Comintern of 1920 declared that "A Latin American bloc with Mexico at its head would greatly check the lust for power"<sup>16</sup> of the United States, making a strong Comintern presence at the gateway to the rest of Latin America and butting up against the

greatest capitalist power of its time a critical enterprise. The Communist Party of the Mexican Proletariat, formed in early 1920 and accepted by the Comintern in 1922, thereupon reformed into the PCM.<sup>17</sup>

The government stand against the church also seemed opportune for radicalizing from the communist front. The Constitution of 1917 had severely restricted the operations of the church, to the extent of confiscating church buildings and limiting religious instruction and the political rights of the clerics. The Articles stating these limitations, however, had not been enforced until President Calles decided to do so in 1926, with the result that no Mass was observed in Mexico again until 1929. It was during this period that the Cristero rebellion broke out, with armed Catholic peasants taking on the military forces of the government, the violent conflict claiming thousands of victims. During this three year period, the communists sided with the government, forming Anti-Clerical Leagues and in general taking every opportunity to oppose the church. The communist Unitary Trade Union Confederation declared "that it hopes

<sup>16</sup> The Second Congress of the Communist International, Moscow: The Publishing Office of the Communist International, 1920, p. 123. Cited in Charles James Stephens, "Communism in Mexico", M.A. Thesis, University of California at Berkeley, 1963, p. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Herman, pp. 60, 61.

the Government maintains its attitude before the disobedience of the Roman clergy, not accommodating differences in any form".<sup>18</sup>

The Comintern then took a "left turn" in 1928, actualized in Mexico at the July 1929 meeting of the PCM Executive Committee as a newly radicalized position against the government. The masses needed to be agitated against imperialism and capitalism in a form more uncompromised than ever before.<sup>19</sup> Already by April, *El Machete* had stated that "Only by armed force can the workers and peasants guarantee the establishment of a worker and peasant government in Mexico".<sup>20</sup>

In gearing up for its showdown with the Mexican government in mid-1929, the PCM began to define who was a loyal party member and who was not, and Rivera was increasingly coming under suspicion for his supposed sympathies for Trotsky. He was ceremoniously expelled and soon after came out publicly in favor of Trotsky. On this issue, Modotti stood by her Party, writing to Weston in September of 1929:

Diego is out of the party ... Reasons: That his many jobs he has lately accepted from the government ..., are incompatible with a militant member of the p[arty] ... I think his going out of the party will do more harm to him than to the p[arty]. He will be consid-

ered, and he is, a traitor. I need not add that I shall look upon him as one too, and from now on all my contact with him will be limited to our photographic transactions.<sup>21</sup>

There are two points of interest here. She is writing to Weston, never a communist, and thus has no need to impress him with her PCM loyalty. Indeed, a friend at this time complained of "how Tina has sacrificed everything to this damn Communist Party".<sup>22</sup> Yet, she is willing to profit monetarily from her work of photographing Rivera's murals. How would the PCM have felt about this willingness to deal with a "traitor" at this level, as her photographs of his work were largely responsible for his great fame, at home and abroad? Modotti is riding the political fence here.

Perhaps Modotti was trying to satisfy her duty to the PCM and at the same time acknowledging the great debt she owed Rivera for his unwavering support of her during

<sup>18</sup> *El Machete*, March 9, 1929, p. 2. Quoted in Herman, p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> Barry Carr, *Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> In an article entitled "The armed campesinos should not turn in [to the government] nor a single rifle nor a single gunbelt", no. 161, p. 1. Cited and translated in Stephens, p. 66.

<sup>21</sup> Letter of September 17, 1929. Stark, pp. 68, 69.

<sup>22</sup> Monna Alfau, in Hooks, p. 199.

the scandal surrounding the assassination of her lover Mella in early 1929, when she had been under intense suspicion of complicity by the police. Rivera had published an impassioned defense of her in the newspapers. He had also been a friend and comrade of Mella, appearing with him at rallies and at speakers' platforms.<sup>23</sup>

The fluctuating mission of the PCM according to shifting instructions from the Comintern begins to apply to my analysis of *La Técnica*. In 1919, the Comintern was interested in "mobiliz[ing] the forces" for an imminent victory of the communist revolution throughout the world, and as this strong directive was then tempered into watchfulness and a managed state of readiness, to be geared up again in 1929 into militant action, this photograph can be read partly as a visualization of this zig-zagging agenda. This juggling between action and rest, between activist or watchful behavior is what the experience of a PCM member was during these years. This instability would have been felt even more pointedly by Modotti, a member of the Stalinist PCM, yet close to the Trotskyite sympathizers Mella and Rivera. All of this in the context

of international and Mexican communists gearing up to an explicit challenge to capitalism in 1928-1929. This photograph expresses in visual terms the highly conflicted nature of these political dynamics in what it shows and does not show, both in terms of actual objects and people, but more importantly in the depiction of a tension between stillness and action.

Looking one last time at this photograph, the issues raised by the historical and political contexts now apply. The typewriter remains still and silent. This is especially poignant, as the frayed and worn ribbon and the resultant pale ink on the paper speak of long and recent heavy work and relentless attention to the political content of the work at the expense of the equipment pushed to its limit. Perhaps this sort of propagandistic posing and posturing was the best that could be expected of and for the Mexican communists of this time. Or perhaps this aspect of frozen yet potentially active agency, of studied formal complexities that promise yet suspend political action were equally indicative of the position of Modotti and other communists in the political culture of Mexico in 1928.

<sup>23</sup> Albers, p. 226.

