A Nationalist Metaphysics: State Fixations, National Maps, and the Geo-Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Mexico

Raymond B. Craib

The boundaries [of nation-states], and the naming of the space-time within them, are the reflections of power, and their existence has effects. Within them there is an active attempt to ‘make places.’

—Doreen Massey, “Places and Their Pasts”

In 1847 Mariano Otero, attempting to account for the ease with which “ten or twelve thousand men . . . penetrated from Veracruz to the very capital of the republic,” offered a stinging explanation: Mexico did not constitute, nor could it properly call itself, a nation.1 Locating the absence of nationhood in the persisting legacies of colonial rule, Otero questioned the degree to which Mexico had moved from colony to modern nation. Such an assertion must have proved disturbing to many, coming as it did a quarter-century after the procla-
mation of independence from Spanish rule. Certainly the Mexican elite that inherited the mantle of independence in 1821 imagined themselves to be members of a distinctly Mexican nation and state. Yet acts of imagination were not, in and of themselves, powerful enough to sustain Mexico, regardless of how hard or heartfelt “its” leaders imagined, as the turbulent years leading up to and including the Mexican-American War had amply demonstrated. In the wake of the war, the questions that had confronted the republic in 1821 persisted: How would an extensive and complex landscape and its inhabitants cohere as an intelligible, material unit? How would a new political territory be seen as externally and internally legitimate? And what would be the best way to demonstrate that a nation, a state, a government were something more than mere conjecture? These were, to borrow a term from philosophy, metaphysical questions and the methods devised to answer them were part of a broader nationalist metaphysics.

Routines of mapping and naming figured as fundamental components of this nationalist metaphysics and in the symbolic creation of the Mexican nation-state. To demonstrate that Mexico was indeed something more than a concept, to legitimate Mexico’s spatial and temporal existence, and to make visual arguments about its historical and geographical coherence, intellectuals from the Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística [SMGE], with the

2. The most comprehensive statement to this effect can be found in David A. Brading, The First America: The Spanish Monarchy, Creole Patriots, and the Liberal State, 1492–1867 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991).


4. I draw upon Aristotle’s Metaphysica for my understanding of metaphysics: first, metaphysics as a concern for understanding the basic requirements necessary for a “thing” to be able to be said to exist. This is, in effect, a question which would now fall under the rubric of ontology; second, metaphysics as those things that exist apart from the material realm—things eternal and immutable, transcendent and trans-empirical. I use the term in both senses. In the first place, what was it that was required or thought necessary to demonstrate the existence or reality of a Mexican nation-state? How could it lay claim to being? I will argue that by the mid-nineteenth century, history and geography (in the form of a territorialized history and a historicized territory) were the fundamental components that helped define the nation-state as such and endowed it with international legitimacy. At the same time, while the nation-state was territorially historicized it was also given a transhistorical quality, appearing as a natural rather than socially constructed entity. The nation-state became, paradoxically, both richly historical and timeless. See Aristotle, Metaphysics, trans. Richard Hope (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1952).
backing of state officials, increasingly devoted their attention to the construction of general maps (*cartas generales*) of the republic. On the purportedly objective surfaces of national maps, they blended history and geography to connect a conceptual space to a narrated place, endowing Mexico with both a textual tangibility and a palpable past. Mexico thus materialized on the cartographer’s table, a plotted surface upon which the nation-state’s past and future could simultaneously unfold.

The following essay is divided into four sections: the first explains why Mexican officials pursued the construction of a national map; the second section analyzes Antonio García Cubas’s 1857 carta general of Mexico to show how cartographic science visually naturalized the nation-state; the third section shows how artistic images that appeared on that same map served to connect the plotted territory to an ideologically saturated portrait of a supposedly quintessential Mexican landscape; and the final section focuses on the importance of place names on the map, specifically, how the arbitrary changing of place names by municipal authorities complicated metropolitan elites’ desires to spatially (and cartographically) ground a foundational narrative.

### Vision

“The frontiers are there, the frontiers are sacred. What else, after all, could guarantee privilege and power to ruling elites?”

—Basil Davidson, “On Revolutionary Nationalism: The Legacy of Cabral”

“All nations have begun as we have, on the road of science,” averred Manuel Orozco y Berra in 1881. It is no surprise that such a statement—revealing as it does the very constructedness of the nation-state—would come from one of Mexico’s preeminent geographers. Geography proved a key science in the formation of nineteenth-century nation-states, and had a close association with the technical, regulatory needs of those in power. The professionalization of geography and its incorporation as a discipline in the halls of higher learning as well as the founding of national geographic societies were direct consequences of rising military and economic nationalism. Mexico’s first geo-


graphic society—the Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística (later to become the Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística)—had been created in 1833 by Valentín Gómez Farías, a president who believed that the accumulation and production of geographic and statistical knowledge of the nation’s territory were critical for national development. The growing concern with the importance of knowledge to governance ensured that, once established, the Instituto persisted in its activities relatively uninterrupted by the constant shifts in political power except for changes in its name. While statistical knowledge referred to the general collection of a wide array of numerical data on such things as agricultural production and population, the geographic focus was quite specific, namely, the creation of a general geographic map of the republic.

Why the emphasis upon a national map? Certainly there were very practical concerns related to governance, particularly in the early years of the republic. For example, without a reliable national map the newly installed government could hardly begin to conceive of, let alone carry out, any political reorganization of the territory. This would prove to be a constant source of concern in the recurring territorial reconstructions of the country’s politico-territorial divisions by federalists and centralists, each of whom had their own politico-administrative geographies. A national map could also prove useful in the war against fiscal chaos, administrative fragmentation, and regional politics in that a variety of local and regional statistical information, as well as what were said to be quite precise state maps, could be compiled and incorporated into a master map. More importantly, perhaps, a national map of geographic


8. In 1839 the Instituto was renamed the Comisión de Estadística Militar, a name it kept until 1849 when it was renamed the Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística. See Mendoza Vargas, “Historia de la geografía en México,” esp. pt. 2.


10. On the abundance and precision of state maps see Tomás Ramón del Moral,
and topographic accuracy could improve the fledgling state’s military capacity
during a time of both international and domestic uncertainty, at least for the
macrocoordination required for national defense. Thus in the 1820s the gov-
ernment created a new course of study in geographic engineering, commis-
sioned individuals to “travel throughout the entire territory and assemble
statistics and a geographic map,” and composed a national map from the rem-
nants of the Spanish navy’s collection of images created for the defense of New
Spain.  

Such concerns provide an initial explanation for the persistent pursuance
of a carta general but not a complete one, particularly as the years progressed.
The fact remains that national maps are of such small scale that they often
have minimal instrumental value. A military expedition sent to crush a rural
rebellion or ward off a foreign invasion across the mesa central would find only
so much of value in a map of the entire republic. The plotting of routes and
planning of tactics required the large-scale topographic maps produced by
military engineers based upon their traverse surveys through the countryside,
not the small-scale political and geographic overviews of a carta general con-
structed from a compilation of sources. Similarly, development efforts, such as
the building of roads that would tie regional economies and politics to a cen-
tral apparatus, required primarily regional and local maps of various kinds.

Yet federally subsidized agencies such as the Comisión Militar Estadística,
successor of the Instituto Nacional de Geografía and immediate predecessor
of the SMGE, still devoted the vast majority of their energies to creating a
carta general, one which would be a “faithful expression of the land it repre-
sents.” Why? A national map had as much iconographic as it did instrumen-
tal power. It served the very basic function of defining a bounded space within
which a newly emergent postimperial elite could purport to assert their power,
confirm their continuing status, and legitimate their rights to rule and, in

“Condiciones del trabajo geográfico de la Comisión de Geografía y Estadística del Estado
de México, 1827–1829,” in Lecturas geográficas mexicanas: Siglo XIX, ed. Héctor Mendoza
Vargas (Mexico City: Univ. Nacional Autónoma de México, 1999), 3–6. See also, Orozco y
Berra, Apuntes para la historia; and Timothy Anna, Forging Mexico, 1821–1835 (Lincoln:
Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1998), 100.

11. See Ramón del Moral, “Condiciones del trabajo geográfico,” 3, quoted in Héctor
Mendoza Vargas, “Las opciones geográficas al inicio del México independiente,” in México
a través de los mapas, ed. Héctor Mendoza Vargas (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés Editores,
2000).

12. Actas de la Comisión de Estadística Militar, 27 Oct. 1839, quoted in Mendoza Vargas,
effect, represent. Moreover, a national map offered a symbolic affirmation of the political reality of an entity whose very existence was at the time increasingly called into question: a unified and sovereign Mexican nation-state. Rebellions in northern territories, the secession of Texas and the Yucatán, and regional conflicts all confounded any comforting thoughts of a unified national space and repeatedly raised the specter of total national disintegration. A national map refuted such troublesome realities by visually affirming what supposedly already existed: after all, if a map were simply a mimetic reflection of an objective reality, then a national map by definition presupposed the existence of the nation itself. The still-precarious and open-ended process of forging an independent Mexico appeared as authoritatively over, concluded, and confirmed. A scale-map of a nation-state, which furthered the ideological mirage of neutrality by applying presumably objective mathematical principles to map construction, thus argued backwards from the desired conclusion, serving as a model for, rather than of, what it purportedly represented.


14. For critiques of the powerful and persistent notion that maps simply mirror a spatial reality, see J. B. Harley, “Maps, Knowledge and Power,” in The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design, and Use of Past Environments, ed. Dennis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988); idem, “Deconstructing the Map,” Cartographica 26 (1989); idem, “Silences and Secrecy: The Hidden Agenda of Cartography in Early Modern Europe,” Imago Mundi 40 (1988); idem, “Rereading the Maps of the Columbian Encounter,” Annals of the Association of American Geographers 82, no. 3 (1992); and Harley and Woodward, Cartography. See also Denis Wood, The Power of Maps (New York: Guilford Press, 1992). I discuss this literature further in Raymond B. Craib, “Cartography and Power in the Conquest and Creation of New Spain,” Latin American Research Review 35, no. 1 (2000). It is understandable but somewhat ironic that efforts to deconstruct the map and problematize space have arisen at the same time that spatial metaphors—“mapping” and “space” are prominent examples—have gained increasing popularity in academic writing. While the pervasive use of spatial metaphors is welcome in as much as it may reflect an increased sensitivity to space in critical theory, there is a very real danger that a proliferating and uncritical metaphorical promiscuity may give such words little more than a trendy banality, simultaneously sapping them of their critical meaning and inadvertently implying that cartography, and space itself, is unproblematic. See Neil Smith and Cindi Katz, “Grounding Metaphor: Towards a Spatialized Politics,” in Place and the Politics of Identity, ed. Michael Keith and Steve Pile (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Geraldine Pratt, “Spatial Metaphors and Speaking Positions,” Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 10 (1992).

15. See the analysis in Thongchai Winichakul, Siam Mapped: The History of the Geo-Body of a Nation (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1994). On signs as predictive—as
Even simply delineating where Mexico ended and other nations presumably began could be significant at a time when established boundaries and territorial cohesion were increasingly regarded as integral features of the modern nation-state.\textsuperscript{16} Indeed, the powerful sway of territoriality as the basis for modern identity and control ensured that geographic science and its primary medium, the map, would occupy a place of preeminence in the nationalist repertoire. This was particularly the case by the 1840s. The increasingly strident predations of Mexico’s northern neighbor, with its fervent faith in Manifest Destiny, left little room or time for what one author has aptly termed “growing pains.”\textsuperscript{17} In a manner befitting their continentalist convictions, and further evidence of the power of the geographic imagination at the time, U.S. officials relied upon a kind of cartographic determinism to justify their imperial pretensions.\textsuperscript{18} Already in 1823 John Quincy Adams had equated geographical proximity with historical destiny when he promulgated his so-called ripe apple policy that argued that Cuba and Puerto Rico were “natural appendages to the North American continent,” fated to fall under U.S. control once the proper conditions prevailed.\textsuperscript{19} Soon after, in 1825, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Clay took such geographic determinism to an audacious extreme by representing things as yet only imagined—see Angel Rama, \textit{The Lettered City}, trans. John Charles Chasteen (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1996).

\begin{itemize}
  \item 16. On the increasing role of territorial coherence in the definition of the modern nation-state, see Charles S. Maier, “Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era,” \textit{American Historical Review} 105, no. 3 (2000). Maier locates this new emphasis on territoriality around 1860, “for the sake of simplicity,” although he does note that already by the late seventeenth century fluid zonal frontiers were progressively being superceded by defined boundaries, which set the limits of sovereign control. An exemplary study of this shift, rooted in the social experience of agrarian life in the Pyrenees, is Peter Sahlins, \textit{Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees} (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989).
\end{itemize}
suggesting to Mexican officials that turning over the northern reaches of Mexico would actually benefit the country by geographically centralizing its capital.\textsuperscript{20} By 1844 businessman and Democrat John O'Sullivan could comfortably assert that anyone “who cast a glance over the map of North America” could see that Texas was “a huge fragment, artificially broken off” from the continent to which it naturally belonged.\textsuperscript{21} He had little cause for concern: the presumably natural and national soon united.

The importance of the carta general took on dramatic significance with the Mexican-American War. While countries such as the United States, England, Spain, and France achieved a degree of self-definition through imperial expansion, Mexico's imperative need to construct and present itself as a sovereign, independent nation-state arose in the face of invasion and perceived impotence.\textsuperscript{22} Antonio García Cubas put it dramatically in his summation of the armistice of 1847:

> Our history is written simply by saying that Mexico and the United States are neighbors. At least France and England are separated by the Channel; between our nation and our neighbor there exists no other border than a simple mathematic line . . . God help the Republic!\textsuperscript{23}

Under these less than auspicious circumstances the SMGE's new carta general appeared in 1850, hastily finished in the aftermath of the war and


\textsuperscript{21} Quoted in Anders Stephanson, Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right (New York: Hill & Wang, 1995), 43.

\textsuperscript{22} See Vicente Riva Palacio, introduction to La reforma, vol. 5 of México a través de los siglos: Historia general y completa del desenvolvimiento social, político, religioso, militar, artístico, científico y literario de México desde la antigüedad más remota hasta la época actual, ed. Vicente Riva Palacio, 5 vols. (Barcelona: Espasa y Cia., 1887–89).


\textsuperscript{24} Actas de la Comisión de Estadística Militar . . . sesión del 27 de Agosto de 1848, quoted in Mendoza Vargas, “Historia de la geografía,” 55.
during the initial phases of the boundary demarcation. It contained a wealth of statistical information: comparative tables of principle mountain chains, including a Humboldtian comparison between those of Mexico and the major mountains of Europe; computation of the size of the republic in square leagues according to total territory; physical configuration insets; and charts of the major rivers. It also included a visual elaboration of the amount of territory lost in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the demarcation of the new international limits between Mexico and the United States. Reflective of the increasing primacy of the visual in the nineteenth century, the image purportedly brought an expression of bitterness from General Antonio López de Santa Anna who, for the first time, could actually envision the magnitude of territory Mexico had lost.  

The map was never published, partly because of a financial shortfall, and in 1851 a foreign traveler, Brantz Mayer, warned others that “there is no complete map of the territory which may be confidently relied upon.”

The need for a published and circulated Mexican-produced national map became even more pronounced when, in 1854, Mexico lost another portion of its territorial claims as a partial result of a faulty U.S. map. Article 5 of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo dictated that John Disturnell’s 1846 Mapa de los Estados-Unidos de Méjico be used in the setting of the boundary line between the two nations. However, perceived defects in the map—particularly with regards to the location of El Paso and the course of the Río Grande—helped justify renewed U.S. territorial claims, culminating in the 1853–54 Gadsden Purchase. Regardless of the role Santa Anna and others played in the politics of the Purchase, Mexican intellectuals were convinced that Mexico needed an

25. Antonio García Cubas, El libro de mis recuerdos: Narraciones históricas, anecdoticas y de costumbres mexicanas, anteriores al actual órden social (Mexico City: Imp. de Arturo García Cubas, 1904), 452.


accurate, reliable, and internationally accepted and published national map of its own.

But was it enough to merely delineate the nation’s territorial extent? Otero, in 1847, observed that it was “useless to point out that the Mexican republic possesses an immense territory of more than [840,000 square miles]” when Mexico itself lacked a “national spirit.”28 After the war, a new carta general, constructed by Antonio García Cubas in 1856, would both proffer an iconographic image of the state’s new parameters and fill that territory with the ghosts of the past, creating an image of a single national spirit.

Naturalization

[How could a nation resist being found if a nineteenth-century map had predicted it? —Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*

Shortly after the Mexican-American War, Antonio García Cubas (1832–1912) made a name for himself as one of Mexico’s leading geographers and cartographers. He began his career in the offices of the Secretaría de Colonización y Industria, simultaneously studying engineering at the Colegio de Minería. Due to the financial straits of his widowed mother, he took longer than usual to finish his degree, eventually graduating in 1865. In the meantime, he worked diligently on various cartographic and geographic projects, spending his free afternoons and evenings in the library of the SMGE and in the private collections of a number of the Sociedad’s members.

The corridors of the Sociedad and the pages of its bulletin exposed García Cubas to a generation of intellectuals—both conservative and liberal—who increasingly viewed practices such as ethnography, linguistics, statistics, economics, history, and geography as integral and scientific components to nation-state formation.29 Befriended by a number of the scientists and intellectuals who coalesced around that institution, such as the geographer Manuel

29. Manuel Orozco y Berra defined ethnography as the “science, which has as its aim the classification of peoples,” primarily linguistically. See Manuel Orozco y Berra, *Geografía de las lenguas y carta etnográfica de México* (Mexico City: Imp. de J. M. Andrade y F. Escalante, 1864), xiii. On statistics as a science, see Tomás Aznar Barbachano, “Importancia del estudio de la geografía y estadística como base fundamental de un buen gobierno,” *Boletín de la Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística* (hereafter cited as BSMGE), vol. 8 (1860).
Orozco y Berra and historian José Fernando Ramírez, García Cubas flourished and was inducted in 1856, at the precocious age of 24, as an honorary member of the Sociedad. Before the end of the decade, García Cubas would be widely considered one of Mexico’s premier cartographers and geographers, on a par with his elderly mentor Orozco y Berra. In the coming years, his pictorial-descriptive maps and atlases would constitute the most important and well-known images of the Mexican nation-state produced prior to the publication of the maps of the Comisión Geográfico-Exploradora in the last decade of the nineteenth century. They hung in the halls of power in Mexico City and on the walls of classrooms; they graced the pages of national histories, such as the multivolume México a través de los siglos (1887–89), and were exported to foreign countries where they were highly regarded as authoritative sources for publishers of guidebooks.30 In addition to producing national maps and atlases, he wrote numerous “booster” works, designed to promote Mexico abroad as a place for both physical and economic colonization, and a series of geography texts for Mexican schools.31

The work that catapulted García Cubas to fame within government circles and the Sociedad, and which led to his early admission into that institution, was his carta general of 1857. In July 1856, García Cubas showed a number of the members in the Sociedad a national map he had produced based upon his consultation of various maps and atlases.32 The members of the Sociedad were evidently extremely impressed and García Cubas published the carta general the following year to wide acclaim (see figure 1).

This carta general became the most well-known national map of Mexico well into the next decade and served as the basis for Orozco y Berra’s own cartographic reorganization of the political landscape under the French in 1865. García Cubas also included it in his 1858 Atlas geográfico, estadístico e histórico de


31. See, for example, Antonio García Cubas, The Republic of Mexico in 1876, trans. George E. Henderson (Mexico City: La Enseñanza, 1876); idem, Mexico, Its Trade, Industry and Resources, trans. William Thompson (Mexico City: Secretaría de Fomento, 1893); and idem, Cuadro geográfico, estadístico, descriptivo, e histórico de los Estados Unidos de Mexicanos (Mexico City: Oficina Tip. de la Secretaría de Fomento, 1884). García Cubas also made cartographic games for children such as his Los insurgentes: fuego histórico para niños (1891), a game about Mexican independence in which children would follow the routes of the insurgent generals across the face of a map of Mexico. The map for the game is available at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Library, Univ. of Texas at Austin.

la República Mexicana, a work designed to aid the grand projects of an ascendant liberal regime: colonization, capitalist development, and the disentailment of church and Indian lands.33

While designed to aid in a variety of grand projects, García Cubas’s map was something of a grand project itself. García Cubas’s atlas, particularly the carta general, is an exemplary representation of a new nationalist sensibility arising from the Mexican-American War. Here, for the first time, a carta general purported to offer not only a vision of Mexico’s geography—of its territo-

33. Antonio García Cubas, Atlas geográfico, estadístico e histórico de la República Mexicana (Mexico City: Imp. de José Mariano Fernández de Lara, 1858).
rial extent—but also of “its” history. On the surface of the map, history and geography came together to compose Mexico as a coherent historical and geographical entity; that is, as a legitimate nation-state. In one sense, the two disciplines came together in García Cubas’s own conception of history, which he understood as a geographically descriptive enterprise aimed at discerning how the country literally took shape. His maps and atlases were genealogies of the territory, narrating a kind of property-history in which the historical existence of the nation-state was taken as a given and a history of “its” territory was simply recounted. Hence his inclusion in the atlas of a lengthy political genealogy which traced contemporary Mexico’s politico-historical origins back to at least the seventh century and the kingdom of the Toltecs. And thus his devotion of generous space, in his *Diccionario geográfico, histórico y biográfico de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos*, to the Mexican-American War (which resulted in a massive territorial amputation) and his reduction of the French intervention (which did not) to a few scanty paragraphs. But history and geography came together in other ways on his carta general, in particular through a careful blend of scientific and artistic images.

To understand how, I begin with García Cubas’s cartographic method. What did it mean to be a cartographer in Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century? Any image of a solo explorer slogging through the brush mopping sweat from his brow, waging warfare against teeming insects while straining under the weight of expensive instruments would be wide of the mark. García Cubas did very little fieldwork or surveying to construct his maps. Other than his historical map of the battle of Cinco de Mayo, for which he traveled to Puebla and toured the battlefield, all of his maps appear to have been constructed in his office in Mexico City. The opposition press of Mexico City seems to have picked up on this very point, ridiculing the distinguished ingeniero in rhyme: “Without making any stops / or even moving for a second / he knows the entire world / at least by a map.” They certainly understood the artificial conception of reality held by those who learned of the world from the comfort of metropolitan parlors.

García Cubas might have been surprised by their scorn. On one level, it
was simple: he was not a surveyor. To be a mapmaker in mid-nineteenth-century Mexico was to compile images and plot them onto a mathematically ordered surface: a task suited to an office rather than the field. Indeed, García Cubas frequently and proudly proclaimed that his maps were based not upon his own fieldwork but upon the “most recent and reliable information,” collected from state and municipal governments. The process entailed collecting the maps and then comparing them. It was a rational, rather than empirical, project based upon reason and deduction, not experience and exploration. Such a methodology reflected, in part, not only a lack of personnel and money to conduct large triangular surveys and regional chorographies, but also a faith in (and fascination with) encyclopedic forms of knowledge construction common at the time. When Orozco y Berra began his multivolume *Diccionario universal de historia y geografía* in 1853, he proudly wrote that his work was one of “compilation and not of creation.”37 The first carta general of 1850 included a statement of authenticity, attesting that in the formation of the map the cartographers had gathered close to 300 maps of the territory. García Cubas touted his own carta general as being nothing more than the product of careful comparative analysis of “the most exact maps” available at the time.

Regardless of the quantity or quality of maps consulted, map compilation suffered from a particular and seemingly irresolvable tension: if the previous maps had been incorrect, inaccurate, and uncertain, what assurances did one have that the map they contributed to building would not suffer similar problems? There were none. A contemporary review by Orozco y Berra of García Cubas’s carta general observed that “the work is . . . of simple compilation; it is not perfect and still shows considerable errors.”38 However, he continued, the indisputable merit of García Cubas’s map consists in his reuniting the best existent maps, coordinating them and bringing them to light, completing for the first time an enterprise which had been impossible for the Sociedad de Geografía, and which in spite of its defects is as of today

37. Laura Pérez Rosales, “Manuel Orozco y Berra,” in Pi-Suñer Llores, *En busca de un discurso integrador*, 367. These kinds of encyclopedic fetishisms reflected a broader nineteenth-century faith in the presumed unity and totality of knowledge and humankind’s capacity to a complete and comprehensive knowledge of physical reality. For a compelling literary perspective, see Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993).

the only one of its kind, and has filled a great space in the geographic science of our nation [patria].

As the author here suggests, García Cubas’s success came from his compilation of the “best existent maps” into a coordinated, coherent whole. An act of symbolic centralization, it garnered its status not as a result of a series of comprehensive and careful field surveys nor from necessarily correcting previous maps but from the unification of disparate regional maps into a single bound whole. The visual effect minimized variation and rupture, offering instead an apparent structural unity known as the nation-state. The success of the image, and its international legitimacy, derived also from the fact that García Cubas not only reunited a variety of available maps but also “coordinated” them, as Orozco y Berra’s felicitous word choice reveals. He literally coordinated the images by superimposing a graticule—the net of imaginary parallels and meridians thought to envelope the globe and which together provide geographic coordinates—onto his compiled material. Within this graticule, he positioned Mexico for the first time in relation to the Greenwich meridian rather than the easternmost point on the cathedral in the central plaza of Mexico City, the traditional meridian for Mexican maps. He thus brought Mexico into cartographic consonance with what were then construed to be the icons of advanced civilization, giving it a “modern” spatial sensibility.

But García Cubas’s use of the graticule surpassed the mere act of making sure his coordinates were internationally coordinated. While the graticule (as a concept put into practice) has a history, the graticule itself is strictly ahistorical in terms of what it delineates: it is simply, so the story goes, a reflection of

40. I am indebted to Héctor Mendoza Vargas for bringing this to my attention.
41. Matthew Edney has suggested that the use of a local meridian—the Capitol dome in Washington, D.C.—by U.S. map makers constituted a means by which “to declare the status of the U.S.A. as a nation.” If the use of the cathedral in Mexico City were considered in a similar light, the shift to an internationally coordinated meridian may have signified a fairly significant and concomitant shift in the nature of nationalist thought. I am indebted to Matthew Edney’s insightful commentary on the panel “Cartographic Narratives in the History of North America” (the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, Boston, Jan. 2001). See also Matthew Edney, “Cartographic Confusion and Nationalism: The Meridian of Washington, D.C. in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Mapline: Newsletter of the Hermon Dunlap Smith Center for the History of Cartography at The Newberry Library* 69/70 (1993): 4–8; and idem, “Cartographic Culture and Nationalism in the Early United States: Benjamin Vaughan and the Choice for a Prime Meridian, 1811,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 20, no. 4 (1994).
a mathematically derived order, itself supposedly a mirror of the natural order of the universe more generally.42 In other words, it is something not so much created as discovered according to formal rules of mathematical logic. Mexico’s location within this timeless matrix made a similar subtle and transhistorical assertion: it was a nation discovered, not created. Structured by the graticule, the nation-state appeared as an objective reality, existing in advance of its own exploration. Its physical existence predicted by global coordinates, all that remained was to better render its dimensions and internal composition, a process guaranteed by a firm belief in scientific progress.43 In effect, García Cubas scientifically naturalized the Mexican nation-state through the visual medium of the map.

**Visualization**

National identity . . . would lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition: its topography mapped, elaborated and enriched as a homeland.

—Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*

A plotted, scientifically naturalized territory did not make Mexico. While the graticule predicted and structured a given space, it did not reveal a place.44 To


44. The distinction between “space” and “place” is a common one and the literature is vast. While a variety of definitions exist, I follow here the basic notion that “place” is space to which meaning has been ascribed, and thus an historical and social creation rather than an innate fact. This is the general definition found in Yi-Fu Tuan’s classic, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1977); and in Erica Carter, James Donald, and Judith Squires, eds., *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993). Engagements with questions of space and place have served as a foundational point for much of the new literature in cultural geography. For an overview, see Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Oxford: Basil
make Mexico a tangible reality the scientifically derived surface needed to be attached to a visual panorama.\(^45\) Thus, adjoining the graticule, carefully placed so as not to obscure nor blend with the lined surface, lay artistic images that provided a visual, historical and spatial anchor to the plotted points of the abstract grid.\(^46\) These images visually complemented the coordinates that covered, and connected, a cartographic Mexico. They gave the scientific image an aesthetic and historical depth, infused a modern methodology with foundational mythology, and reconciled the pervasive nineteenth-century nationalist tension between modernity and authenticity.

To the right of the cartouche García Cubas reproduced a number of popular images of archeological sites (see figure 2). He included here four images:

---


45. On the relationship between plotted points and pictorial representation, see Burnett, *Masters of All They Surveyed*, esp. chap. 3.

46. I have taken the term “spatial anchor” from Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places* and adapted it to my own purposes.
labeled progressively from left to right are Palenque, Pirámide de Papantla, Mitla, and Uxmal. The images are indicative of an increasing reliance at mid-century upon the pre-Columbian past to improve Mexico’s national image. Certainly this was not the indigemanía of Porfirián Mexico, when state officials presented Aztec palaces at world’s fairs, unveiled statues of Aztec heroes such as Cuauhtémoc on Mexico City’s Paseo de la Reforma, and devoted an entire volume of México a través de los siglos, the ambitious synthesis of Mexico’s past, to the pre-Hispanic era.\textsuperscript{47} This kind of neo-Aztecan indigemanía was still inchoate in the 1850s and 1860s. It would be another three decades after the publication of García Cubas’s map before lands containing the very archeological monuments he painted were even exempted from alienation or sale and before an office for the Inspección y Conservación de Monumentos Arqueológicos de la República would be founded.\textsuperscript{48}

Yet neither was this the Mexico of the 1830s, characterized by a general “indifference to Mexico’s indigenous heritage,” in which the most conspicuous commentary on Indians in elite writings was their utter absence.\textsuperscript{49} Rather, in the middle decades of the century, intellectuals from the SMGE drew upon the perspectives of Clavijero and Teresa de Mier to appropriate a generalized indigenous past for historical precedent and priority. An editorial in the bulletin of the Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística observed as early as 1850 that not only did foreign writers provide an extraordinarily distorted view of Mexico by focusing only upon its recent history but they also virtually ignored the cultural achievements of contemporary Mexicans’ direct predeces-


\textsuperscript{48} On the exemption of lands with monuments, see the circular sent to all state governors in 1877 by the Secretaría de Fomento, Colonización, Industria y Comercio. Reprinted by the government of Veracruz as Circular 25, 5 Oct. 1877, in Colección de leyes, decretos y circulares del Estado de Veracruz Llave, año de 1876–1878 (Xalapa-Enríquez: Imp. del Gobierno del Estado, 1894), 146–47. On the office of Inspección, see Tenorio-Trillo, Mexico at the World’s Fairs, 84–89.

\textsuperscript{49} Hale, Mexican Liberalism in the Age of Mora, 217.
sors who were entitled “to be regarded as the most cultured people the Spaniards found in the New World.” Among other things, the editorial noted that the “ancient Mexicans” had “maps of the country and of the lands traversed by their forebears,” indicative of just how significant a place maps held in the pantheon of civilizational status. Orozco y Berra would pursue a similar line of argumentation in years to come, engaging in prodigious amounts of research to show that the Aztecs had geographic maps and plans as well as modern conceptions of property prior to the conquest.

The images in García Cubas’s cartouche belong to this tradition. While the Nahua would assume increasing prominence on the ancestral pedestal, a number of sedentary indigenous groups—Maya, Tarascans, Zapotecs—that had inhabited the terrain within contemporary Mexican national boundaries were included in the pantheon of Mexican patrimony. In sharp contrast, nonsedentary indigenous groups such as the Apache and Comanche, from their now predetermined peripheral realms, were deemed treacherous enemies of the state-in-formation. Both Orozco y Berra and García Cubas cast the Indians of the central plateau as sedentarists living the agrarian romance, defending civilization and progress from the incursions of “perfidious, traitorous and cruel” northern tribes. The nonsedentarists were “tribes” rather than “civilizations”: with no proper “ruins” or remnants to take one back in time and no rootedness to satisfy the nostalgia for origins, they were construed as having no history to speak of. A nationalist narration of the passage of time could only begin by envisioning a permanence in space. Connecting contemporary Mexico to a variety of sedentarist indigenous pasts portrayed it as a presumably unified territorial entity of historical longevity with a statist tradition, endowing the government’s own centralizing tendencies with historical pedi-

51. Ibid., emphasis mine.
gree. Images of disparate archaeological sites, such as the ones in the image here, thus wedded ideas of historical piety to geographical priority.54

The images also elevated Mexico’s cultural capital in an increasingly exoticizing world while drawing attention away from the reality of the contemporary Indian, a problematic issue for both liberals and conservatives. Contemporary Indians conjured up images of caste wars and colonial legacies and were understood largely as a “problem” to which liberal and conservative alike offered varying solutions: the abolition of communal land tenure, their political incorporation as national citizens, or the encouragement of European immigration and the whitening of native groups. Conservative Francisco Pimentel complained that “in Mexico there is no commonality between whites and Indians; everything is different: physical aspects, language, customs, [and] state of civilization. In Mexico there are two different nations on the same land, and worse still, two nations that are to a point enemies.”55 A liberal counterpart voiced similar concerns that contemporary Indians were not Mexicans as they “still conserve their own nationality, protected by family and language.”56 By comparison, the ancient Mexican must have seemed a safe and pristine premise for cultural and historical validation.

This is precisely the effect of the image: the archeological emphasis glorified indigenous culture from a temporal distance, rendering Indians as inanimate objects of natural history and artifacts for contemplation.57 The collapsed heads, the encroaching jungle, and the crumbling structures all suggest the past rather than the present, consciously drawing attention to the primordial while erasing its threat. The inclusion in the image of what appear to be

54. This was, in other words, a selective tradition, “an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a preshaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification.” See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), 115. For a suggestive engagement with the relationship between sedentarism, the state and history, see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “1227: Treatise on Nomadology—The War Machine,” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987).

55. Francisco Pimentel, *La economía política aplicada a la propiedad territorial en México* (Mexico City: Imp. de Ignacio Cumplido, 1866), 186.


57. In this sense, scientific discourse—archeology, history, and the developing field of anthropology—reconfirmed the distinction between self and other which had previously been mediated by a colonial legal system which recognized two independent republics, *la república de españoles* and *la república de indios*. See Roberto González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1998).
tourists, at the far left and far right, underlines the point. They stand in profile or with their backs to the viewer, as active participants in the scene. In sharp contrast, the two Indians included in the image are inert parts of the scene itself. Positioned in the foreground and posed, with spears in hand, as if in a diorama, they appear as romantic and proud warriors of a bygone era, impressive yet impotent. This subtle conflation of what we would now differentiate as archeology and ethnography merely confirmed that the Indian had been reconstituted as an object of historical study rather than a subject with political will. In other words, indigenous history and culture had been revived as dead, resuscitated with the fetid breath of archeology.58

García Cubas complemented this cultural landscape with a natural one in the other pictorial image on the map (see figure 3). In contrast to a forbidding and overgrown land threatening archeological ruins with absorption, here nature appears almost manicured in its perfection. We see seven prominent topographical features designed to present a panorama of the beauty of the Mexican landscape. From left to right are Organos de Actopan, Iztaccihuatl, Cofre de Perote, Popocatepetl, Montañas de Jacal, Orizaba, and the Cascada de Regla. This was, it should be emphasized, anything but a “natural” landscape. It was a cultural construction, a way of seeing, and an active ordering...

58. Thus Luis Villoro’s argument that the Indian at midcentury was “no longer present,” but reduced to a “pretty archeological theme.” See Luis Villoro, Los grandes momentos, 161. On reviving the indigenous as dead, see Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (New York: Routledge, 1992), 134. Pratt refers specifically to the “European imagination” and how it produced contemporary non-European peoples as “archeological subjects.” Although not speaking of Europeans, I think the general concept translates quite well to late-nineteenth-century Mexico in which a Europeanized imagination revived the indigenous past both for their own contemplation and for that of their European counterparts.
such that landscape takes on both its verbal and nominal meanings. In fact, it was an impossible scene in which García Cubas collapsed features from spatially disparate areas into one frame and arranged them for theatrical force: the images to the far left and far right serve as curtains pulled back, drawing the viewer’s eyes to the centerpieces of the performance, the idealized and gracefully snowcapped peaks. A simultaneity of perspective is given in which the viewer sees the Pico of Orizaba and Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl from dramatically different locations. The land appears unusually ordered and organized and any signs of human presence have been removed. Unlike the previous cartouche, here the native presence is obvious only through its absence. Mexico appears as a land of sublime contemplation, where one could “admire the sublimity of nature,” a trope García Cubas and others inherited from von Humboldt’s own views of Mexico and the veracruzano landscape.

There are, of course, multiple ways to interpret the landscape image. In practical terms, the image helped promote Mexico as a pleasing prospect for potential colonizers and investors. The image made Mexico appear familiar to the foreign viewer and as an untouched arcadia of vast proportions, replete with open land for cultivation and torrents of water for irrigation. In an era of increasing calls for attracting (white) immigrants to settle in underpopulated


regions of the country, calls that would echo most loudly in the coming decade in the works of men such as Francisco Pimentel and García Cubas himself, the visual tidiness and harmony of the image promoted Mexico as “one of the choicest countries in the world for colonization.”

But hardly does the image conjure up a cornucopia and it functions on a more subtle level. While suggestive as a panorama of the Mexican landscape, the image primarily portrays features from a sharply delimited part of the country: the corridor that connects the port of Veracruz to Mexico City. Most travelers to Mexico—diplomats, artists, journalists, scientists, or military personnel—reached Mexico City through this corridor, at least until the Porfiriato, when railroads connected the northern border town of El Paso to Mexico City. These were, then, the topographical features with which most of the European and U.S. reading public would be familiar, features that had long played a starring role in the topographical imaginary of what Mexico “looked like.” Repeatedly replicated in the travel literature, artistic portraits, trade journals, and military narratives of the period, the promontories of Popocatépetl, Itzaccihuatl, and the Pico of Orizaba were metonyms for Mexico itself.

But the features were more than mere metonyms. They were also, to use Bakhtin’s term, *chronotopes*: historically charged “points in the geography of a community where time and space intersect and fuse.” Prior to all of the gringo armies, bourgeois travelers, and scientific expeditions, Cortés traversed this corridor, viewed these topographical features and conquered an empire. The Spanish conquest invariably influenced the way new arrivals experienced and viewed their surroundings. Reading their accounts it seems as if every action, to some degree, was imbued with the weight of the conquest. Sometimes literally: visiting a bar in front of which stood a cart that “might have come over from Spain with Cortés,” W. E. Carson described how, with 25 silver dollars in his pockets, he “felt like an ancient Spanish galleon loaded with pieces of eight.” But it was specifically Cortés’s historical presence that weighed most heavily on the minds of travelers, and it was his march to

---

Tenochtitlán, described in epic detail in the copies of William Prescott's *The Conquest of Mexico*, which they brought with them, that most captured the imagination. The physical space of central Veracruz thus assumed form as a theatrical stage-space for many travelers, who integrated the epic of Cortés's expedition into the drama of their own passages. In effect, García Cubas's image served to conjure a particular historical trajectory through the use of a number of the most symbolically saturated geographical points in the nation's official history. Cortés's contingent and precarious journey became a fixed itinerary, a set-piece of passage that functioned as the primary trope for both imagining and entering Mexico.

With García Cubas's map, and its enframing of the land as a quintessentially Mexican landscape of sun-tinged Orizaba and beckoning Popocatepetl, the viewer, not just the traveler, could now engage in a symbolic reconquest of

---


67. A good selection of travel accounts through Veracruz is available in Martha Poblett, *Cien viajeros en Veracruz: Crónicas y relatos* (Xalapa-Enríquez: Imp. del Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, 1992). See also Siemens, *Between the Summit and the Sea*.

68. On the use of a small number of historical itineraries in elaborating a quintessential image of the colony or nation, see Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996).
Mexico, traversing the land in stride with the conquistadores from the comfort of an armchair. As we will see in the next section, intellectuals at the SMGE were eager to fix Cortés’s passage on the map, with more than vistas of the countryside.

Narration

Without geographic maps, it is impossible to understand the majority of political events, follow the march of armies, [or] the routes and discoveries of travelers.
—Manuel Orozco y Berra, Materiales para una cartografía mexicana

In 1860, two years after the publication of García Cubas’s Atlas, readers of the Boletín de la Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística encountered a startlingly fervent, if brief, essay by one of its members, José Guadalupe Romero.69 Entitled “Dictamen sobre los inconvenientes de mudar los nombres geográficos de las poblaciones de la república, aprobado por la Sociedad,” Romero’s article stood in sharp contrast to the usual fare of lengthy ethno- graphic studies, linguistic analyses, and regional geographic treatises that regularly appeared in the journal. Eschewing description and an apolitical pretense, Romero penned an unabashedly prescriptive essay intended ultimately for the eyes of the president of the republic. Romero’s essay would have remarkable resilience and resonance over the course of the next half century as members of the Sociedad and state officials repeatedly referred back to it as a founding statement on the politics of place names.70

The report stemmed from an investigation, headed by Romero, charged

70. For example, see Antonio García Cubas, Francisco Díaz Covarrubias and Manuel Fernández, “Dictamen sobre los inconvenientes de variar los nombres a los lugares de la República,” BSMGE, 2ª Epoca, vol. 1 (1869); Agustín Díaz, Memoria de la Comisión Geográfico-Exploradora presentada al oficial mayor, encargada de la Secretaría de Fomento, sobre los trabajos ejecutados durante el año fiscal de 1878 a 1879 (Mexico City: Imp. de Francisco Díaz de León, 1880), 26–7; and Ricardo García Granados et al., “Dictamen presentado a la Sociedad por los socios ingenieros Ricardo García Granados y Francisco de Piña y Ricardo Ortega y Pérez Gallardo, sobre la proposición que hizo la ‘Sociedad Cultural, Intelectual, Moral y Física,’ de Guadalajara, para cambiar los nombres de los dos picos del volcán de Colima, conocidos por Volcán de Nieve el uno, y el otro por Volcán de Fuego,” BSMGE, 5ª Epoca, vol. 3 (1908).
with “selecting the best means to avoid the disorder and confusion caused to our geography, and even the science of geography in general, by the changing of the names” of cities and towns in the country. Romero, perhaps perceiving the volatility of naming as an allegory for Mexico’s own political instability, quickly turned geographical inconvenience into ominous portents for political society, repeatedly alluding to the “serious problems,” “ills,” and “disorders” inevitably occasioned by such changes. The nation would face “serious problems,” he warned, if the changing of geographic place-names continued unabated. Indeed, “civilized nations,” he wrote, “had been very cautious” with regards to the changing of place-names. The span of centuries and waves of political crises had done little to alter the names of “Memphis and Thebes, Babylon and Ecbatana, Jerusalem and Athens,” geographic names that had far outlived those that named them. Even in the “heat of revolution,” he argued, the French had only changed the name of one place, the capital of the Department of Vendée and even this single variation had given rise to interminable problems. Thus, he concluded, certain issues require that the national government have exclusive rights to pass laws and “who can doubt that among this class of laws are those that fix invariably the geographical names of the nation?” The committee under Romero’s direction offered a solution: proclaim that only the federal government, rather than the federated states or municipal authorities, would have the power to change geographic place names.

In an era of civil war between centralists and federalists these were sharp words. And, in fact, the government, under the federalist leadership of Benito Juárez, ultimately rejected Romero’s proposal, due undoubtedly to concerns over alienating municipal and state leaders whose support was critical in the aftermath of a three-year civil war and in the midst of a foreign invasion. A memo sent to all the state governors at the orders of Juárez stated that while the government remained “convinced of the inconveniences caused by the frequent changes of names,” it did not believe it “necessary to force state authorities to prevent such changes.” Rather, it would be enough to “make them aware of the need to support the petition of the Sociedad.” But what compelled Romero to make such an impassioned plea for something as seemingly innocuous as onomastic permanence in the first place? Why was federal intervention necessary? And what were these ills and disorders that threatened to undermine the nation?

On one level, Romero’s concerns were entirely pragmatic. As he remarked, if the arbitrary changing of place-names persisted, domestic rule and international relations would be thrown into disarray and the mass of confusion which already plagued “the charts, maps, statistical studies, laws and government orders” would continue. While obviously alluding to the administrative chaos that resulted from an uncodified landscape, Romero avoided any further explicit discussion along these lines. It was left to his associates in the SMGE, among them Antonio García Cubas, to state unequivocally a decade later that the constant and arbitrary changing of place-names by municipal and regional authorities impeded the rationalization of taxation and undermined the foundations of property.72

But Romero’s concern over the changing of place-names was above all an historical one. In the first place, Romero observed that place-names, particularly indigenous place-names, preserved history itself by imprinting the land with a genealogy. In an analogy revealing for its transparent overtures to state control, Romero compared geographic place-names to the proper names given by the state to “its” citizens. Arguing that proper names had “always been understood as immutable [and] . . . as the only means of identifying people and distinguishing among them,” he suggested that only in the rarest of cases should an individual be permitted to change their name, and even then only through addition of a new surname on to their old one rather than outright replacement.73 Similarly, how could Mexico’s own deep genealogy be substantiated if place-names were not permanent? Romero thus continued his analogy:

With even more reason geographic names of places should enjoy such immutability and duration, as men, in the end, exist for few years, and frequently change their situation and disappear; but places are permanent and firm, destined to contain races and generations, and to be mute witnesses of history.74


74. Romero, “Dictamen sobre los inconvenientes.”
Place-names were mute witnesses that spoke volumes: they spoke through their names and constituted the means by which a history of “races and generations” could be reconstituted. Romero approvingly cited German linguist Karl Bauschmann’s observation that “geographic place-names, by their permanence and duration, can be considered as precious monuments of remote times.”

Such concern with indigenous place-names was part of a larger developing indigemanía and constituted a prime component of the more general trend described by Edward Said as the postcolonial “search for authenticity.” Unlike the colonial project, in which naming (or more correctly, renaming) functioned as a routine mechanism for possession, in which a new cultural presence was spoken on to the land to create a space upon which colonization could occur, the nationalist project resurrected or actively perpetuated names which alluded to a history prior to the colonial origin. Never did a Mexican

---

75. See also the work of Antonio Peñafliel who argued that place names preserved tradition in places where “history has completely disappeared.” Peñafliel, *Nomenclatura geográfica de México: Etimologías de los nombres de lugar correspondientes a los principales idiomas que se hablan en la República* (Mexico City: Oficina Tip. de la Secretaría de Fomento, 1897), vi; and idem, *Nombres geográficos de México: Catálogo alfabético de los nombres de lugar pertenecientes al idioma “Nahuatl,” estudio jeroglífico de la matrícula de los tributos del código mendocino* (Mexico City: Oficina Tip. de la Secretaría de Fomento, 1885).

76. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Press, 1994), 226. To what degree nineteenth-century Mexico can be described as “postcolonial” is open to question. The term itself, for all (or because of) its prominence in academic discourse, is susceptible to a number of interpretations and usages. As the point of this article is in part to draw attention to the discursive devices used to simultaneously efface and confirm persistent forms of domination, “postcolonial” in this instance should not be understood as a description of some entirely new situation that superceded colonialism. As Arif Dirlik observes, such an understanding “mystifies both politically and methodologically a situation that represents not the abolition but the reconfiguration of earlier forms of domination.” See Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995). See also the cautionary remarks on “colonial and post-colonial discourse” in Rolena Adorno, “Reconsidering Colonial Discourse for Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Spanish America,” *Latin American Research Review* 28, no. 3 (1993).

77. The literature on colonialism, naming and possession is extensive. For a sampling, see William Boelhower, “Inventing America: A Model of Cartographic Semiosis,” *Word and
official, when confronted with a confusing administrative landscape, suggest that the names of smaller villages and towns be replaced by their global coordinates of longitude and latitude, as one colonial official suggested be done in British India. The names themselves were living sources of that deep history so critical to contemporary geographic and historical self-fashioning. When García Cubas resurrected Romero’s article in 1869, he observed that indigenous place-names often signified an idea, recorded a historical event or indicated the topographic situation of a place. For example, in the old empire of Michoacán, Acámbaro meant “place where the maguey is abundant” in the language of the Tarascan; and “in the Mexican language the word Cuauhtitlán literally means ‘next to an eagle’ and as an historical place teaches us that the Aztecs in their pilgrimage stayed in this place for three years.” For García Cubas, such names were a critical component to his own endeavors, begun in 1857 and eventually published in 1885, to reconstruct the historical route taken by the Nahua from the northern reaches to the central plateau.

Obsessions with pre-Hispanic history never went so far as to completely occlude Mexico’s pretension to European consanguinity. Indicative of the tension over history, José Guadalupe Romero had another route in mind and his genealogical analogy had a second meaning. The catalyst behind the formation of the committee that he directed stemmed from the recent inability of the cartographers of the SMGE to trace Cortés’s route from Veracruz to Mex-

---

79. See García Cubas et al., “Dictamen sobre los inconvenientes de variar los nombres.” The Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística, in 1871, named a commission to create an etymological treatise. Appealing to members’ “patriotism and love of science,” they requested they submit a catalog of indigenous words used in the area of different classes, including “nombres patronímicos” and “nombres geográficos.” See Ignacio Ramírez to Manuel Altamirano, 8 Nov. 1871, in SMGE—Archivo Histórico Ignacio Manuel Altamirano—Comisionados y representantes, vol. 75, 1851–1920.
80. García Cubas et al., “Dictamen sobre los inconvenientes de variar los nombres.” For similar investigations, see Eustaquio Buelna, “Peregrinación de los Aztecas y nombres geográficos indígenas de Sinaloa,” *BSMGE, 4ª Época* (1890).
ico City in the first general map of the republic.81 The map, while primarily intended as a symbolic affirmation of the country’s “political respectability” after the crushing loss of half the national territory in the war with the United States, was also designed to construct a visual narrative of Mexico’s “true history.”82 A stated task assigned to the cartographers who composed the map had been to retrace and mark “with exactitude” two historical routes considered foundational journeys in Mexico’s own path to self-realization: Agustín Iturbide’s itinerary from Iguala (where he delivered his famous proclamation) to Mexico City (where the Spanish capitulated) and Cortés’s route from his landing on the coast to his arrival in and conquest of Tenochtitlán. After careful study, the researchers reconstructed Iturbide’s route; that of Cortés proved more elusive.

Cortés’s second letter to Emperor Charles V, written at some point during the autumn of 1520, served as the primary source for the cartographers. In the letter, Cortés narrated his journey from his landing on the gulf coast to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán:

I traveled for three days through the country and kingdom of Cempoal . . . on the fourth day I entered a province which is called Sienchimalem, in which there is a town which is very strong and built in a defensible position on the side of a very steep mountain. . . . Then I went over a pass which is at the frontier of this province, and we called it Nombre de Dios, because it was the first we had crossed in these lands . . . [and] on the slopes below the pass there are other villages and a fortress called Ceyxnacan which also belongs to Mutezuma. . . . From there I continued for three days through desert country which is uninhabitable because of its infertility and lack of water and because of the extreme cold. . . . After three days we crossed another pass . . . we called it Firewood Pass. On the descent from this pass . . . there is a valley thickly inhabited . . . this valley and town are called Caltanmí. . . . After staying there four or five days, I left them all very pleased and went up the valley to the town of the other chief I spoke of, which is called Ystacmastitán.83

81. As far as I have been able to determine, this represented the first effort on the part of either a private institution or government agency to retrace Cortés’s route.
These brief references were most likely supplemented by those found in Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* [True history of the conquest of New Spain] who recalled, for example, the first day’s march terminating in Jalapa, “from which we went to Socochima, a fortified place with a difficult approach.” Bernal Díaz continued in subsequent pages to fill in some of the narrative gaps left by Cortés’s letter, but even so, these are sparse references indeed for reconstructing an historical itinerary. Yet this proved to be the least of the cartographers’ concerns. More problematic was the fact that the indigenous place names mentioned in the two texts had seemingly vanished from the landscape, having gone through repeated changes, presumably lost forever. As Romero observed, “in the end, two places along the Spanish conquistador’s route remained in doubt, because one could not definitively determine what the names today are of places that prior to the conquest had different names.” Romero did not state which two places these were nor did he provide any explicit indication as to the nature of the name changes. It seems clear however that in general indigenous place-names were being supplanted by those of Mexican patriots of independence—Allende, Morelos, and Hidalgo, among others—a practice which eventually led García Cubas to assert that while “perpetuating the memory of illustrious men” was a laudable goal, a statue or a monument would just as easily achieve such an end. Just as problematic, places often had multiple names: one town could have simultaneously an ecclesiastical, indigenous, common [vulgar], and legal name, all of which were substantially different and not necessarily categorically fixed and archived. By the century’s end, a new state exploration agency would have as one of its primary tasks the collection and cataloguing of all such names in order to overcome persistent ambiguities.

But at mid-century finances did not permit quick resolutions. The SMGE cartographers never recreated what was thought to be Cortés’s precise route

85. Romero, “Dictamen sobre los inconvenientes.”
86. See García Cubas, “Dictamen sobre los inconvenientes de variar los nombres.”
and the itinerary was excluded from the final map. It was this perceived failure that provoked a strong response, at least among the members of the SMGE, and Romero’s subsequent letter. They understood the power of foundational narratives as a means to geo-historical legitimacy. For Romero, like his Creole predecessors, José María Luis Mora and Lucas Alamán, and his contemporaries Francisco Pimentel and Manuel Orozco y Berra, Mexico’s genesis began with Cortés and his epic confrontation with the Aztecs. If Cortés’s travels and travails were acts of national foundation, how could they be contingent and ambiguous? If the nation’s roots were to be found in Cortés’s route, how could it be anything other than a solid, firm line, boldly coursing across the center of the page?

All nation-states have their founding myths, overdetermined and evolutionary narratives that give an allegorical dimension to the nation-state’s existence and lend credence to certain claims to rule. Such myths are geneological teleologies: arguing for filial authorization, they give power the presumed legitimacy of descent and argue implicit consent. Not only are these foundational myths a mode of historical narration, a way of narrating the past, they are often the object of history itself, a hallowed means of imposing a temporal order—a chronology—upon the contingencies and multiplicity of what has come before in order to tell a coherent, delimited, encoded story. Nationalist history, however, has little power without a space upon which to unfold. As

88. Years later Manuel Orozco y Berra would suggest that the route was not included in the map due to scale, as well as the missing places, but I have found no evidence that in the 1850s the issue of scale was raised: the fundamental failure was the unfixed landscape.

89. Indeed, Romero was not merely a quirky crank but representative of the period’s obsession with attaching history to territory. As well as the reiterations of Romero’s arguments made by García Cubas and others, the first president of the SMGE, José María Justo Gómez de la Cortina, devoted years of his life to the creation of a Diccionario de voces necesarias para el estudio de la cosmografía, geografía y topografía para la inteligencia de las relaciones históricas y de viajes, which was never completed or published.

D. W. Meinig has wryly put it, “history takes place.”91 A good deal of the fascination with geography, and the inscribed national map, revolved around the understanding that it could create those places upon which a foundational, sequential history could be narrated; upon which one could “follow the march of armies, [or] the routes and discoveries of travelers” and compose the course of history itself.92

The geographical concerns of Sociedad intellectuals such as José Guadalupe Romero and Antonio García Cubas were thus simultaneously historical ones: the possibility that toponymic turmoil would make Mexico’s own historical genealogy unstable, interrupting the “narration of the nation,” and with it, the enterprise of history itself.93 By putting a stop to the arbitrary changing of place-names, historical as well as geographical ambiguity would be reconciled through a form of spatial order and cartographic permanence. Only then could a retrospective coherence be constituted and a destiny deciphered, in the process drowning out the cacophony of competing histories of the land.

**Conclusion**

The historical unity of the ruling classes is realised in the state, and their history is essentially the history of States and of groups of states. —**Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks**

In a panegyric to Antonio García Cubas, delivered to the members of the Sociedad in 1909, Francisco de P. Piña averred that “History and Geography” were two “beautiful sciences powerfully united,” which, together, provided a “real and positive, rather than ideal and platonic conception of the nation [patria].”94 Together they explained not only “the reason for its existence” but also the rationale behind “the sacrifices which arise from the defense of its inviolable rights of sovereignty and independence.” History and Geography were more than beautiful sciences: they were national sciences, two sides of a

single complex that gave a territorial expression its historical legitimacy and history a territory upon which to unfold. Together, they wrote a narrative around which modern Mexico would cohere.

The praise for García Cubas is not surprising. His 1857 carta general served in many ways as a defining moment in Mexican nation-state formation. Nationhood itself found expression in the disciplinary unification of history and geography on the surface of his national map which, through a subtle blending of technology and iconography, portrayed Mexico as both timeless yet richly historical. The scientific naturalization of the nation's territory, the visual production of a particularly Mexican cultural and natural landscape, and the narration of its presumed roots converged on his map to fix the land as a stable cultural, political, historical, and geographical object.

In this sense, García Cubas’s carta general has more in common with the indigenous pinturas of pre-conquest and early colonial Mexico than might at first seem apparent. In Barbara Mundy’s careful examination of the cartographic images produced as part of the *relaciones geográficas* for the Spanish monarch in the late sixteenth century, she showed how a particular genealogy and history was woven into the pinturas of indigenous groups whom the Spanish conquered. While the surface differences between these pinturas and a map such as García Cubas’s are paramount, there is at least one similarity worth noting: both sets of images function to bring history and geography into mutual dialogue in order to validate or legitimate the position of those in power in relation to those over whom they presume to rule. As I have attempted to demonstrate by analyzing both the internal form and content of the map as well as the historical circumstances that conditioned its production, the presumably objective and “modern” scale-maps that appear so natural to us are themselves powerful stories about the past and the present, replete with their own ideological presuppositions.

The insertion of a history into the map can lead, ironically enough, to anachronistic history. As Thongchai Winichakul has observed in his careful analysis of the cartographic creation of Thailand, by taking as a given the prior existence of the Thai nation-state, historians miss the fact that it was in the process of being created, and at the expense of a whole array of smaller, dispersed kingdoms. They thus inadvertently replicate and give credence to a nationalist discourse that arose at a specific point in time to legitimate certain

---

spatial claims to power.96 Timothy Anna’s recent study of nineteenth-century Mexico makes a similar, although no where near as comprehensive or daring, claim: in assuming the existence of a coherent entity called Mexico, “uninterrupted, since the time of the ancient civilizations,” historians have codified the legitimation discourse of late-nineteenth-century nationalist elites who consciously constructed the early years of independence as a moment of threat to an already constituted space and thus reduced the history of Mexico to a metropolitan-narrated nationalist tragedy of territorial aggregation and disintegration.97

An historical and spatial domain called Mexico was never external and prior to history, like coordinated points in the graticule. It was actively constituted and narrated and national maps played a foundational role in that process. This should not be construed as suggesting that García Cubas’s image was an alien representation that obscured or erased a more “authentic Mexico.” Precisely the opposite: there was no “authentic” landscape or essential Mexico hiding behind the façade of the image, waiting to emerge, pristine and untouched, from the primordial mists.98 It was, in fact, the very search for

96. Thongchai, *Siam Mapped*, 146–48. Part of the power of Thongchai’s critique is the way in which he is able to connect such histories with broader trends in contemporary historiography and politics. Historians take the existence of Thailand as a given because they feel compelled to see the history of Thailand primarily through the lens of international relations and colonialism. Thus, an already integrated nation-state (Thailand) confronts the Western powers. Such an epistemological grid excludes the “voice of those tiny states which were never born later as nations, despite their active role at that time, and allows only the story of the emerging nation to be heard.” (p. 147). It also excludes from consideration the manner by which the Bangkok elite appropriated Western mapping technologies to assert control over those locales. Thongchai’s assertions offer comparative food-for-thought for nineteenth-century Mexicanists. José Jorge Klor de Alva’s questioning of the applicability of the term “postcolonial” to Latin America already constitutes one such fruitful comparative engagement. See Klor de Alva, “The Postcolonization of the (Latin) American Experience.”


such fixed essences that proved so critical to defining the nation-state. In this sense, García Cubas’s carta general was the broadest of a whole array of what could be called “state fixations”: federal obsessions with the permanence—the fixity—perceived as basic to the practice and theory of government and to state-promoted capitalist development. Rule and development required the capacity to count, to tax, to arbitrate—in a word, to regulate. Regulation and investment in turn required homogenous, predictable space and fixed units of analysis: political jurisdictions, categories of people, bounded properties, and so forth. But, as Mariano Otero’s lamentations (with which this article began) clearly suggested, faced with the imperialist pretensions of a northern neighbor, the most basic unit of analysis in need of “fixing” was the nation-state itself. Hence the obsession with a very material fixation: the carta general. Hence also the debates over permanent place-names, the fetishism for sedentary—fixed—Indian civilizations, and the reification and naturalization of highly contestable and contingent versions of history and space into official portraits of the past. The subtle connection of history and geography offered an ideologically saturated and finished image of a nation-state in formation, in which a developing terrain appeared as tradition and a multiplicity of spaces were reduced to the linearity of a singular narrative. Such erasures left only one story to be told: that of the state itself.

100. On how the very idea of the state has to be constructed and sustained, see Philip Abrams, “Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1, no. 1 (1988); and Derek Sayer, “Everyday Forms of State Formation: Some Dissident Remarks on ‘Hegemony’,” in Joseph and Nugent, *Everyday Forms of State Formation*.