



## About Mexican formations: selective hegemony under neoliberal multiculturalism

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About Mexican Formations: Selective Hegemony Under Neoliberal Multiculturalism is a coordinated effort to debate an ethnographic present within a Gramscian perspective. Taking such an approach to the Mexican transformations of the first two decades of the twenty first century has demanded analytical clarity as much as dedicated fieldwork. Building on the contributions of a generation of scholars who were committed to engaging the work of Antonio Gramsci, we took up their approach for our ethnographic projects, proposing a particular reading of Mexican landscapes and populations driven by specific class directions.

The contributors have come together to engage in this endeavor from 2015 to the present. We met at a proseminar (“Power, Class & Culture”) hosted subsequently in two different graduate programs of the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla. Some of us were students, other professors, and some guests. We were never all together but were close enough to cultivate the common thread of the discussion. When we started this process in 2003 with the good and auspicious backing of Nancy Churchill and Leigh Binford, we could not have anticipated the hard lessons we learned, nor the joy of endurance. Over the years other colleagues would join, enriching the seminar as it was turning into the research network it has now become. This is not the space to acknowledge them individually, but they know who they are, and we hope they will recognize their influence and insights in the articles and their “intertextuality”. Yet, we dedicate this special issue to the teachings and comradery of Luis Vázquez León (1951-2021), who departed while we were working on it. It was Luis who proposed that we craft our discussion into a special issue in a journal that could provide the space and exposure he deemed we had earned. For this and many other things we are indebted to his memory and honor him accordingly.

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We made several drafts and conducted extensive talks of possible ways to go before deciding on “tag-teams” to develop original articles. We wanted to provide an arc of debate while keeping a common focus. This meant carefully choosing who would work with whom and which projects that we had taken up in the past would most benefit from renewed discussion. Once we agreed on a proposal and generated revised first drafts, we approached the Editors of *Dialectical Anthropology*. In the year or so that it took to go through the process of submitting drafts, correcting, and translating them, we were supported and encouraged to bring the proposal to fruition. Some of us had published before in this journal, others had not, but we all agreed it was the best venue.

Not all of us are Mexican citizens, yet its state formation is the focus of our analysis and recurrent political reality. Within it we confront and enjoy life, trying to educate ourselves, caring for some, while engaging in multiple disputes with others. There is no certainty about immediate futures, much less long-term ones -- we can only offer our frank and interested effort to improve our understanding regarding the nature of the future. Only by analyzing and debating the state formation from a grounded perspective in theory, methodology and politics, is there a chance to steer it in a different one. The political activity of the present is a welcome change from the years under scrutiny, but in order to be effective activists and organizers need theory and historical context to know what they are organizing, for whom and where they are going. We hope that this discussion we present will animate, educate, and provide lessons for the organized fronts of the present and future.

Even though the proseminar started in 2003, it ought to be placed within a broader inflection. The starting point for our project was the urgency and possibility to reignite a contemporary Marxist anthropology after the collapse of real existing socialism in Europe and the dominant interpretations in anthropology after 1989-91. The early reading in Puebla and Michoacán of William Roseberry's *Anthropologies and Histories* while most anthropologists in Mexico City and elsewhere in the country were undergoing a Geertzian conversion after the translation into Spanish of *The Interpretation of Cultures* was the friction that produced the sparks and then embers of our discussions and proposals. Even though both editorial landmarks are pivotal for many more trends than the one we are engaging, it demanded a confrontational relation in teaching and learning against the liberal and postmodern “chorus” identified by Asad in his *Genealogies of Religion*. It also demanded that we broaden the theoretical horizons and paths for advanced training. On the one side we engaged with Marxist scholarship in anthropology and beyond, appropriating the canon of “political economy” for cultural-ideological analysis, while on the other we criticized the institutional re-provincialization of chiefdoms under the disguise of a “Mexican anthropology” reinscribed along a North and South divide.

As the Mexican theater of the war on drugs went from low intensity into full-fledged carnage a new generation of scholars cut their teeth against it, trying to figure out its contours, direction and participants. The year 2006 would be singled out in episodic accounts as that in which the war of position became war of maneuver, but the process was underway well before. The war on drugs was imposed from the outside in rhetoric and strategy, state of the art weaponry and intelligence, but Mexican warring factions were militarizing regions, displacing populations and violently

fragmenting power within institutions, like the armed forces, and stimulating the proliferation of irregular armies under the guise of indigenized or communalized vigilantism. All this without any need to justify that imported war to be fought within Mexican borders and among its countryfolk. The field of force has proven to be multidimensional (Roseberry 1994).

If the teleological master signifier of the “democratic transition” after 1989-91 could entail “velvety” revolutions in Central Europe, not so much in the postcolonial world. Much less in Mexico where “The Revolution” of its early Twenty Century produced a State Party and political regime that venerated itself through that fetish turned into patrimony. This would all crumble by the end of that century after persistent challenges accelerated over its final three decades. By the year 2000 the alternance of power between political parties happened. It also was imagined and planned quite differently by opposing factions and forces. The imported narrative of the democratic transition demanded a civil society to be made out with first world prescriptions and privatized through the third sector. Recognizing the relation between the impositions of the external interests and the violent reactions of domestic forces in political and military realms did not mean it was understood and therefore a processual approach ought to be worked out. This entailed a critical reading of how two previous generations had debated, defined, and settled around ethnographic subjects, fieldwork methods, and anthropological theory in order to adjust them and make them productive to think.

If 1968, according to its self-defined heroic participants, was nothing short of a maximalist “countercultural” (Bartra 2008: 128) revolution, it ought to be explained then how easily it gave in to a minimalist and confessional multicultural reformation after 1994 (Bartra 1999: 23). It simply was not enough to identify, classify, and enjoy the *Omens of Adversity* (Scott 2014) conscripting us to war within the democratic transition and its ecumenical celebrations. *Confronting the Present* (Smith 1999) is what we have tried to do in our projects and discussions framing them in the seminar from a Gramscian perspective within the Marxist tradition.

The influence of the authors mentioned above as well as that of Kate Crehan, Gerald Sider, Micaela Di Leonardo, Susana Narotzky, Mahmood Mamdani, Henrietta Moore, Elizabeth Fitting, Carmen Martínez, Gabriela Zamorano, Michael Blim, Andrew Roth, and Robert Shadow would be evident through specific concepts, notions and keywords and in the references on each article. Apart from the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla at least two of the authors of the articles have moved through the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, El Colegio de Michoacán, or Dalhousie University as graduate students. Over the years we enjoyed the comradery and friendship of professors, students and fellows each time we were able to meet at those locations to discuss our projects in conferences and banter.

The articles can be read on their own but together they follow a discussion regarding the Mexican state formation through ethnographic subjects. At and beyond borders, at the center of ethnic and gender politics, this is a discussion on hegemony, subalternity, and class. At some points it goes under the umbrella of NAFTA, while at others it shows precisely the impossibility of reducing the ethnographic present to botched political projects. Thought as a whole, they relate

to each other using Gramscian and Marxist notions and frame specific debates on multiculturalism as a class ideology and project. More than simply reinforcing singular positions, together they aim to open discussions challenging a neoliberal commonsense. We think that the following sequence is logical but different readers may find others more provocative. “The Historical Unreality of the Proletariat as an Ethnographic Subject of Mexican Anthropology” by Hernández Corchado and Zagal with “Integral State on the Northern Border of Mexico: Administration and Surveillance of Subaltern Groups in Tijuana, Baja California” by Villafuerte and Pacheco, present the basic political and theoretical orientation regarding the mutual constitutive process of the state formation and its subjects. Sharper focus on class, gender, ethnicity and their intrinsic and hierarchical relations inform and are analyzed by Castell and Alvarez in “Migration and Dependency: Mexican Countryside Proletarianization and the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program”, Flores Morales and Flores Montes in “The Kaleidoscope of the Indigenous. Female Artisans and Female Maquila Workers in Multicultural Mexico”, and Hernández Amador and Sandoval in “Multiculturalism, Intercultural University and Civil Society in The Sierra of Zongolica, Mexico”. We close with the article by the guest editors debating the violent underpinnings of success histories in “Export Quality: Historical Bloc, State of Exception, and Hegemonic Process in the Hass Avocado Enclave of Michoacán”.

Even though this is an installment in an ongoing debate rather than a summary or conclusive interpretation, we are confident that there is no “Great Arch” in the Mexican state formation, as suggested by Joseph and Nugent (1994), but the constant crumbling and rebuilding of cathedrals, palaces and schools, to be left unfinished by Daughters and *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (Wolf 1959) Currently, this debate engages *In the Shadows of the State* (Shah 2010), as the conjugated crises of multiculturalism, neoliberalism and globalization unfold. As a discipline of crisis anthropology took root in Mexico and while debating one we try to interpret the other dialectically, critically, and passionately.

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