Stating space in modern Mexico

Jeff M. Banister*

Department of Geography and Regional Development, and the Southwest Center, University of Arizona, 1052 N. Highland Avenue, Tucson, AZ 85721, USA

Abstract

This paper critiques the largely Anglophone “New Cultural History” (NCH) written on post-revolutionary Mexico, calling for a more robust theoretical and methodological approach to the state than scholars have thus far employed. Earlier trends, each of course inflected with the politics of their times, remained fastened upon the purportedly unified force of Mexican officialdom. Revisionist narratives tended to abstract the state from social and cultural belief and practice. As such, scholars’ grasp of social change was weakened by their failure to see politics, culture, and society as interrelated processes. Nevertheless, the closer examination of popular culture stressed by some contemporary historians still does not obviate the need for a solid, at times even central, focus on processes of state-formation. Herein, I review some of the critical contributions to a growing multidisciplinary field of state/culture studies, and from critical human geography, and suggest ways their insights might be useful for historians and historical geographers focusing on the post-revolutionary Mexican state.

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Keywords: Mexico; State-formation; Political power; Historical geography

Introduction

This essay engages the “New Cultural History” (NCH) written on post-revolutionary Mexico, calling for a more robust theoretical and methodological approach to the connections between social-space, state-formation, and cultural politics than research has typically employed. Cultural historians have largely overlooked the social production of state-space as a legitimate object of analysis, particularly when it comes to institutions and political organizations.
Likewise, they have, in most cases, failed to render but a superficial position on the work of political power in sustaining 70+ years of authoritarian rule. I see these two problems as inextricable: addressing the latter is necessary for an adequate treatment of the former. State interventionism a la Mexicana, particularly since the revolution, was effected through a vast expansion in juridical structures and corporatist political networks, such that histories of modern Mexican citizenship and identity remain significantly weakened without reference to their multi-faceted institutional dimensions.

The essay, then, embraces the spirit of the “cultural turn” in recent historical research, but sets forth a critique both of its portrayals of power and of the roles of spatial representation and practice in Mexican statecraft since the 1930s. Drawing from critical human geography and from a vibrant field of study on the nexus between state-formation and subjectivity, the piece also points out ways towards a parallel reformulation of political power and statecraft in the post-revolutionary period (roughly, the mid-1930s to the mid-1980s). I begin here with a brief overview of Mexicanist NCH, proceeding on to a critique of its views on power and spatial practice. I then shift to an exploration of the pertinent literature on state-formation, space, and culture in an effort to provide something of a modest framework for a relational state-space. Finally, I seek to ground these theoretical formulations in recent research by Mexican anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz (2001), who has written some of the few spatially informed analyses available on modern Mexico. By meshing the gears of these different literatures with historians’ wide-ranging theoretical and empirical exegeses, I hope to contribute towards a stronger theoretical position from which to approach the history of Mexican political geography.

Deeply influenced by Foucault, the NCH has moved some distance beyond the negative Marxian concept of class-consciousness or ideology, whereby domination simply “falsifies” subjectivity rather than acting as a major force in its production (Gordon, 1980:239). The results of this transition are useful to political geographers, for cultural historians have begun to build a rather damning critique of the state-centrism so predominant in the Mexicanist literature, while creating analytical space for the role of subjectivity in producing the state. Their insights are further useful to those who study the effects of Mexico’s abrupt neo-liberal turn in the early 1990s. How, after all, can we understand the changing form and function of the nation-state within processes of economic and cultural “globalization” when we have but a thin historical gloss of state-space to begin with? Conversely, cultural historians continuously invoke “space” in their work with little or no attempt to pursue the idea to useful ends. I see a theoretically informed approach to state spatial practice as a way to bridge these worlds.

New Cultural History versus the Leviathan

It is hardly surprising that when scholars began looking more closely at the role of culture in twentieth-century Mexico, common perceptions of the state should fall away. Historians had, over several decades, produced a rather rigid teleology of centralized authority, one that began with the fragmented politics of Juarismo (mid-1800s) and culminated in the “institutional revolution” of the middle twentieth century (Knight, 2002; Van Young, 1992). The military phase of the Mexican revolution (1910–1917) broke with some of the most egregious forms of autocracy perfected during the Porfiriato¹ (1876–1911); but it had also begun, paradoxically, with

¹ “El Porfiriato” refers to the period 1876–1911, during which President Porfirio Díaz ruled consecutively, with the exception of a 4-year hiatus. Under Díaz’s tenure, the republic underwent its most radical social, economic, and political transformation, and the most impressive consolidation of executive power since independence (1822).
a “burning defense of the past,” an ardent *apologia* for the nation’s liberal political traditions (Córdova, 1973:87). The revolution’s subsumption of those liberal traditions helped pave the way for one of the most interventionist governments in the history of Latin America (Fox, 1992).

The 1917 constitution, ratified in the confusion of revolutionary violence, granted the executive sweeping authority in areas as diverse as agriculture, land, water, health, religion, education, and labor, among others. With the new juridical tools at its disposal—most prominently in agrarian reform—post-revolutionary state power developed in tandem with radical transformations of national space. The empirics of federal involvement in everyday Mexican life, particularly since the 1930s, thus render deeply problematic recent efforts to destabilize the idea of an omnipotent state so predominant in scholarly approaches since the middle twentieth century.

Somewhat typical of these approaches, during the 1970s and 1980s Marxist scholars wrote compellingly on important dimensions of the capitalist state, such as relative autonomy (Hamilton, 1982) and agrarian populism (Sanderson, 1981), to cite two prominent examples. But strict emphasis on the relationships between class structure and legitimacy within agrarian and other forms of Mexican populism left out the more precarious and unpredictable outcomes of cultural politics. Historians have recently begun to address this oversight. In an edited volume on cultural history, for example, Vaughan and Lewis (2006) suggest that popular mobilization during both the fractious post-independence years (1810–67) and revolution (1910—ca. 1940) placed at the state’s disposal a vast repertoire of nationalist imaginaries. Despite the striking parallels of such constructions with Catholic iconography and belief are quite striking (Vaughan & Lewis, 2006); they speak to government’s ability to capture and redeploy cultural symbols within longstanding cognitive frameworks. The relative strength of post-revolutionary regimes—particularly after the Cárdenas presidency (1934–1940)—therefore in no small way depended upon aggressive programs to consolidate an official language and iconography of political inclusion/exclusion.

Combining these efforts with a bold program of state-led economic development, by the 1940s “the Revolution” began to emerge as a relatively stable set of cultural meanings and practices, a framework of domination (Bobrow-Strain, 2005) based on populist revolutionary discourse. The framework remained sufficiently stable to buffet single-party authoritarian rule against several significant political challenges. By the time the PRI lost its grip on the presidency in 2000, it had controlled all levels of government for over 70 years.2

These recent reformulations share in common a desire to highlight the micro-political bases of authoritarianism. Influential among them is Jeffrey Rubin (1996), who argues that scholarship had misconstrued the roles of power and statecraft in producing such a durable hegemony. Processes of state-formation in the post-revolutionary period, he argues, were far less stable than the literature had permitted; they were always more geographically and historically contingent at the regional and local levels, and call into question the political sway of “the Center.” The much-vaunted state-building achievements of the 1930s Cárdenas presidency, thus, were “...actually a simultaneous forging of multiple regional arrangements—each a distinct combination of bargaining, coercion, and alliances—that together reinforced the power of the center in broadly similar ways” (1996:86). Analytically shifting the locus of political power from

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2 There were some significant exceptions to this. The conservative Catholic *Partido de Acción Nacional* (PAN) party, for example, won the governorship of Baja California Norte in 1989, and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, of the leftist *Frente Democrático Nacional*, is widely believed to have won the 1988 presidential race against PRI candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari, whose victory was declared only after a highly suspect crash of the computerized vote-tallying system.
Mexico City to regions and locales has resulted in important challenges to long-held beliefs vis-à-vis the real workings of single-party rule. While some historians point to a breakdown of regional identities and social structures (Van Young, 1992), state strength might also emerge from their subtle refashioning.

In light of the central government’s now more fully understood weaknesses, Rubin and others have thus begun to epistemologically “decenter” the idea of a Leviathan state. Their work explores broadly on the role of culture in Mexican society, seeking out alternative frameworks to previous historians’ mostly structural formulations of national development (Rubin, 1996; Schmidt, 2001). The approaches spawned by this shift fall more or less under the broad rubric of New Cultural History. In crude terms, the NCH is an exploration of the cultural, representational, and transnational dimensions of Mexican capitalist development and politics. Such cultural dynamics, scholars argue, often as not took place outside of yet directly informed the centralization of political power in the national capital and in the hands of the President. The NCH importantly starts with “culture” as a level of analysis—as opposed to a “thing”—of processes of “signification, interpretation, and representation,” in short, “as the very terms in which social action unfolds” (Lomnitz, 2006:341). For the purposes of the present argument, I likewise adopt this processual understanding. The next section briefly charts the course of the NCH in Anglophone Mexican historiography since the 1980s.

**History, culture, and power in regional perspective**

A 1999 special issue of the *Hispanic American Historical Review (HAHR)* brought together several prominent Mexicanist historians to reflect on the epistemological concerns, methods, sources, and potential directions of the new cultural history. Mary Kay Vaughan (1999:271, 272), writing on studies of the Mexican revolution, cites four more or less coterminous processes, starting with the 1980s, that precipitated the shift away from revisionism towards culturally grounded histories of the state. First, studies of the Mexican revolution had begun to focus on participation at regional and local levels, and thus challenged previous notions of an all-encompassing post-revolutionary state power, rural homogeneity, and peasant acquiescence. Alan Knight, for example, suggests that on the eve of the 1910 revolution, Mexico appeared “less as a nation than a geographical expression, a mosaic of regions and communities, introverted and jealous, ethnically and physically fragmented, and lacking common national sentiments” (1986:2). Second, historians began to draw from a growing literature of comparative peasant studies, in particular from the work of James Scott (1976, 1985) on peasant agency, and from anthropologists’ historical and ethnographic accounts of the intersections between quotidian life, economy, and politics. Third, many social historians began to turn away from structuralist political economy towards conceptualizations of capitalist development, transnationalism, and modernization as contingent cultural processes (Joseph & Nugent, 1994). Notions of power, moreover, became reworked in Foucaultian terms as “capillary” (Foucault, 1980; Rubin, 1996) and “dispersed” (Vaughan, 1999), rather than discrete and centralized. Within such conceptions, the modern Mexican state could no longer be viewed as the wellspring of power; rather, it was the effect of the tactics of “governmentalization” (Foucault, 1980; Mitchell, 1991). Fourth, by the 1980s, citizens’ challenges to PRI-state dominance called into question the regime’s purported lock on political power, as well as popular perceptions of the relationship between state- and identity-formation. Historians’ analytical decentering of the state, therefore, emerges through an exploration of the complex links between fragmented and geographically dispersed cultural processes and the social “whole” (Coronil, 1998). The task
here is less one of shifting the analytical focus *tout court* than of destabilizing the types of foundational “truths” of centralization that revisionism failed to question (Rubin, 1996; Schmidt, 2001; Vaughan, 1999).

Informing Rubin’s work is Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent’s (1994) seminal edition, *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico*. The volume’s pivotal insight is that state-formation and “popular culture” cannot be understood as discrete processes. Knight, a contributing author, puts it most succinctly: “there can be no high politics without a good deal of low politics.” He sees the Mexican revolution as “a genuinely popular movement,” the coalescence of several regional popular mobilizations, and “the precursor...of the étatiste ‘revolution’—the ‘high politics’—that followed in the 1920s and the 1930s” (1986:x, xi). The authors argue that the revolution’s unleashing of popular forces was such that state-formation would, of necessity, require an unprecedented degree of “negotiation from below” (Joseph & Nugent, 1994:12; Knight, 1994a, 1994b).

Whereas official efforts to construct a national imaginary during the *Porfiriato* (1876–1911) had remained largely confined to elite circles, after the revolution non-elites increasingly became the objects of state cultural campaigns and capitalist advertising blitzes (French, 1999; Tenorio-Trillo, 1996). Popular culture played an ever more protagonistic role here, something that the contributors to *everyday forms* highlight. Elite hegemony was not simply a matter of grand state projects; it was also achieved in the more banal practices of daily life. The intimate machinations of *ejido*3 assemblies, transformations of indigenous government, replacement of the *metate* and *mano* with electric corn mills, and displays of national pageantry in the growing number of rural schools are but a few examples of daily Mexican life in which the state was both enacted and experienced after 1930 (Niblo, 1999; Palacios, 1999; Vaughan, 1997). The 1930s were probably the watershed years for the consolidation of post-revolutionary government power. According to Jan Rus’ narrative of change in highland Chiapas, the decade of Cardenismo became something of a datum, after which “a more intimate form of domination” would become the norm (1994:267). State-formation thus began to operate at many more levels than it had before the revolution, on a variety of social registers, linking a cultural geography of distinctive regions and locales—*patrias chicas*—with an increasingly powerful center of political and cultural life: Mexico City.

A more recent contribution to the cultural history of post-1940 Mexico is Joseph, Rubenstein, and Zolov’s edited volume, *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico since 1940* (2001). *Fragments* pulls together the work of historians, anthropologists, artists, and social theorists around a few core assumptions: that post-1940s Mexico cannot be understood without a firm grasp of cultural politics; that the PRI-party’s political—economic strategies hinged on aggressive official efforts to construct, promote, and stabilize national cultural ideals; and that, finally, the PRI’s cultural and economic achievements were far more intertwined than most structuralist analysis had thus far conceded. From the ever-popular *lucha libre* (wrestling), to cuisine, *rocanrol*, comics, and funeral *cortèges*, these scholars attempt to link identity-formation and representation to broader flows of political power in Mexican society. As Schmidt notes in his introductory essay, Mexican culture in the post World War II era developed at the interface between the state, business, and popular sectors. One of the volume’s ostensive goals, therefore, is to understand the links between the fragmentary appearance of social and cultural life and the “complex architecture of [the] whole” (Coronil, cited in Schmidt,

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3 In crude terms, an agrarian-reform community.
2001:24). All of the contributions to *Fragments* attempt to grapple with questions of state-formation in one way or another. Most are concerned to link wide-ranging forms of nationalism—the rise of *lo mexicano* (roughly, “Mexicanness”) “as an organizing motif for society,” for example—to the ambiguous, fragmented, and multitudinous dimensions of everyday life (Joseph, Anne, & Eric, 2001:7).

There are, however, some glaring problems with the NCH. If historians are truly interested in tracing the linkages between a fragmented social world and a “cultural whole” (usually expressed as nationalist discourse), they provide little sense of the processes through which this connection might occur. In the next section I pursue this critique in some detail.

**Historicizing power, stating space: a critique**

Most of the above-cited collections, despite their narrative strengths and novel approaches, still fall rather flatly when it comes to defining the state, exploring social-space, and providing a working framework for understanding political power. Of these three concerns, the NCH’s portrayals of power are the most troublesome, and directly influence inconsistencies in the two other areas (space and state). The region/center binary present in Rubin’s and others’ scholarship permeates the historical literature on cultural politics, provoking still other bimodal (as opposed to more complex relational) understandings of politics. Notwithstanding the admonitions of several scholars on the plasticity of analytical categories like “region” (Van Young, 1992), the flow of power within current spatial conceptions of state-formation remains a fairly static affair. This is rather ironic, given the importance of Foucault’s work to recent histories of cultural politics, and his deep suspicion of totalizing categories, even if, like “region,” they provide a finer-grained analytical starting point than “nation” (Philo, 1992).

Despite its frequent mention in narratives of cultural politics, state-formation has become somewhat epiphenomenal to the NCH, I argue, because of a basic theoretical and methodological tension. Cultural historians have eagerly followed Foucault in viewing power as the product of “infinitesimal mechanisms,” each with their own techniques, tactics, and trajectories (Foucault, Bertani, Fontana, & Macey, 2003:30), while at the same time invoking neatly arranged, often hierarchical geographical units within which power is allegedly deployed. Such categories take on rather than interrogate official spatial representations. This argument is particularly salient for studies of post-revolutionary Mexico, when so many government development policies took homogeneous regional ideal-types as starting points.

We are thus faced with a double-barreled problematic: decentering the state becomes an act of re-centering, because all too often analysis unquestioningly assumes the spatial units of official discourse, which, in turn, produces a conflation of form with content (Marston, Jones, & Woodard, 2005). Ironically, then, we are presented with a neatly nested, hierarchical configuration of power, when in fact the original objective, in concert with Foucault’s vision of “spaces of dispersion,” was to highlight its uneven distribution and circulation, its fragmentation through geography (Philo, 1992).

Where scholarship once fetishized nation over region, now there exists the danger of simply producing a mirror-image reversal, granting region or locale analytical primacy, leaving “the State” as “Center”—particularly in its institutional forms—and under problematized. The politics of culture, however, does not simply play out on some imagined lower plain of society—the barrio, rancho, campo, *los bajos fondos*—just as there exists no a priori center/whole—Mexico City/the state—against which we can gauge the political dimensions of subjectivity. All of these ideal-types, to be certain, produced material effects of their own. Yet,
scholars could stand to be far more attentive to the deconstruction of such spatial discourses and their effects, and to the processes that connect subjects and state across different scales.

The two trail-blazing edited volumes on cultural history cited above, to be fair, have pointed out some important ways to comprehend the Mexican state as cultural—political process rather than something ontologically prior to subjectivity. And scholars continue to draw inspiration from this work, as they seek to understand the relationships between national symbolism, governance, and the production of gendered and racialized subjects who would—at least within official visions of “Revolution”—patriotically toil away in the service of national development (Vaughan & Lewis, 2006). But the processes linking identity and nationalism within state-formation still must be coaxed from their narratives, when they could be dealt with in a far more systematic and theoretically informed way. Joseph and Nugent, for example, dispensed with the matter by stating, simply, that the state is an “ideological project”—or combination of such projects—as opposed to an agency or set of agencies that actively promotes such a project (1994:371). Even the most recent cultural—historical research, following this lead, refuses to tackle the admittedly thorny question by avoiding discussion on what processes may condition or connect the state’s diverse empirical dimensions (cf. Vaughan & Lewis, 2006).

The “everyday forms of state-formation” literature had set out to show how statecraft becomes the product of historical negotiation between so-called everyday social actors—generally assumed to be situated below or outside of official political spaces—and the privileged state agents within them. While perhaps useful in a general, descriptive sense, however, this representation so radically cleaves the flow of political power that we are left with little or no room for its more subtle expressions. It assumes the presence of boundaries to social interaction where none may exist at all. The ubiquity of such spatialized language threatens to render cultural approaches to the state merely antipodal to earlier “top-down” analyses, wherein actions taken “above,” at the level of central government (or, more recently, “the global economy”), simply refashion regional or local-level social relations (Massey, 2004).

On the “elite” side of the supposed power equation, we are provided only the thinnest understanding of the situatedness of otherwise privileged agents, social actors whose “spatial reach,” though generally greater than those over whom they exercise authority, cannot be taken for granted (Marston et al., 2005:421). The “popular culture” side, meanwhile, evokes sets of terms—everyday, local, regional, etc.—that become proxies for an overly concrete, agent-based politics, directing historians away from processes that both connect and disjoin subjects across different levels of social interaction, and that become stabilized (if only fleetingly) within institutional networks. In other words, “popular culture” and its skein of synonyms can easily become proxies for a progressive cultural politics, when, in fact, they mean very little outside of historical and geographical context (Massey, 1994).

Finally, when social-space is given explicit treatment, it typically describes arenas (or the relationship between them) of interaction between actors, organizations, and the state, a topography of diffuse power relations. Joseph and Nugent argue, for example, that “[g]iven a plurality of decentralized sites or (better) spaces [where subjects are formed], diverse possibilities for resistance may emerge historically...” (1994:18). The argument is compelling on its face, but analysis should not stop there. How might the geography of power itself be implicated in

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4 Examples of this understanding abound in Mexicanist historiography. One of the latest works to take up this—top-down/bottom-up—approach is the otherwise excellent volume on Mexican cultural history by Vaughan and Lewis (2006).
the very spatial concepts and practices of actors, rather than simply describing their situation in an a priori dispersed or hierarchical terrain of social interaction? According to Marston (2004:7), so-called spaces of rule and ruling are far more than simply contexts for social relationships; rather, they are themselves constantly refashioned “or altered by the subjects whose everyday practices constitute their production, [they take shape] where state and society converge.” Understood thus, space becomes a much more integral dimension of hegemony, a critical stake in the contest between differently positioned actors and groups to construct a discursive and material terrain of rule (Harvey, 2001; Lefebvre, 1991).

In sum, the NCH has become caught in a double analytical bind, at once faithful to a decentralized conception of power, and at the same time forced to respond to the “top-down,” or “center-out,” legacy of the previous revisionism. One result seems to be the rather unconscious adoption of narrowly conceived binary oppositions that pit so-called ordinary Mexicans against the elite, regions against the center, place against space. (The reversion to neatly bounded regional or local units of analysis typifies this trend.) On the other hand, it has further reified the state as a singular object, notwithstanding claims to the contrary. The overall effect is an inadequate set of analytical tools for grasping power’s different modalities, its temporal and spatial dynamism. As Allen (2004) argues, once we understand power as merely part of “everyday” practice, it potentially becomes less relevant to analysis. Likewise, if power is simply possessed, something inferred from one’s status within a given social (class) structure, the otherwise complicated space-time of hegemony provides little analytical purchase on understanding state authority. The former conception is deceptively horizontal, the other hopelessly vertical. Both exaggerate power’s range of possibilities. Neither, however, allows for the distorting effects of distance within social relations (Allen, 2004), or for the more intentional, strategic constructions of distance through which state power is produced. Both viewpoints diminish the astonishing institutional and organizational dynamism typical of post-revolutionary Mexico. The next section elaborates one among many possible avenues towards a processual state-space, and, thereby, begins to address these critiques.

Towards a new epistemology state-space in modern Mexico

How might scholarship retain some of Foucault’s more critical insights, while at the same time exposing them to rigorous historical and geographical inquiry? Clearly, I am not in favor of a scale-cum-hierarchy understanding of power in Mexican politics. But nor am I entirely comfortable with the “spaces of dispersion” portrayal that Philo (1992) finds in his readings of Foucault.5 The processes and flows that characterize the state’s work at supposedly higher levels of scale (i.e. the space assumedly hovering above region and locale) can never escape the often less geometrically rigid networks of political power that encompass them in “place” (Escobar, 2001; Massey, 2004). The social scale of state/cultural politics (local, regional, national) is, therefore, always part of a contested terrain and as such becomes an object of

5 I do not necessarily agree, on the other hand, with Marston et al. (2005) when they argue that we need to completely purge the concept of scale from the human geographical lexicon, primarily because, as Sayre (2005) argues, social processes can and do shift with shifts in scale. I think it is sufficient to approach scale and hierarchy with a healthy dose of skepticism, to understand them as social constructions. Marston et al., nevertheless, bring up important points about the ways in which scale-thinking can lead to a conflation of form with function; their insights have clearly influenced my arguments in this paper.
historical inquiry in its own right. And yet, within the literature on post-Revolutionary Mexico it constitutes a vast terra incognita.

Power, I argue, is best understood as neither a priori centered nor decentered, but rather much more historical in its geometries, something to be assessed empirically, through careful archival sleuth-work and ethnography (Wolf, 1999). Following John Allen’s lead, here I want to make a case for approaching power as a complex arrangement of time and topography, an effect of social relations “where there are no pre-defined distances or simple proximities” (2004:19). Foucault’s portrayal of power tends to trivializes the existence of actual power centers. This seems patently false in post-revolutionary Mexico, when so much of the nation’s economic, political, and cultural capital became located in Mexico City. Yet, we cannot, at the same time, take the process of centralization for granted, for it was often quite fragile, too. Instead, I argue in favor of Allen’s proposition, wherein power results from the mobilization of different media, or “territorially-embedded assets and resources—money, information, people, ideas, symbols [and] technologies” (2004:24). That the mere mention of “the State” should so consistently evoke the liberal vision of an authority towering above society suggests the fundamental centrality of spatial discourses to conceptions of political power.

Escobar (2001:170) argues that “the State,” like other totalizing conceptions (e.g. “globalization”), might best be understood through “multiple genealogies of place-based (if not clearly place-bound) practices.” Conceptions of place, however, need not exclude the formal institutional and organizational settings that so typified the post-revolutionary state and yet remain so glaringly absent from most cultural research. The cultural politics that weaves together these genealogies in the production of Mexican national space demands far more intellectual scrutiny than it has thus far received. A processual understanding of what states are and what they do, I argue, can provide this linking function.

It should be clear from the discussion thus far that I do not take the state as a unitary object; rather, it might be better understood as the processes and practices emergent in social relations between differently situated institutions, individuals, and locales. The socio-spatial networks alluded to here are more than simply context; they are also part of the stake in struggle and negotiation (Bobrow-Strain, 2005; Lefebvre, 1991). To better flesh out these claims, I turn to Bourdieu (1977, 1998, 1999), Sayre (1999), and Secor (2004a, 2004b), whose work lends greater specificity to the state-as-process ideal. For Bourdieu, the state’s primary power resides in its ability—through education, research, media, and other socializing mechanisms—to construct the very “categories of thought that we spontaneously apply to all things of the social world—including the state itself” (1999:53). This so-called symbolic production typifies the state’s affective power. Through the construction and deployment of “subjective principles of organization”—in Mexico a process intimately linked but not limited to bureaucracy—it deeply influences the way we perceive, experience, and act upon the ostensibly objective order (1977:164).

Part of the state’s “magic” is its ability to institutionalize and formalize—capture—that which is arbitrary, and in so doing produce the conditions and contexts for its naturalization. By virtue of its monopolistic claims on both the construction of knowledge categories and of world views (Bourdieu, 1998), state authority is simultaneously a feature of identity and part of a larger milieu of social phenomena abstracted in paper and other types of representation (Sayre, 1999:46). In short, the state’s struggle to assert its priority over other organizations in the national space is largely waged on representational grounds. This latter point is particularly salient for post-revolutionary Mexico, with its enormous investments of financial and other forms of capital for the production of nationalist sentiment and for a vast federal bureaucratic apparatus in support of this end.
A spatial corollary of this labor of abstraction and representation is the state’s capacity to suspend or motivate, among other things, “the circulation of people, documents, money, and influence” thereby creating particular space-time matrices of rule (Secor, 2004b: 2). Here, the very social and political process of organizing space—its history—is forgotten, erased, or reworked to meet contemporary political ends. The state’s territorially is rendered “obvious” (Secor, 2004b: 2), the very plural social process of “territoriality” is replaced by the singular idea of “territory.” This condition of obviousness, nonetheless, is never simply created once and for all; it is the focus of ongoing struggle and negotiation. In post-revolutionary Mexico, such struggles seemed to have circulated in part around several bimodal spatial ideals: modern—traditional, urban—rural, region—center, top—down, and apex—base.6 Genealogies of conflict around conceptions of territory are fertile yet mostly unexplored ground for future inquiry.

Bourdieu understands the state as a process of capital accumulation, but uses the word “capital” in a novel sense. The state combines what he calls different “species of capital” (physical force; cultural/informational; bureaucratic, economic, and, most importantly, symbolic) into a “meta capital” (1999:57). Accumulating symbolic capital, however, is a primary means by which the state comes to control the other types of capital. It is, he suggests, “any property (any form of capital whether physical, economic, cultural or social) [that] when it is perceived by social agents endowed with categories of perception...cause[s] them to know it and to recognize it, to give it value” (1998:47). Amassing symbolic capital is how the state—“which possess the means of inculcation of the durable principles of vision”—classifies, defines, and subjectifies (1999:63). These principles of vision emerge through social struggle and contests over meaning. But, by virtue of its control over the production of symbolic capital, the state is constantly working to stabilize discourse and practice around the choices it makes such that over time, alternative possibilities and past struggles “become totally unthinkable” (p. 54). Thus, according to Bourdieu, there exists the “danger of always being thought by a state that we believe we are thinking” (p. 53).

Bourdieu has been criticized for overemphasizing the potency of state, for making subjects seem like the interminable dupes of officialdom. However, Sayre (1999) responds to such critiques by pointing out how, within Bourdieu’s argument, the passage of time breaks the apparent subject-reproducing object tautology. Everyday events, however innocuous seeming, can at times produce ruptures and slippages that disturb these otherwise durable principles of vision. Sayre goes on to suggest that such ruptures are particularly pointed in capitalist society, where long-held cultural values constantly clash (and/or get reworked) with fast-paced changes in technologies and markets. World views thus developed under previous historical circumstances clash with changes in values necessitated by new, “quasi-objective” forces of capital accumulation (Sayre, 1999).

This friction intensifies when socio-spatial relations of particular locales, regions, etc. (or sets of them), abstracted in official representations, inform the decisions of government agencies. The conversion from state epistemologies to on-the-ground ontologies is nothing less than the state idea made material (Sayre, 1999). At the point of application, however, state agents are confronted with social dynamics that vary wildly from those of official

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6 This is in reference to the pyramidal view of political authority in Mexico, with the charismatic cuadillo-president occupying the apex of power. For an in-depth discussion on the “political culture of the pyramid,” see Wil Pansters (1997).
representation. The social disjuncture produced by such situations, can, of course, take any number of directions and more often than not reinforce dominance; but they may also become the pivotal moments of statecraft that end up altering even the overall patterns of circulation—the social networks—that over time come to characterize official epistemologies. One result might be the intensification of inter- and intra-agency strife. The state’s claims on the mediation of social relations within the national space thus become so riven with conflict that any singular conception of it quickly breaks down. Bob Jessop, I believe, captures it best: “state actions…should be understood as the emergent, unintended and complex resultant of what rival ‘states within the state’ have done and are doing on a complex strategic terrain” (1999:9).

Joseph and Nugent’s Everyday forms of State Formation (1994), among other important volumes, offered historically and ethnographically sensitive analyses that helped break down the persistent view of a monolithic state that could mostly be read off of institutions and agencies. While states might provide many of the dominant frameworks for understanding distinct social realities, individuals were now seen to rework them in personally resonant ways. These re-fashionings, Joseph and Nugent suggested, bore the imprint of specific local, regional, and historical contexts. Yet, such works, though still influential within Mexicanist cultural history, have led to what Sayre (2002:xviii) calls a “theoretical agnosticism” vis-à-vis the state, and what I have argued above is an overly simplified bifurcated approach that reifies culture in place and abstracts political power from the social dynamics of space. Understanding the state—including institutions—as a synthesis of relations emergent within the accumulation of species of capital (bureaucratic, symbolic, etc.), on the other hand, provides a much more expansive analytical portmanteau. It allows for a deeply relational understanding of the ways discourse and practice can at once congeal into relatively permanent forms (that produce their own effects), and dissolve and become redeployed in newly emergent networks. This understanding articulates well with Lomnitz (2006) view that pragmatism rather than strict adherence to revolutionary ideals and practices characterized the twentieth-century Mexican state.

States herein are thus understood to emerge through practices aimed at stabilizing meaning around diverse sets of hegemonic, economic, political and cultural projects, often in the context of rancorous dissent among institutionally situated citizen-subjects. The outcomes of such practices, moreover, either imperil or bolster the framework of domination through which the state’s role as supreme social mediator, its apparent autonomy, is enacted. Political power here is not simply top-down, bottom-up, or center-out. It is, instead, a function “of…many and varied modalities…constituted differently in space and time” (Allen, 2004:20). But what does all of this have to say about statecraft in post-revolutionary Mexico? The next and final section grounds these abstract musings in the work of Mexican anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz.

The core-periphery dialectic and state-space in modern Mexico

Particularly salient for the framework elaborated above is Lomnitz’s Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism (2001), on the process of distilling an idealized national space from a diverse cultural geography. While agents of the post-revolutionary state strove mightily to move this process forward, Lomnitz’s account describes how hegemonic spatial discourses became reworked in practice and in place. By doing so, he opens readers up to the possibility that citizens construct the state, rather than the reverse. The volume is unique in the Mexicanist literature for approaching nationalism as combined process of spatial—cultural differentiation. Nationalism became a powerful idiom of state hegemony through which local
political demands were met and compromises reached. The process linked subjects to patrio-
tically spun, state-led development projects, and, ultimately, to corporatist political networks. As
a set of highly mediated “principles of vision” (Bourdieu, 1999), “The Revolution” evolved
and circulated through these projects as a totalizing idiom of state personified in the “Revolution-
ary family” headed by the President (Joseph et al., 2001; Lomnitz, 2001). Revolutionary
nationalism, similar to presidencialismo, then, can be seen as the effect of complex networks
of exchange and accumulation, rather than simply their cause. Here, Bourdieu is instructive:

“Just as the sorcerer mobilizes the capital of belief accumulated by the functioning of the
magical universe, the President of the Republic who signs a decree of nomination…
mobilizes a symbolic capital accumulated in and through the whole network of relations

If there was anything in post-revolutionary Mexico at all resembling a cultural “whole,” ar-
gues Lomnitz, it was the centripetal force of the political struggle to define a national space of
Mexicanidad based largely on a mythologized rural indigenous/mestizo peasant past, “The Rev-
olution,” and revolutionary patriarch (2001:191). The focus on rural indigenous culture built
into definitions of Mexicanidad particular assumptions about the roles of space and place, spe-
cific understandings of a people flash-frozen in time and existing in a singular framing of space.
The binding together of state and territory within such agro-pastoral tropes provided critical
justification for federal intervention in the Mexican countryside (Alonso, 1994), and the raison
d’être for a vast institutional apparatus developed expressly for the purpose of transformation of
national spaces of production, consumption, and reproduction.

For Lomnitz, such assumptions about time and space also largely revolved around a region/center or core/periphery dialectic. His empirically grounded theorizations—based mostly on Tepoz-
lán, Morelos—challenge scholars to assess how this and other spatial discourses were deployed as
a fundamental feature of post-revolutionary nation-building and citizenship. The work, likewise,
takes a significant cut at interrogating the role of so-called local cultures—or articulations of
them—within nationalism, without over-playing the heroics of place or the unstoppable hege-
monic forces of capitalist state-space (Alonso, 1994; Escobar, 2001; Mallon, 1999; Massey, 2004).

Lomnitz argues that dependency theory, long influential in economic and political analysis
of Latin America, has tended to blunt otherwise complex “local” expressions of hegemonic
discourses. Its models made sense at national- or world-regional scales, but erased local hetero-
genity by reifying core and periphery into tidy socio-spatial categories. When taken up by re-
searchers, then, the spatialized language of dependency theory all too readily lent itself to facile
over-determination. The classic case here is the folk-urban continuum that either orientalized
the people of Tepoztlán (Tepoztecos), or portrayed them as forever reacting to the forces of
domination (Lomnitz, 2001:166). Dependency theorists, put differently, generally failed to
grasp how significantly social processes would change with shifts in the scale of analysis,
even if such processes remained intertwined.

But Lomnitz does not stop with critique. His careful archival and ethnographic search re-
vels that core and periphery idioms—in several different iterations over time—long permeated
Tepozttelecan social relations. It is not terribly difficult to see how, then, as a dialectical rela-
tionship (rather than a spatial reification) the core-periphery discourse might have formed an in-
tegral part of the state’s accumulation of species of capital—particularly if we understand the
state to mean the effects of this historical process, rather than the reverse. This, in turn, prompts
the question: if such discourses were so central to the organization of social-space throughout
Tepoztlán’s history, what were their roles in Mexico’s more generally?
The dialectic, I argue, could be viewed as a spatial corollary of the process of accumulating species of capital. Bureaucratic, symbolic, economic, all of these types of capital require specific boundaries (or a lack thereof) for their accumulation (Bobrow-Strain, 2005; Sayre, 1999). And what is the core-periphery dialectic if not struggle and/or negotiation over competing practices of territory, the building up and tearing down of the borders—institutional and otherwise—that enable and constrain the state’s spatial reach? The dialectic, in other words, is a kind of short-hand for competing and/or allied spatial practices whose mediations are productive of the state. The same relationship might be found by examining other liberal discourses prominent in post-revolutionary Mexico: sacred versus secular space; ejido versus private land tenure; state versus civil society; irrigated versus rain-fed agriculture, and so on. Such discourses were productive of institutional networks that bound state and person, nation and place together in tensile relationship (Alonso, 1994:384).7

Yet, as a process of value-formation, spatial practices built around hierarchical notions of centrality and marginality could, of course, set in motion countervailing forces. In Tepoztlán, for example, they took on unique local distinctions that tended to refashion their relation to broader hegemonic epistemologies. Such distinctions, writes Lomnitz, are largely missing from contemporary analysis. Discourses of core and periphery have undergone frequent reformulation over the course of Tepoztlán’s history in ways that are productive of official resources at certain historical junctures, only to become counter-hegemonic at others. And the socio-spatial dynamics (indeed, the very morphologies) of neighborhoods, villages, and fields there have come to reflect such restless reworking, much in the manner of a palimpsest.

But, again, if paper and other forms of representation characterized the “abstract space” (Lefebvre, 1991) of the post-revolutionary state, different species of capital would never simply accumulate through superimposition or government fiat. Lomnitz is able to discern within the history of the core-periphery dialectic, a broad transition. The twentieth century saw an overall shift from a relative regional homology between dominant economic interests and the spatio-administrative order in place before the revolution, to a more complex terrain of divergence in its wake. The breach rendered even more tenuous relationships between state spatial practices and subjectivity. Particularly since the revolution, then, the constant unfolding of relations around competing notions of core and periphery might just as likely yield critical social oppositions, or at least strategic appropriations (Secor, 2004a, 2004b) of “official” discourses that would otherwise fasten subjects in place, and suspend ethnic, gender, and other dimensions of identity in time.

The production of symbolic capital in Tepoztlán, since the colonial period, was an ongoing political negotiation over the very ability to define subjects’ position vis-à-vis “the Center.” Hispanicized representations of urban civilization were part of the complex cultural and normative environment of the Center, which remained in dialectical tension with those of backwardness, Indianness, etc. Modern symbolism thus took the urban core—plaza, church, market—as the focal point from which it would arguably radiate outward in a penumbra of civilizing forces. But constructions of difference did not simply mimic official discourses of Mexico City or the state capital, Cuernavaca; rather, it was always refracted through local circumstances. In other words, local constructions of center and margin changed over

7 The National Irrigation Commission, established in 1926, is the classic example of a post-Revolutionary institution set up expressly for the purpose of transforming national space. Its scale of operation—or more accurately, that of its successor, the Ministry of Hydraulic Resources—was astonishing even in the context of big Mexican bureaucracy.
time, and yet remained in place as sets of cultural constructions developed around the organization of a broader political space. This meant that *Tepoztecos*, at different times in the village’s history, would adopt urban practices and material culture as defined by state and market, only to become Indians at a later time in order to defend their village against what they perceived as the more deleterious effects of national development. The ongoing reconstitution of center-periphery discourses might mean outright rejection of values emanating from centers of power, thereby calling into question the very idea of such a center. Or, conversely, they might reshape such constructions as a way to stake out a position in relation to the state, such that to be peripheral or marginalized might paradoxically generate scarce resources.

Still, Lomnitz remains somewhat vulnerable to some of the same types of criticisms I have leveled against Mexicanist New Cultural History more generally. While “locals” are understood to reformulate dominant spatial discourses in personally resonant ways, the initial production of such discourses still seems a rather placeless and agentless affair, occurring “above,” at the purportedly removed level of state and/or the market. Space is, therefore, both understood as socially constructed and, paradoxically, taken for granted. If we take Lomnitz as a starting point, however, and hone in on the state as emergent in sets of social—spatial practices (rather than as a singular entity somehow prior to and situated above them), I think we can begin to build a far more dynamic understanding of the “whereabouts” (Allen, 2004) of post-revolutionary rule. 8

Lomnitz’s research, overall, argues for a relational approach to state and subjectivity that runs parallel with a similar portrayal of the relationship between place and space. Doing so means searching for points of articulation between the complex place-making relations of ethnic, gender, religion, etc., and struggles to formulate a dominant but never complete imaginary and practice of national space. Places thus become central to the emergence of the state through efforts to build a “national space,” rather than simply its victims (Escobar, 2001; Massey, 2004). Lomnitz shows how discourses become reworked in localities but is less clear on the ways such reformulations might at times transverse their particular historical contexts to take on a broader, even hegemonic, force (Marston, 2004). At some point, the

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8 Cultural geographer Aaron Bobrow-Strain’s takes us further in this direction. The territorial re-configurations of post-revolutionary rule—in part because of the popular forces loosed by the revolution itself—became conditioned by dissent in ways that previous spaces of rules never were. Working in highland Chiapas, Bobrow-Strain (2005) found that new forms of state spatial organization, such as the *ejido*, might enhance the autonomy of certain groups and thereby challenge longstanding forms of territorial domination. Federal subsumption of rural spaces, for example, allowed indigenous groups to bypass or contest the characteristically violent hegemonic projects of regional landowners. But it also meant that peasants might just as likely find themselves subordinated to “complex structures of authoritarian corporatist political representation” (p. 755). State thus replaced landowner as the local hegemon. The limited autonomy provided by modern spaces of governance also tended to enframe intra- and inter-community strife.

Bobrow-Strain’s work articulates well with Lomnitz’s in illustrating how the “techniques, goals, idioms, and channels of hegemony struggle are shaped by existing territorial configurations and, in turn, generate new boundings” (p. 747) such that it becomes nearly impossible to take spatial representations as given territorial units. Declining landowner power in Chiapas, therefore, must be understood “as the result of both broad historical shifts in the configuration of regional hegemony [as a socio-spatial process] and conjunctural formations of landowner identities and interests” (2003:8). There is no pre-spatialized conception of power here, as its “territory” meted out in practice, not merely something created once and for all at the “state level,” and adapted to at the “local” level below it. The decline of official control in the Mexican countryside over the last 20 or so years severely undercut the economic power of regional elites, and challenged the cultural understandings that long underwrote their dominance. The current shift in power, thus, cannot be understood without an adequately historicizing social-space.
contingencies of place—or processes of place-making—can and do become features of the very institutions and practices of state. The state, otherwise, simply becomes a thing—an apparatus—that is created at a particular point in time and runs on automatically thereafter (Jessop, 1990).

We need a better sense of how this happens, and this is where the species of capital formulation (or other relational formulations) is an important corrective device. The state, with its accompanying claims to sovereignty, evolves through relationships, through interactions. It is borne of the tensions present at every level of exchange between those who would represent and control identity, and those who struggle against or negotiate with them. There is, within this tension, always the latent possibility that dominant discourses themselves get reworked, indeed that the institutions and agents that mediate them and emerge through their mediation come to embody this tension. Locating the state within processes of mediation, in short, reminds us that “[e]ven the most far-flung, abstract or alienated instances of domination depend on the willful acts of particular individuals possessed of various and conflicting values” (Sayre, 1999). And, particularly after the revolution, these individuals were as likely as not to operate from somewhere within Mexico’s enormous institutional landscape.

Conclusions

I have argued here for a more robust theoretical approach to the “whereabouts” (Allen, 2004) of state in post-revolutionary Mexico. How power became so centralized in the huge Mexico City-based bureaucratic apparatus; the figure of “the President”; and in the vast economic resources and intellectual and cultural capital of “the Center” has long vexed politicólogos. Mexico’s 70+ years of authoritarian rule were not the result of military might, unlike many twentieth-century Latin American regimes. Nor did they tend towards the political instability seen elsewhere in the Americas. Particularly after the 1930s, elections remained permanent and stable features of the Mexican political landscape. Citizens more or less knew what to expect, despite the occasional drama—real or contrived—that might arise in the electoral process. And every 6 years, a new “liberal Machiavellian” (Córdova, 1973:87) would transition smoothly into the presidency. Recall Jeffrey Rubin’s (1996) point, however, that while authoritarianism in Mexico was, of course, undeniable, how it took shape is still poorly understood. Mexico did enjoy unprecedented economic prosperity between the 1940s and 1970s under Import Substitution Industrialization. And for a time, some of this wealth actually trickled down to impoverished communities (particularly in the countryside through aggressive state-led development programs), producing quite tangible improvements in living standards. But economic development was highly differentiated across time and space, and as an explanation of political power too facilely reduces Mexicans to a kind of homo economicus.

Historians, meanwhile, have trained their analytical sights on the politics of culture, but their understandings are too spatially static. Since the 1930s and the Cárdenas presidency, Rubin suggested, state power was “…actually a simultaneous forging of multiple regional arrangements—each a distinct combination of bargaining, coercion, and alliances—that together reinforced the power of the center in broadly similar ways” (1996:86). I have argued here that this understanding of political power, so prolific in the literature, is still over-determined, as it takes erstwhile official spatial representations as givens, assumes a bifurcated logic and inadequately questions the meaning of “the Center.” Perhaps it is best, then, to speak of the multiple authoritarianisms
that produced post-revolutionary rule, and their relationship with state-space as both object of struggle and force in its own right.

In general terms, the NCH has tended to simply invert the top-down predilection of previous scholarship. This is not surprising, given that the vast majority of archival material comes from state agencies (overall, federal ones). In other words, the NCH’s approach partly stems from a reaction to the official bias of the raw material of historical analysis. One way to treat this bias, of course, is by further blurring the lines between ethnographical and historiographical analysis, which some historians of modern Mexico have done. Another is to overhaul historians’ approach to state power and political space. Towards this end I think Allen (2004) has it correct when he argues that there is no compelling reason to take the top-down, bottom-up, or dispersed formulations as givens. Comprehending the geography of power under authoritarian rule demands, as I have argued here, starting with the assumption that it is a complex arrangement of time and topography, multiply mediated through social relations and that circulate through “territorially-embedded assets” (Allen, 2004). In Tepoztlán these assets could be glimpsed in urban morphology, in the struggles pitting upper barrio against lower barrio (Lomnitz, 2001). The state’s spatial reach, in these portrayals, is emergent, fragile, and defiantly impermanent, yet paradoxically continuous.

The Dictionary of Human Geography (2000:789), finally, portrays the contemporary nation-state as vulnerable “…to numerous transnational forces [that] dissolve territorial borders while simultaneously fragmenting the political terrain within, challenging [its] continued viability…” Cultural historians working on modern Mexico, meanwhile, have shown that fragmentation always characterized the post-revolutionary nation-state. Lomnitz, for example, argues that within subaltern national communities like Mexico, the links between “national imagery and everyday practice” are often tenuous and at risk of being exposed (2001:128). Exposure results in part because of a central irony of nation-states: “they are political communities within a world system of communities, but they are part of an economy that cannot be contained by national borders.” The economic modernization of nation-states thus creates “spaces of national identification and confrontation” (2001:130). The important point here is that the friction between the state’s efforts to represent subject populations and the ways those populations identify themselves is shaped by both the transnational economic and cultural context of the national community, and the spaces of contact that the state requires to function. Commercial tourism, migration, and scientific production thus become “frames of contact” that, for Lomnitz, destabilize “internal forms of social distinction” (2001:142). These processes indelibly marked state hegemony in post-revolutionary Mexico. In what ways, then, is this fragmentation different from or continuous with that of the present? How does the past continue to actively inform (as opposed to merely back-ground) the contemporary dynamics of economic and cultural (neo)liberalization that have taken center stage in national politics, and so occupied scholars’ efforts? I hope that this essay, at the very least, adds to a more substantive conversation between cultural historians and geographers around these important questions.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Sallie Marston for her unflagging patience, encouragement and helpful comments, and the three anonymous referees for their careful readings and astute critiques of

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earlier drafts. The University of Arizona Southwest Center, my employer, has long provided a sort of writer’s retreat, a fringe benefit that, I am afraid, I have abused with some abandon. I am ever grateful to its faculty and staff. Finally, I dedicate this first cut at academic publication to my mom and dad, and to Heidi.

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