

Contents

List of Illustrations	<i>viii</i>
Acknowledgments	<i>ix</i>
List of Abbreviations	<i>xiii</i>
Introduction	<i>i</i>
1. Revolution and Stasis in Oaxaca, 1876–1928	22
2. The Caudillo and the State, 1928–34	42
3. The Rise of Cardenismo and the Decline of Chicolopismo, 1932–36	76
4. The Politics of Cardenismo, 1936–40	107
5. Cárdenas’s Caciques, 1936–40	135
6. Politics and Socioeconomic Reform, 1936–40	194
7. The Problems with Cardenista Politics and the Rise of the Urban Social Movement, 1940–44	241
8. The Rise and Fall of Edmundo Sánchez Cano, 1944–47	289
9. The Vallistocracia Governor, 1947–50	328
10. The Short Reign of Manuel Mayoral Heredia, 1950–52	362
Conclusion	402
Notes	415
Bibliography	495
Index	535

Introduction

On 24 January 1947, a week after Edmundo Sánchez Cano was deposed as governor of Oaxaca, a pressure group called the Alianza-Revolucionaria-Oaxaqueña published an open letter to President Miguel Alemán Valdés. The dispatch stated that since the Revolution, the state had failed to assert any measure of control over Oaxaca. The national party was nonexistent. Worker and peasant organizations remained autonomous. Successive state governments had eschewed national ideological programs and instead based their meager power on combinations of nepotism, *caciquismo* (bossism), and a handful of state employees.¹ Five years later, during another successful popular movement to remove the incumbent governor, the Oaxaca academic Enrique Othon Díaz wrote a series of articles in the national press titled “The Enigma of Oaxaca.” The articles claimed that Oaxaca was “not a state, like the other states of the republic.” Its sheer ethnic, political, and geographic diversity had prevented “traditional ties and common bonds.” Instead, various regions operated entirely independent of the state capital. Commercial routes and ethnic links connected the Mixteca to the neighboring state of Puebla, the Costa Chica to Guerrero, the Isthmus to Chiapas, and Tuxtepec to Veracruz (map 1). He concluded that Oaxaca was “a dislocated and anemic political entity, more apparent than real, more in form than in deed.”²



MAP I. Mexico

INTRODUCTION

These two pessimistic estimations of the state's role in Oaxaca are borne out by the rapid marshaling of some quantitative data relating to what Alan Knight has termed "the weight of the state."³ At the most prosaic level, the number of federal administrators in Oaxaca was low, even by Mexican standards. The 1940 census indicates that the state had less than 1 bureaucrat per 329 citizens compared to a national average of around 1 for every 176.⁴ These bureaucrats faced the most ethnically diverse state in Mexico, with sixteen indigenous groups and more than a hundred mutually unintelligible indigenous dialects.⁵ The state's communications network, which might have favored political and economic integration, was notoriously poor. The economist Moises de la Peña claimed it was "the worst in Mexico."⁶ Despite the persistence of a few unreliable railway lines and the construction of the Pan-American Highway, travel was still predominantly by mule, horse, or foot. As a result, tax collection was also notoriously difficult. In 1950 in Oaxaca, state taxes per head of population were around seven pesos per year or the lowest per capita rate in Mexico. In 1947 Oaxaca produced only 2.2 percent of the country's tax revenue. Furthermore, tax collection was completely uneven. Nine of Oaxaca's thirty fiscal districts contributed over 90 percent of the state's taxes.⁷ Although grinding poverty obviously kept duties low, the general hostility of both rural and urban inhabitants to federal, state, or even municipal taxation compounded the problem for the handful of fiscal agents. In Aldous Huxley's account of his travels in Oaxaca during the early 1930s he described the goring of a local tax collector at the annual bull fight. On seeing the administrator drunk, bloody and prostrate, the crowd let out a "great shout of excitement." According to Huxley "the crowd had got what

INTRODUCTION

it wanted. This was good, this was very good indeed.”⁸ In fact, the state’s complete inability to penetrate many regions of Oaxaca is borne out by the deficiency of the census data. De la Peña stated that the 1930 census had covered only 49.5 percent of the surface area of the state, and the 1940 census had covered only 36.7 percent.⁹ Census takers repeatedly complained that indigenous communities failed to fill out forms, completed questionnaires incorrectly, or ran the administrators out of town. In 1940 one census taker working in the Costa Chica grumbled that during his stay in the region, he had been robbed twice and forcibly removed from three communities.¹⁰

However, despite the state’s political, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity and the general hostility of many to state interference, there is no doubt that the state did start to penetrate many regions of Oaxaca during the postrevolutionary period. Although Oaxaca often appeared to be a geographical and political anomaly, it was gradually subsumed into the national project of state formation. As in the rest of Mexico, successive politicians undertook the reconstruction of the state’s governmental apparatus and attempted to assert a measure of control over the Revolution’s bellicose caciques, obstreperous peasants, and radical workers. Despite Oaxaca’s relative isolation, between 1920 and 1952 national leaders and local elites enacted a series of political deals, mass mobilizations, military repressions, and institutional changes, which brought about an end to periodic outbreaks of revolutionary conflict and the beginning of the “miracle” of political stability and economic growth. Nevertheless, these actions were not applied in an integrated, homogeneous, or rigorous manner. At every level, political intermediaries negotiated, resisted, appropriated, or ignored the dictates of the central government.

INTRODUCTION

As a result, national policy reverberated through Oaxaca's local political networks in countless different ways and resulted in "the simultaneous forging of a multitude of regional arrangements."¹¹ It is this process of diffusion, politicking, and conflict that forms the basis of this book. By understanding the multivalent contradictions, fragmentations, and crises of the state formation at the regional level, it is possible to reconstruct a more realistic appreciation of the national project.

Over the past century, three successive generations of historians, sociologists, and political scientists have attempted to construct models of state formation according to their visions of the contemporary Mexican political system. In broad terms, they can be described as pluralist, revisionist, and neo-Gramscian. I argue that although these models work at particular times, in particular regions, or at particular levels, each fails to describe the sheer panoply of regional arrangements enacted by the Mexican state. Starting with the panegyrics and hagiographies of U.S. journalists, there was a wave of favorable reaction to the postrevolutionary regime.¹² Above all, these saw the period 1934 to 1940 as the apotheosis of the Mexican Revolution. Their opinions were predicated on President Cárdenas's support for labor, land reform, and a "socialist" education program and on his general character, "his simplicity, his complete devotion to and identification with the common people of the country, especially the Indians, the peons, and the little farmers."¹³ Political theorists of the 1950s and 1960s, working within the paradigm of the state as a neutral arena, developed this idea of a pluralist and representative state, moored on the popular reforms of the Cárdenas period.¹⁴ Mexico could "be regarded as a developing democracy because of its representative government structure and its recent progress in the direction of the responsibility of the people."¹⁵

INTRODUCTION

After the massacre of students at Tlatelolco in 1968, revisionist scholars began to modify their appreciation of the Mexican political regime.¹⁶ Historians now viewed the mass mobilizations and concomitant reforms of Cárdenas's presidency as base palliatives, designed to weaken, co-opt, and utilize the popular forces of the Revolution. This program came to a head with the creation of the Party of the Mexican Revolution (Partido de la Revolución Mexicana, PRM), "a corporatist instrument that centralised and solidified the control of the state over the workers."¹⁷ Instead of praising the ill-defined socialism of the period, they censured the project for its capitalist intent or at least its capitalist outcome.¹⁸ By 1940 there was a "powerful economic machine at the service of the capitalist development of Mexico, with private business as a base of that development and with the State leading the way and intervening opportunely to correct its deviations."¹⁹ Political scientists challenged the paradigm of the state as a neutral arena and instead argued that the growth of the state was the central explanatory factor behind the country's postrevolutionary history.²⁰ Building on seminal works on authoritarianism and corporatism, these scholars argued that government control had been imposed through the legalization and institutionalization of peasant and labor movements, which were now sanctioned and regulated by the state.²¹ There was "a multi-class, integrative, hegemonic, one party-dominant system." The centerpiece of the system, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI), "ha[d] become so efficient, and all-encompassing in its incorporation of interest groups that it embrace[d] not only those unions which support it politically but even those which d[id] not."²²

Over the past decade, historians and political scientists have started to reevaluate the formation and structure of the Mexican

INTRODUCTION

political system. Many scholars have turned to Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Although previous literature had employed the theory to describe how elites prevented class conflict by inflicting a kind of false consciousness on the masses, recent works of neo-Gramscian scholarship have emphasized the role of hegemony in framing the boundaries of debate between different social groups.²³ According to William Roseberry, hegemony constructs "a meaningful framework for living through, talking about and acting upon social orders characterised by domination."²⁴ Although resistance is possible, domination channels any opposition to the social or political status quo in directions that make the overthrow of the regime extremely difficult. It is perhaps unsurprising that this new interpretation has witnessed its most coherent implementation in examining the construction of the seemingly interminable reign of the PRI. In particular, by reformulating hegemony as a negotiated process rather than an imposed and static outcome, scholars have started to reimagine state formation in the years immediately following the Revolution. Mary Kay Vaughan has challenged revisionist conceptions of socialist education by employing the theory to describe how popular groups accepted, resisted, co-opted, and reappropriated the state discourse during the 1930s. As long as the state that emerged from this process of intense political interaction remained capable of "meet[ing] social demands and satisfactorily process[ing] grievances," it was able to maintain a degree of stability.²⁵

Although thinking about hegemony has undoubtedly helped scholars move away from previous static interpretations of the relationship between domination and resistance in the process of state building, there are certain dangers inherent in this effort. First, in the case of hegemony, however broadly defined, there

INTRODUCTION

is the risk of according hegemonic structures a coherency and strength that they lack. In doing so, the historian may overlook spaces, improvisations, and contradictions within the hegemonic project.²⁶ Second, when dealing with postrevolutionary Mexico, there is an almost prescriptive urge to find the “end point” of hegemony, that instant at which national domination became irreversible. For example, Marjorie Becker asserts that the brief period of dialogue between Cárdenas and Michoacán’s P’urhépecha Indians in the early 1930s resulted in ample state hegemony by 1940.²⁷ As will become clear, caciques, ethnic strategies of resistance, devout Catholicism, and popular urban movements often delayed the moment at which groups started to speak the state’s “language of contention.” Third, by stressing the various manifestations of popular consent, scholars have often overlooked the utilization of coercion and violence as vital political tools even during the 1940s and 1950s. Although many groups undeniably “negotiated” a working relationship with the state based on a common cultural framework, others refused all forms of compliance and were in turn targeted for military or paramilitary repression.²⁸ Fourth by “plac[ing] state building at the core of the revolutionary process,” there is a tendency to overestimate the nature, function, and intrusiveness of the post-revolutionary state.²⁹ Alan Knight has argued that despite this process of state building, even the more muscular state of the 1940s and 1950s was relatively powerless, riven by faction, and plagued by the demands of various social movements; it “appeared full of holes like Swiss Cheese.”³⁰ Jeffrey Rubin’s work on the town of Juchitán, Oaxaca, has offered a local example of the broad political practice, and he argues that the weak Mexican state often failed to penetrate the country’s provinces but instead relied on autonomous,

INTRODUCTION

decentralized, and distinct “domains of sovereignty.”³¹ The weakness of the state obviously does not preclude hegemony. However, in Mexico where the state was sometimes crippling feeble and internal colonial relationships and strategies of resistance endured, it is important to remember Raymond Williams’s broad assertion that hegemony is not only “resisted, limited, altered and challenged by pressures not at all its own” but also that “the concepts of counter-hegemony and alternative hegemony . . . are real and persistent elements of practice.”³²

All three models of state formation in Mexico are useful but also problematic. As will become clear, in postrevolutionary Oaxaca, the prevalence and persistence of counter-hegemonies, alternative hegemonies, and political violence undermine the historian’s ability even to employ the looser framework of the neo-Gramscians with any degree of efficacy. Instead, I suggest a move away from these overarching models of state formation and toward an analysis of distinct, contained moments of interaction between regional elites, popular groups, and the state. Over the past two decades, scholars of other geographically and ethnically diverse administrative units have increasingly employed this flexible, locally specific vision in describing the process of state formation.³³ In his work on early twentieth-century China, Prasenjit Duara has argued that although social theories offer the scholar certain insights, “their universalistic scope makes them too abstract for the social historian who has to deal with the details of a particular culture.” Instead, he proposes framing the process of state formation by viewing it as in constant interaction with a complex, regional “cultural nexus of power,” including hierarchical institutions of kinship, religion, and mercantile control and patron-client networks.³⁴ In so doing, Duara manages to explain

INTRODUCTION

an ambivalent process of state formation that exchanged greater tax extraction and apparent centralization with slippage in local control. Karen Barkey has also moved away from overarching, nominally Western models of state formation and toward a local framing of state intervention. In the seventeenth century Ottoman Empire, the central state combined a patrimonial system of rule with a brokerage style of centralization. As a result, the optical illusion of centralization belied regional arrangements based on a series of deals with local bandits as state control was “developed by a series of fits and starts and using a combination of rational-legal and traditional aspects of rule.”³⁵

In describing the process of state formation in an ethnically and geographically disjointed state like Oaxaca, moving away from static, comprehensive social science models toward these dynamic, supple, localized antimodels holds certain advantages. First, on a methodological level, they permit a constant dialogue between the diachronic and the synchronic, the persuasive, unilinear narrative of state formation and the necessary analysis of local institutions and cultures. Second, they allow for the sheer diversity of local responses to federal interaction. In Oaxaca, national projects of *agrarismo*, socialist education, and centralized rule reached into the miasma of local politics and developed along distinct, often contradictory paths. Third, they offer space for the paradoxes and dualities within the process of state formation. The same institutions in different regions and at different times promoted competition and cooperation, generated consensus and dissent, engendered stability and ended in civil war. In fact, the postrevolutionary state in its entirety was deeply incongruous. Although various levels of the national government sought to subordinate, co-opt, or destroy the relatively autonomous authority of local

communities and organizations, the effects were mixed. As Ben Fallaw and Adrian Bantjes have argued, local power structures—developed according to a series of historical, political, cultural, and social contexts—modified, contradicted, and paralyzed the state’s projects.³⁶ In many regions, individual local political narratives failed to entwine themselves around the national account of state formation. The historical cord that attached the Revolution to the postrevolutionary PRI state was inchoate and frayed as individual strands wrapped themselves around locally formulated alternate narratives.

Methodologies

Despite building on these alternative investigative frameworks for state formation, exact comparison with either early twentieth-century China or the late seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire is, of course, absurd. Although both suggest strong parallels—including the prevalence of informal armed factions, the system of centralization and decentralization, and the importance of local interest groups—in Mexico the state was forced to reach into differing local power relationships based on the country’s colonial, postcolonial, and revolutionary past. By looking beyond conventional chronologies and geographies of Mexican state formation, the historian is able to observe these interconnected associations, which include urban social movements, *cabecera*-village relations (i.e., dealings with district centers), ethnic interaction, caciques, and camarillas.

Alan Knight has identified a “chronological and conceptual gulf” in the study of postrevolutionary state formation. On the one hand, almost all historical appreciations of the regime have remained in a vortex, repeating the same cycle of arguments over