Ensayos de Reseña/Review Essays

Politics, Culture and the State:
Explaining the Mexican regime
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I. In October 1999, in the midst of the vociferous battle for the candidacy of the PRI for the upcoming presidential elections, a propaganda comic book (historieta) was distributed in markets and popular neighbourhoods in Mexico City about the private and public life of Francisco Labastida Ochoa, the strongest contender and eventual winner of the PRI’s first nation-wide primaries. In the twenty-four pages of coloured drawings the reader was presented with an image of the decent and hardworking life of the former governor and Minister of the Interior. The historieta not only praised the virtues of Labastida’s happy family life, it also contextualised his life and career by incorporating recognisable symbols of the nation such as the national flag, the army, the UNAM – as opposed to an expensive private university – and even the life of Benito Juárez (La Jornada, 10 October 1999). It is not likely that the distribution of thousands of these historietas has had any significant effect on the outcome of the primaries at a time in which Mexican politics are increasingly being dominated by costly marketing campaigns in the electronic media. What is significant is the fact that effort and money was put into the historieta in the first place. The decision was most probably related to the enormous popularity and influence that comic books used to have in Mexican society some decades ago. Anne Rubenstein has now published a wonderful book on this very subject.

At first glance the books under review here would seem to deal with highly diverse subject matters: Rubin studies the history and nature of one of Mexico’s most successful radical ethnic movements in the 1980s and 1990s, Vaughan analyses the educational effort of the state during the 1930s in rural communities, while Rubenstein examines the relationship between the state and civil society through comic books and their producers, readers and censors. How-
ever, these books all focus on the cross-roads between politics and culture. They share an interest in the cultural dimensions of state formation and nation-building in post-revolutionary Mexico. In doing so they all attempt to break new ground in our understanding of the emergence and consolidation of Latin America’s most stable political regime.

II. In recent years, the social sciences have witnessed an unprecedented interest in culture and cultural practices. The growth of ‘cultural studies’ as a new branch of the social sciences is perhaps the clearest intellectual and institutional expression of this increased attention. In theoretical terms, this reorientation owes much to post-structuralism, women studies and the strong influence of constructivist epistemology. Contemporary scholarly work on political systems and processes in Latin America also demonstrates this shift. Most scholars would agree that ‘culture and politics are innately intertwined, but neither is overwhelming and overpowering of the other’, yet how are the connections best conceptualised and operationalised?

A common starting point has been to broaden the scope of the concept of politics beyond its traditional arena of formal political institutions, processes and behaviour. In his work on the radical Zapotec organization COCEI in Juchitán, Rubin makes a case for placing culture and everyday practices squarely within the discussions about power and the state. Vaughan suggests ‘to extend the realm of politics to penetrate everyday life’ (p.17). Both authors draw on Foucault’s seminal work on the ubiquitous workings of power. Rubenstein argues along a similar line when she attributes the success of the Mexican state to its cultural politics (p.4).

It is perhaps not surprising that the shared interest in broadening the realm of politics has a follow-up in the common use of two other concepts: hegemony and negotiation. The Gramscian concept of hegemony was from its inception geared towards understanding the sources of power beyond coercion and violence, that is as ‘the myriad ways in which the institutions of civil society operate to shape, directly and indirectly, the cognitive and affective structures whereby men perceive and evaluate problematic social reality’. From the books under review here, Vaughan’s is the most explicit about the use of the notion of hegemony as consensual rule and dedicates various pages to its discussion. Rubenstein uses the concept in a manner that is typical for the book that does not dwell on any conceptual issue in detail. Her theoretical framework has (purposefully?) been submerged in her empirical analysis. Rubin uses the concept of hegemony frequently but he does so in an unorthodox manner. For him the concept acquires meaning in the context of a host of other concepts stemming from cultural studies and postcolonial theory. Despite these differences, all authors share an emphasis on hegemony as a (temporary) construction in the hands of different social groups, and it is here that the notion of negotiation becomes relevant. The importance of the three books under review here lies in the fact that they study the ways in which different actors interact in the construction of the post-revolutionary state and nation. It means that the consolidation of post-revolutionary institutional arrangements and discourses on nation and identity are the result of the active participation and input of subaltern groups just as much as of powerful state actors. In general, one could argue that these books privilege agency above structure. Rubin:
the Mexican state and regime should be seen as parts of a complex and changing center that coexists with, and is indeed embedded in, the diversity of regional and cultural constructions that have evolved in Mexico since the 1930s (p.13). Mary Kay Vaughan examines the negotiation between central state, regional and local actors over definitions of nation and community, culture and modernity, citizenship and history, while Rubenstein looks at the concrete workings of hegemony by analysing how the interactions between individual bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, activists and artists reinforced a political hierarchy. The latter book analyses the contents of the historietas that sold an estimated half million copies daily in the 1940s. Rubenstein shows how the images and the narratives of the comic books helped to define what modernity meant in post-revolutionary and post-war Mexico, a society characterized by the tremendous impact of the forces of industrialization, migration and urbanization on values and identities. The discourses on modernity and the counter-discourses of tradition formed mainly around the representation of women. Rubenstein is at her best when she analyses how the construction of gender roles epitomizes many of the cultural tensions and shifts of the era. The book shows convincingly that the rivalling discourses developed in dialogue with each other about gender, work, community and nation, without one being able to supplant the other. In the remaining part of the book the author studies the different actors involved in the discussions about comic books, ranging from conservative pressure groups, readers and publishers to government agencies. With respect to the latter she looks at the functions and workings of the Comisión Calificadora de Publicaciones y Revistas Ilustradas, a ‘censorship’ office charged with looking after the regulations concerning comic books and other publications. One of Rubenstein’s most important conclusions is that the debates about comic books and popular culture came to constitute a space in which the participants could negotiate their position in society and national culture, while the government strengthened its central position by mediating between them.

III. While the three authors under review here share common interests and some concepts, they also participate in more specific debates. Vaughan situates her research explicitly in the post-revisionist historiography of the Mexican revolution, a current of thought that questions the strength of an all-powerful, single party state. Instead, it proposes a conceptualisation of the state, at least until 1940, as ‘a fledgling institution subject to persistent contention in a context of intense sociopolitical mobilization around conflicting projects’ (p.8). According to Vaughan, the post-revisionist critique of the revolution and the period of reconstruction of the state poses an intellectual challenge to get beyond a concept of the state as a ‘narrow political construct of a top-down, clientelist organization’ (p.9). The view of a relatively weak central state, unable to impose a particular (educational) project on a fragmented and mobilized society, then leads the author to focus on the interactions and negotiations between different actors. Political scientist Jeffrey Rubin convincingly argues against what he calls the state-centred approach to Mexican politics that stresses the thoroughness of the transformations achieved by Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s, and the effectiveness of centrally controlled corporatist structures in maintaining domination during a prolonged period. Such an approach attri-
butes the rise of opposition movements and parties in recent times to the breakdown of the once successful corporatist arrangements. In contrast, Rubin proposes to ‘de-centre’ the regime, thereby opening up space for ‘locations’ of power that lie outside both centre and formal politics. The author basically develops the idea of de-centring along two dimensions. The first refers to the domain of culture and everyday life. In his fieldwork in Juchitán’s courtyards and markets, he encountered the numerous connections between everyday experiences of work, ethnicity, family life and gender roles on the one hand and politics and social movements on the other. The emergence of COCEI has as much to do with a long regional history of cultural practices as with questions of political power and socio-economic change. The second dimension refers to the complex relationship between central and regional power structures, which I will analyse below. Vaughan and Rubin thus both oppose the influential interpretative model of the pervasive, corporatist and authoritarian state that dominates Mexican civil society. However, there is a crucial difference in their position. Vaughan tends to understand the weakness of the post-revolutionary state primarily in historical terms: ‘The Mexican state in the 1920s and 1930s was no Leviathan capable of steamrolling society in the interest of its singular project’ (p.8). In contrast, Rubin does not base his critique of the corporatist model on some historical periodisation, but on the theoretical principle that the state can never be understood as the sole or even the main locus of power. This constitutes one of the many theoretical points Rubin wants to make in his wide-ranging work. In general, Rubin is very wary about the use of ‘unitary’ concepts and arguments. When writing about the state in Juchitán, he mentions its fragmented and incomplete presence that is confronted with multiple sites of contestation; when he analyses COCEI as a social movement he stresses the fact that it can not be understood as the embodiment of a coherent and homogeneous class or ethnic project, but as the coexistence of ambiguous discourses and contradictory practices; with respect to democracy he stresses that its meanings are locally constructed and vary from theoretical norms and procedures. Rubin’s conceptual language is one in which fragmentation, unevenness, difference, heterogeneity and ambiguity take centre stage. His study of Juchitán is a successful attempt to integrate ethnohistorical research with sophisticated conceptual reflection.

IV. A proven strategy to deconstruct the ‘homogeneous’ claims of the model of the all-powerful central Mexican state has been to focus on the regional and/or local level. Both Rubin and Vaughan make considerable contributions in this area. The bulk of Vaughan’s book on the politics of rural schools in the 1930s consists of fascinating accounts of the ways in which four distinct local societies (two in central state of Puebla and two in northern Sonora) negotiated the state’s educational project. The well-researched case studies show that in the encounters new linkages, identities and languages were forged according to the socio-economic, political, ethnic and cultural specifics of these localities. The state’s educational project was thus differentially contested and incorporated by these societies. In the words of Vaughan, a language of dissent and consent emerged that was mutually constructed through negotiation and that incorporated subaltern demands and concepts. The relationship between national politics and institutional structures and regional and local domains can
then no longer be understood as one of obstruction or domination. In the words of Rubin, regional power configurations were ‘active forces in shaping local people’s daily experiences and defining the arenas of central state action’ (p.258). This argument is very relevant for the politics of identity and radicalism in Juchitán, where regional identification and opposition to outside political and cultural forces has since long been a remarkable feature. In the 1930s this took the form of a regional cacicazgo that endured until the early 1960s and that was characterized by a significant degree of autonomy from the central state. Rubin argues that these arrangements were typical of this period but that its dynamics in terms of bargaining, autonomy and ethnicity are not acknowledged in the usual corporatist model of Mexican politics. The demise of regional caciques in Juchitán and elsewhere provoked processes of contestation and conflict that were shaped by the events of the cacique years in interaction with initiatives from the central state. The alliances that emerged from this period in their turn established the framework for negotiations over electoral processes, social movements and the meaning of citizenship in the 1980s. As a result, so-called ‘national’ politics in the twentieth century has been significantly shaped by the rise and decline of regional cacicazgos and by the conflicts that succeeded them, a claim that ‘directly contradicts the relative homogeneity of political process and outcome postulated by the state-centered approach’ (p.253). Region and locality thus constitute the second dimension of the decentring of politics and power.

The books reviewed here are excellent examples of a new generation of studies that broaden the scope on politics, power and the state. Interestingly, these books demonstrate that similar argumentative objectives can be reached with highly different styles of writing. For example, Rubenstein’s sympathetic and uncomplicated style stands in stark contrast to Rubin’s conceptually dense and academic writing. Fortunately, all three books provide the reader with interesting historiographic and ethnographic material. They all contribute to a more adequate understanding of the nature and workings of the Mexican regime. Although most of the material analyzed in these books refers roughly to the 1930-1960 period, its relevance can easily be extended. Contemporary debates about democratization and transition that focus on electoral processes and formal institutions have much to gain from a culturally informed approach to politics.

Notes

3. These books fit very well in the path that was ‘opened up’ by Joseph and Nugent’s volume *Everyday Forms of State Formation. Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 1994), although most of the research was conducted well before this book was published.
4. These developments were also represented by other forms of cultural production such as cinema, music and photography. For a recent analysis of the politics of photojournalism in the 1950s, see John Mraz, *Nacho López y el fotoperiodismo mexicano en los años cincuenta* (México D. F: Océano/Conaculta-INAH, 1999).
5. The recent work of Rob Aitken on contemporary politics provides further evidence for this

6. Here Rubin places his own research in a comparative perspective. Among other things he discusses my own work on the formation of the Avila Camacho cacicazgo in Puebla and Armando Bartra’s analysis of the state of Guerrero (pp.253-261). Although I share most of Rubin’s ideas, I disagree with some aspects of his critical review of Bartra’s and my own work. Rubin questions the compatibility of caciquismo and corporatism up to the conflicts of the 1960s, as suggested by Bartra and myself. For Rubin, corporatism implies state structuring of political interests and institutions, whereas cacique-politics is thought to be much more caught up in local conceptions and structures of power. However, in making this distinction Rubin constructs a false dichotomy. The presence of corporatist structures within a certain regional power domain does not imply that they will necessarily be instruments in the hands of the central to dominate a regional domain. These corporatist structures can become part of local conceptions of the world and locally negotiated structures of power. In Puebla, as elsewhere, corporatist structures were ‘localized’, to use Aitken’s terminology, not in the least because they were manned by people who owed their loyalty primarily to the regional strongman. Moreover, the presence and importance of corporatist structures can differ substantially across regions. The profound differences in the socio-economic organization of Puebla’s core region and Juchitán in the 1930s can account for the relative importance of corporatist organizations. It seems to me that Rubin confuses the presence of corporatist structures in certain regional domains with the meaning attached to them in the state-centred view of Mexican politics.