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The Challenge of Feminist Political Geography to State-Centrism in Latin American Geography

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INTRODUCTION

In 2003, Juanita Sundberg provocatively claimed that masculinist epistemologies “predominate” in Latin Americanist geography (Sundberg 2003: 180). Sundberg argued that this masculinism has found expression in some scholars’ claims to disembodied objectivity in the research process, and in a widespread unwillingness to acknowledge social positions that facilitate our production of knowledge about Latin America. Here, we are interested in a collateral tendency of such masculinist scholarship: state-centrism. Ince and Barrera de la Torre (2016) clarify that tendencies towards state-centrism are not specific only to geographical research in/of Latin America. We suggest that the moment is ripe for reflecting specifically upon the stakes of a more robust feminist turn in the political geography of Latin America, a turn that would examine the state as an effect of everyday life and processes of social reproduction. Specifically, we argue that a feminist orientation towards ethnographies of the state is important for challenging masculinist tendencies towards state-centrism that naturalize the “view from nowhere” (Haraway 1988: 582) and thereby lend “the state” its power. Looking beyond the illusion of state space as a neutral backdrop for political life (Coleman and Stuesse 2016: 528) allows us to recognize how people who identify or may dis-identify with “the state” produce situations of governability or, conversely, elicit radical social change through practices of social reproduction that state-centric scholarship on political life may not immediately identify as its object of study.

While we observe decades of important feminist contributions to geographical research on the region (e.g. Radcliffe and Westwood 1996; Cravey 1998; Sundberg 2003; Mollett 2010; Swanson 2010; Radel 2012), we also note an enduring state-centrism in commonsense geographical imaginaries of Latin America, for which feminist political geography could serve as a corrective. The proponents of state-centric geographical imaginaries are rarely explicit about their assumptions. Indeed, more prevalent is what Ince and Barrera de la Torre (2016: 13) call a “silent statism,” or a failure to recognize the contingency of the state form as a mode of organizing society. In the remaining pages, we reflect upon and assess the implications of a feminist turn away from silent statism in geographical scholarship in/about Latin America – a turn that resonates with the work of feminist political geographers in other research communities.

Feminist political geographical literature on the state has, since the 1990s, challenged statist theories of the political that reproduce a myth of the state’s autonomous power to determine the coordinates of political life. Its adherents have subjected state power to critical scrutiny through an ethnographic approach that reveals how everyday practices of social reproduction may construct spaces for the exercise of state authority. In what follows, we first define what it means
to think about the political “beyond the state,” with an eye to social reproduction. We briefly summarize feminist political geographers’ contributions to the relevant transdisciplinary scholarship, and we clarify how this feminist shift in orientation matters for geographical scholarship in/about Latin America. In the second section, we present brief examples from our efforts to look “beyond the state” in our own research. We show how Bolivians and Mexicans participate in constructing an actionable state/non-state distinction, and producing governable “state space.” We conclude by arguing that a feminist turn in political geographies of the state in Latin America would train our attention to the vital role of struggles over social reproduction in recent political developments in the region, while promising to denaturalize a social-spatial ordering of everyday life that sustains injustice. In short, as the editorial team of the *Journal of Latin American Geography* (Gaffney et al. 2016: 1) has reaffirmed a commitment to “socially engaged” research that confronts injustice in the region, we believe feminist political geography has a vital role to play.

**THE POLITICAL “BEYOND THE STATE”**

Scholars in a variety of disciplines have worked in different ways to denaturalize a common-sense boundary between “the state” and “its outside” (e.g., Abrams 1988; Rose and Miller 1992; Mountz 2003; Asad 2004; Painter 2006; Jones 2012). By showing that the effect of a state structure is created by social processes that “the state” ostensibly governs (Mitchell 1991), scholars have challenged an understanding of the state as a self-contained organization functioning for its own maintenance, or as a force that encompasses society in top-down fashion. Feminist political geographers are at the forefront of promoting theoretical and methodological resources for understanding the state as an effect of daily practice that is “shaped by [and shaping] the local and regional communities in which it operates” (Mountz 2003: 628; cf. Marston 2004; Staeheli et al. 2012). Often supporting their claims through evidence from ethnographic research, feminist political geographers have shown that the apparent boundary around the entity we know as “the state” is constructed through material and discursive practices, frequently by people who do not explicitly identify as state actors. These accounts cast doubt on trans-historical, statist theories of the political that would obscure opportunities to confront injustices perpetuated in the name of the state.

To be sure, ethnography is not an inherently feminist practice. Indeed, scholars can and have produced masculinist ethnographies of political life in Latin America, by assuming state space as a neutral backdrop for ethnographic study, and by proceeding without scrutiny for the categories through which state power is exercised (Berger 1995). But feminist political geographers have demonstrated that we can produce ethnographies of the state that denaturalize unjust social
order and reveal the state itself as contingent (Ince and Barrera de la Torre 2016: 13). “Studying up” the state (Nader 1972) and challenging its myth of durable coherence can create conditions for emancipatory politics.

A feminist “beyond the state” approach matters for geographic research in/of Latin America for at least three reasons. First, we cannot make sense of the contemporary political landscape in Latin America if we maintain a rigid state/civil society binary in our fieldwork and political conceptualizations. As Uruguayan journalist Raúl Zibechi (2016) recently observed, in the 1990s and 2000s, progressive “pink tide” governments in Latin America needed to create new understandings of the state that would allow them to channel popular, often movement-based demands into policy. Liberal theories of the state (often) forged in the United States and Europe that assume a strict separation of “civil” and “political” society, and which promote an emphasis on highly visible political actors over and above ordinary people in research, are therefore inadequate to the task of examining political developments and justice demands in the region (Ellner 2016). Against calls for an anachronistic and arguably patriarchal strategy of left-wing populism (Roth and Baird 2017), and against “masculinist constructions of knowledge predicated on accessing elites” (Billo and Mountz 2016: 215), feminist ethnographies of the state promise to reorient our attention to ongoing contestation and struggle at the level of everyday life.

Second, and related to the first point, a feminist political geographical approach to the state in Latin America is urgently necessary for sustaining a sense of political possibility at a time when the aforementioned “progressive cycle” of government policy in the region is understood by many observers to be imploding (Grandin 2015; Modonesi 2015). The consistent reference points in commentary on this “ebb of the pink tide” have been electoral defeats, corruption scandals, and government failures to uphold post-neoliberalism in practice. A feminist political geography of the state in Latin America might suggest that this pessimism can be attributed at least in part to state-centrism, by which we mean a focus on the failures of actors one can uncontroversially identify with state institutions. In mainstream commentaries on “the death of the Latin American Left” (Castañeda 2016), the fact of enduring movements for autonomy and creative practices of social reproduction in the region are obscured (cf. Reyes 2015). But feminist geographers of Latin America and elsewhere are attuned to precisely these obscured processes, and feminist political geographers specifically demonstrate a need to examine how everyday life and social reproduction are a constitutive force in state formation, not secondary phenomena subsumed by statecraft (Cravey 1998; Katz 2001; Marston 2004; Mountz 2004).

Finally, Latin American(ist) geographers should care about a feminist “beyond the state” approach to examining political life in the region because it would enrich existing feminist work on the region with specially feminist-
political-geographical insights on state power. As we make this claim, we note that political geographical scholarship of/in Latin America has recently started to explicitly blur the state/non-state distinction, and has done so to the effect of achieving greater clarity about where, how, and through whose practices state power is exercised (e.g. Garmany 2009; Ballvé 2012; Meehan 2014; Boyce et al. 2015; Risør 2016). Even when these researchers do not explicitly define their research as such, we suggest that this scholarship is contributing to a feminist turn in our understanding of the state in Latin America insofar as it directs our attention to the role of “non-state actors” in the exercise of state power and to the scale of social reproduction. In short, this emerging feminist scholarship on the state in Latin America trains our vision on everyday encounters that constitute a fragile, contingent geography of state power. In what follows, we further substantiate a feminist orientation towards research on state power in Latin America by way of examples from our research in Mexico and Bolivia. Our analyses reveal the role of ordinary people in constructing state/non-state distinctions, and by recognizing these distinctions as constructed, works to denaturalize the social-spatial ordering of everyday life that sustains injustice in the region.

PRODUCING “THE STATE” THROUGH YOUTH POLITICS IN MEXICO AND COCA POLITICS IN BOLIVIA

Neither of us began the projects discussed here with an intention to examine the state. Instead, we initiated our projects in Mexico and Bolivia with an interest in processes of social reproduction (memory work in the political mobilization of young people in Mexico, and the everyday interpretation and implementation of coca control policy among coca growers in Bolivia). In each case, processes of social reproduction work to disseminate, recirculate, and reify categories that can be acted upon in the name of the state. Our research projects in Mexico and Bolivia demonstrate the importance of feminist ethnography for detailing everyday material and discursive practices through which “the state” is given form.

In Mexico, for example, the youth activist practice of dis-identifying from “porros” provides a case in point. In 1950s and 1960s, popular representations of rebellious, ungrateful youth created what came to be understood as the “student problem,” and reflecting anticommmunist anxieties, made that problem visible as an external threat to the nation (Pensado 2013). Political and economic elites in Mexico drew upon this popular articulation of students as a threat in order to legitimate extralegal policing tactics of intimidation, expulsion, and detention, including the implantation of pseudo-estudiantes in student activities. By the mid-1960s, these “fake students” became organized as “porra” gangs, who would be
available to public authorities and economic elites alike for short term employment to assist in policing student radicalism. Five years after one such “shock group” famously attacked a student march in Mexico City and killed more than one hundred people, Gastón García Cantú (1976: 4-5) described “porristas” or porros as agents of repression that, for reason of their uncertain position vis-à-vis “the state,” he understood as part of “the privatization of public authority.”

More recent events underscore the uncertainty of this relationship between adjudicating legitimate political practice and the figure of the porro. For example, in 2012, young participants in the protest movement #YoSoy132 initially defended their political legitimacy by asserting that they were indeed students. They were provoked to do this in response to now-President Enrique Peña Nieto’s erroneous claim that the protesters who disrupted his campaign event at the Universidad Iberoamericana on 11 May 2012 were porros paid by an opposition party (the PRD). Here, young people claimed an identity that assured them access to a receptive public. The identity “student activist” made sense in the context of what Nelson (2003) would describe as sedimented political discourses. But, when young participants in the protest movement asserted this “student” identity, they paradoxically aligned with Peña Nieto on the political illegitimacy of porros.

Informed by popular memory of the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, this position is reaffirmed in countless activist meetings and demonstrations, when student activists accuse other young people of being porros. For example, the dis-identification with apparent porros would shape the final moments of the 2 October 2015 march to commemorate the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre. From where I (NJC) was standing to listen to the families of the disappeared student-teachers from Guerrero (there under the sign of #Ayotzinapa), we could see an eruption in the southeast corner of the Zócalo. At approximately 6:00 pm, people began throwing firebombs at riot police. Photojournalists and many participants in the march immediately broke from the planned meeting around the families and organizers to chase photographs of the battle between the riot police and “jóvenes encapuchados” (masked young people). An organizer of the march observed this dynamic from on top of a bus and, through a megaphone, encouraged other participants in the convergence to “stay organized” in the face of “provocateurs who identify with the state.” The convergence in the Zócalo would disperse less than twenty minutes later (fieldnotes, 2 October 2015, Cuauhtémoc, Mexico City). In photojournalists’ subsequent representation of the event as a battle with riot police, in protestors’ reference to popular memory to make sense the molotov cocktails in terms of porrismo, and in the organizer’s articulation of allies and adversaries (the latter who presumably “identify with the state”), we witness an array of people contributing to the configuration of political life in terms of “the state” in relation to which one must either align or, conversely, stand in opposition.
Processes of social reproduction similarly produce “the state” in Bolivia. During research in Bolivia, I (ZP) observed many cocaleros (coca leaf growers) categorizing coca production in the country’s two prominent coca growing regions as either “legal”/“legitimate” or “illegal”/“illegitimate,” and this even while many of these same cocaleros participated in bending the rules of (il)legality in practice. After Evo Morales became president of Bolivia in 2006, emerging from the ranks of the coca unions in the Chapare region, the government increasingly formalized an approach to controlling production of the coca leaf that would be sensitive to cocaleros’ economic, political, and social relationship to a leaf that is the main ingredient in cocaine, as well as a food, medicine, and cultural resource used in the Andes for thousands of years. The approach, often called “social control” was to be implemented and enforced at the level of the unions. Social control allows some cocaleros to grow a small plot of coca (1600 m² to 2500 m² depending on the growing region), through a system of licensing and registration. Participants police themselves and each other to ensure that all members abide by the dictates of “social control.” This approach to controlling production of the coca leaf represents a huge break from coca control in the past, when, from the 1970s through 2004, Bolivian government forces were targeting peasants as part of a violent coca eradication strategy supported by the United States Drug Enforcement Administration. Cocaleros in the Chapare coca growing region in particular feel a sense of ownership over “social control,” owing both to the central role these cocaleros play in carrying out the policy, and because many of the main features of the model were formulated from within the Chapare coca growers’ federations, still led today by cocalero President Morales (Grisaffi 2013).

But the relay between policy and practice is not entirely smooth. During research in Bolivia in 2012, 2013, and 2014, I (ZP) learned the extent to which some cocaleros engaged in and/or supported practices of “cheating” even while they accused others of breaking the rules of “social control.” I witnessed this dynamic both within the two main coca growing regions, the Yungas de La Paz and the Chapare, and also between them. In several places within the Chapare, I learned that cocalero unions at several levels of governance were allowing non-licensed federation members to grow a small plot of coca in a way that would be illegible to the government forces charged with checking their properties. One afternoon I met privately with Francisco (pseudonym), because he didn’t want to be overheard in town. He spoke angrily about inequality in coca plot registration: certain cocaleros had cheated during the initial registration process, dividing their land and registering multiple coca plots per family. Meanwhile, Francisco knew long-time coca federation members who had fought against punitive anti-coca policies, but could not obtain legal coca licenses now because of inequalities in distribution. Because these long-term members “made ‘social control’ possible,”
Francisco argued, his federation was justified in allowing such unlicensed cocaleros to grow a coca plot despite lacking registration (fieldnotes and interview, 25 September 2013, Entre Ríos, Bolivia). I spoke to many other cocaleros in the Chapare who both defended what they understood as their own legitimate reasons for growing more coca than they were officially allowed, while accusing others of illegally growing more than their fair share. Despite the ambiguities in cocaleros’ execution of “social control” on the ground, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the amount of land dedicated to coca production has been decreasing since 2011 (UNODC 2016). The UN understands this as a success. Cocaleros are therefore determining how the change in coca control policy since 2006 is being carried out, and they are doing so not to the letter of what is being defined by the government, but according to social relations among coca growers, between coca growing regions, and with a concern for what officials need to see in order to deem the policy a success. Here again, everyday life and social reproduction are a constitutive force in state formation, not a secondary phenomena subsumed by statecraft.

Ethnography has been crucial for generating our insights into how people create social relations recognizable as an effect of “the state” in Mexico and Bolivia. In both cases, immersive research has resulted in complicating distinctions between “state” and “non-state” actors, and in both cases, people are nonetheless observably invested in and actively upholding categories through which state power is exercised and/or the effects of government policy can be measured; they are understanding themselves and making normative claims about how political life should be in relation to state authority. By learning from individuals and communities we can understand the production of “the state” as a process through which ordinary people (as well as practitioners of spectacular capital-P Politics) produce a state effect that is specific to their historical-geographical context.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued for a feminist turn in geographical research on state power in Latin America. We have suggested that a feminist-political-geographical orientation to the state for critical geographies of Latin America will facilitate greater sensitivity to the role of processes of social reproduction through which state authority is being (re)produced and social-spatial order that sustains injustice is maintained. Statist theorizations cannot adequately account for how the contemporary political landscape takes shape. Furthermore, in the current political conjuncture, attention to a bodily scale of negotiation with the capacity to produce social relations that are widely recognized as an effect of the state could not be more urgent. We have suggested that, absent this admission of ongoing struggles
for social justice in everyday life, this conjuncture -- for some, the “end of a cycle” -- lends itself to an abysmal pessimism. A feminist ethnographic approach to state formation “beyond the state” in Latin America highlights the historical-geographical contingency of the state form, and suggests that our political lives have the potential to be otherwise.

REFERENCES


