In the immediate aftermath of Mexico’s revolution (1910–1920), increasing numbers of surveyors, agronomists, and agrarian bureaucrats headed out to the countryside to implement the agrarian reforms promised in the decree of 1915 and the Constitution of 1917. In this essay I ask a very basic set of questions about the use, evaluation, and making of spatial knowledge in a revolutionary context: when bureaucrats went into the field after the revolution, what did they do? What roles, if any, did local inhabitants themselves play in the processes that unfolded? And what constituted the acceptable body of knowledge—the archive—necessary to resolve persistent boundary questions that impeded the reform? I examine these questions by looking closely at the textual and personal interactions between one agrarian bureaucrat and the inhabitants and authorities in the villages to which he had been sent in central Veracruz. Their interactions reveal the degree to which campesinos in the countryside appropriated and deployed different aspects of revolutionary rhetoric in an effort to shape new spaces, or recreate previous ones, in the 1920s.

The archive that serves as the source base for this article was created, in part, by Carlos Olivares, a dibujante [draftsman] in the employ of the Veracruz’s Local Agrarian Commission and Ministry of Public Works in the early 1920s. Like many postrevolutionary bureaucrats involved in some capacity in agrarian reform, Olivares collected and often transcribed an array of documents, land titles, and property deeds in the course of his work. His correspondence with his superiors (as well as their instructions and replies), his reports, and the letters and queries of local authorities with whom he interacted are all included in the file. So too are the testimonies he collected from villagers in the areas to which he was sent, such as the pueblo of Santiago Huatusco, Veracruz, in the autumn of 1922.1 Olivares had been sent there by the agrarian reform bureaucracy to gather information that would aid in the resolution of a land dispute between the villagers of Santiago Huatusco and their neighbors in San Juan de la Punta [see Map 1]. The presumed resolution of this dispute would then speed the way for the implementation of land redistribution as outlined under the agrarian reform program. His work thus constituted the groundwork necessary to ensure the success of land redistribution and agrarian reform.

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1 The source base for this essay is a case file entitled ‘Lo relacionado con los límites entre los Municipios arriba indicados—Santiago Huatusco y San Juan de la Punta,’ in the Archivo General del Estado de Veracruz, Ramo de Fomento, Tierras, Deslíndes. All documentary cites are from this file unless otherwise noted. San Juan de la Punta and Santiago Huatusco were both renamed in the early 1930s: San Juan de la Punta is the current-day municipality of Cuitlahuac; Santiago Huatusco is the current-day municipality of Carrillo Puerto.
This essay follows Olivares and the inhabitants of Santiago Huatusco and San Juan de la Punta in their interactions over the course of one month in 1922. It asks a very basic, and deceptively simple, set of questions about the use, evaluation, and making of spatial knowledge in a revolutionary context: when bureaucrats went in to the field after the revolution, what did they do? What roles did local inhabitants themselves play in the processes that unfolded? And what constituted the body of knowledge—the archive—available to the various actors involved as they sought a resolution to the dispute?

Writing about ‘the archive’ is a daunting task, in no small measure because the term has been amplified in recent years to encompass a broad array of meanings, from the purportedly apolitical act of accumulating and storing data to the entire discursive system within which a given community operates. I use it here in two ways, one figurative and one more literal: on the one hand, ‘archive’ as the discursive framework within which arguments and statements resonate, as reasonable and intelligible; and on the other, as the generation and maintenance of a documentary record accorded privileged epistemological status and the institutional and architectural apparatus coproduced with it. The point in part is to stress how directly related those two processes were and their entanglement with particular political moments. The determination of what counted as knowledge did not necessarily precede its application; rather, determination and application proceeded in tandem.2

My aim is not to analyze in detail the entire dispute, which took some years to resolve; in fact, Olivares was only the first of a number of bureaucrats to pass through the region and charged with examining the conflict.3 Rather, I want to look more closely at the slim set of documents produced out of the initial interactions between a bureaucrat, a number of campesinos and local authorities trying to come to terms with the promise and problems of agrarian reform in a revolutionary context. The different accounts of boundaries produced by the villagers in each place is of interest in this essay not for how they do or do not intersect with what the real boundaries were—a concern of the utmost importance to villagers themselves—but in relation to the modes of understanding land and articulating land rights at a volatile point in time.

To follow this process, I focus on three aspects of this archive. In Part I, I look closely at the initial petition, submitted by the municipal authorities in Santiago Huatusco, requesting a boundary survey. I am especially interested here in the manner in which they framed their petition: that is, the largely rhetorical archive upon which they drew to make their case and which effectively drew Olivares to their pueblo. In Part II, I examine Olivares’s work once he arrived in Santiago Huatusco. I focus particularly on what he reported as his first act: interviewing four male villagers in Santiago Huatusco who were said to be knowledgable of the municipality’s boundaries. Their testimony, along with the municipality’s land title, would purportedly aid Olivares in his efforts to create a map of the area under dispute. Part III turns to the villagers of San Juan de la Punta who contested Olivares’s efforts and who, more importantly for my purposes, drew upon a different archive—physically depleted but rhetorically rich—to make their case.

II

On February 20, 1922, the municipal president of Santiago Huatusco, Vicente Malipica, and 78 other villagers committed themselves to writing. In a letter addressed directly to the state governor, they sought a resolution to a conflict over land with the neighboring municipality of San Juan de la Punta. That such was the purpose of their letter was not immediately apparent, although certainly the governor (or one of his aides) would have known what was coming. The letter began in formulaic fashion: ‘We the undersigned, being of legal age and in exercise of our rights as inhabitants and natives of this municipality... put forth the following,’ at which point the writer then provided a lengthy historical sketch of the municipality. It began:

The governor of our Nation, which then carried the name of New Spain, Viceroy Don Luis de Velasco, in fulfilling the Reales Ordenanzas granted to this pueblo as a Republic or community of Indians (which in pre-Cortesian times was the ancient cacicazgo of Cuilatchoy destroyed according to history by the
Mexican kings Axayacatl and Moctecuzoma Ilhuicamina), an extension of land bounded by the following borders...

The letter’s author then proceeded to verbally delineate the borders according to directions, boundary markers, and natural features. Having set the bounds of community, he then turned to the repeated attempts made in the past by hacendados, neighboring villagers, and speculators to seize portions of that land. For example, at some point in the colonial era, a portion of land was taken by owners of a neighboring hacienda. The community appealed to the Spanish courts three times, in each instance generating a positive verdict, yet one that the Mexican audiencia (high court) ignored. By the early nineteenth-century community leaders had given up hope of ever recuperating the land, particularly when the Spanish crown confronted the impending threat of Napoleon; the War of Independence in Mexico was the final nail in the coffin for their efforts. Thus, in 1824, while resigned to having lost the portion of land taken, they asked for an apoyo (boundary survey) in order to consolidate their remaining landholdings. This was done on March 22, 1824. From 1824 to 1857 they evidently inhabited their land with little to no further protest or conflict. Then in 1857, with the ‘abolition of the Comunidades de indígenas,’ new ambitions were awoken. These ‘new ambitions’ came from inhabitants in the neighboring municipality of San Juan de la Punta, ‘never a pueblo de indios but a Congregation of ambitions’ came from inhabitants in the neighboring municipality of San Juan de la Punta, ‘never a pueblo de indios but a Congregation of ambitions’ came from inhabitants in the neighboring municipality of San Juan de la Punta, ‘never a pueblo de indios but a Congregation of ambitions’.

Land seizures continued: in 1885 portions of municipal land were disingenuously included in the purchase agreement for the nearby, and now deteriorating, Hacienda Trapiche de Mesa. The protests of the victims were for nothing, the Judges acted deaf, and the theft was consummated. The sordid history of theft and deception thus concluded, Malpica made his petition:

now that the epoch of vindication and restitution [reivindicaciones] has arrived and now that the voice of the proletariat is not drowned by the sugary words of the magnates we call on you, as the head of the great Veracruz family, to lend us help in order to recover our rights... We include a copy of the title that protects us, not submitting the original for fear that it may get lost, with the understanding that the copy is faithfully taken from the original. We do not ask that others be dispossessed of their property; what we ask is that the lands annexed by the Hacienda of Trapiche de Mesa be returned to us [se nos restituyan]... These lands our ancestors possessed without dispute and formed the extinguished Community of indígenas until June 25, 1856 and were adjudicated as tierras de repartimiento at the end of November 1876.

He then provided census information for the municipality, noting also that ‘among these are various [inhabitants] who need a place to live and work to earn what is necessary to survive.’

The letter does much more than signal a conflict that needs to be resolved. It is a strategic rhetorical intervention on the part of the signatories. It is a history: an argument composed of ‘narrative sentences’ that refer to a past in relation to, and with knowledge regarding, what will follow. This is a basic point but one worth reiterating in the context of an essay on the production and use of archives in that it draws necessary attention to how any writing on the past—whether it is this essay or the histories provided by this essay’s subjects—is inevitably, ‘always already’ suffused with a theory about that past and about ‘history’ itself. The formulaic introduction, the recounting of a particular history, the emphasis on dispossession and indigeneity: all were efforts at persuasion that are part of a particular understanding of the past, and thus both instrumental and structural. This is not to suggest that such claims were untrue or even necessarily exaggerated (although they may well have been), but that they were perceived as the bases for making a strong claim for the return of land. In making their claim to land, the signatories to the letter from Santiago Huatusco drew upon an archive—what they believed to be the local and ethnic discourses, metaphors, and categories shared by those to whom they were writing and grounded in a documentary trail—to construct a narrative that would buttress their claims. They emphasized their history as a pueblo de indios; they provided a detailed verbal narration of boundaries essentially meaningless to the reader who had never been to their pueblo; they claimed an origin in the early colonial era; they fixed efforts at dispossession to key dates in the revolutionary rhetoric of restitution (for example, 1856 and the implementation of a law calling for the break up of indigenous communal lands), and they stressed that they had no desire to dispossess others.

The emphasis on historical longevity was not uncommon in many such petitions. Based upon Mexico’s revolutionary Constitution of 1917, petitioners could request land in one of two ways. Existing communities could ask for land to be restituted—that is, a specific tract of land be returned to them based on an ability to show prior possession with titles and/or documents of various kinds; or collectivities could together petition for a grant of land—known as a dotación—based not on prior possession but need. In the case of a dotación, the land granted to them would be taken from the surplus holdings of a large landowner in the region, and the community in question would be given usufruct rights to the property as an ejido in perpetuity. The ejido technically remained the property of the state and those granted rights to it were not permitted to rent, sell, or mortgage the land. While such an approach could appear complementary in its aims to seek revolutionary justice—either in the form of restitution or in the form of a grant—as we will see it in fact created two oftentimes incompatible, indeed competing, forms of space.

Many communities, at least in Veracruz, would often initially petition for restitution, but they frequently ended up being granted land rather than having it restituted, due in part to the persistent...
lack of clarity regarding village boundaries and the fragmented archival record upon which mediators could draw.11 This is not how many pueblos would have preferred it: pueblos, when possible, emphasized that the land in dispute was land that had belonged to the community in question since at least the colonial period, land granted by the Viceroy to a comunidad de indígenas. Among villagers in central Veracruz in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, this was a fairly common mode of making a claim: it suggested that the community had an historical right to the land rooted in a grant made by the early colonial government. Viceregal grants (or mercedes) were made to Indian communities, beginning in the 1530s, some 15 years after the arrival of Hernán Cortés and his men. A community would petition to the Spanish authorities who in turn would order a local magistrate to go to the community in question and conduct a survey. The magistrate would be accompanied by community officials, other inhabitants, and a translator as he walked the boundaries, made measurements, and recorded features of the land. Such perambulations, often accompanied by ritual acts such as throwing stones and scattering flowers. The magistrate would then acquire the testimony of witnesses—both Indian and Spanish—testifying that the land fell within the bounds of Indian town limits, that the land was suitable for herding, and that no private interests would be adversely affected. The merced—the document which formally noted the boundary points and formalized possession—would be then issued. Although not necessarily intended as such, these documents generated out of Spanish legal codes and colonizing practices quickly came to be regarded by Indians and Spaniards alike as legal proof of possession, and over time they became the archival basis, upon which land claims were evaluated.12

The litigation brought by Indian communities over land and tribute, as well as the efforts to document land grants by the crown, spawned a paper trail of significant length. The history of what would eventually become Mexico’s National General Archive (AGN) is in many ways a history of the epistemology of colonial rule, of a bureaucratic state attempting to manage (and cope with) the proliferating paper generated by its own legitimating practices of rule.13 The AGN was never simply a repository for colonial documents but an edifice that mirrored colonial epistemology and contained within its walls are colonialism’s deep and documented historicity.14 Indeed that documentary record itself shaped the contours of communal memory in often dramatic fashion such that the two cannot be easily disaggregated, which only served to further complicate officials’ efforts to codify boundaries, divide lands, and the like. Changes in political control could hardly erase the paper remnants of empire and the colonial bureaucracy far outlasted its master. As the petition from Santiago Huatusco makes clear, villagers in the 1920s were in no way going to permit new revolutionaries to ignore their deep and documented historicity.

Revolutionary bureaucrats had to confront not only the legacies of colonialism’s legal culture—and the lengthy ‘social careers’ of the documents it produced—but the developing ethnicized discourse associated with the revolution.15 The author of Santiago Huatusco’s letter made sure to emphasize that his was a comunidad de indígenas. There were clear reasons to emphasize such a point. For one, part of the discourse of the revolution itself, even at this early a moment, of redeeming the Indian, gave such historicity a certain amount of rhetorical prestige. Such prestige presumably deepened when that identity could be contrasted with that of the Cordoban elite who were frequently derisively referred to as gachupines, a derogatory term originally applied to Spaniards in the Americas but that by the 1920s seemed to carry both a class and racial connotation: elite and white. Or, in theory at least, when an Indian identity could be contrasted with that of the village of San Juan de la Punta, which

11 Craib, Cartographic Mexico, 242–248 (note 3).
14 On colonial archives and epistemology I have found especially useful Stoler, Colonial archives and the arts of governance.
15 For examples of such conflicts, both pre- and postrevolutionary, see Craib, Cartographic Mexico, chaps. 2 and 7 (note 3).
17 Craib, Cartographic Mexico, chap. 2 (note 3).
the huatusqueños argued ‘was never a pueblo de indios but rather a congregation [congregación] of black slaves, from the Hacienda of Trapiche de Mesa, [whom] after seconding the cry of Yanga, and after throwing cauldrons of boiling cane syrup at their masters, established themselves in that place [and] attempted to snatch away from Santiago Huatusco a third of its territory.' The reference here is most likely to a slave uprising on the hacienda of San Juan de la Punta in June of 1735. The awareness and inclusion of this history is telling: for the signatories of the letter, it is a small but revealing tale of race and betrayal, of black slaves and rebellion, a story that sits uncomfortably in their history of Mexico. The revolution, for Malpica and others, had been fought to redeem the Indian (survivors of generations of conquests by Spanish conquerors, rapacious landowners, and Porfriano speculators and officials), not descendants of African slaves who had rebelled against their masters. That those slaves were also victims of conquest, speculation, and exploitation went uncommented upon as did the fact that the land that had originally belonged to Santiago Huatusco be returned to it. Such a caveat was important, particularly in 1922 when things had become volatile in the Veracruz countryside. The revolution, undergoing radical renova-
tion under the governorship of Adalberto Tejeda, appeared increasingly threatened that spring. Tejeda had his hands full with a tenant strike in the port of Veracruz, with the uprising—albeit brief—of landowner Francisco Lara, and his final acrimonious split with carrancista general and emerging hacendado Guadalupe Sánchez. Reactionary landowners, including some of the most virulent among the Cordoban elite, were continuing tofoil revolu-
tional aims and, in response, Tejeda pushed harder for the formation and arming of local cueros de voluntarios [volunteer corporations]. As could be expected, the cueros de voluntarios, by both landowners and some villagers, increased efforts were made to get them to lay down their arms. (San Juan de la Punta was one community in which villagers would eventually form a cuerpo de voluntarios.) In such a context, Malpica’s discourse of originary rights, of historical rights, may have func-
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oric, regional politics, and the local practice of a still unfolding revolution.

II

Carlos Olivares arrived in Santiago Huatusco in early November of 1922. That it had taken Olivares some 9 months after Malpica’s initial petition to appear in the village was not unusual. The early postrevolutionary state suffered from a dearth of available surveyors and agrarianists. By September 1922 Malpica had become increasingly concerned about the delay and sent a letter to the governor asking for permission to appoint a local commission composed of villagers who would do the survey themselves. Such requests were all-too-common in the 1920s and the agrarian bureaucracy suffered under a crush of claims and a dire need for more surveyors and reform agents. Olivares, by the time he was ordered to Santiago Huatusco, had been at work throughout the countryside for some time. Employed as a draftsman in Veracruz’s Ministry of Public Works, he had already been drafted in to surveying boundaries throughout the campo Veracruzano for the Local Agrarian Commission. Still, despite laboring with an enormous backlog, agrarian agencies were hardly ready to cede the reform process itself to locals. Thus, Olivares was still in the field—surveying in Atoyac—when the Secretary of the Interior ordered him to then proceed to Santiago Huatusco to ‘visit the municipalities, gather information and testimonies, draw up agreements and carry out the necessary topographic surveys in order to propose a resolution to the legislature.’

What did bureaucrats assign such tasks do upon their arrival in places like Santiago Huatusco? How did they do their work? And how important were the documents and discourses of the villagers with whom they interacted? The answer varies according to the specifics of any given case. For example, in instances where landowners were contesting the division of their lands, agents often spent as much time in local archives combing notarial records as they did in the field, attempting to discern to what degree landowners had legally acquired their land and how much of it they

19 See note 4. Yanga was an African slave who led a rebellion and created a maroon community around Córdoba in the seventeenth century. On Yanga see J. Laurencio, Campaña contra Yanga en 1628, México, 1974.


21 Such discursive strategies serve as a potent reminder of the need to wary of invocations of ‘community,’ a point made trenchantly by M. Watts, The sinister political life of innocent places, 217–244, 1985.

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might in fact be hiding through fractioning. In other cases, they
carried out scientific surveys of property or village boundaries; or
they conducted interviews with villagers; or offered classes on how
to petition for land; or collected information locally on boundaries
and landholdings. Olivares had been instructed, as the governor’s
aide made clear to the municipal president of San Juan de la Punta,
to gather:

information and suggestions from the Ayuntamientos and
the vecinos of the two municipalities, in order to take those
in to consideration in producing his report. . . [and] to collect
testimonials... and to carry out the necessary topographic work... and to make a map of the limits between that Municipio and that of Santiago Huatusco, according to the
information provided to him by the respective Ayunta-
mientos in such a way that the boundaries that both Municipalities claim are in the corresponding plan, and
while the issue remains unresolved the legislature will
respect the possession of those who up to now have occupied
the lands in question.27

It might stretch the word but it does not seem altogether
inappropriate to suggest that Olivares’s approach to the issue was
ethno-scientific. That is, he was instructed to gather his information
not solely from documents and the deployment of instruments but
from local practices, knowledge, and testimony: essentially, from
field work. What information did he look for? What were the sources of
that information? What evidence did he use in order to determine
the boundary? What counted as evidence and why? Olivares’s first
act was to ask a question of the municipal authorities: who were
the inhabitants considered knowledgeable with respect to the
boundaries of the municipality and who could serve as guides in his
topographic work? Taking their testimony, he would compare it
with the boundaries provided by the municipality’s title.28 Thus, on
the morning of November 6, in the municipal hall of Santiago
Huatusco, Olivares interviewed four villagers (to whom he was
undoubtedly directed by the municipal authorities): Manuel
Salgado, Sixto Reyes, Marcario Reyes, and Crisanto Benigno. Oli-
wares included the transcript of his interviews with these four
villagers. All four men, ranging in age from 35 to 72 years, swore to
knowing the boundaries of the municipality as they were establish-
lished with the 1824 boundary delineation. Salgado, who identified
himself as a farmer [labrador] in fact named no fewer than 20
boundary stones [misionerias] or orientation points sequentially,
apparently in the order one would encounter them on a perambu-
lation, and from memory. Salgado claimed to have such knowledge,
in Olivares’s words, ‘because he was born here and is a resident of
the place, a public and well-known fact, . . . [and] because in the era
when there was cattle, 37 years ago, some questions regarding
boundaries arose and then he had the chance to learn of the
mentioned points from his ancestors.’29 Benigno, also a farmer and
70 years of age, answered in similar fashion, also claiming to have
learned the boundaries by walking them with his ancestors when
issues regarding boundaries arose. Macario Reyes and Sixto Reyes,
unlike the first two witnesses, were both jornaleros [landless
laborers] and they were both younger: Macario was 46 and Sixto
was 35. Macario noted in his statement that he knew, due to

27 Subsecretaria del Gobierno al Presidente Municipal de San Juan de la Punta, Nov. 13, 1922.
28 Olivares al C. Secretario General del Gobierno, Dec. 6, 1922.
29 Resumen de los testimonios, anexo a Carlos Olivares al Subsecretario del Gobierno, Dec. 6, 1922.
30 See note 29.
AGN would be the dispatching of ‘certified copies of primordial titles, mercedes, maps and other original documents.’ Neither restitution nor granting of lands could proceed without an adequate documentary base. One might add that, given the importance of the agrarian question and land to postrevolutionary reconstruction, the new administrations could hardly ignore the epistemological bases for such programs or their importance in buttressing the idea of a functioning state. The national archive and its holdings could potentially serve not solely as a repository of knowledge but, in theory, a space where the workings of the modern state were made purportedly transparent and where the state itself was made both manifest and inevitable.33

So papers, where they existed, certainly had epistemological authority, but they were not necessarily sufficient in and of themselves, particularly given the fact that so many communities had lost their titles over the course of 400 years, a fact not lost on Olivares or on many of the village petitioners themselves. Moreover, the documents that remained were often wayward survivors of vaster corpses dead and buried by fire, floods, and time, leaving only hazy impressions of the past. And what was one to make of copies, rather than originals, of land titles, boundary determinations, and the like? The villagers of San Juan de la Punta claimed in very stentorian terms that Santiago Huatusco’s title from 1824 should not be given any credibility because it was not the original. Moreover, as noted previously, the original surveys were often done haphazardly in the colonial era and thus existing documents did not necessarily help much. As a consequence, as was the case prior to the revolution, resolving a boundary dispute entailed analyzing much more than documents.

Second, in the early 1920s authority was precarious and relationships of dependence ran as much from villagers out to the bureaucrats as it did from bureaucrats to villagers. This effectively ensured the continued relevance of village voices and their own customary cartographies. In postrevolutionary Mexico, the precarious legitimacy of the fledgling state required a co-productive process of boundary perambulation and the resolution of boundary disputes, one that had to sustain a productive tension between the archive and the field. In this sense, the process of creating knowledge intersected with the process of creating the state and, conversely, the practices of rule intersected and shaped how knowledge was produced and used.35 Olivares simply could not go in with available documents and run the border accordingly. Too much was at stake; his method in part thus reflects the political moment. One might conclude in fact that, in the early 1920s, politics was made manifest in epistemology.35

Third, the fact that Olivares left no lengthy explanations or ruminations about how and why he came to trust these particular witnesses is revealing. That he did not need to leave such explanations does at least suggest one thing: that Olivares’s strategy was hardly exceptional or anomalous. Indeed, as most recently noted by Yanna Yannakakis, there existed in Mexico a long tradition of taking oral testimony from witnesses in cases of land disputes.36 This was not a practice that Olivares had to justify or explain to his superiors: they had ordered him to collect precisely such testimony. Such interactions with, or dependence on, campesinos in supposedly technical activities suggests that we revisit what have come to be fairly common ideas about agrarian reform bureaucrats (and bureaucrats more generally) in Mexico. Daniel Nugent and Ana María Alonso, for example, provide what is a fairly typical take on reform bureaucrats in 1920s Mexico:

The agrarian reform process was profoundly distant from the communities and people whose lives it was designed to reorder. The distance was physical, social, and rhetorical. CNA meetings took place in Mexico City, far from the affected communities. They were not attended by peasants but by members of the CNA—lawyers, bureaucrats, schoolteachers, and politicians, few of whom had risen through the ranks of the popular movements. They articulated the norms of the agrarian reform in edicts, proclamations, fact-finding rulings issued in state-controlled publications, and a host of internal memoranda circulated within the CNA and the CLAs… The language [of agrarian reform] was stripped of local references recognizable to the beneficiaries of the land redistributions; their respective communities, their patrias chicanas—landscapes impregnated with generations of work, struggle, and meaning—were reduced to or recast as so-and-so-many hectares of such-and-such category of land for this-and-that type of use.37

In many instances it is hard to argue with this vision of the CNA and agrarian reform on the national level. Agrarian bureaucrats could often be quite removed from the social, ecological, political, historical and cultural complexities of the localities they were charged with overseeing. Nugent and Alonso, moreover, make a compelling case that the work of the reform in Namiquipa, Chihuahua was indeed a radically distancing and attempted top-down imposition. Even so, their critique should not be taken as license to paint all bureaucrats with the same brush. Like so many other sectors of political and social life, the reform bureaucracy itself was hardly monolithic. For one, the reform worked in different ways in different places. State governors in particular could dramatically impact the operations of the agrarian reform agents in their respective states. So too could municipal and village authorities who sought to manipulate or delay reforms they perceived as injurious to their interests—a rationale, perhaps, for a more heavy-handed approach by some state officials. Moreover, agrarian bureaucrats in the local agrarian commissions, working on the ground with campesinos, should not be conflated with their superiors in Mexico City. At least in Veracruz, relations between the Local and National agrarian commissions could be quite strained. Nor, as Michael Ervin has persuasively argued, should the agronomists trained in Mexico City themselves be homogenized or dismissed too simplistically.38 Agronomists and bureaucrats came from some place: they do not arise in a vacuum, removed from the

32 In ‘Diario Oficial’, tomo XVI, no. 27 correspondiente al sábado 2 de octubre de 1920, reproduced in Mariscal, Reña histórica, appendix III (note 13).
35 I draw here from Sheila Jasanoff’s discussion of ‘co-production’ in S. Jasanoff, The Idiom of co-production, in: Jasanoff (Ed), States of Knowledge, 3 (note 33).
36 For a similar argument regarding science and ideology in early modern England, see Shapin, A Social History of Truth (note 31).
37 Yannakakis, Witnesses (note 12).
contexts of their upbringing or of the revolution itself. For all of the ‘agency’ that has come to permeate the pages of historical monographs over the last 30 years, bureaucrats infrequently seem to have any. Olivarés’s work might suggest at the minimum that we grant more complexity to at least some of those surveyors, agronomists, and bureaucrats in the agrarian reform structure. Their interactions with campesinos were more complicated than they might appear after the fact.

A final point: Olivarés’s work also suggests that we consider seriously the ways in which rural cultivators participated in the reform process and, by extension, their larger role in the social and cartographic histories of their country. Indeed, the work of many an agrarian reform agent was unimaginable without the support, assistance, and labor of local inhabitants. They were, to borrow a term from the history of science, the ‘invisible technicians’ in the field: people whose knowledge and labor was put to use in the surveying, mapping and boundary making of the agrarian reform yet whom only intermittently appear as actors in the subsequent narratives, official or otherwise. Even more to the point, their histories and ideas—not only their labor—proved fundamental to the ways in which surveys and reforms unfolded. This is a crucial point in that it not only affirms the dialectical relationship that adheres between the technological and the social but emphasizes again how central non-elite actors are to the histories we recount. Too frequently the presumption persists that in histories of science and technology non-elites were non-entities; when confronted by scientific routines and bureaucratic experts, at best, they resisted; at worst, to paraphrase E.P. Thompson’s biting critique, they are presumed to have been mystified by the first person they saw with surveying instruments.

To recognize these social histories is not to naively downplay the dominant direction in which power flowed or, worse still, to somehow ignore the operation of power. (Precisely the opposite: it permits a more nuanced rendering of power’s articulation while at the same time pointing to the inevitable skew of any history viewed only from the top down.) Nor is it to suggest that villagers always got an equal hearing in the countryside or that they were equal participants in the process to the degree that the reform they got is the reform they wanted. Rather, it is to argue only that we take seriously their influence on the shaping of the postrevolutionary landscape and on the ways in which agrarian surveys unfolded on the ground in the 1920s. The reality is that, at least in these early years of reform, much of the archive was in the field, in the hands and heads of campesinos themselves.

III

The problem for Olivarés was that there was more than one archive in the field. When Carlos Olivarés arrived in Santiago Huatusco, the members of San Juan de la Punta’s ayuntamiento voiced suspicion regarding his very presence. It is not hard to see why: his superiors sent him to the area essentially at the behest of the inhabitants of Santiago Huatusco who sought the return of lands they claimed had been taken from them by the owners of the Hacienda Trapiche de Mesa, lands which now had been occupied and worked for a number of years by the residents of San Juan de la Punta. Resistance appeared soon after his arrival: having conducted his interviews with the testigos from Santiago Huatusco on November 6, Olivarés planned to gather with inhabitants from both Santiago Huatusco and San Juan de la Punta the next day at a pre-determined point—within the ‘zone of disagreement’—to carry out his boundary perambulation. Although each municipality had formed a small commission to meet with Olivarés, on the morning of the scheduled perambulation the members of San Juan de la Punta’s commission refused to go forth with the survey.

The basis for their refusal complicated Olivarés’s work dramatically. For one, they arrived with a lawyer, Adolfo Espejo. Espejo argued that no boundary survey could take place without the issuance of a legal decree by the judicial authorities. Moreover, he argued, the property title used by the authorities of Santiago Huatusco to establish their boundaries was from 1824 and surely the possibility existed that documents had been drawn up and lands had changed hands after that date. As an example he noted that lands belonging to Nestor Cuesta—owner of the Hacienda Trapiche de Mesa, one-time mayor of Córdoba, and father of future literary figure Jorge Cuesta—fell within the bounds of Santiago Huatusco, at least according to the property title; yet Cuesta had for some time been paying his taxes to the municipality of San Juan de la Punta, to whom then the rights to that land devolved. This, at least, is how the municipal president of Santiago Huatusco (Malpica) described the arguments of that day to the state authorities. He supplemented this description with his own analysis: he suggested that Espejo was actually Cuesta’s friend and attorney and had convinced the authorities of San Juan de la Punta to go along with their efforts to stop the huatusqueño’s claim. Why? According to Malpica, the owner of the hacienda in 1885, the Minister of War Pedro Hinojosa, had stolen the land in question from Santiago Huatusco. The huatusqueños had little recourse at the time due to Hinojosa’s power and the landowner sympathies of the ruling President Porfirio Díaz. More recently, the inhabitants of San Juan de la Punta had taken advantage of the instability caused by the revolution to open paths [brechas] through the land, dividing it up and cultivating it. With no documents to prove their rights to the land, now that the huatusqueños sought restitution, the inhabitants of San Juan de la Punta had effectively gone along with the ‘trickery’ of Nestor Cuesta in order to continue occupying and working those lands.

Olivarés made no reference to a lawyer, to Nestor Cuesta nor to the complication over the lands of the Hacienda Trapiche de Mesa. Rather, he noted only that the authorities of San Juan de la Punta…


33 I have taken the notion of ‘invisible technicians’ from Shapin, A Social History of Truth (note 31), and modified it here somewhat.


35 Olivarés al C. Secretario General del Gobierno, Dec. 6, 1922 (note 28).

36 Vicente Malpica al Secretario General del Gobierno, Nov. 8, 1922 and document fragment dated Nov. 22, 1922 in the same file.
lamented that their property titles had been destroyed during the revolution; that a legal decree was required for a deslinde (boundary survey); and that they feared any such survey would result in a grant of definitive possession for the villagers of Santiago Huatusco. Despite Olivares’s assurances that he was there to perambulate the boundaries designated by both parties only in order to create preliminary maps of the disputed area for consultation by his superiors, he reported that ‘it was impossible to arrive at an agreement’ and the representatives of each village went their separate ways.\(^{44}\) Olivares persisted in his efforts to engage the representatives from San Juan de la Punta the following day, and although he ultimately had to abandon his attempted perambulation he did succeed in gathering some material from the authorities of San Juan de la Punta, including a highly schematic sketch map indicating their claimed boundaries (Map 2).

But what did the authorities of San Juan de la Punta have to say about the process? In the immediate aftermath of the failed perambulation, the authorities in San Juan de la Punta sought clarification from the state government regarding Olivares’s charge. The answer they received—that Olivares was to gather information from the inhabitants of each municipality, collect ‘testimonials,’ create a map of the boundaries between the two municipalities, and produce a final report, the contents of which would be used by the legislature to reach a resolution—did not assuage their fears, but what is of particular interest here is the language employed by the authorities from San Juan de la Punta in their letter.\(^{45}\) They wrote: ‘Those from the municipio of Santiago Huatusco have always wanted to seize the lands of this municipio in order to expand further the immensity of their lands; [they] have vast tracts of land that they do not cultivate while San Juan de la Punta, a genuinely agricultural and commercial municipio, lacks land to expand agricult[al produc-]

Here is a rationale that points to a subtle, but important, difference in how land and the promise of the revolution were understood and to an ability to wield revolutionary rhetoric with sophistication. Their argument goes to the heart of revolutionary ideology. For one, it accuses the inhabitants of Santiago Huatusco of already having ‘immense’ tracts of land; even worse, of not making those lands productive and putting them under cultivation. Agrarian reformers viewed large swathes of idle land—albeit usually under the auspices of an hacendado rather than campesi-nos—as remnants of feudal and counter-revolutionary practice, as the epitome of the ‘agrarian problem’ that spurred the revolution in the first place. As if that were not bad enough, the huatusqueños now sought to expand their holdings further by taking land that purportedly belonged to the municipality of San Juan de la Punta. To justify their rights to this land, the authorities of San Juan de la Punta did not argue their case primarily or solely through reference to old documents and burdens of proprietary proof. They made little reference to a distant past of mercedes, enslavement, or revolt, although they did allude to a possible land title at the AGN and noted that the boundaries shown on their sketch map were boundaries they had had ‘since time immemorial’ [desde tiempo inmemorial].\(^{47}\) When they accused the huatusqueños of attempting to seize their lands, they made only the vaguest of historical claims of a right to possession. This is not to suggest their historical

\(^{44}\) Olivares al C. Secretario General del Gobierno, Dec. 6, 1922 (note 28).

\(^{45}\) Subsecretaria del Gobierno al Presidente Municipal de San Juan de la Punta, Nov. 13, 1922 (note 27).

\(^{46}\) Pedro Olguiny, Presidente Municipal de San Juan de la Punta, al Subsecretario del Superior Gobierno del Estado, Nov. 8, 1922.

\(^{47}\) The reference to the boundaries from time immemorial is made in Presidente Municipal de San Juan de la Punta Pedro Olguiny al Co. Carlos Olivares, Nov. 25, 1922.
And it was, for the time being, a successful response. The arguments and concerns voiced by authorities in both municipalities were enough that Olivares was ultimately unable to resolve the dispute and, after submitting his final report on December 6, 1922—with the blunt conclusion that by ‘examining the attached sketch, which indicates all of the boundaries in question, and taking into consideration the information gathered, it can be resolved however is considered most just [lo que sea de justicia]’—presumably moved on to other cases requiring his attentions. 49 Was then the enormous amount of archival labor invested by agents and surveyors like Olivares—the extensive notarial investigations, the efforts at archival recuperation and preservation, the transcription of often damaged documents from the republican and colonial eras—in many respects for nought? Perhaps the workings of bureaucrats like Olivares ultimately did not count for much; perhaps in the final analysis, agrarian reform proceeded in idiosyncratic fashion, dependent upon the specificities of political power of the localities, regions or states in question. Perhaps, still, the commitment to collecting testimonies and combing archives—in the process creating new ones—suggests a kind of symbiotic relationship between political pressures and epistemological practices, as does the fact that such labors could not put matters emphatically to rest. The fact is the revolution, on the one hand, inherited a physical, textual archive impossible to ignore and, on the other, created a set of new political and discursive possibilities that called the relevance of such texted pasts into question.50

In a volatile context, what constituted knowledge did not necessarily precede its application; theorization and practice proceeded together. Surveying, agronomy, the array of activities associated with the agrarian reform program were simultaneously scientific procedures and social practices, ones in which practitioners had to constantly keep in mind the political and social implications of their work vis-à-vis the developing post-revolutionary state. By, in Jane Jacobs’ words, ‘taking the local seriously’ one can see how the ambitious ideas and the seemingly monolithic practices of centers of power—of empires (in Jacobs’ case) or newly formed postrevolutionary states (in this case)—are contingent upon an array of specific interventions and interactions, and how such ideas and practices are constantly reformulated in the field.51 The focus on a kind of bureaucratic nexus, on the interactions between folks at the actual point of dispute—looking at the place of knowledge—helps to generate an ethnographically sensitive portrait of the state, its purported agents and subjects, and the archives they all produce.52 Rather than one-dimensional bureaucrats, or passive peasants, or a monolithic state imposing centralized plans willy-nilly, we get a portrait of individuals and collectivities trying to make sense of (and generating their own) work in progress. To this, at least, the archive can attest.

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