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Hegemony at the Margins: Nationalism, Mapping, and State Formation Along the Guatemala-
Mexico Border in 1970

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts in Latin American Studies

by

Javier Porrás Madero

2020

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Hegemony at the Margins: Nationalism, Mapping, and State Formation Along the Guatemala-

Mexico Border in 1970

by

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Master of Arts in Latin American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Fernando Pérez Montesinos, Chair

Borders are oftentimes perceived as byproducts of nation-state formation; as peripheral geographies that are fixed and subject to distant negotiations of power. Among other things, such understanding inhibits a conception of borders as autonomous spaces, shaped by local, regional, national, and transnational forces. More importantly, such understandings fail to question the existence and contingency of borders. This thesis investigates the Guatemala-Mexico border in 1970 to understand its role in the building of nation and state during tumultuous political, social, and economic change in both nations. In a time when state hegemony was severely challenged, the border played a central role in exposing the contradictions of nation and state construction. By engaging with archival documents, I delineate state efforts to control space—and assert hegemony—and how consensus was built during a time of fractured state hegemony, both in Mexico and Guatemala.

The thesis of Javier Porras Madero is approved.

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2020

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Introduction: Hegemony in Borders

In this work, I look at the border between Guatemala and Mexico in the 1970s to understand the historical precursors to the violence that is currently ongoing in the region. I historicize this largely understudied period and argue that the events of the 1970s are key to understanding the present iteration of this border. To do this, I explore the intersections between borders and hegemony. Specifically, I examine the ways hegemony becomes grounded in borders, and how borders impact the constitution of hegemony. My analysis is framed through spatial theory and Gramscian perspectives on hegemony, a combination that opens avenues to argue for a specific type of *grounding* of power in borderlands.

I take from various interpretations of borderlands to define borders as the places where relations of production are tangibly shaped by notions of difference created by national boundaries.¹ This characterization of borders leaves room for a spatial analysis that sees borders as places—distinct geographies not only shaped by the nation-state, but also by local peoples. Doreen Massey pushes us to understand places as the “foci of the meeting and the non-meeting of the previously unrelated and thus integral to the generation of novelty.”² Understanding places as sites of unexpected novelty rids them of any static, concrete definition and instead shows their contingency. This is essential in gauging border geographies: borders, as seen by states, are projects of stabilization. Yet such geographies are at times unpredictable and unmanageable, constantly shaped by relations of production and social relations.

¹ Definitions of “borderlands” vary across fields. Historians define them by focusing on colonial boundaries, drawing connections and distinctions to “frontier” (see Adelman and Aron). Political scientists define them as regions for the strengthening of transnational relations while also a place of threat-importation (see Deleixhe, Dembinska, and Danero Iglesias). Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa speaks of borderlands as central to the creation of otherness (in the context of diasporic, queer, and non-normative communities). The definition I use draws from these works but leaves room to analyze the geographies that so strongly shape borders. However, I choose to minimize my use of the term “borderlands” through this paper, given its implications in various academic disciplines and its limitations in imagining the border.

² Doreen Massey, *For Space*, (London, Sage, 2005), 71.

To gauge the power behind borders, I turn to Antonio Gramsci's interpretation of the formation and maintenance of hegemony. According to Gramsci, hegemony forms when there is an internal reconciliation of competing and/or contradicting parties' demands about which ideas, institutions, interests, etcetera, are normalized and accepted, and which are not. This, then, informs ideology, knowledge, and relations of production, among other things. It sets a social standard. An example is a national government's power over its sovereign territory: from partisanship, disagreements, and contradicting viewpoints on what values should be legally and socially accepted, the government gains legitimacy to enact laws, exercise violence, and protect the sovereignty of the nation, based on the parameters set through political and social compromise. (Notably, the state is not the only structure where hegemony can be created.)³

Parting from these definitions I argue three points: first, that embodiments of state hegemony are strongest at the border; this geography necessitates a constant assertion of hegemony given its proximity to the Other. As the beginning and end of national territory, it is a place that is critical for the state's claim to sovereignty, thus a critical place for the exercise and legitimization of power. Second, while borders are a place where state hegemony manifests in its clearest forms, they are also where hegemony is most fragile. Borders are critical and vulnerable geographies where hegemony needs to be constantly asserted, interpreted and re-interpreted, for the same reasons: proximity to the Other (and its differential politics) and marginal placement in relation to national centers of power (specifically in the cases of Mexico and Guatemala).

Borders are places constructed around relationships of affect and power, which expose their weak and contingent bases. They reveal the arbitrary foundations of hegemony: local and

³ This paper examines hegemony at the juncture of nation-states. In such geographies, the legitimization of hegemony is much more contingent than it is at the interior of the nation-state. The consensus-building process' contingency is unmasked at the border—this relationship between margins and power are at the center of this inquiry.

regional social power relations. Third and last, borders are inherently and fundamentally political. Much more political than Mexico City or Guatemala City, borders are places where power relations have to be simultaneously legitimized alongside perceptions of belonging. The proximity to the Other prevents borders from being harnessed, from being fully integrated as part of a homogeneous nation. This, in turn, makes them a geography that is always in flux.⁴

By engaging with archival documents, I explore the local, regional, national, and transnational relations that shape the border between Guatemala and Mexico. Wendy Brown describes the border as a site of anxiety; a characterization that I explore in the context of the Guatemala-Mexico border.⁵ How is this anxiety manifested and manipulated by nations and peoples? I investigate how this process took place in the 1970s, a time of tumultuous political, social, and economic change in both countries—albeit embodied differently in each territory.

Mexico's post-revolutionary political and economic shortcomings led to developmentalist governments' exploitation of national resources to sustain clientelist practices (which, in turn, sustained the governments' claim to legitimacy). The drive to extract natural resources translated to a clearer demarcation of national territory in the resource-rich south—Mexico needed to know exactly where its territory was in order to exploit it. Guatemala was in the midst of an internal war that started with the CIA-orchestrated overthrow of democratically-elected, Jacobo Árbenz. While the war's violence reached an apex between 1980 and 1982, when the military launched a genocidal campaign against the Ixil indigenous populations in the Western Highlands, the preceding years were increasing political instability and constant violence that contributed to the

⁴ I understand “geographies” by combining Doreen Massey’s and Antonio Gramsci’s work. Massey highlights how humans rid spaces with (unequal) power relations that are accepted and reproduced by groups. Gramsci’s work highlights how such (spatial) power relations become naturalized through consensus-building. Thus, by “geographies” I allude to the power dynamics that go into the production of border spaces.

⁵ Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, (New York, Zone, 2010), 121.

normalization of a fraught political and social climate. In the case of Guatemala, less importance was assigned to developmentalist policies given the state's focus on asserting political and social legitimacy through the control and manipulation of violence.⁶

The border would play a key role in differentiating spaces and experiences of precarity and safety in both countries. The collision of two political structures occurred at the border, bringing to the fore the differential jurisdictions that ideologically, institutionally, and socially separated both nations. In focusing on 1970, I explore how the border became a point of reference in the crafting of hegemony by both states in a pre-neoliberal, Cold War period. Driving my inquiry are questions of how state and nonstate discourse creates and interprets the nexus between nation and territory. In so doing, I blur the state/nonstate dichotomy and demonstrate the converging multi-scalar processes that construct the border, physically and discursively. Here, I will outline events from 1970 to piece together a historical account of border spatialization and its ensuing effects on nation-state construction.

Overview

To make these arguments, this work analyzes three different moments during 1970. 1970 was a time of significant social, political, and economic change in Mexico and Guatemala. It was a time for presidential elections in both nations: Mexico's ruling party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), sought to regain political legitimacy in a post-1968 loss of political trust from the public, given its aggressive repression of domestic social movements. It also sought to maintain economic legitimacy as economic growth slowed after years of high

⁶ While Guatemalan officials were more concerned with legitimizing the state by controlling violence, prominent social discourse focused on the development of the nation. Grand ideas of development seeped into the imagination of a future Guatemala. While such discourse is relevant and analyzed in this paper, it did not translate to a concerted government development agenda, or developmentalist practice from government officials and/or institutions.

growth. In many ways, this was a time when the PRI sought to (forcefully) justify its permanence in power.

In Guatemala, the ending civilian presidency of Julio César Méndez Montenegro, coincided with increasing violence throughout national territory. The Guatemalan military, with substantial influence and control over the government, aggressively targeted guerrilla groups which corresponded such actions. This conflict led to an increase of violence throughout Guatemala and a concentration of guerrilla (and military) activity in urban centers, most notably Guatemala City—a factor that stifled previously ongoing developmentalist projects.⁷ Furthermore, the winner of the election, General Carlos Manuel Arana Osorio, was a military man known for his strong and aggressive approach to subversive groups.

Parting from such context, this work examines three different times and spaces. The first is April of 1970, in Guatemala, when the West German ambassador to Guatemala was kidnapped and killed by guerrillas, which resulted in the Guatemalan government instituting a state of siege. I specifically inquire the effects that such actions had on Guatemala's northern border with Mexico and, through an analysis of periodicals, examine how nationalism during this time became a way of consolidating (or attempting to) state power. The second is the mapping and surveying work undertaken by the Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas (CILA) between Mexico and Guatemala to construct and maintain the physical border line. In analyzing how CILA officials corresponded, and the materials they produced to map the border, I work to understand how state actors asserted control over national territory through power-ridden spatial and cartographic practices.

⁷ Historian Carlos Sabino outlines the sides of this internal conflict: the Guatemalan military, paramilitary right-wing groups, and left-wing guerrillas. While Sabino's historiography is highly biased with anti-leftist perspectives, he provides a useful overview of Guatemala during the 1960s and 1970s. Carlos Sabino, *Guatemala, A Silenced History*, (Guatemala, Grafia Etc., 2017).

Finally, I use the previous two times and spaces to re-understand the way state hegemony functioned in Mexico during this time. In this last section, I explore how state hegemony was formed and reproduced at the margins. Mexican contemporary history is oftentimes told through the lens of central power arbiters, such as presidents, but in this section, I argue that state power in 1970, in its search for legitimization, sought to consolidate the margins and use them as sources for the production and reproduction of state hegemony.⁸ In doing so, I present a dynamic history of local, regional, and transnational power relations that are deeply impacted by the existence of the border.

⁸ While a central purpose of this history is to re-tell national histories in a manner that centers borders, I only focus on Mexico due to space constraints. Further works will specifically explore the way social, political, and economic contexts (especially at the border) impacted Guatemalan state hegemony.

Space in Siege

In early April 1970, Guatemalan President Julio César Méndez Montenegro declared a nationwide 30-day state of siege—*estado de sitio*—where all “political” gatherings, whether “public or private, regardless of size,” were prohibited. Civilians were not allowed to carry weapons and all levels of law enforcement and a number of government officials were placed under military control. Anyone found violating these rules would be arrested.⁹ Effects were quickly felt by the Guatemalan public. Fueling such action was the recent kidnapping and subsequent murder of Karl von Spreti, West German ambassador to Guatemala. Those responsible were the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR), who funded their revolutionary operation by kidnapping notable individuals and asking for ransom, release of other guerrillas, or both. Though Guatemalan nationals were the typical targets, the FAR did not let nationality constrain their money-making operation—in fact, non-Guatemalan citizens became targets because their kidnapping asserted the severity of their demands and made their operations more profitable.¹⁰

Despite the fact that von Spreti was kidnapped and killed in Guatemala City and the state of siege was declared there, reverberations extended throughout the country, including at its northern border with Mexico where Guatemalans crossed to reach safety given the unstable climate nationwide. Nearly 400 kilometers north of the Guatemalan capital, and a few days after the state of siege was declared, a Mexican official reported: “...a noticeable and large amount of Guatemalan nationals have penetrated the country as tourists, [we] consider that they are arriving

⁹ “En receso toda actividad política,” *Gráfico*, April 3, 1970.

¹⁰ In early March, Sean Holly, a U.S. diplomat was kidnapped and returned after 39 hours in captivity by the FAR in return for the liberation of four members of the FAR in government custody. “Las FAR Secuestran a Diplomático de E.E.U.U.,” *Gráfico*, March 8, 1970.

in Mexico to avoid the political crisis in their nation.”¹¹ This report, written from the Mexican border municipality of La Trinitaria, highlights the role national boundaries played during times of political instability in Guatemala—among other things, the border became a way of reaching safety for Guatemalans in states of precariousness. Political boundaries also became a site enabling one’s detachment from the nation-state, to break with the jurisdiction of one space and enter another, less hostile one.

In days following the state of siege declared after von Spreti’s body was found, uncertainty spread into Guatemalan society. Censure of the press prevented information from reaching the public. With policing tasks centralized to the military and the prohibition of public gatherings of any type, political violence occurring in Guatemala seeped into the nation’s populace.¹² A Mexican foreign official informed: “Uncertainty reigns in Guatemala. This uncertainty is caused by the lack of news and the contradictions in the few things the local press, subject to censure, publishes.”¹³ Publicly, the reasoning for this climate of uncertainty was the recurring (political) violence between military, guerrilla, and paramilitary groups. However, such actions were steps for the Guatemalan state to control national territory through the manipulation of violence. Speaking on the social effects of states of emergency, a Guatemalan journalist expressed: “When the government declares a state of emergency, it protects itself, but individuals are left in an even worse situation. They cannot carry arms, less than ever, to defend themselves, and instead *violence is diffused on them*.”¹⁴ The state of siege worked to clearly demarcate state-sanctioned forms of violence and those outside it. By centralizing the legitimate use of violence in the state, nonstate forms of violence were seen as alien to the nation and cast

¹¹ AGN, Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales, Caja 1128A, foja 523.

¹² “En Receso Toda Actividad Política,” *Gráfico*, April 3, 1970.

¹³ Archivo SRE, leg. 339, exp. 21.

¹⁴ “Amenazas a la Prensa,” *Gráfico*, Jan. 31, 1970. Emphasis mine.

outside of it. The state of siege, then, was a measure toward the construction and legitimization of the Guatemalan nation-state in the context of violence.

The consequences on northern Guatemalan borderlands were substantial. The same Mexican report that spoke about Guatemalans crossing into Mexico given the former's "political crisis" stated:

...in the morning a squad of the Guatemalan National Police was observed inside our Territory...armed with caliber 45 Thompson submachine guns, handguns, knives and machetes. These Guatemalan National Police forces are stationed in our country's border to prevent infiltrations into Mexico; however, it is known that on occasions they cross into our territory searching for Guatemalan nationals who cross the Border.¹⁵

The Guatemalan military's intrusion into Mexican territory became an effect and extension of the violence occurring in the country. Crossing the border line simultaneously served as a movement for refuge (for those entering Mexico as "tourists") and one of violence (for those persecuted transnationally by the Guatemalan military). Such juxtaposition of border as a space of differential jurisdictions questions the static spatiality assigned to nation-states.

During this state of siege, homogeneous national space was challenged, causing state actors—in this case armed forces—to take extra-national measures to harness borderlands. This posits borders as places of exception where widely accepted notions of state sovereignty are lackluster, and, therefore, where hegemony needs to be strongly asserted. The jurisdiction of Guatemalan armed forces was implicitly expanded to "foreign" territory without hesitation or care. And there appear to be no consequences (given that archival records do not show a strong

¹⁵ AGN, Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales, Caja 1128A, foja 510.

response from the Mexican government). This challenging of homogeneous, sovereign, national territory undermines the logics of territorial fixity from the nation-state; it dynamizes space at the border by undermining basic principles of national sovereignty.¹⁶

As shown, this situation was a consequence of a Guatemalan state policy that sought to centralize power within a specific branch of the state: the military. The siege worked to facilitate the assertion of state hegemony through the domination of space. Those engaging in political and/or violent acts during this time were classified as nonstate actors and, consequently, persecuted. This, then, was a direct action aimed at defining Guatemalan national identity in times of violence. In recognizing this, we can grapple with the ways in which the relationship between nationalism and the border was also impacted.

A Mexican official wrote of the effects of Guatemala's political instability on Mexico that, "[In the Guatemalan press] an intense journalistic campaign has started which attacks our asylum policy..."¹⁷ Mexico, known for its friendly asylum policy, was criticized for providing asylum to guerrilla fighters and blamed for the continued existence of these groups outside of Guatemala. A column in "Prensa Libre" partially blamed Mexicans for the murder of von Spreti, saying "Mexico is partially guilty for our pain, by having agreed to be the refuge of the worst enemies [communists] us *iberoamericanos* have had in our sour history."¹⁸ Cold War repudiations of communism and communists are exposed as antithetical to the nation. Additionally, the trafficking of cross-border contraband—a regular occurrence before and after

¹⁶ Doreen Massey speaks of nation's drive for "fixity" in order to assert a top-down idea of what space should represent. She challenges us to move toward an understanding of space as multiplicitous, where varying perspectives and understandings of space are acknowledged and accepted. Massey, *For Space*.

¹⁷ Archivo SRE, leg. 339, exp. 21.

¹⁸ Significantly, Mexico also provided asylum to Guatemalan businesspeople and political figures. While Guatemalan public discourse called for Mexico to change its asylum policy, the cases of non-guerrilla asylum seekers were never questioned. This meant that, from a Guatemalan perspective, Mexico deserved some of the blame for continued violence, since they were not willing to bring guerrillas to "justice."

this period—gained visibility as various Guatemalan news outlets noted the presence of smuggled goods from Mexico in Guatemala.¹⁹ The comparisons to Mexico, whether in asylum policy or in contraband products, presented an “us” versus “them” binary, fueled by nationalist discourses—only made possible by a division between both states, territorially embodied in the border.

Resource Nationalist Othering

Occurring during the April 1970 state of siege, such discourses were part of the “realization of a hegemonic apparatus” in Guatemala.²⁰ Critiques on actions undertaken by Mexicans were part of a consensus-building process that sought to re-configure the Guatemalan state’s hegemony over its people and territory in the midst of heightened violence. Guatemalan media outlets sought to present Mexico as antagonistic to Guatemalans’ well-being. In doing so, Mexico (presented as a unitary homogeneous structure) shifted into an entity preventing the realization of a Guatemalan potential. This nationalist “ideological terrain” sought to integrate an oppositional view of Mexico—as it related to the hindrance of Guatemalan development—into perceptions of belonging in Guatemala.²¹ Periodicals in Guatemala sought a depiction of Guatemala as a natural, national entity; as a territory whose sovereignty was threatened and should be defended. Through such, a morality of what it meant to be Guatemalan came to the fore: one encompassing a staunch defense of national territory against nations and communities who (directly or indirectly) threatened the legitimacy of the state. The introduction of “a new morality in conformity with a new conception of the world,” where Guatemala was a nation in need of fending off intra and international threats, resulted in a re-conceptualization of what it

¹⁹ “Contrabando de cigarrillos interceptado en el Suchiate,” *Nación*, April 12, 1970. “Ninguna Información sobre un Contrabando,” *Prensa Libre*, April 12, 1970.

²⁰ David Forgacs, ed., *The Gramsci Reader*, (New York, NYU Press, 2000), 192.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

meant to be Guatemalan in times of siege—a conception borne out of contentious juxtaposition to the Other.²²

Resource nationalism played a significant role in maintaining division (and crafting hegemony). In the midst of the state of siege, Guatemalan news outlets decried Luis Echeverría, then-presidential candidate for Mexico’s Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), and his campaign promise to build “a series of dams along the Usumacinta River,” a fluvial border between Chiapas/Tabasco, Mexico and Petén, Guatemala. One article stated: “No one doubts that the realization of those dams would greatly affect Guatemala, since they would flood significant portions of Petén, with grave consequences on the country’s future economic development.” Also mentioning: “Of course that this benefits them, but at the sacrifice of a substantial portion of Guatemalan lands.”²³ The pitting of Mexico’s national (capitalist) development against the lives of Guatemalans in Petén—one of the poorest and most “marginal” Guatemalan departments—reinforced national antagonism rooted in borderlands. Emphasizing how one country’s development negatively impacts another’s underscores the contentious encounter between different hegemonic apparatuses.²⁴ Another article portrayed the Usumacinta River as “the reserve for the future of the nation, GUATEMALA’S ONLY HOPE, the solution to our development shortcomings and the only truly resource-rich region [*única región en realidad pletórica de recursos naturales*]...” The article was titled “Will our Nation be defended?”²⁵

²² Ibid., 192.

²³ “México y sus Presas en el Usumacinta,” *Impacto*, April 15, 1970.

²⁴ Framing the border as a place of encounter follows geographers’ re-understanding of space as a place for heterogeneous coming together. I am interested in following this work—especially of re-framing colonization as a violent encounter, rather than a conquest—to understand the coloniality of territories, but also to give agency to local actors. I have much to develop in this regard.

²⁵ “Entrevista al Ingeniero Obiols: ¿Sera defendida nuestra Patria?” *Hora*, April 20, 1970 (uppercase in original).

Paradoxically, three days before the publication of the above article, the Guatemalan press celebrated the *first time* a Guatemalan president reached Petén by land. His visit was part of the inauguration of the first highway that connected Petén to the core of the nation, Guatemala City, and southern departments. A news report stated,

These two economies, a vigorous one in the Southern Coast and an aspiring one in the Northern Coast, are today, memorable date in the annals of the nation's history, thoroughly connected by this highway...which [has] suddenly become the *last link in the chain of our Guatemalan nationality*. Given such, its naming of Tikal is expected, a glorious symbol of progress in the annals of pre-Columbian civilizations in the American continent...²⁶

A combination of modern national development—with colonizing undertones—alongside an appeal to “pre-colonial civilizations” advances the construction of Guatemalan identity and territory; despite the fact that until April 1970, Petén was largely inaccessible, it quickly became integrated to the imagination of a singular national (ladino) identity through developmentalist and culturalist discourse.²⁷ A land of future modernity, preceded by great civilizations, Petén was presented as the essence of Guatemala. From the margins of the nation, therefore, emanated a nationalist call for territorial pride—a border department became a central actor in the construction of nationalism and territoriality.

The example of Petén utilized simultaneously as a way of claiming Guatemalan heritage and evoking Guatemalan nationalism against Mexico demonstrates how the mobilization of

²⁶ “Primer Presidente del País Llega al Petén,” *Imparcial*, April 17, 1970 (emphasis mine).

²⁷ This “identity” largely ignored the significant indigenous populations in northern Guatemala. The centering of Petén in national discourse also entailed an erasure of its indigenous communities. This neglect for indigenous groups precedes the genocide of Mayan groups across Guatemalan territory in the years to come—proof that such erasure was not without consequence.

resource-based nationalism during times of political instability in Guatemala reified the perception of the Mexican Other. It also demonstrates the concomitant strength and weakness of state hegemony in borders. Regardless of Petén's considerable distance from the capital and its weak state presence, it became central to nationalist discourses bent on naturalizing this territory as a unified part of a whole. Nationalist discourses were less interested in the actual development of Petén and more focused on the imagined potential of national territory. This potential was a key component of nationalism during this period: "El Petén has made many dream and there will be many Guatemalans who will want to go to it, feeling it so close now [*sabiéndolo ya tan cercano*]. There will also be those who see an unexploited center of production and decide to use their energy on colonizing enterprises."²⁸ Such language of colonization served to vent the frustrations created by uncontrolled violence throughout the country. Instead of focusing on the violence in the interior, a tangible and immediate problem for Guatemalans, a distant entity was used as a rallying point of unification on what it meant to be Guatemalan. Significantly, the same article states:

Unfortunately... Petén continues to be boxed-in by the southern states of Mexico and Belize. Anyone who has been in Petén cannot help but feel its need to a maritime outlet. Even with the newly built highway connection, the department is in a jail that imprisons it. Beyond the bars of Belize is that part that so naturally belongs to it [Petén] that it feels like an amputated member. [*Tras las rejas de Belice está esa parte tan suya que es como un miembro que le hubiera sido amputado.*]²⁹

²⁸ "La Ruta a El Petén al Fin Hecha Realidad," *Gráfico*, April 18, 1970.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

Petén's underdevelopment is attributed to the Other. Borders "jail" Petén by depriving it of access to sea—thus preventing it from realizing its economic destiny. Mexico and Belize squeeze Petén. Belize is presented as a natural extension to Guatemalan territory, significant given Guatemala's claim over Belize, still ongoing.³⁰ Belize is presented as something that needs to disappear in order for Guatemala to be truly "free." While the author hypes Petén's potential for Guatemala, its "underdevelopment" is attributed to its placement between Mexico and Belize, feeding into imaginings of colonization and its benefits. Notwithstanding, developmentalist ambitions in Petén were not based on sizeable state-backed projects, rather, they were fueled by imaginations of what could be in the future.

Cold War Nationalism and Cross-Border Ideology

In the midst of the April 1970 state of siege, Cold War discourses played into the construction of borders and the push for (capitalist) development. The construction of Guatemalan hegemony (along with the state's distinction between state and nonstate violence) occurred and was influenced by Cold War anti-communist discourses. Guatemala was not excluded from Cold War hysteria and discussions of fearmongering and portrayal of "Marxist dominance" within and without the nation. In the midst of a battle for ideological dissemination and domination, the border played a significant geopolitical role in relation to the transference of ideology: borders became places where nationalist dogmas reached their territorial limitations, opening the possibilities for the circulation of counter-nationalist ideas. Fear of the encroachment by the Other exposed the "anxieties" around "the fading strength or importance of nation-state sovereignty" outlined by Wendy Brown.³¹ Inability to stem the flow of leftwing

³⁰ In fact, 1970 included much discourse around Guatemala's "ownership" of Belize. This topic is not the focus of this paper, but is nonetheless significant in the conversation of borders in Central America.

³¹ Brown, *Walled States*, 44.

ideology exposed the weakness of the state while simultaneously exacerbating nationalist discourses portraying a closed, safe Guatemala.

Cold War antagonisms contributed to the spatialization of borders by highlighting an international threat that had to cross borders in order to spread. At the same time as nationalism was mobilized to enforce the border in Petén, Guatemalan columnist Andres del Val accused President Méndez Montenegro of sympathizing with Marxism—*vulgo comunismo*—and of having the same “morals” as the “red spies and gunmen” who participate in the “kidnapping and death of any foreign official.” According to the author, the violence and uncertainty in the country “form part of the Marxist program of dividing free nations through distrust and dissidence. Now, Marxism tries to subdivide the world to unconnected compartments in order to conquer each...and triumph.”³² Nationalism, thus, was injected with anti-Marxism in public discourse, serving as a way to denounce violence in Guatemala as produced by radical leftwing groups. Samuel Truett tells us that in the crafting of state-centered histories “citizens are the legitimate bearers of history, and enemies of the state haunt the frontiers of the body politic like forces of nature, taunting the narrative logic of the nation.”³³ Steering away from any serious analysis of exploitative social structures, the author of the article equates Marxist mobilizations as the reason for instability nationwide, calling for an end to this nation-threatening ideology.

Here is also a symbolic, not insignificant, appeal to borders. The “program of dividing free nations” undertaken by “Marxists”—a blanket term the author never further defines in the piece—implies an awareness of borders and boundaries among and within nations. Though borders are not directly addressed, equating freedom of nations to anti-Marxism sets the

³² Andrés de Val, “El Yo Acuso, de un Emigrado,” *Prensa*, April 14, 1970.

³³ Samuel Truett, *Fugitive Landscapes: The Forgotten History of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*, (New Haven, Yale, 2008), 5.

foundation for a generalizing critique of popular subversion as incompatible with the nation's freedom and state hegemony. In pointing out the international aspect of this—"among free nations"—borders become central spaces through which "subversive" ideology is spread to other nations, and thus spaces that must be policed, if not physically (due to lack of resources, etcetera), discursively. This explains Guatemalans' outcry for Mexico to revise its asylum policy and stop providing safe haven to guerrillas: "Von Spreti's blood, the pain of the great German nation, and the consternation of Guatemala will not have been in vain if Mexico elevates itself to a dignified height...and expressly declares the end of refuge to communists who want to make a colony of America."³⁴ If borders are closed to guerrillas, the state can more efficiently eliminate ideological opposition and stabilize territory to bring it under its control. In doing so, assertion of hegemony is facilitated by eliminating elements of contentiousness. Discursive and military deployments defending national territory were responses to the anxiety of unfinished state consolidation. Those who opposed the ideological terrain upon which state hegemony was constructed were considered disruptions and challenges to the imagined nation.

April 1970 and the State's Fixation on Space

April 1970 in Guatemala exemplifies why border-making requires much more than dedicating resources to building the dividing line. In order to understand the processes that motivate border-making, one needs to understand the ways the nation is built around a homogeneous character—in this case, an anti-communist, pro-development ideology—by those with/in power. Doubtlessly, such discourse contributed to the construction of Guatemala's "imagined community"—one that required constant defending from deviant and contaminating

³⁴ "Limitación al Derecho de Asilo," *Prensa Libre*, April 14, 1970.

agents.³⁵ However, centering the state's attempts to govern the margins reveals the contingency of the border line, the inability to control it, and the relentless importance it carried in the state's pursuit of legitimization. *Estado de sitio* itself refers to immobility, being situated in a fixed place—an attempt to stabilize national territory. State hegemony, then, was inherently challenged as it was destabilized by the very existence of the border.

Land borders present nations with the existence of the Other, a central characteristic that pushed the Guatemalan state to deploy its power to control the region, whether through military presence, fearmongering of untethered Mexican development, or criticism of Mexican asylum policy. The border revealed the anxiety created by the weakness of the Guatemalan state and, in an attempt to ameliorate this anxiety, pushed the state to place space in siege. An ineffective, yet symbolic action.

In the following section, I center the margins of the nation to present a holistic perspective on nation-building and state-formation that demonstrates how hegemony was imagined and enacted in the periphery in the latter part of 1970. Shifting away from the state of siege, this section builds on state attempts to fix territory by exploring the Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas (CILA) between Mexico and Guatemala and its duty to map and maintain the border line despite the unruliness of the Suchiate river.

³⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (Verso, New York, 1983).

Mapping the Border

The Comisión Internacional de Límites y Aguas (CILA), a binational agency at the border of Mexico and Guatemala, was created in 1961, in direct response to the deteriorating condition of monuments demarcating the border. In 1970, recounting CILA's functions, Guatemala's minister of foreign relations described: "its functions are to advise both countries' governments on border line matters and to decide which works need to be built in any part of the border line, terrestrial or fluvial, and to oversee such constructions to guarantee that the rights of both countries are not infringed."³⁶ CILA was the body in charge of maintaining the physicality of the border line. Structured binationally, its implicit role was to balance internal nation building and state development with preoccupations of territorial limits and limitations. Both nations had a CILA branch with its respective commissioners, engineers, and surveyors. In times of state-backed capitalist development in Mexico and ongoing violence in Guatemala, the implied role of this institution was to balance the interests of two states and their respective hegemony and nation-building processes while maintaining cordial transnational (local and regional) relations. As an institution preoccupied with border maintenance, its role simultaneously required knowledge of local geographies of power and of central governments' demands and visions for the border (and, by extension, the nation).

This section delves into CILA correspondence from 1970 to understand the role this binational institution played in (attempts toward) stabilizing border geographies to "protect" and uphold the myth of natural national territory. As a two-state institution charged with the maintenance of the border, its position required cognizance of transnational, national, regional and local social relations. Scientifically approved approaches were a premise of CILA

³⁶ Archivo SRE, leg. 368, exp. 7.

communications: from the perspective of officials, the border line was bound to exist, their job was to figure out *how* to manipulate space in order to achieve this. CILA personnel sought to meet their objective by producing cartographic material and photographs that translated as state-accepted representations of space, which they would use to create projects for border stabilization. Speaking on the role maps played into the construction of postcolonial Mexico, Raymond Craib writes: “National maps did not simply imagine the nation-state into existence, but they did function as a means through which such an object could be more effectively imagined, propagated, and circulated...”³⁷ CILA maps achieved similar tasks. They created visual representations of borders which translated into limits of belonging based on nationality. In doing so, they normalized political boundaries, legitimized their existence, and worked to present the border as a stable, static geography. Supplementing maps, photographs of the border taken by CILA personnel achieved similar tasks: they presented a snapshot of the border, demonstrating its qualities and positing them as predictable, familiar, and timeless. These two materials underwrote the naturalization and stabilization of the border.

Cartographic and photographic material did not immediately spatialize borderlands. Nonetheless, as I show, they provided tremendous *potential* power. Maps produced by CILA were binationally accepted, meaning they were materials that *could* be used to settle territorial disputes between states, local people, and anything else in between. Therefore, the production of these maps, which were accepted by both nations, legitimized the state’s power over territory at the same time as it exposed the vulnerability of territorial fixation. An analysis on CILA, therefore reveals the subjectivities, masked in positivism, that constructed the border, literally and metaphorically.

³⁷ Raymond Craib, *Cartographic Mexico: A History of State Fixations and Fugitive Landscapes*, (Durham, Duke, 2004), 9.

In mid-September of 1970, Fernando Sosa López, chief engineer of CILA's Mexican section, sent a report to Carlos Molina Rodríguez, Executive Member of the Grijalva Commission, updating him on seven ongoing "defense projects"—*obras de defensa*, or *defensas*—conducted in August 1970 along the Suchiate River. The report included updates on the amount of materials used for the defenses, the progress made, and a map showing the positions of the defenses. Defenses were structures built into the river with the purpose of controlling and stabilizing its flow and course. Since the Suchiate partially demarcates the border between Mexico and Guatemala, fixing the river's direction was a matter of national territoriality—any deviation could threaten jurisdictional differences on both sides. The September report's contents were part of a longer effort to contain the river's flow; an attempt to tame space.

The map (figure 1) depicts the Suchiate southwest of Tapachula, near its outlet to the Pacific Ocean. In depicting the construction of river defenses along the Suchiate, it attempted to represent space across time: the mapped portion of the river was accompanied by time markers for different months of 1970. The purpose of these markers was to show the progress made on the defenses after each month. Additionally, three shades of dark blue demonstrated how far along each defense was: finished, in the first phase of construction, or in the second phase of construction. Thus, the map contained an attempt to embed time onto a static image. Absent, however, were the ways in which the river's course changed over time—the river's margins were static, even though the margins' changeability were the central reason these structures were constructed. Only the defenses provided a dynamic, changeable nature.

Such maps catered to state officials. Not meant for popular reference, surveyors and mapmakers created a representation of the border to officials far from it. Contrary to the role

national maps played in nation-building outlined by Raymond Craib, this map is not a representation of homogeneous national territory; rather, it depicts a point of transnational

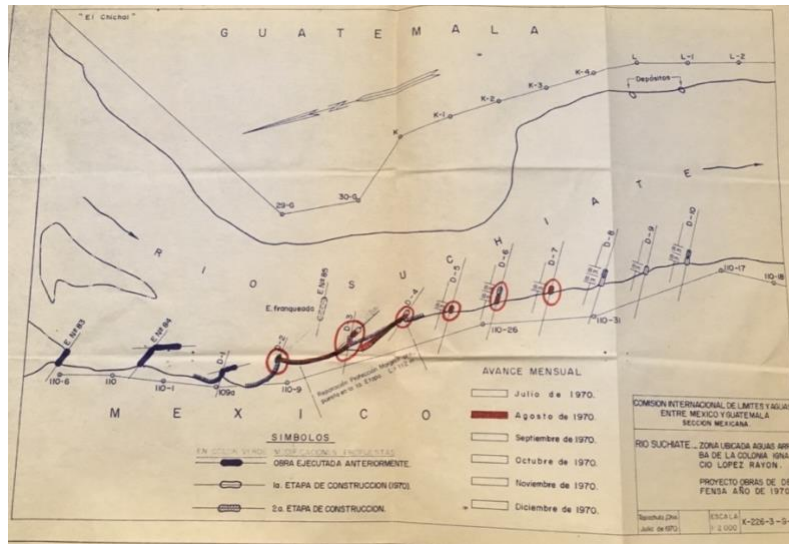


Figure 1. Rio Suchiate – Zona ubicada aguas arriba de la Colonia Ignacio López Rayón.
 Archivo de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores.

junction. However, there are significant similarities to national maps. According to Craib, “Mundane activities such as exploration and surveying assumed paramount importance: the information they provided would help produce the kind of mapped, official knowledge so essential to the effective rule of disparate regions.”³⁸ The act of surveying and mapping allowed the state to *see* its territory, even where its presence was weak. Importantly, such visualizations were taking place at a fluvial border. Because of its fluidity, the state sought to tame the Suchiate: to stabilize its flow and make it predictable to the nation-state. Craib elaborates: maps provided “foreign investors eager to see an image *representative* of the political stability and spatial predictability necessary for profitable investment.”³⁹ Stabilization of the border was connected to a larger project of capitalist development that necessitated assurances of steady

³⁸ Ibid., 9.

³⁹ Ibid., 9, emphasis in original.

profits. The production of maps filled this need. Delineating progressions of river containment signaled an ability to survey space and make it invariable. This, in turn, produced a sense of stability and legitimacy for the state and its officials: by examining the condition of the defenses, officials felt able to minimize the changeability of national territory at the margins. The project of building defenses itself was an attempt, if illusory, for stability.

The mapping of the Suchiate also functioned to wrest away power from local individuals with localized knowledge—situated knowledge—of landscapes along the Suchiate. Doubtlessly, border residents on either side of the river possessed situated knowledge—what Craib refers to as “deeply contextualized understandings acquired of specific regions and localities”—but the creation of cartographic materials by CILA personnel (and their own development of situated knowledge in the process) displaced the validity of local knowledges and gave authority to scientific and methodic representations of space.⁴⁰ The impact this shift had is substantial. Occurring throughout years, CILA’s mapmaking re-configured power relations at the border. It gained legitimacy as a body that could produce binationally accepted representations of border space, i.e. maps. The importance in this lay in land disputes; material produced by CILA could be used to settle land claims, trumping any other form of localized cartographic knowledge/production.

In October of 1970, Martín Prado Vélez, Guatemalan Commissioner for CILA, wrote to Armando Trueba Quevedo, an employee in the Mexican section of CILA, about a land dispute between a Guatemalan national, Angel Pérez Calderón, and his unnamed Mexican counterparts. Pérez’ *finca* extended into Mexico, according to Mexicans who invaded his lands and took control over the crops. Prado, CILA’s highest ranked member in Guatemala, denied these

⁴⁰ Ibid., 11.

allegations and urged Trueba to “open an investigation and correct any anomalies that might exist.”⁴¹ Trueba’s response was disappointing. In it, Trueba highlighted his lack of power in related matters: “[The Mexican Ministry of Foreign Relations] has recommended that I only intervene in matters related to the commission [CILA]” and not in “land disputes, invasions, contraband, etc.”⁴² The latter matters would be left to a higher authority—“*la Superioridad*”—who would decide the handling of the case. Trueba’s response did not make reference to a map, nor did it provide a concrete solution. However, it is all but certain that by *Superioridad* he referred to the Mexico City-based Ministry of Foreign Relations, overseer of CILA. Trueba’s response made a local matter a state matter; now, because of situated knowledge produced by CILA surveyors, officials in Mexico City had the tools, the power, to mediate and decide on conflicts at the margins. Trueba promised Prado that he would talk to his superiors about possible courses of action, though archival documents did not present a resolution to this exchange.

Trueba’s reference to the state as the arbiter legitimized state power at the margin, even if state presence there was minimal. It also points to the *potential* power of CILA border maps. They *could* be used as determining evidence in land disputes. Craib explains, about 19th century maps of Veracruz, “...as disputants increasingly sought recourse from the federal government, the very process of clarification legitimated state power and provided federal officials with the images, documents, and information necessary to imprint their authority.”⁴³ Map-making, then, became a way for the state to claim power at the margins. CILA was an institution charged with surveying and mapping the border between Mexico and Guatemala, but in conducting these

⁴¹ Archivo SRE, leg. 366, exp. 1.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Craib, *Cartographic Mexico*, 201.

duties, they reified the state and legitimized it at the margins. The portrayal of stable and predictable geographies (and the construction of river defenses for this purpose) contributed to this legitimization.

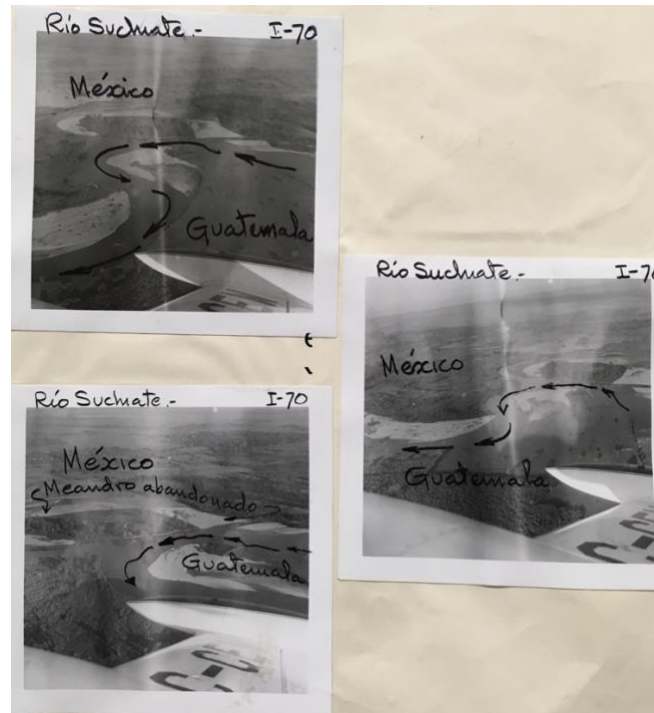


Figure 2. Informe Fotográfico del Río Suchiate, aguas abajo de la Colonia La Libertad, México y Limoncitos, Guatemala. Archivo de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores.

Maps were not the only mediums used to visualize the border. Reconnaissance flights were common ways for CILA personnel to produce other representations. In a flight conducted in January 1970, nine images were taken of a border region close to Colonia Ignacio López Rayón. The objective was to photograph a river meander—*meandro*—that “suffered substantial modifications in the previous rain season.”⁴⁴ Fernando Sosa and Carlos Molina were on the flight and captured photographs of the meander (figure 2), which Sosa sent to Luis Cabrera, the Mexican Commissioner to CILA. The photographs stand out for the superimposed writing on

⁴⁴ IMG 7115

them denoting which side of the river is Mexico and which is Guatemala. Additionally, the direction of river flow is noted, adding a sense of movement to the image. In the photograph on the bottom left the words “meandro abandonado” appear. The words and arrows added (presumably by Sosa) alter the image’s meaning substantially, effortlessly assigning meaning to space. The portrayal of the river as damaged—“*suffered* substantial modifications”—, instead of recognizing that rivers are fluid and changing bodies, reifies the idea that it must be fixed: fixed from the “damage” caused by heavy rains, but also fixed in space, unmovable. The attempt to bring the flow of the river under control mirrors efforts to “simplify and codify a landscape of overlapping jurisdictions and use rights, of ambiguous borders”—the work that CILA members were assigned to do.⁴⁵ The river, however, had its own plan. It is hard to dispute Craib’s conclusion on surveyors’ attempts to map Veracruz in the late 19th century: “At those moments, the land must have appeared as more than merely unknown: it must have seemed almost fugitive, as if it were an accomplice in a larger conspiracy undermining their efforts.”⁴⁶ The Suchiate contained similar elements: it seemed fugitive to surveyors constantly trying to bring its course under control.

Images also demonstrate the state’s limitations in maintaining the border. Superimposed writing, photographs that fail to offer a broader visualization of defense projects, and people holding sticks to denote the depth of the river (see Figure 3) challenge notions of a uniform and well-funded process of border creation. This is not to say that the process used to shape the border was illegitimate; rather, lack of procedural uniformity highlights the variability of border fabrication across different geographies. The tools needed to “properly” (i.e. scientifically)

⁴⁵ Craib, *Cartographic Mexico*, 57.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

measure the depth of the river, for example, would have proved useless in places where the border was not marked by a river—thus highlighting the flexibility and fluidity, required of

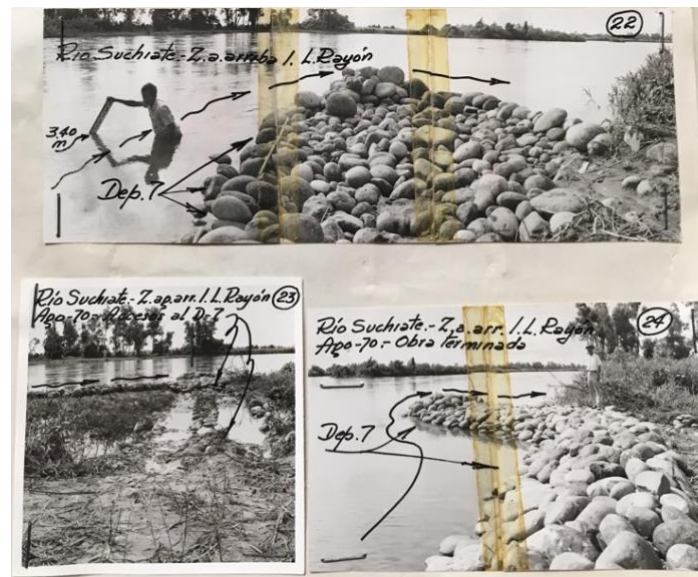


Figure 3. Informe Fotográfico del Río Suchiate, aguas arriba de la Colonia Ignacio López Rayón, fotografías 22, 23 y 24. Archivo de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores.

surveyors and personnel building defenses. In their state-sanctioned act toward stability and predictability, they required flexibility. This brings to light a central paradox in border and state production: stability and quiescence demand constant and perpetual action. Border maps and images, especially those of the Suchiate, embody this tension. In their fixed state, they are illusory representations of successful state fixations, meanwhile the border regularly required upkeep—that is, it required state power to gain legitimacy.

Border formation, then, required visual evidence as part of a broader project of fixation. While periodicals' evocation of nationalism served a powerful goal of nation-building, the physical construction of the border needed to be visually represented in order to ensure the existence of such division. Maps and photographs granted access to state officials, near and far, of the borderscape—a glimpse into the edges of national sovereignty.

These materials are part of a larger archive of maps and photographs used to survey the border by state actors. While their (indirect) purpose was to create an archive of state power—of documents the state could resort to for the mediation of disputes, with the state as the arbiter—that is not the end of the story. The border was a place where state hegemony began and ended; a place of differential jurisdictions. Differential because of two meeting nations, but also because of its marginal position, away from the state, open to local forms of power. The implicit work of CILA was to re-organize the border region around the state; that is, to centralize the state at the margins. Intra and supra-national objectives were at play in the construction of border defenses (the taming of the Suchiate), the creation of maps outlining the desired border, and the general surveillance of territory. These different geopolitical preoccupations made the border a place of politics, not exclusively internal *or* external (i.e., foreign policy, etcetera), rather both had to be simultaneously balanced. Stability and predictability were essential in the state's claim to power at the border. Because of the Suchiate's fluidity and fugitivity, the work to fix it in space was always at risk of collapsing. Samuel Truett's work on the Mexico-U.S. borderlands lends a hand in this: border landscapes are "fugitive not only because [they resist] efforts to fix and police territory, but also because in [their] unsettled condition [they] represented an ambiguous, shifting blank space" in the minds of state and subject.⁴⁷ These dynamics made the border a hyper-politically contentious space. More so than national centers of power, like Mexico City and Guatemala City. The border's position at the edge of the nation exposed the state's perpetual attempts to consolidate and become the legitimate exerciser of power—unraveling the illusion of stability and authority created elsewhere in each country.

⁴⁷ Truett, *Fugitive Landscapes*, 37.

Presidentialist (Non)Border Politics

While CILA personnel worked constantly to uphold the border, prominent Mexican powerholders—most notably president(s)—did not directly manage or conduct border matters.⁴⁸ The border with Guatemala was not only geographically, but also politically, marginal. Thus, the state actors involved in “defending” the Suchiate and maintaining the border—surveyors, cartographers, engineers, and bureaucrats alike—were working relatively distant from the executive’s purview. This did not mean, however, that the work carried out by CILA—as well as the discourse intended to differentiate between belonging and exclusion to the nation—was peripheral to nation-making. The opposite. It was work that represented, created, and reproduced state hegemony at the margins—it required a consensus of the distribution of land that, in the case of Mexico, was settled in the post-revolutionary years with the creation of *ejidos* and modified while the state reconsidered ways to maintain high levels of development achieved in the post-World War II period.

Héctor Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer note that “[After 1940] nationalism, democracy, and social justice were the ideological supports of the legitimacy of the contemporary Mexican political system.”⁴⁹ Craib nuances this analysis by noting that the *ejido* “constituted the means by which to create new relationships of reciprocity and dependency between the state and rural cultivators.”⁵⁰ The *ejido*, then, was the medium through which “nationalism, democracy, and social justice” were simultaneously embodied—a reconceptualization of space as product and reproducer of the revolution’s values. However, by

⁴⁸ Historians Lorenzo Meyer and Héctor Aguilar Camín delineate how the executive branch came out of the Mexican Revolution as the central arbiter of power across the nation. Mexican presidentialism entailed making states subject to the executive branch—centralizing national power around the current president and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

⁴⁹ Héctor Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer, *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution: Contemporary Mexican History, 1910-1989*, (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1996), 189-190.

⁵⁰ Craib, *Cartographic Mexico*, 219.

1970, post-revolutionary momentum was dimming as the “Mexican miracle” hurdled into a new era. Aguilar Camín and Meyer categorize the years following 1968 as the “‘Mexican transition,’ a transition of historical importance that renewed the debate on the duration and the destiny of the political and institutional system derived from the social pact that we know as the Mexican Revolution.”⁵¹ This transition, brought about by the so-called rebellions of modernity, posed an existential threat to the status quo, political and economic—a juncture that was created by grassroots inconformity with an authoritarian political system with limited social freedoms.

Understanding the political climate of 1970, and the way it is historicized, sheds light on how the border was (not) envisioned during this tumultuous political juncture. Aguilar and Meyer argue:

...we might say Tlatelolco killed the continuity of Mexico’s modernization, an alternative to generational transmittal. It represented the clash between an immobile and monolithic political and social sensibility—which hung onto the empty models of national unity and a provincial veneration of national symbols—and the fresh and unbending witnesses to a denationalized and dependent reality, suffering from a rapid process of neocolonial transculturation, who were extraordinarily sensitive to the causes and symbols that were their contemporaries.⁵²

The post-Tlatelolco political crisis disrupted the post-revolutionary consensus—it laid bare the contradictions of Mexican one-party rule and its undemocratic foundations. Rapid development—especially after the 1940s—was contained by a stable, “monolithic,” political system; a stable enclosure upon which development, nation-building, and state-

⁵¹ Aguilar Camín and Meyer, *In the Shadow*, 199.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 201-202.

formation/consolidation—all processes involving substantial change and/or instability—were to take place. But, as Aguilar and Meyer argue, by 1968 the established political system was unfit to co-opt the rising generation. Thus, consensus—state hegemony—needed to reclaim itself⁵³:

Over the scars imposed by that anachronism, a new attempt of the revolutionary regime would emerge in the 1970s to update its ideological baggage, open the doors to the recognition of its accumulated inequalities and deformities, and regroup from above to create a new legitimacy, a new consensus, to revitalize the institutions and the discourse of the Mexican Revolution.⁵⁴

Herein lies a significant fact of this period: state legitimization required re-building consensus, a process that necessitated re-configurations of political, economic, and social relations so as to grant legitimacy to the state and ensure its retainment of power.⁵⁵ However, in their national history of post-revolutionary Mexico, they seldom mention Mexico's southern border—it is deemed a space of stability at best, and a peripheral space of non-change at worst. The only time something of the sort is mentioned is when they detail Mexico's Thirdworldist foreign policy of respect and cooperation with the Central American isthmus.

Thus, while southern Mexico—and Mexico's southern border—was left out of political discourse (and of historiography), its re-co-optation was inherently necessary to the rebuilding of consensus. Nation, state, and sovereignty require territoriality, and thus, the “Mexican transition” of which Aguilar and Meyer speak about entailed a modified relationship with space: the resource-rich South would be a place where development could take place in order to maintain

⁵³ Needless to say, this “reclamation” began violently on October 2, 1968, when Mexican military fired on mostly student protestors in Tlatelolco.

⁵⁴ Aguilar Camín and Meyer, *In the Shadow*, 202.

⁵⁵ This is a process that Aguilar and Meyer explore and detail in their book—though they explore this through the lens of traditional power holders: presidents, prominent politicians, and public figures. Their historiography is an example of the ways Mexican history is told through the eyes of powerful figures, faltering in questioning the foundations of such power (and the heterogeneous and fluctuating relations that reproduce it).

the vestiges of the Mexican miracle alive. The post-Tlatelolco break of national unity challenged the PRI government to provide a justification for their permanence in power, and the answer they provided was economic development and social welfare. Such context explains how presidentialism shifted its relationship with the South after 1968. The 1970 presidential campaign of Luis Echeverría provides a telling example of this shift.

Campaigning the Margins

The results of the 1970 presidential race were never under serious dispute, but the renewed interest in peripheral spaces marked a shift in formations of nationalism, perceptions of territoriality, and state-building compared to prior presidencies. The day after he was inaugurated as president, Luis Echeverría addressed a crowd of foreign diplomats and official guests who attended his inauguration. His intention was to outline the new regime's approach to foreign policy: an approach of peace and cooperation, especially among "underdeveloped" countries. But despite emphasizing Juárez' seemingly timeless "The respect of others is peace," Echeverría characterized a "civilized society" as "one that respects the rule of law, which posits human relations in equal groundings that [in times of conflict] prioritize reason after an impartial analysis."⁵⁶ Going on to state a cornerstone of what would be his foreign policy: "...weak states cannot impose norms in international life; but they are better positioned to arbitrate than global powers" in times of conflict.⁵⁷

Notably, this thirdworldist foreign policy would seek to increase Mexico's influence in Central America through acts of cooperation and collaboration. It was not unprecedented. In early 1970, during his presidential campaign, Echeverría visited Chiapas, a campaign tour where

⁵⁶ Carpeta AGN 1970, IMG 4831

⁵⁷ Ibid.

he underscored his commitment to the southern state, as well as Mexico's southern neighbors.⁵⁸ A January 7 news article stated that Echeverría would send "cordial regards to the sister republics south of the Suchiate."⁵⁹ Another two articles praised Echeverría's presence in Chiapas, saying that he would "listen to all residents of Soconusco" and also give an opportunity to "the Chiapanecan woman [sic] to communicate her problems and reiterate her revolutionary militancy" for Echeverría and the PRI.⁶⁰ Another article was more explicit, characterizing Echeverría's visit as a "return of hope" for projects of development in Chiapas.⁶¹ The clear message was: the attention of Echeverría was in Chiapas, not only for electoral purposes (though undoubtedly the campaign cycle played a substantial role in getting the candidate there), but also to find terrains upon which the dimming "Mexican miracle" could be rekindled: a resource-rich, relatively unexploited state.⁶² (Throughout his campaign, he also promised to build hydroelectric dams throughout Chiapas, other southern states, and along the Usumacinta River which borders Guatemala, to which many Guatemalan officials and journalists protested.)

In post-revolutionary and post-Tlatelolco Mexico, state legitimacy was severely damaged. Echeverría's strategy demonstrates an attempt to consolidate the margins—that is, bring them under the control of the state—in order to govern legitimately in the center. The expansion to the south, a marginal region even compared to the north of Mexico, was a move to

⁵⁸ Looking at Echeverría's thirdworldism reveals that he saw his administration in a position to "help" Central American nations—exposing hierarchical geopolitical power relations. It is also the closest he came, in 1970, to speaking about Mexico's southern border and its southern neighbors. Thus, in this section I outline how the border and foreign policy were central to the consolidation of Mexican state hegemony in a time of political crisis.

⁵⁹ 7 enero 1970, IPS, "La Tribuna" (AGN, carpeta 1970)

⁶⁰ 10 enero 1970, "La Tribuna" (AGN, carpeta 1970) & 16 enero 1970, IPS, "Diario Popular Es" (AGN, carpeta 1970)

⁶¹ 1 febrero 1970, "La Tribuna" (AGN, carpeta 1970)

⁶² In the mid-1970s, toward the end of the Echeverría presidency, vast oil deposits were discovered in southern Mexico, making way for raw commodity-led development, especially in a time of high oil prices. This situation highlights both the lack of exploration in Mexico's south and also how state officials sought out the region to ameliorate slowing development.

stymie opposition by demonstrating potential for capitalist development. Thus, similar to the formation of the *ejido*, but not at all in the same scale, the “Mexican transition” was embodied in the changing economic relations of the South. A re-configuration of modes of production in Chiapas—which also entailed a re-configuration of spatial dynamics—was rapidly enacted, impacting long-standing peasant and indigenous communities and their relations to space. Therefore, the unraveling of the *ejido*, at least in Chiapas, occurred legally in the 1990s, but has roots in Echeverría’s approach to the region.

However, such approach to space also had reverberations across borders. As discussed above, Guatemalan media reacted to Echeverría’s promises to build dams along the Usumacinta River by claiming it a violation of Guatemalan sovereignty and invoking resource-nationalism as a way to decry the proposals. At the same time, Echeverría was sending “cordial regards” to Guatemala and attempting to (seemingly unilaterally) foster amicable foreign relations. Once again, such difference was grounded in territoriality and nationalism: the border disarmed Echeverría’s attempt to legitimize a homogeneous Mexican state at the border. His proposed dams at the Usumacinta were part of a consensus-building developmentalist process in Mexico, but they were challenged by (and exclusive from) the existence of a different consensus/state, that of Guatemala. Echeverría’s thirdworldism, then, was less an effort to actually engage with other nations to build international unity, and more an attempt to consolidate and normalize his domestic agenda in a Mexico with multiplicitous and severe dissent. Never mind that his government systematically engaged in a Dirty War against domestic political dissidents: as long as his international policy was one of friendliness and (vapid) support, his government could claim the legitimacy needed to rule domestically and, importantly, to restore the trust to the PRI.

Such situation exemplifies the importance of the border in the construction of consensus and state legitimacy. Chiapas, a border state, is at once central in Echeverría's developmentalist agenda, while also simultaneously embodying the spatial contradictions in consensus building. As Chiapas became more Mexican, the border with Guatemala became more contentious and divisive.⁶³ The border, then, and its surrounding region was a central space in the re-branding of Mexican presidentialism post-1968. It was an essential geography for the state to control as it tried to explicate its existence. It was also a geography that, when examined closely, exposed the contradictions and the shortcomings of the state—and as long as these were kept out of the limelight, the state (and its main power holder/broker) could create the illusion of national territorial unity in order to enact its agenda.

Understanding presidentialist politics in Mexico during 1970 sheds light on how power was managed on a national scale (both through presidential campaigns and different regimes). The executive, as the main power holder/broker, is a significant point of reference in understanding this historical period. However, centering the executive requires following traditional understandings of history that silence subaltern voices. In researching the Mexico-Guatemala border's impact on nation-making and state-building, it is necessary to first center the space and discourse that constructs and reproduces such divide, and then to understand the ways power operates on a broader, national level. Only through such approach can we begin to gauge the contradictions involved in border-making and nation-state construction.

⁶³ To say that Chiapas became "more Mexican" is both an acknowledgement of the Mexican state's expansion to the margins and of the nationalism (cast under "national unity") involved in bringing Chiapas into the control of the Mexican state.

Conclusion

Historicizing power and state-formation through borders requires a didactic approach. Border-making itself is a multi-pronged, multi-scalar process. At its core, it involves a homogenizing force (the nation-state) imposing certain relations to space on its subjects. Given the proximity to other nation-states, it also involves claiming and re-claiming space to make it national (i.e., Mexican or Guatemalan). In part, centering the borders demands exposing the contradictions upon which state hegemony is built. Doing such, in this case, involves gauging how space is controlled and homogenized by national governments—and creating a history that de-centers traditional spaces and holders of power.

Mexican and Guatemalan historiography of the 1970s rarely examines borders. This work is a step toward bridging that gap, but also a claim that we cannot understand state formation without understanding the margins. These geographies present the contradictions and shortfalls of nation and state building—the absurdity of and perseverance toward homogeneity. Doreen Massey urges us to reimagine “things as processes [which is] necessary for the reconceptualization of places in a way that might challenge exclusivist localisms based on claims of some eternal authenticity.”⁶⁴ While the construction of nationalism in Guatemala and the Suchiate’s malleability are testaments of such “things” utilized as justifications for exclusivist claims, understanding borders as processes leads us to apply the same thinking for the nation-state. One cannot exist without the other, yet they are perceived as static, unmovable structures: change can happen within the state, but only if the margins are stable. This exposes hegemony’s simultaneous strength and vulnerability and reveals anxieties of territorial control in borders. Guatemala’s state of siege and CILA work along the border demonstrate how state hegemony,

⁶⁴ Massey, *For Space*, 15.

always in the process of becoming, was vigorously pursued by national governments. This, in turn, exhibited the border's hyper-political nature. Similarly, Mexican presidentialism required stable and predictable foundations upon which it could re-brand itself during a time of political crisis. The margins were seen as a territory to control in order to build a post-Tlatelolco consensus were the PRI was fighting to justify its permanence in power. Nationwide state hegemony (and internationally through a thirdworldist foreign policy) was impossible to achieve without spatial stability in borders.

In engaging with these three times and spaces, I show the contingency of nation-building well after the post-independence period, to expose the contradictions of state hegemony at the border and to demonstrate the contingent relations upon which the nation-state is founded. To look at the border means to look at the anxieties that arise with attempts to control national space and classify it as homogeneous—an ambitious and impossible task.

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