

Stating space in modern Mexico

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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—an undeniably important analytical tack—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.

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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 *Porfiriato*¹ (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).

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