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# The archive in the field: document, discourse, and space in Mexico's agrarian reform

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**Abstract**

In the immediate aftermath of Mexico's revolution (1910–1920), increasing numbers of surveyors, agronomists, and agrarian bureaucrats headed out to the countryside to implement the agrarian reforms promised in the decree of 1915 and the Constitution of 1917. In this essay I ask a very basic set of questions about the use, evaluation, and making of spatial knowledge in a revolutionary context: when bureaucrats went in to the field after the revolution, what did they do? What roles, if any, did local inhabitants themselves play in the processes that unfolded? And what constituted the acceptable body of knowledge—the archive—necessary to resolve persistent boundary questions that impeded the reform? I examine these questions by looking closely at the textual and personal interactions between one agrarian bureaucrat and the inhabitants and authorities in the villages to which he had been sent in central Veracruz. Their interactions reveal the degree to which campesinos in the countryside appropriated and deployed different aspects of revolutionary rhetoric in an effort to shape new spaces, or recreate previous ones, in the 1920s.


*Keywords:* Agrarian reform; Peasants; Space; Veracruz; Epistemology; Surveying

> And nothing starts in the Archive, nothing, ever at all, though things certainly end up there. You find nothing in the Archive but stories caught half way through: the middle of things; discontinuities.
> Carolyn Steedman, Dust: the Archive and Cultural History

In the tentative peace that followed upon 10 years of armed violence, the pretenders to power in Mexico in the 1920s sought to implement, among other things, an agrarian reform. Some sought only tentative resolutions to the so-called agrarian question; others pursued it with more ardour. Few could ignore it. Their collective efforts, and those of subsequent leaders and bureaucrats, generated an eventual peace and an interminable amount of paper. An array of decrees, laws, and reports made the understanding of the reform itself a cottage industry. Archives abound for researchers interested in the agrarian reform and, not surprisingly, it has been subjected to intensive scrutiny. What follows is an exploratory essay about one brief episode from one portion of one file of that burgeoning archive. Found in an archive, it is a story from the field.

The archive that serves as the source base for this article was created, in part, by Carlos Olivares, a *dibujante* [draftsman] in the employ of the Veracruz's Local Agrarian Commission and Ministry of Public Works in the early 1920s. Like many postrevolutionary bureaucrats involved in some capacity in agrarian reform, Olivares collected and often transcribed an array of documents, land titles, and property deeds in the course of his work. His correspondence with his superiors (as well as their instructions and replies), his reports, and the letters and queries of local authorities with whom he interacted are all included in the file. So too are the testimonies he collected from villagers in the areas to which he was sent, such as the pueblo of Santiago Huatusco, Veracruz, in the autumn of 1922.[1] Olivares had been sent there by the agrarian reform bureaucracy to gather information that would aid in the resolution of a land dispute between the villagers of Santiago Huatusco and their neighbors in San Juan de la Punta [see Map 1]. The presumed resolution of this dispute would then speed the way for the implementation of land redistribution as outlined under the agrarian reform program. His work thus constituted the groundwork necessary to ensure the success of land redistribution and agrarian reform.

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[1] The source base for this essay is a case file entitled 'Lo relacionado con los límites entre los Municipios arriba indicados—Santiago Huatusco y San Juan de la Punta,' in the Archivo General del Estado de Veracruz, Ramo de Fomento, Tierras, Deslindes. All documentary cites are from this file unless otherwise noted. San Juan de la Punta and Santiago Huatusco were both renamed in the early 1930s: San Juan de la Punta is the current-day municipality of Cuitlahuac; Santiago Huatusco is the current-day municipality of Carrillo Puerto.

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**Map 1.** Region of Córdoba, Veracruz showing the relative location of Santiago Huatusco and San Juan de la Punta. From P. Gerhard, *Geografía histórica de la Nueva España, 1519–1821*, Mexico City, 1986, 85.

This essay follows Olivares and the inhabitants of Santiago Huatusco and San Juan de la Punta in their interactions over the course of one month in 1922. It asks a very basic, and deceptively simple, set of questions about the use, evaluation, and making of spatial knowledge in a revolutionary context: when bureaucrats went in to the field after the revolution, what did they do? What roles did local inhabitants themselves play in the processes that unfolded? And what constituted the body of knowledge—the archive—available to the various actors involved as they sought a resolution to the dispute?

Writing about 'the archive' is a daunting task, in no small measure because the term has been amplified in recent years to encompass a broad array of meanings, from the purportedly apolitical act of accumulating and storing data to the entire discursive system within which a given community operates. I use it here in two ways, one figurative and one more literal: on the one hand, 'archive' as the discursive framework within which arguments and statements resonate, as reasonable and intelligible; and on the other, as the generation and maintenance of a documentary record accorded privileged epistemological status and the institutional and architectural apparatus coproduced with it. The point in part is to stress how directly related those two processes were and their entanglement with particular political moments. The determination of what counted as knowledge did not necessarily precede its application; rather, determination and application proceeded in tandem.[2]

My aim is not to analyze in detail the entire dispute, which took some years to resolve; in fact, Olivares was only the first of a number of bureaucrats to pass through the region and charged with examining the conflict.[3] Rather, I want to look more closely at the slim set of documents produced out of the initial interactions between a bureaucrat, a number of campesinos and local authorities trying to come to terms with the promise and problems of agrarian reform in a revolutionary context. The different accounts of boundaries produced by the villagers in each place is of interest in this essay not for how they do or do not intersect with what the real boundaries were—a concern of the utmost importance to villagers themselves—but in relation to the modes of understanding land and articulating land rights at a volatile point in time.

To follow this process, I focus on three aspects of this archive. In Part I, I look closely at the initial petition, submitted by the municipal authorities in Santiago Huatusco, requesting a boundary survey. I am especially interested here in the manner in which they framed their petition: that is, the largely rhetorical archive upon which they drew to make their case and which effectively drew Olivares to their pueblo. In Part II, I examine Olivares's work once he arrived in Santiago Huatusco. I focus particularly on what he reported as his first act: interviewing four male villagers in Santiago Huatusco who were said to be knowledgable of the municipality's boundaries. Their testimony, along with the municipality's land title, would purportedly aid Olivares in his efforts to create a map of the area under dispute. Part III turns to the villagers of San Juan de la Punta who contested Olivares's efforts and who, more importantly for my purposes, drew upon a different archive—physically depleted but rhetorically rich—to make their case.

## I

On February 20, 1922, the municipal president of Santiago Huatusco, Vicente Malpica, and 78 other villagers committed themselves to writing. In a letter addressed directly to the state governor, they sought a resolution to a conflict over land with the neighboring municipality of San Juan de la Punta. That such was the purpose of their letter was not immediately apparent, although certainly the governor (or one of his aides) would have known what was coming. The letter began in formulaic fashion: 'We the undersigned, being of legal age and in exercise of our rights as inhabitants and natives of this municipality… put forth the following,' at which point the writer then provided a lengthy historical sketch of the municipality. It began:

> The governor of our Nation, which then carried the name of New Spain, Viceroy Don Luis de Velasco, in fulfilling the Reales Ordenanzas granted to this pueblo as a Republic or community of Indians (which in pre-Cortesian times was the ancient cacicazgo of Cuahtocho destroyed according to history by the

[2] Despite the prevalence of citations to Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida in work on archives as epistemological sites, some of the best meditations on the archive have been offered, unsurprisingly, by historians, anthropologists, and archivists. See among others C. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, Baltimore, 1980; A. Burton, 'Introduction,' in: A. Burton (Ed), *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, Durham, 2005; A.L. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton, 2009; Stoler, Colonial archives and the arts of governance, *Archival Science* 2 (2002) 87–109; C. Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*, New Brunswick, 2002; and N. Dirks, Colonial histories and native informants: biography of an archive In: N. Dirks (Ed), *Colonialism and Culture*, Ann Arbor, 1992; as well as the articles collected in *Archival Science* 2 (2002), 3–4.

[3] I discuss this case in an abbreviated, and somewhat different, fashion in Craib, *Cartographic Mexico: a History of State Fixations and Fugitive Landscapes*, Durham, 2004, chap. 7.