Getting Over Hegemony and Resistance:
Reinstating Culture in the Study of Power Relations across Difference

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Neoliberalism, the failure of leftist revolutions, and the rise of indigenous and other social movements in Latin America have all complicated established thinking in Latin American studies. Ethnographers may no longer treat cultures – indigenous or otherwise – as self-contained, timeless wholes but must view them at least in part as heterogeneous, contingent, self-interested representations implicated in global transformations and transnational flows. At the same time, Marxists must admit that identity politics and cultural differences at times do confound class analyses, to say nothing of actual revolutions. Postmodernists in turn feel licensed to interrogate all forms of representation, from scholarship and literature to popular culture, as part of an unbounded present that nonetheless immediately begs for historical antecedents and received conventional constraints on the possible. Whatever the alternatives, an abiding question remains how to situate local places – the so-called sites of subaltern imaginings and scholarly interventions – in national or transnational spaces without succumbing to the romantic essentialism of enduring cultures, the global historicism of capitalist domination, or the postmodern presentism of ideologised representation.

For many, hegemony – or more equivocally, hegemonic processes – has become a convenient gloss for the contested spaces of meaning, power, and agency that now confront us wherever we look. Talk of domination, and especially resistance, has become de rigueur in the study of social relations across difference. Because the once-proprietary anthropological term culture figures so prominently in these discussions as the means – or misrepresentation – of such difference, I focus this essay on the way contemporary anthropological understandings of culture may in fact subsume such hegemonic processes. Indeed, the more revisionists reduce hegemony from the elite-enforced ideological consensus some once took it to mean, the more it begins to look like culture, not as critics of largely outmoded formulations would have it, but as most anthropologists today would recognise the term. As such, hegemony may needlessly conflate what might be more straightforwardly analysed as culture, power, and ideology.

To explore this possibility, I begin with hegemony’s ambiguity and redundancy in anthropology, then propose the notion of ‘procedural culture’ as another way of conceptualising – and methodologically specifying – the play of power across local, ethnic, and political differences. Interactions between Maya Indian communities and state officials in late nineteenth-century west-
ern Guatemala will exemplify where to look for such procedural cultures and how attention to them might improve ethnographies of state and national cultures in the present as well as the past.

**Culture, Ideology, and Hegemony**

Ever since James Scott’s study of peasant resistance in Malaysia definitively dismissed hegemony as a seamless, elite-imposed ideological consensus, anthropologists have increasingly treated hegemony as a ‘material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterised by domination’. As a discourse of command and contestation rather than the accomplished fact of coerced compliance, hegemony in this sense may seldom be experienced as power at all, since its effects are rarely wrought by overt compulsion. They are internalised, in their negative guise, as constraints; in their neutral guise, as conventions; and, in their positive guise, as values. Yet the silent power of the sign, the unspoken authority of habit, may be as effective as the most violent coercion in shaping, directing, even dominating social thought and action.

Conventions, norms, values, the silent power of the sign – all these sound remarkably like typical anthropological characterisations of culture, if now expressly linked to the exercise of power and persuasion within ‘political communities’.

More explicitly than most, anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff have sought to specify the relationship between culture and hegemony. Ironically, the more they succeed (as I think they do) in situating hegemony as the middle term between culture and ideology mediated by the consciousness of historical actors, the more I think they succeed in explaining hegemony away. They define culture as the generalised, taken-for-granted conventionality that makes meaningful communication possible – the historically given ‘semantic ground on which human beings seek to construct and represent themselves and others’ (p. 21). In contrast, ideology refers to the more consciously held – and practised – worldviews that rationalise and reproduce the values, beliefs, and agendas of particular groups (p. 24). Hegemony partakes of both culture and ideology as ‘that part of a dominant worldview which has been naturalised and, having hidden itself in [cultural] orthodoxy, no more appears as ideology at all’ (p. 25). That is, in the process of cultural production and reproduction, prevailing interests and outlooks of dominant groups attain such a routinised presence that other groups come to take them largely, if never absolutely, as given. Hegemony thus represents culturalised ideology that circumscribes the ‘rules of the game’ of power that different constituencies within a given political community then play.

Such culturalisation of ideology, however, does not make all culture ideological.
Since it is possible, indeed inevitable, for some symbols and meanings not to be hegemonic – and impossible that any hegemony can claim all the signs in the world for its own – culture cannot be subsumed within hegemony.... Meaning may never be innocent, but it is also not merely reducible to the postures of power. (p. 21, original emphasis)

Furthermore, precisely because hegemony resides specifically in those ‘forms (or “structures”) – the commodity form, linguistic forms, epistemological forms, and so on’ – associated with ‘differences of social value and political ideology’, hegemony may at decisive historical moments ‘rise to the level of explicit consciousness, of ideological assertion, and [thus] become the subject of overt political and social contestation’ (p. 30). Like any discursive form that remains inevitably (but not infinitely) open to interpretation and implication, hegemony never achieves absolute sway because the historical experiences of individuals in different groups motivate them to formulate their own pragmatic understandings of its forms.5

Hegemony thus oscillates dialectically between cultural givenness and ideological assertiveness. It derives its taken-for-grantedness from the conventionality of culture, but conscious historical actors ultimately deny it the irrefutability of false consciousness by periodically unmasking it as ideology. In many ways, culture constitutes the pivotal term here because through it ideology becomes hegemonic, and from it consciousness and power appropriate or unmask conventional forms for ideological ends. Hegemony proves analytically derivative, if not redundant, to the extent that culture demonstrates both a naturalised givenness beyond the interests of power and sufficient indeterminacy that makes alternative ideologies both possible and inevitable. It remains to examine these seemingly contradictory cultural processes.

**Procedural Culture**

As an alternative to hegemony, my current research on late nineteenth-century western Guatemala has suggested the idea of ‘procedural culture’. By this I mean the patterned behaviours and understandings that emerge from recurring social interactions across local and translocal boundaries. Rather than denoting a distinctive kind of culture – or one that replaces more typically conceived local cultures – procedural culture simply extends cultural analysis from the mutually recognised conventions that hold within groups to the conduct (if not always courtesies) that constitutes relations between them. It assumes that wherever meaningful exchanges or regular patterns of interaction develop across differences of community, class, custom, appearance, descent, power, identity, or history, a culture exists, no matter how rudimentary or contested.

I characterise this culture as ‘procedural’ for several reasons. First, it is out of patterned interactions most generally that individuals come to attribute meaning to their own and others’ actions through the acquired habits of often unspoken (but never static or simply determinant) practices.6 Second, different groups commonly engage each other through delimited, at times highly formalised, encounters, and the nature of these dealings directly shapes the un-
derstandings (or misunderstandings) that develop between them. Third, I emphasize procedures because translocal engagements often (but not always) involve higher authorities, especially states, that use the institutional formalities of courts, schools, bureaucracies, and the like to regulate local citizenries. Attention to such bureaucratic regularities—or in the case of corruption, their highly personalized irregularities—reveals the actual rather than virtual power that different parties exercise.

Like current concerns with hegemony, procedural culture entails the play of power in routinised, mutually accepted behavioural and institutional forms; yet unlike hegemony, it frames interactions and their outcomes across differences of power and privilege without implying a priori who or what ultimately controls them or whose interests they inevitably serve. In this way, the term avoids having to argue constantly with itself about not implying the deeper compliance or complicity with superordinate powers that prior signification of hegemony implies. Instead, it more straightforwardly encourages inquiry into how face-to-face encounters routinise, and thereby experientially reify, the exercise as well as limits of power for all participants, not just those at the bottom. This is not to say that larger historical or institutional inequalities do not exist or do not restrict the latitude of some actors more than others within and beyond these interactions. It only suggests that all too easily disembodied (and disjunctive) oppositions between top-down hegemonic domination and bottom-up popular resistance can blind us to other practices like accommodation, reciprocity, or collusion that may temper exactly who always gets to do what to whom. A more open-ended approach centred on procedural cultures may help clarify these complexities.

Obviously, in invoking culture in this way, I refer to neither essentialised configurations of timeless traditions nor disembodied meanings arranged in abstract structures. Rather, I take culture to reside in what Robert Redfield used to call the ‘organisation of conventional understandings manifest in act and artifact’ that emerges from individuals’ ongoing and remembered interactions with each other. Shorn of Redfield’s romance of insular folk life and ‘little communities’, this notion of culture as a lived organisation of conventional understandings sounds surprisingly like more fashionable talk about hegemony as ‘material and meaningful’ discursive frameworks. What it lacks, of course, like most definitions of culture of its time, is explicit reference to power, but it by no means precludes, much less obviates, such concerns. Indeed, as Eric Wolf reminded us in his last book, Envisioning Power, the contemporary concept of culture originated in efforts to counter the Enlightenment’s presumptive consecration of Reason through appeal to the unanalysable genius of particular peoples and places: from its very inception, culture has entailed politicised difference.

More specifically, a focus on conventional understandings accounts for culture’s seemingly paradoxical givenness yet indeterminacy. As working agreements, conventions reflect the simultaneous contingencies and constraints of social cooperation between parties who can never absolutely compel unwilling or duplicitous others but who must ultimately trust others to comply. Far from hard and fast rules that simply dictate behaviour, much less the imaginative production of individuals immersed in global predicaments or transnational flows, cultural conventions work as arrays of alternative techniques, practices,
scenarios, genres, identities, linguistic forms of use and implication, and associations in thought and memory that individuals draw on to make sense of—and to each other. In any given instance, individuals holistically consider a range of conventional options that may extend far across their linguistic, cultural, and personal knowledge. As they variously invoke and adapt available conventions in the course of interacting, interlocutors acquire mutual understandings about which alternatives usually evoke what possible responses. Actual utterances and deeds, along with their perceived intent and meaning, take shape against this knowing familiarity about what might have reasonably (or unreasonably) been said or done instead. This cultural knowledge of extensive, densely cross-cutting, evocational semantic fields precipitates for interlocutors a mutual sense of meaningfulness—if seldom precisely shared meanings, much less opinions.

Out of such experientially-derived associations, as well as the occasional explicit injunction, norms (that is, expectations) and values (preferences) merge into a generally accepted, naturalised order of things. As such, culture never autonomously determines social action, but it frames alternative—and therefore always contestable—gambits for social engagement influenced by individuals’ previous interactions and historically conditioned possibilities. Which alternatives individuals pursue or recombine depend on their immediate (if at times inchoate) intentions, perceived circumstances, and differing command of the myriad cultural discriminations and associations theoretically available to them. These alternatives in turn, by their very extent and multiple valencies, never coalesce into a totality uniformly experienced or even known by everyone in the same way. Indeed, individuals constantly modify and improvise conventional alternatives and associations as they use them. The power as well as indeterminacy of conventional forms thus reflect the workings of culture itself, not just the politicisation of representation or subaltern resistance to hegemonic discourses.

Conceptualising culture as this systemic yet always personalised ‘organisation of conventional understandings’ points us analytically in two seemingly opposite directions, each with its indispensable historical dimension. First, if culture is most often lived tactically as personal (if not always political) constructions of the moment, it becomes possible—indeed imperative—to ask what is the distribution of cultural knowledge and privilege within defined communities that prompts different individuals to assert (and others to acknowledge) the things they do. At the same time, we need to view the conventional background of such constructions in long enough historical perspective to appreciate the strategic antecedents that make some constructions more likely—and compelling—than others to those who construct them. Otherwise, we risk canonising a new ethnographic present that simply trades timeless traditions for ongoing constructions—or crises—of the moment.

Second, if culture works in such historically-motivated but open-ended fashion, its conventional patterning should apply, not only to shared homogeneity within boundaries of difference, but also to any lived nexus of expectation, experience, and expediency that informs meaningful interactions across differences. As with local cultural constructions, these translocal cultures emerge from the patterned interactions between groups and the inevitable play in them across differences of power, interest, and knowledge. The culture history of these relations involves neither the mechanical diffusion of traits or institu-
tions from one group to the next nor even less their wholesale imposition. Rather, it involves the acquisition of associations in habit and memory by individuals engaged in relations across perceived boundaries that come to inform their subsequent aspirations and actions within and between groups. This then constitutes the study of what I mean by procedural culture.

In this sense, procedural culture represents as much a methodological as conceptual notion. By identifying translocal relations of power as cultural processes, it focuses analytical attention precisely where this culture happens, that is, in direct encounters across boundaries of difference. Ethnographically, for instance, Lynn Stephen has shown that local agrarian histories and struggles over land account for how peasants in Oaxaca, Mexico could support both the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party and the Zapatista rebels after 1994. Rather than reducing this apparent contradiction to unresolved peasant false consciousness or counterhegemonic resistance, she found that Zapatista cries for 'freedom, justice, democracy' and government use of Zapata's image to validate land reform in the 1930s but neoliberal privatisation in the 1990s resonated with local memories: paternalistic state officials once did help communities acquire land, while people resented ensuing state neglect and renunciation of land reform policies – but also appreciated limited government programmes to compensate for losses due to these changes. Her close attention to shifting encounters between state and communities over time reveals not simply state bad faith but the expediencies of changing national policies; not simply contradictory peasant consciousness but coherent (if diverse) views informed by prevailing values, remembered histories, and changing life experiences across different generations.

Historically, inquiry into procedural cultures becomes methodologically more difficult, primarily because the sources of ten remain so one-sided. Histories from below – or in the case of procedural cultures, from in between – can hardly be expected to emerge directly from sources written largely from above. To overcome this impediment, some scholars seek out indigenous language sources or expressly counterhegemonic accounts. Others closely analyse existing documents for how they rhetorically routinise elite authority and authorship over otherwise undocumented others and thus skew in indeterminate ways the representation (in its appropriately duplicitous sense of portrayal as well as political voice) these others find in the historical record.

Attention to procedural culture may help negotiate the extremes between empiricists who decry the lack of documents and postmodernists who doubt we can read them. It suggests we mine historical sources not only for the rare subaltern gem – let alone for the mother lode of institutional histories – but also for the encounters these documents portray between authors and their others, and when, how, and why these others emerged into written note, and with what consequences. Even if we can never fully recover the past, we might still be able to say what brought these actors together in the first place and what they took to be believable about their encounters at the time, however biased and incomplete their actual accounts may remain. Documents in this sense would become a species of anthropological informant in a telegraphic – but not hopelessly telepathic – historical ethnography. They would provide the evocative instances of which we might ask, not simply what must have happened, but also what could have happened in light of the culturally possible.
A Nineteenth-Century Procedural Culture in Western Guatemala

In the larger work that this essay anticipates, I apply the idea of procedural culture to administrative records and community land titles from late nineteenth-century western Guatemala. Specifically, I focus on the department of Huehuetenango in the far northwestern corner of southern Guatemala adjacent to the Mexican state of Chiapas from mid-century to 1900. Documents from the Sección de Tierras (Land Registry) and incoming correspondence of the Ministerio de Gobernación (Ministry of the Interior), both catalogued in the Archivo General de Centro América in Guatemala City (AGCA-ST and AGCA-MG respectively), provide information on annual municipal inspections by the jefe político (departmental governor), ethnic and jurisdictional disputes within and between municipios (townships), state surveillance and punitive expeditions against suspected sedition, and petitions to the national government for land titles from both Maya and Ladino (mestizo) communities.

While hardly offering a rounded view of interactions between these largely Maya towns and the Creole (Guatemalan-born white)-controlled state, these documents represent both recurring encounters, as in jefes’ annual inspections and voluminous circulars to los pueblos del margen, and extended exchanges, as in petitions and complaints from towns, especially regarding land. Although for the most part mundane and repetitious – in the words of one historian, at times ‘very boring’ – it is precisely their everyday quality that catches the ethnographer’s eye. That is, these documents do more than provide incidental insights into daily life in rural Huehuetenango a century ago; they also served instrumentally to address ongoing concerns, if not always as authorities intended or as citizens imagined. Their very matter-of-factness, as well as pragmatic intent, constitute perhaps the closest firsthand sources we have for ascertaining the routine tenor of relations between state and communities, Ladinos and Maya.

In this regard, land claims from Huehuetenango during the 1880s preserve extended dialogues between communities and the state. These seemingly inextricable exchanges typically begin with initial claims and counterclaims by towns and their neighbours, then move to ministerial reviews, land surveys, local delegations to the capital, preliminary judgments, reversals, and finally, the granting of the title by presidential decree. The process could take years, if not decades, and reveals how repeated interactions conditioned local responses to state fiat while also generating competing notions of what such compliance meant. Negotiations often schooled Maya to act as deserving, obsequious citizens, at least on paper, but however submissive their rhetoric, Maya and even poor rural Ladinos often managed to obtain community titles to their land that directly contravened Liberal philosophies of individualism, private property, and capitalist enterprise. While government officials might argue that the granting of titles proved state sovereignty over these towns, Maya could just as easily interpret these titles as state recognition of their towns as self-constituting, semi-sovereign local constituencies. Indeed, Maya often appear to have treated the state as a third-party arbiter, and their readiness to contest even so-called final titles belies any ready submission to state authority.

Administratively, jefes políticos inspected and filed reports on all the towns in their jurisdiction each year. They chronically complained that Maya town
officials needed to keep municipal books better, collect more taxes to pay local school teachers and municipal secretaries, and work toward the betterment of their communities. Rather than blame these shortcomings on innate Maya ignorance or intractability, however, at least one jefe saw here competing interests between the state and local Maya elders for control over local land and labour. Indeed, expected to underwrite their own incorporation into an all-too distant state, Maya officials saw little reason to comply with unfunded state mandates regarding municipal record-keeping, schools, and civic improvements, and jefes could do little more than admonish their lack of diligence. At the same time, the increasing number of Ladinos living in Maya towns provided effective eyes and ears for higher authorities, and the heavy hand of state power could make itself selectively, but tellingly, felt in capturing suspected rebels or ravaging entire communities with fines and executions for supposed disloyalty. Nonetheless, an undersized bureaucracy, a limited capacity for coercive interventions, and above all, a scarcity of state revenues, insured a continual negotiation and renegotiation of the conditions of local, departmental, and even national rule.

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, jefes políticos in Huehuetenango clearly succeeded in instituting state-mandated procedures for local governance and land claims. Outward compliance aside, jefes ended up year after year having to repeat much the same administrative directives to local Maya officials about improving municipal administration, schools, and revenues. Such Maya recalcitrance, however, reflected as much the ambiguous role of local Maya officials as nominal state functionaries yet also representatives of their towns before the state as it did peasant foot-dragging or subaltern resistance. Indeed, when it suited them, as in land and jurisdictional disputes, Maya could and did avail themselves of state procedures, and often enough prevailed. Maya also soon learned that the highly personalised nature of power in caudillo politics meant any official decision could always be reversed at a higher level, and even there, arrival of a new jefe or a change in national regime provided ample opportunity to renew old disputes or appeal past defeats. Beyond hostility or resistance, Maya willingness to obey but not comply may have simply expressed an understanding of how the system really worked. This is not to say that new procedures and increased state presence changed nothing. On one hand, such contact may have helped foster among Maya and Ladinos alike a national consciousness, not necessarily in the sense of an identity of mutual belonging, but as a growing awareness of living in a nation called Guatemala from which officials and their procedures derived authority and to which they as citizens might occasionally appeal. On the other hand, Maya indifference, if not hostility, to state projects may have also intensified prejudices against tradition-bound Indians. An increasing state tendency to essentialise contending differences of culture, class, and community, plus an abiding fear of Indian revolt, became routinised in this procedural culture as the racism and political repression that would shadow Guatemala for the century to come and beyond.
Conclusion

In addressing the issues and concerns hegemony raises, this essay has sought to refocus how we might think about conjunctions of meaning, power, and agency in ways that get us beyond the increasingly stultified polarity of domination and resistance. To do so, I have turned to what I think still remains anthropology’s great strength – its love of complexity from within and without that first-hand ethnographic research instills. I have suggested how we might use the idea of procedural culture to broaden this appreciation historically, spatially, and institutionally while also keeping it grounded in the fullness of human encounters and endeavours. As such, the study of local places in national and transnational spaces has become for me an inquiry into translocal procedural cultures centred on recurring interactions and remembered, personalised histories that inform the selective appeal – and therefore the fitful growth – of broader affinities and antipathies in multicultural, plurilingual places like Guatemala.

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Notes

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7. A procedural cultural need not apply only to formalised, bureaucratic records and procedures. For example, see Robert L. Welsch and John Edward Terrell, ‘Material Culture, Social Fields, and Social Boundaries on the Sepik Coast of New Guinea’, in: M. T. Stark (ed.), The Archaeology of Social Boundaries (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), p. 55. In writing about a reciprocal exchange network between friends along the Sepik Coast of northern New Guinea, they describe a set of conventions by which ‘virtually the entire coast shares the same basic idea about what a friend should do and how a friend should behave’, despite enduring cultural and linguistic differences between local communities. This could also constitute a procedural culture as discussed here.


18. See the discussion of how ‘cramped bureaucratic pilgrimages’ could have forged Creole national consciousness in colonial Latin America in Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, revised ed. (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 53-58. For the growth of national consciousness from below, see Mallon, Peasant and Nation.