

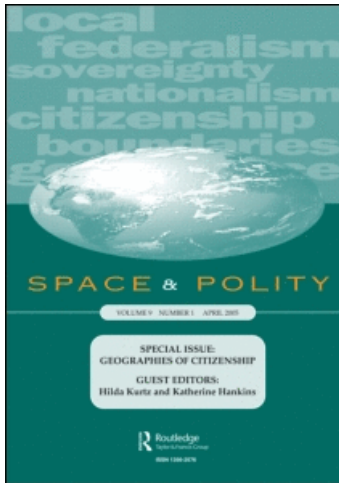
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National Fragments and Post-national Cultures: Mexican National Identity in Transition?

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National Fragments and Post-national Cultures: Mexican National Identity in Transition?

PATRICIA M. MARTIN

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Abstract. Over the past two decades, Mexican society, economics and culture have undergone a dramatic set of transformations. Accordingly, certain historical narratives that underpinned Mexican national identity formation throughout the 20th century have begun to unravel. As a result of this process, some scholars posit that a ‘post-national’ political culture is emerging in Mexico. This paper seeks to examine these trends through a critical examination of the narratives around national identity found in interviews conducted in Mexico in 2000. As a theoretical frame, this paper begins by examining the concept of post-nationalism. It then turns to an overview of 20th-century national formation in Mexico to provide a contextual basis for the interpreting the interview excerpts. The resulting analysis demonstrates the co-presence of national and post-national narratives in Mexico, both of which display hegemonic and subaltern dimensions. The particular discursive contours of these narratives have roots, this paper argues, in the contemporary intersection of state authoritarianism and neo-liberal globalisation.

1. Introduction

Mexico doesn’t exist. Mexico is a collection of regions, a mosaic united by force. And now that the nationalism of the revolution, that project has shattered, what brings us together? Football? Criticising Carlos Salinas? Nothing more (media representative, Mexico, 2000).

The statement “Mexico doesn’t exist” is quite provocative. Yet this phrase is echoed frequently in Mexico meriting, therefore, some reflection. The longer quote, taken from an interview with an individual working in the media in Monterrey, Mexico, offers contextual clues for possible interpretations of such an assertion. For example, the description of Mexico as “a mosaic united by force” links the perspective that “Mexico doesn’t exist” with two centuries of troubled, frequently violent state and nation building in Mexico. The phrasing,

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“now that the nationalism of the revolution, that project has shattered”, which dethrones the Mexican Revolution (1910–17) as a presumed source of modern national unity and identity, further reinforces such a stance, demanding fresh interpretations of Mexico’s 20th-century social and political history. Simultaneously, this provocative phrase invites the construction of a new framework for understanding the relationship between culture and politics in contemporary Mexico in a manner that addresses historical constructions of national identity as they intersect with contemporary transnational realities.

To investigate these contemporary dynamics, this paper explores claims made about contemporary Mexican nationhood as they question the idea of the nation as a “hegemonic, commonsensical, and tacitly shared cultural construct” (Lomintz, 2001, p. 3). To provide an analytical frame, this paper begins with an overview of the existing literature that addresses the concept of post-nationalism. With this framework in mind, the paper then addresses contemporary debates about Mexican nationalism through a discussion of 20th-century national formation. This in turn offers a situated context for analysing claims made about the Mexican nation in interviews that I seek to analyse. The resulting analysis offers a decentred portrayal of Mexican nationhood, in which alternative geographical spaces cut across the national imaginary. These representations interpolate a society shaped by the historical and ongoing lines of struggle between the Mexican state and its subalterns *and* the transnational economic and cultural processes that underpin globalisation. Such an analysis sheds critical light on the substance of post-nationalism. It demonstrates that the post-national does not reflect simply and straightforwardly the ascent of the global but rather signifies a politicised transformation that contains partially hidden histories of exclusion, violence, and oppression.

2. A Post-national Condition?

The unprecedented rise in the circulation of people, resources and commodities linked to the emergence of contemporary global capitalism has led many observers to claim that modern political and cultural formations rooted in the nation-state have become increasingly unbound (see Sassen, 1996; Appadurai, 1996; Tambini, 2001; Agnew, 1998; Anderson, 2002). Accordingly, ‘post-nationalism’ is one among a range of neologisms that seeks both to signal and to explain the resulting qualitative shift in the structures of feeling that shape contemporary cultural and political landscapes (Croucher, 2003). Yet, as with many terms that hope to capture recent political-economic change, the significance of the term post-nationalism is still under construction and thus contains multiple valences.

In a recent and cogent review of the nation in a global era, Croucher (2003) seeks to unravel and clarify the explosion of terms that have engulfed debates about the changing nature of contemporary political identities. In so doing, she clearly demonstrates the need for sustained definitional rigour, for the continuous conceptual slippage that has plagued for so long the terms state and nation has worked its way into literature that seeks to interpret the contemporary mutations of both of these concepts. The confusion wrought by this original slippage is amplified with the proliferation of terms such as ‘translocal’, ‘transnational’, ‘post-national’, ‘post-sovereign’, and ‘global’, some of which are used interchangeably and in a somewhat indiscriminate manner. To a certain degree, this confusion is completely logical for, implicitly or explicitly, these terms seek to

understand the changing relationship between the transformation in the scales and institutions of governance and the transformation of the sites and contents of political identity (or the changing relationship between the state and the nation, writ large). Nonetheless, despite the fact that globalisation destabilises the taken-for-granted categories of political space (Anderson, 2002), it still seems both plausible and vital to separate analytically the changing nature of governance from the changing nature of political identity in a global era because one does not necessarily follow the other. If we follow Croucher's insistence on definitional rigour, discussions of post-nationalism should foreground questions of political identity—or how social subjects understand and interpret their political worlds and the degree to which such interpretations are embedded in a national imaginary. Thus, it is this dimension of post-nationalism that I theorise in the paragraphs that follow and trace through the subsequent analysis.

In examining how the term post-nationalism has been used to apprehend shifts in the contemporary nature of political identity, there are four central issues that come to the fore. The first issue addresses the changing geometries of contemporary political identity. In other words, what are the sites and scales of contemporary communities of belonging and do they challenge the centrality of the nation-state? Three observations can be made in this regard. The first is that post-nationalism signifies, in the words of Appadurai (1996, p. 169), new "formations of allegiance and loyalty" that sit at a scale larger than the nation-state. He posits that the rise of global social movements, international NGOs and a language of global citizenship provide examples of these new forms of affiliation. A second geometry of identity associated with post-nationalism refers to the affirmation that there is less and less congruence between the geography of actually existing states and the geography of national sentiment (Appadurai, 1996). Research that examines the national affiliations of transnational migrants has been particularly important in this regard (see, for example, Soysal, 1994; Smith and Guarnizo, 1998; Ong, 1999). A third geometry affirms that political identity is multiscalar. As Lawson (2004) has demonstrated for migrants in Ecuador, for example, the scale of feelings of belonging can be distinct from the perceived scales of rights and responsibility. Anderson's (1996) term 'new medievalism' is particularly apt in capturing this kind of geometry. Addressed separately, it could be argued that none of these geometries is powerful enough to define post-nationalism or to unseat the nation-state. However, taken together, they all point to an increasing lack of correspondence between political identity and territory that seemed so well resolved in the idea of the nation-state. I would argue, in fact, that it is exactly the co-presence of these distinct geometries—which continually puts into question the nation-state—that contributes to the construction of what might be called a 'post-national condition'. Thus, a post-national condition does not necessarily signal the end of the nation, but rather a situation in which the nation is continuously and openly destabilised.

The issue, however, is not just whether new geometries of identity are emerging under conditions of globalisation, but perhaps more crucially what kinds of political practices are associated with these identities. Thus, a second central debate relates to the contents, or the practices and visions, which give substance to a post-national political identity. The work of Habermas (2001) cuts directly to this question, for his greatest concern is to understand how globalisation is undermining democratic culture and under what conditions a post-national form of democratic culture might emerge. In so doing, he has offered a set of

guideposts for evaluating the nature and contents of a post-national identity. He emphasises the importance of 'civil solidarity', the capacity to make a 'reflexive intervention in society', and a popular confidence in the ability to 'self-legislate' (see pages 60, 62–65). Central to these practices is rational discourse that contains a recognition and concern for others. Gareth Williams, who depicts a profound transition from national to post-national cultures in Latin America, is also concerned about content, which he frames through the language of hegemony and subalternity. As he writes

Quite literally, transnationalization and the insertion of Latin American nations into global networks has ungrounded the nation-state and, alongside it, the transformational potential of the national-popular. It has brought the nation-state and the national-popular (Gramsci's 'nation-people') to their economic, institutional, and conceptual knees (Williams, 2002, p. 8).

The theoretical and empirical task that remains is to

articulate a theoretically grounded reflection on what remains after, and perhaps exceeds, the uneven and incomplete histories of national development in Latin America as well as those of an even more uneven and incomplete transnationalism (Williams, 2002, p. 9).

He asks us to determine, in other words, what the new faces of hegemony and subalternity are in contemporary Latin America and how they work though and beyond the nation.

While both the geometry and content of contemporary political identities form the centre of debates about post-nationalism, there is a third, somewhat muted debate that concerns the origins of contemporary post-national cultures. The overwhelming majority of authors link the rise of post-nationalism directly to globalisation (see, for example, Appadurai, 1996; Marden, 1997). Yet at least a few Latin Americanist scholars draw a slightly different portrait. For example, (drawing on Habermas), Mexican sociologist Roger Bartra (2002), argues that, in Mexico, "we face the problem of constructing postnational forms of identity". Yet for him, the 'post-Mexican condition' cannot simply be read off North American integration, but also has roots in a political crisis that predates neo-liberal globalisation. This political crisis, he argues, "put to an end the specifically Mexican forms of legitimacy and identity" (Bartra, 2002, p. 60; translation mine). Grandin (2004) likewise argues that, throughout Latin America, state-sponsored violence, mobilised under the shadows of the Cold War did much to upend the nation as an 'imagined community' (see also Williams, 2002). This point is quite significant, for it suggests that post-national identities cannot be understood simply in relationship to globalisation, but that, at least for Latin America, must also be understood within the context of the political crisis and political violence that characterised the 1960s and 1970s.

Kay Anderson (2000) offers a fourth angle on post-nationalism. For her, post-nationalism presents an epistemological opening. Rather than a description of contemporary trends, post-nationalism offers a new way of theorising political identities that begins with undoing "the fixity of nationalist frames of reference" (p. 381). This approach responds in part to contemporary globalising processes, but also emphasises the fact that nation-state construction has always been transnational. In the spirit of Eric Wolf's (1982) argument, that nations represent

bundles of multiscaled processes rather than pre-ordained static objects, post-national thinking can also be applied to historically minded evaluations of the nation-state. Unsettling nationalist frames of reference provides, furthermore, a means for opening a conversation between global and 'sub-national' challenges to the nation-state. As an epistemological tool, post-national thinking provides the means for conducting an analysis that avoids simplistic, dichotomous thinking around the national and the post-national. Instead, post-national thinking argues in favour of studying multiscalar identity formation through time in a way that captures periods of national dominance as well as national destabilisation.

In dialogue with these debates around post-nationalism, this paper has three objectives. First, it seeks to present the composite geometries of political identity found in the research that I conducted. In other words, the findings presented in this paper point to a series of overlapping national and post-national projects, some of which fully affirm the nation-state, while others disavow national thinking. Collectively, this messy 'composite' unsettles the nation-state, while at the same time demonstrating that a clear-cut transition towards 'post-national cultures' remains uncertain. Secondly, this paper seeks to offer an historically minded analysis to argue that the contemporary destabilisation of the nation is not simply the result of globalisation in Mexico, but also a reaction to unresolved legacies and memories of state authoritarianism which, for some, produced a rift between the 'nation' and the 'state'. Finally, this paper seeks to identify the political contents that give form to contemporary national and post-national sentiment in Mexico. In particular, the paper is interested in sketching out the new contours and sites of post-national power and resistance. Before turning to such an analysis, however, it is important to contextualise such a discussion in relationship to the history of 20th-century Mexican nation-building, which I address in the following section.

3. 20th-century Mexican Nationalism

The literature that addresses the construction of Mexican nationalism during the 20th century is quite voluminous. In order to cut through this literature in a manner appropriate to this paper, this section will begin by outlining the dominant narrative that has shaped our understanding of Mexican nationalism during the 20th century, which, crudely put, describes the rise and the fall of the Mexican nation. This section will then turn to a set of literature that, following K. Anderson, challenges the "fixity of the national frame of reference" (Anderson, 2000, p. 381) by highlighting the process of identity formation at a range of scales other than the nation. Such literature demonstrates that any kind of dichotomous reading of national and post-national cultures is problematic. Finally, this section will return to the context of the present. While it may be difficult to theorise a smooth or simplistic transition from the 'national' to the 'post-national', it can still be asserted that a set of distinct complexities distinguishes the contemporary processes of identity formation from those of the past.

Contemporary discussions of Mexican nationalism inevitably confront the towering legacy of the Mexican revolution and the intense period of state- and nation-building that followed. As Vaughan writes

In the 20th century no other state in the Western Hemisphere invested as much in the creation and promotion of a national culture as the Mexican central government" (Vaughan, 2001, p. 471).

Even when viewed from the early 21st century, the enormous energy that went into nation-building in Mexico has generated a powerful national narrative arc that is difficult to escape fully. Schmidt (2001) analyses this narrative arc through the paired discursive frameworks of 'revolution to evolution' and 'revolution to demolition'. The first of these frameworks refers to the construction of the post-revolutionary cultural project. This project, peopled with a range of heroes and villains drawn from Mexican history, sought to construct a unified 'revolutionary family' in a country marked by deep regional, class, racialised and generational difference (Joseph *et al.*, 2001a, p. 8). The construction of this national 'family' was bolstered by a discourse of revolutionary modernity built on the cornerstones of social justice and progress. *Mestizaje*, or the blending of European and indigenous cultures, was also central to this national project. This overarching cultural project dovetailed—seemingly perfectly—with both import substitution industrialisation and the process of political integration that was structured through corporatist institutions linked to the Partido Revolucionario Institucional.

Even as state policy moved away from fulfilling the promises of the revolution (Joseph *et al.*, 2001a), the project of revolutionary modernity experienced a 'golden age' during the post-World-War-II period (roughly 1940–60). During this time, Mexico projected an image of a strongly national society that was a paragon of cohesion, stability and peaceful development in which nation, economy, culture and politics strongly coincided. Within this image, power emanated from the centre and the state and nation became inextricably intertwined (Rubin, 1996).

Visible cracks in the optimistic vision of national progress and cohesiveness provided by revolutionary nationalism began slowly to appear in Mexico, opening the door to the second predominant narrative framework proposed by Schmidt, that of 'revolution to demolition'. There are multiple beginning points to this shift. One could point to the railroad strikes of the 1950s and the resulting government repression, or the publication of Carlos Fuentes's *The Death of Artemio Cruz* in 1962, which explored political violence and corruption just beneath the surface of the revolutionary state. Nonetheless, the clear marker of this transition was 1968 and the Tlatelolco Massacre of student protesters in Mexico City, which demonstrated the increasingly autocratic nature of the national political regime. Rising unemployment and growing income inequality defied, moreover, the social justice progressive discourse of revolutionary nationalism (Ruiz, 1992). In response to these trends and under the sway of insurgent radicalism in Latin America, revisionist understandings of state- and nation-building began to emerge, which emphasised the corruption and power of the state. In this narrative frame, therefore, the state was seen as betraying the nation. Thus, by the late 1960s, an important discursive rift—even in official circles—began to emerge between the state and the nation in 20th-century Mexico.

Despite growing critique of previous myths of nation-building, the Mexican political regime held onto populist and nationalist discourses through the 1970s, underwritten in part by discoveries of oil, extensive borrowing abroad and selective political repression at home. The slow break-up of the 'revolutionary family' only accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s, nonetheless, as Mexico cycled through a series of economic and political crises while aggressively pursuing neo-liberal reform (Martin, 2005). Mexico has emerged transformed, fully embedded (albeit in an uneven and unequal manner) in the global circulation of currencies, commodities and people (Bauer, 2001). Certainly, armed with the ideological

languages and policies of neo-liberalism and democratisation, the Mexican state has sought to provide new purchase on understandings of the Mexican nation (O'Toole, 2003). Yet, as Claudio Lomnitz argues

Neoliberal politicians (have not succeeded) in reformulating Mexican nationalism in a way that preserves the sense that the nation has its own internal system of value production. As a result, the opposition between state and nation, between a 'deep Mexico' and commercial, international, and superficially modernising elite, emerges as a common image of the national situation (Lomnitz, 2001, p. 122).

Lomnitz echoes Schmidt, in other words, in arguing that a 'state' against 'nation' or a 'revolution to demolition' narrative remains a common framework for understanding contemporary Mexican political life.

Both historically and in the contemporary period, a series of political, economic and cultural processes have also shaped Mexican worlds in a way that challenges the deeply engrained national narrative that informs our understanding of contemporary Mexico. Indeed, nationalism and the Mexican nation were never as coherent and totalising as they appeared. Reflecting this, research by historians and ethnographers has sought to rethink the nature of the Mexican nation-state during the bulk of the 20th century. This scholarship views power as not solely emanating from the national centre, but rather as residing in an on-going process of contestation, negotiation, consent and coercion at multiple scales and among multiple actors (see for example Rubin, 1996; Joseph and Nugent, 1994; Joseph *et al.*, 2001b; van Young, 1992; Lomnitz-Adler, 1993; and Beezley *et al.*, 1994). In this light, active resistance and alternative spatial, cultural and political processes that describe important dimensions of the Mexican experience can be brought to light. As many authors have noted, for example, local, communal, place-based identities have played an important role in shaping the world-view of many Mexicans, particularly rural, indigenous communities (for example, Purnell, 2002; van Young, 1992; Esteva and Prakash, 1998; Bonfil Batalla, 1994). Influential Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla has offered analytical purchase on historical and contemporary indigenous culture by counter-posing the existence of an 'imaginary Mexico' and a 'deep' (profound) Mexico. In his view, the abstract Western project of the nation-state (of which the revolutionary nation represents one iteration) represents the former and has been forcibly imposed upon a non-occidental, Mesoamerican civilisation. The latter continues to exist but remains largely invisible, embedded as it is in highly localised spaces. Yet, this localised culture speaks to the practices and lived realities of a majority of people in Mexico (see also Esteva and Prakash, 1998). The local in this regard, is a site of political resistance and cultural alterity. Other authors seek to challenge this view by demonstrating that the local and the national are co-constitutive, rather than strong polar opposites (Purnell, 2002).

Taking a distinct tack, other scholars have sought to examine transnational processes that have shaped identity formation in Mexico (Joseph *et al.*, 2001b). Such research takes on multiple guises. Certain authors demonstrate that the production of Mexican national identity during the mid 20th century occurred at the interstices of national and transnational production. Tourism, for example, fashioned and refashioned 'Mexicanness' for both domestic and foreign tourists (Saragoza, 2001). Gómez (2003) also brings a transnational focus to Mexican national formation through a focus on Mexican immigration to the

US. Historically, Mexican migrants and US citizens of Mexican descent have both challenged and contributed to the 'imagined communities' on both sides of the border. For example, during the early part of the 20th century, the Mexican government actively worked to organise Mexican communities in the south-western US. Decades later, a new form of Mexican nationalism emerged among Chicano activists.

If we recognise that the production of political identities in Mexico has always been multiscalar, then the contemporary transformations in the process of identity formation may speak to a shifting relationship between scales and a relative waning of national dominance. Such an analysis opens the door to examining the co-existence of national and post-national world-views and the potential sites of rupture or articulation between such world-views. In Mexico, for example, fragments of counter-hegemonic Mexican populist nationalism continue to burst onto the political scene, challenging neo-liberal policies and narratives. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas's bid for president in 1988 provides one such example, as does the Zapatistas' recourse to the historical figures of the Mexican revolution for inspiration. Thus, the foundations and meaning of the Mexican nation still serve as a site for political struggle.¹ Alongside continued nationalist discourses, however, deep rifts in the Mexican political community also signal, "a fundamental weakening in the foundations of the modern nation-state" (Williams, 2002, p. 7) in which the global remapping of populations, territories and goods resulting from globalisation has forcibly constructed a distinct means for understanding and apprehending the world. In order to explore this complex conjuncture, in the following section, I turn to an examination of the contemporary political horizons in Mexico as expressed through interviews that I conducted in 2000.

4. Situating Mexican National Narratives

During the year 2000, I spent 11 months in Mexico conducting a comparative study of democratic transition in two urban localities, Oaxaca, Oaxaca, and Monterrey, Nuevo León. I pursued this sub-national comparative study in order to examine how the twin processes of globalisation and democratisation intersected in different ways in each location. While attentive to regional difference, the research also sought to highlight the interconnections between each location. As part of this broader research agenda, I investigated understandings of Mexican nationhood in order to theorise the relationship between national identity formation and the process of democratic transition. As a primary research strategy, I conducted a total of 72 open-ended interviews (35 in Oaxaca and 37 in Monterrey) with individuals located in diverse institutional locations, including the media, NGOs, local government officials, political parties and unions.² This research strategy, which provided access to the interpretive frameworks of a range of individuals in each research site (Valentine, 2005), helped to shed light on shifts in the discursive architecture that underpins political transition. One potential shortfall of the material collected here is that it comes from what might be considered an élite pool, if not in socioeconomic terms, than along other lines of status. Among the people I interviewed, however, there were individuals who represented ideas and positions that were actively silenced from public debate. Thus, I remain confident in claiming that, collectively, these interviews provided insight into the dynamics of contemporary political change from a broad range of social and political perspectives.

The interviews I conducted offered a multilayered view into the process of identity formation in Mexico. At one level, the interviews represent social texts (Nagar, 1997) and were strongly informed by historical narratives articulated with Mexican nationalism. In this sense, the interviews drew on and then refracted out socially produced visions of Mexico. Yet, the interviews also contained more personal, situated or embodied narratives. Thus, each person I interviewed elaborated a particular vision that contained information about their particular experiences with distinct visions and practices of the nation. Hence, the interviews I conducted can also be viewed as active sites of political elaboration and contestation in which individuals actively made political claims and staked out political territory. In so doing, they demonstrate that the transitions in the form and meaning of nationhood are not inevitable or natural, but rather a site of political engagement.

As will be seen in the following analysis, certain individuals reproduced a 'revolution to evolution' perspective shaped by revolutionary nationalism, while other perspectives resonated with the 'revolution to demolition' interpretive frame. These patterns demonstrate that historically produced national narratives continue to carry discursive weight. As I will demonstrate, however, other individuals provided interpretive frames that escaped these national narratives, drawing instead on global or local frames. In a strict sense, it is difficult to assert that the results presented here demonstrate an historical shift in national sentiment among Mexicans, for such an affirmation would require comparative data from an earlier time-period. Nonetheless, the interview excerpts that I present do contain a degree of historical depth that marks, in one way or another, historical and geographical change. For example, certain individuals seek to challenge directly national narratives (see, for example, the quote that opens this paper); others introduce contemporary political grammar such as human rights, 'global citizenship', or cultural difference that serve as discursive markers of contemporary political change. Thus, the data can be used to elucidate contemporary complexities of identity formation in Mexico that are influenced by political and economic forces particular to Mexico. As will be demonstrated, the data presented here place us at the uncomfortable crossroads of still inspiring populist nationalism, exacerbated forms of authoritarian nationalism and 'post-national' grounds for new political utopias or dystopias. This range of discourses is scattered, furthermore, throughout the Mexican polity. Forms of nationalism and post-nationalism disperse and converge through distinct social subjects and geographical spaces.

In keeping with these observations, there are three aspects of the interviews that I explore. First, I am interested in examining the sites and scales of affiliation articulated by the individuals that I interviewed in order to understand the degree to which a national community serves as a touchstone for the political imagination in Mexico. Secondly, I am interested in using the interviews to understand how and why national sentiment has been put into question. Finally, I seek to identify the kinds of practices that give substance to these narratives and whether the practices invoke marginalisation and oppression, consumption and travel, or resistance, solidarity and democracy.

Table 1 presents an overall portrait of the status of the Mexican nation, as depicted in the interviews I conducted. As this table indicates, about a third of the individuals argued in one way or another that a coherent sense of nationness existed in Mexico, even though some recognised that there were differences.

Table 1. Evaluations of the status of the Mexican nation

<i>Unified</i>	
Unified	9
Unified despite differences	12
Sub-total	21
<i>Not unified</i>	
Nation in decline/nostalgia	6
Fractured nation	6
Nation against state	5
One element unifying Mexico	7
No national identity	5
Sub-total	29
<i>New project</i>	
Constructing a new project	14
Sub-total	14

Included in this register, for example, was the view of one individual who argued that Mexico is “a very diverse country”, yet who asserted that “at the bottom, it is authentic, that feeling, that identity of being Mexican”. The second major section, “Not unified”, categorised a range of answers that offered a view of deep-seated conflict, decline or non-existence regarding Mexico as a nation. Thus, this broad category includes the perspective of one individual who argued that soccer was the only thing that united people in Mexico. He claimed, “There is regionalism; I don’t think there is nationalism. There is regionalism, so much so that most states in Mexico are sub-divided in regions”. This categorisation also included individuals who argued, as in the quotation that opens this paper, that “Mexico doesn’t exist”. For example, a gentleman working in the media in Oaxaca argued that patriotic holidays like the “16th of September and the 5th of May” were the only things that unify Mexicans. He went on to say that, “in sum, we are identified by very special dates because Mexico is not a Mexico, there are thousands of Mexicos”.

Finally, a third category of interviews includes the views of individuals who shifted the tone of the question slightly. Rather than responding in a descriptive manner to questions I posed regarding the Mexican nation, these individuals responded in an overtly normative manner. In other words, they saw the question as an opportunity to offer a vision of what political community should be like in Mexico. In this sense, their claims offer insight into new political visions that are emerging on the Mexican landscape. For example, an individual working for an civil society organisation in Monterrey argued that defining the practices that underpin globalisation is more important than defence of the nation. She said, “We don’t think that the nature of the connection between all the nations should be a result of commerce. Let’s see how to globalise honesty. I mean why aren’t values globalised?” I now move to an interpretive analysis of the range of visions imparted through the interviews I conducted.

5. Layering the Narratives

This section builds a multilayered path through the range of perspectives on the Mexican nation introduced in Table 1 and discussed in the preceding paragraphs.

Rather than working through the table in a linear manner, however, I now build a conversation between perspectives that reference historical debates regarding 20th-century Mexican nation-building and those that put a national framework into question. In this sense, the interview excerpts that are presented here were selected because they offer an explanatory frame for the contents of Table 1.

The path that I construct weaves through four sets of interview excerpts that serve as a series of 'points and counterpoints'.³ I begin by highlighting a pair of excerpts that pivot around a quasi-authoritarian discourse of the nation, in which national unity above all else is the highest value. Following this, I turn to two excerpts that directly challenge this unity by drawing on histories of exclusion, marginalisation and violence. As points and counterpoints, these perspectives demonstrate an active, on-going debate about the role of the state in Mexican history. The next set of excerpts shift focus. They implicitly downplay the importance of the nationalist past, drawing instead on 'globalisation' as the key frame for understanding processes of identity formation in contemporary Mexico. Layering the narratives in this way serves to argue that the contested nature of contemporary Mexican national identity is wedged between a history of unresolved and on-going violent state-building and a set of new articulatory and discursive processes ushered in by neo-liberal globalisation. By positioning the narratives in this way, I also argue that in certain cases the language of globalisation provides a platform for forgetting historical struggles and injustices (see Jelin, 2003). Finally, I finish with 'counterpoints' to the dominant globalisation narrative, by drawing attention to ways in which individuals have sought to reclaim a critical political space between the histories of violence and exclusion and the banality of contemporary neo-liberal consumption. These political spaces represent a key political bridge that critiques both the historical violences of nation-building in Mexico and the current hegemony of neo-liberal globalisation. Thus, the views contained in these interview excerpts begin to map an alternative political path between hegemonic national and post-national formations in contemporary Mexico and could serve as the basis for an alternative democratic politics in contemporary Mexico.

5.1 *The Authoritarian Pivot: Unity Above All Else*

I begin with the perspective of an individual who was quite optimistic about the unity and direction of Mexican national development. This individual was working with an elections institution at the time I interviewed him and his career indicated a longstanding association with the PRI.⁴ His response provides one example of the nation as 'unified', as categorised in Table 1. His view resonates with the deeply rooted 'revolution to evolution' paradigm of national development, which sees an organic kind of unity that carries Mexico forward in a linear, developmentalist manner

Look, I see a very solid nation, a growing nation, a nation that is in development. A nation with less corruption, with greater culture. A nation with less illiteracy. A nation poor still, but that is fighting so that everyone has health care, that everyone eats, that there aren't great inequalities. I think we are achieving that. Each time the people are better prepared through universities and public schools. We have a lot of international capital that is investing in our nation.

When I asked him to comment on the fact that some argue that Mexico is profoundly pluricultural, he responded by stating

That's right. Yes, it has great contrasts. But that doesn't mean that each time we don't have better roads, better tourist centres, better security.

His response makes clear his insistence that all Mexico and all Mexicans are on the same path of political, cultural and economic development. The issue of 'difference' or the possibility that Mexicans may have different experiences with national development remains incompatible with his linear, organic view of national development.

The following interview excerpt comes from an interview with an individual working with the media. This view is also rooted in an authoritarian political culture. He expresses a strong sense of nostalgia for Mexico's 'golden age', when the country appeared unified; thus, his response would be located in the 'Not unified' category of Table 1.

We have lost our national identity. Look, I obtained my degree to be a radio announcer in the late 1950s. And we were told that there were three taboo themes in Mexico. You cannot talk about the Virgin of Guadalupe, you cannot talk about politics, and you cannot talk about the Mexican army. 41 years later there is an exhibition in Guadalajara and they put the legs of Marilyn Monroe on the Virgin of Guadalupe. With regard to the army, there are generals in prison, there are others that are being investigated and drug traffickers have infiltrated the Mexican army.

I also pressed this individual, asking whether these changes were negative or positive. He responded by stating

What I am getting to is this: the cohesion has been broken.

For this individual, national cohesion holds the highest value even if it is built around an acknowledged pattern of censorship. In this light, political and cultural critique has no place in the national, public arena.

While these two views seem distinct, they in fact intersect in the values and vision with which they imbue Mexican nationalism. Cohesion and unity, past or present, are the most important values. The possibility of cultural difference or political dissent remains an imminent threat to such unity. In an historical manner, one might argue that this understanding of the nation reached a political apogee under the presidencies of Díaz Ordaz (1968–74) and Echeverría (1974–80) (see Krause, 1997). Both of these individuals held prominent positions at the time I interviewed them. Thus, these quotations indicate that such a view of Mexican nationalism still circulates, still holds political currency, actively working to diminish the democratisation of Mexican political culture.

5.2 *Challenging Organic Unity: Stories of Violence and Marginalisation*

It was precisely an authoritarian brand of Mexican nationalism, spanning the late 1950s to the early 1980s, which underpinned state-sponsored violence against Mexican citizens (Krause, 1999). This trend spoke not only to the increasing concentration of power within the Mexican presidency, but also indicated a preoccupation with national security influenced by Cold War politics. Within this

shifting ideological terrain, the place of social actors within the nation was recast. Previously celebrated, workers, peasants and students became potential enemies from within. This shift produced what the individual quoted next delicately calls an “exaggerated” form of nationalism.

Well, I think the PRI supported an exaggerated form of nationalism. Nationalism was used because of the history of our country, because of the foreign interventions that occurred. But nationalism was used to strengthen the PRI regime and it was a form of nationalism that was misunderstood. I think that each country should have values, something with which we all identify. But those values and that identity should serve the majority of the population and should not be used to keep someone in power who doesn't fight for the interests of the people.

This interview excerpt comes from a person who has worked closely with the families of disappeared peoples in Mexico and points directly, therefore, to a hidden history of political violence in Mexico (Doyle, 2003). While the numbers remain unsettled, hundreds of people disappeared in Mexico under the presidencies of Díaz Ordaz, Echevarría and López Portillo and thousands more were detained and tortured.⁵ Thus, the view on Mexican nationalism expressed earlier emanates from an individual very familiar with the kind of violence that an insistence on national cohesion can justify. This person's words provide, therefore, a direct challenge to the absolute value of national unity. In pointing to Mexico's dirty war, they demonstrate that all citizens do not experience the nation in the same way and that political practices made in the name of the nation must be opened to critique.

In a similar manner, the interview excerpt that follows calls into direct question the utility and value of a view of Mexican nationalism that places unity above all else. This individual, a Catholic priest, draws on the experience of Mexicans who migrate to the US as a means for evaluating the idea of Mexican nationalism. Migrants produce knowledge that is often “suppressed and marginalized” (Sousa Santos, 2004, p. 313). As asserted by this individual, migrants have experienced a palpable betrayal on the part of the Mexican government. Yet, despite this, they continue to embody and practise a deeply rooted sense of identity. By speaking through the perspective of Mexican immigrants, this narrative also mobilises a ‘state again nation’ framework and brings attention to the fact that the benefits of economic development have been highly uneven in Mexico

Well, I think the people who are in power, unfortunately, have been giving our country away; they have sold our sovereignty. But the people are jealous of their identity, but powerless because they do not move in economic and political circles. For example, here there are many migrants to the United States and in the United States there are organisations that represent many of the local communities here. They have their music; they celebrate their village parties just like here. They are linked, they are not in the place, but they are linked, remembering, remembering.

As ‘counterpoints’, these two quotes challenge directly the narratives of unity expressed previously. They draw on the standpoints of families of disappeared peoples and transnational migrants in order to provide an alternative reading of the past and present experience of Mexican nationalism. Importantly, these

interview excerpts point to deep conflicts over the ways in which an imagined Mexican nation has been practised and experienced, thereby opening up a space of critique and debate regarding the meaning and values of Mexican nationalism and who best embodies those values. These perspectives resonate, therefore, with a 'state against nation' discourse that animates historical struggles to democratise Mexican political culture.

5.3 *Global Realism*

As the interview excerpts I have presented demonstrate, a deep debate continues in Mexico about the meaning and practices of an imagined national community, most particularly with regard to understanding the role the state has played in relationship to an imagined nation. Both official and subaltern narrations of the nation continue to circulate in the public sphere in Mexico. Clearly, this debate is protracted and holds high political and economic stakes. Yet, in my interviews, there were those who sought to put this historical debate about the nation aside in order to argue that a new 'global' reality is emerging that is more important than the nation. Reflecting this mood, one individual, who held links with the business community in Oaxaca, made the following statement

I like the San Antonio society because it is a bi-national society that has equal pride being North American as being Mexican, that speaks Spanish as well as English, that works on both sides of the border, something exceptional, with a very good level of culture, that feels proud of being Mexican and American. As McLuhan said, 'the global village'. In the end, we will understand one another because we are citizens of the world, and we cannot try to identify ourselves specifically—we can feel proud of our roots—but conscious that we have to be citizens of the world. Nothing will happen to our Mexico.

As a frequent visitor to San Antonio, this individual draws on a particular transnational perspective to assert the importance of thinking as a global citizen, thereby destabilising the importance of the nation. Interestingly, he refers to an ease of working, living and enjoying both sides of the border, thereby drawing out a positive and pleasurable experience of transnationalism that differs dramatically from the bulk of Mexicans who traverse the border. His view seeks to place the 20th-century debate of national identity clearly in the past, exemplifying a cosmopolitan, neo-liberal form of post-nationalism (Williams, 2002).

Another individual who held ties to the business community in Monterrey strongly echoed this view. The resonance between these interview excerpts reflects the degree to which the business community in Mexico offers a powerful platform for projecting a neo-liberal post-national political subjectivity

Let me tell you what is happening. I think what is happening is that yes, effectively, we are beginning to have a global perspective. Here in Monterrey, there are many people who travel to the United States for reasons of business or pleasure, we copy many things from the United States, we consume many things from the United States. Among professionals, people with some education, you find a lot of literature in English. So it is quite easy to have a global perspective. Many people watch CNN and that also structures your way of thinking.

This individual asserts that a concern with Mexican national identity was not of great value; rather a new global reality, expressed through a series of consumption, travel and other pleasurable practices, is producing a new kind of subjectivity. An insistence on this version of the new global reality has the effect of erasing the past, thereby undermining the political grounds individuals might use to redress crimes committed during the Dirty War. It also demonstrates little recognition for the experience of many migrant workers in this new global reality.

5.4 Asserting Post-national Political Communities

In the earlier paragraphs, I have outlined views of the Mexican nation that have stressed an authoritarian kind of unity, others that seek to challenge such a perspective by bringing politically and economically subordinated perspectives into view. This *de facto* debate about the historical nature and practices of Mexican nationalism is displaced, in turn, by another set of narratives that draw down and project out the importance of a new (neo-liberal) global reality. As indicated in Table 1, there was a third kind of response, in which individuals described in an overtly normative way their idea of political community, making claims about what the nature of political community should be like. Significantly, there were two primary projects that emerged in these kinds of responses, each set at a scale different from that of the nation. One was channelled through a positive engagement with local differences and *la patria chica* (local homeland), while the other engaged with a sense of globality, particularly through the idea of human rights. In what follows, I will provide two examples of former and one of the latter.

The first interview excerpt comes from an individual who works in the media. He argues that the debate about the nature of the Mexican nation holds historical links to authoritarianism. To confront this history, he argues in favour of engaging with historical and contemporary difference in Mexico, which he expresses as a placed-based sense of cultural difference

I think that debate, that discourse of identity in Mexico is part of the authoritarian discourse. When we are the country that has the most living languages in the world, right? It's amazing, and where are they? We are a cultural mosaic more complicated than a jigsaw puzzle and we are worried that everyone be the same. We should be concerned with all of the prejudices we have. Certainly, the search for diversity in terms of culture is something that did not happen before mid-century because the thumb was placed on the issue of identity. Oaxaca and Guadalajara are cities that are completely different. We should look for and live alongside that mosaic, and really allow different cultures to blossom and participate.

Like the previous two perspectives that depicted a new global reality for Mexico, this individual also seeks to draw a distinct portrait of Mexico, one based in idea of a cultural mosaic. Yet, the argument here is distinct, because it does not seek to erase the authoritarian past, but rather to acknowledge it and, through that acknowledgement, provide the basis for a distinct kind of political future. Thus, here we see a specific discursive articulation between the past and the future. This future is not based on consumption and travel practices, but rather the search for a politics of recognition and participation. The following interview excerpt, which came from an interview with someone who was working with

the PRI at the time I interviewed him, similarly argues that the nationalist project has failed.⁶ In this person's estimation, *la patria chica* (small homeland) provides an alternative sense of political community through which a new kind of participatory political project could be constructed

I think that nationalism hasn't prevailed. I think *la patria chica* continues to be more important and I tell you, and surely you will see it, it is going to be the solution in this country. It is going to be the political expression, the strengthening of local political parties, political associations, NGOs, citizens, at the local level, the regional level and the state level. It is going to be the real expression of this country.

In both of these interview excerpts, the individuals argue that a valorisation and acknowledgement of local affiliation offers a means for building new sites of political participation. In a sense, therefore, both of these excerpts are focused on highlighting new paths to the construction of a democratic polity in Mexico that opens the door to citizenship at the local level.

At the other end of the spectrum, there were individuals who drew on a globalised human rights discourse in order to present an alternative normative vision of political community. A woman working in a human rights organisation voiced the following opinion in defence of human rights

Human rights include the whole, integral person. Human rights include political, economic, cultural and social rights, yes? All rights, or all that which impedes a person from living with the dignity that we deserve.

She went on to describe her vision for the future, which seeks to tear down national borders

Hopefully one day the borders will disappear and we could see ourselves as brothers and sisters, as friends, as human beings, divided only by an imaginary border.

One might argue that this particular political vision holds certain resonance with the 'global realism' narrative presented previously. The critical difference, however, is that this understanding of a world without borders is based on a set of political ideals and not a set of travel and consumption practices. Here, the concern is for establishing a new set of political practices based in a concern and recognition for the other. Such a vision has both spatial and historical depth, as it seeks to respond to the deep-seated political, economic and cultural conflicts in Mexico. These alternative political futures destabilise the centrality of the nation and offer a means for reinvigorating politics by providing a means for imagining and expanding the practices of citizenship in Mexico.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

In the guise of discussion and conclusions, I would like to return to the goals that I set out at the beginning of this paper. These included offering a portrait of the composite geometries of political identity as found in the research that I conducted; theorising the particular origins of 'post-national' culture in Mexico; and, finally, understanding what contemporary nationalisms and post-nationalisms might tell us about the nature of political practices in Mexico. I treat each of these subjects in turn.

This research offers insight into the 'messy composite' that shapes contemporary political identities in Mexico. The content of the interviews that I conducted demonstrates an overlapping series of projects in which strongly nationalised narratives co-exist alongside narratives that invoke other scales as frames of reference. These narratives are both scattered and uneven and display historical depth along with new imaginative elaborations. The narratives presented here cut distinct paths through Mexico's recent past, referencing different events and processes and drawing on a range of political imaginations. At moments, nonetheless, one can detect an ordering of discourses indicating that positions on national identity also coalesce and work through distinct institutional locations in Mexico. The presence of this 'messy composite' demonstrates, furthermore, that Mexico's uncertain transition towards a post-national future is not linear or teleological, but rather is shaped by struggles over the nature of political and economic change. Admittedly, I have only offered a partial image and one that could be complemented by perspectives centred on transnational migration, the US–Mexico border, or heightened regionalism in Mexico. Nonetheless, it remains significant that this 'messy composite' has found expression among non-diasporic, non-border, political subjects. Thus this research demonstrates that the destabilisation of Mexican nationalism (and hence a 'post-national condition') reaches deeply inside the Mexican polity (see also Lawson, 2004).

Secondly, this paper has sought to demonstrate that the origins of this contemporary 'messy composite' cannot be understood solely through the lens of globalisation but also reflects a particular history of state–citizen relationships. Thus, a terrain of political power has shaped the contours of Mexico's pathway towards this post-national condition. In particular, I argue that the unresolved historical record of authoritarianism and the attendant practices of impunity and the profoundly uneven distribution of economic and social rights structured by neo-liberal policies shape the contours of this debate. The practices of state authoritarianism created an open rift in the Mexican national imaginary that the processes of globalisation only exacerbated. We can tentatively posit that this wedge between historical experiences with the state and contemporary globalisation created a critical space in which notions about the nature of political community, identity and politics have been refashioned, producing a post-national geometry particular to Mexico. In this sense, defining the nation and defining the terms of a transition towards a post-national future remains highly politicised.

Regarding the political content of the discourses, both dominant and subaltern perspectives emanate from the national and post-national frameworks that I have presented. Thus, certain national discourses reference an authoritarian mode of discourse, while certain post-national discourses reference a strongly neo-liberal narrative. Similarly, popular nationalisms co-exist with pluricultural and human rights discourses, giving voice to subaltern discourses on identity formation. This dual presence suggests that, rather than thinking dichotomously about national/post-national forms of power and resistance, it might be more effective to think about the articulations and disjunctures between each. Just as the state can still leverage nationalist discourses while pursuing 'deep integration' within North America, similarly, subaltern groups can engage in a certain kind of 'discursive mobility' (see Pratt, 2004) that moves across scales while drawing on alternative national and post-national imaginaries. This kind of articulation and mobility is of fundamental political importance because it works against a politics of erasure—a hallmark of neo-liberal global subjectivity—and instead works to

outline and leverage the bridges that exist between Mexico's past and present struggles for democracy.

The results presented in the paper indicate that Mexico is marked by a 'post-national condition'; while the structures of national belonging have not been eclipsed, they have been destabilised along a range of paths. Recent events in Mexico indicate that such a condition will only deepen in the near future. The Mexican government, for example, is actively pursuing deep integration with the US and Canada through the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America, further unravelling Mexican sovereignty (Pickard, 2005). Recent data released by the World Bank demonstrate, furthermore, the contemporary significance of Mexican international migration, particularly to the US. In 2005, Mexico was ranked globally as the country with the highest number of emigrants; according to the same report, the US–Mexico border is the most important immigration corridor in the world.⁷ These profound transnational realities have been paired, moreover, with important internal political conflicts and crises that point to deep fractures in the Mexican social fabric. The 2006 presidential election, which pitted a neo-liberal candidate against a left-of-centre candidate, symbolised the confrontation between two distinct national projects for the country that had quite distinct regional expressions. Because of the closeness of the results, and accusations of fraud, a winner (Felipe Calderon, representing the neo-liberal right) was not declared until two months later (see Giordano, 2006). At the same time, a protracted popular uprising in the southern state of Oaxaca, that sought to force the state governor to resign, mobilised and defended localised plural identities as they pursued common cause (see Martin and Gática, 2008). Such events suggest that the basis for the construction of a common identity among Mexicans is rapidly undergoing profound change. For those who seek to expand democratic politics, the challenge lies in building a polity based in complex forms of equality that work across scales, and, indeed, across borders.

Notes

- 1 The current debate over the privatisation of Mexican oil provides an acute example of this.
- 2 I have chosen not to conduct a regional comparison in this paper. In fact, as will be seen in the interview excerpts, many themes that emerged in the interviews cut across region.
- 3 This strategy draws on Said's (1993) notion of 'contrapuntal' readings.
- 4 I identify in a general way, the institutional location of individuals I interviewed, although I have removed almost all other identifying information. I include institutions because that was the means through which I identified individuals for interviews. I do not claim, however, that the perspectives voiced in my interviews represent an official position of the institution.
- 5 See the Mexico Project at the National Security Archive at: www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/mexico/
- 6 A surprising critique for someone affiliated with the PRI.
- 7 <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1199807908806/Top10.pdf>

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