Citizens and sons of the pueblo: National and local identities in the making of the Mexican nation

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In 1908, the district political chief of Etla sent a routine inquiry to local authorities in the villages under his jurisdiction, requesting information on the extent and value of any communal land sold to individuals in accordance with prevailing law, so that he might compile a report solicited by the Ministry of Government in the city of Oaxaca, capital of the Mexican state of the same name. The municipal president of Alatlahuca sent an equally routine reply: no such land existed in his village, he reported, 'because all of the residents of the pueblo have lands of their own acquired under various titles and the communal lands possessed by these same residents are planted in corn and beans'.

The very banality of this exchange obscures an

1Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Donald Hafner, Gerald Easter, Lynn Stephen, John Watanabe, John Tutino, and Stephen Lange for their comments on this and earlier versions of the article. The research was made possible by a Research Incentive Grant from Boston College.

1 Municipal president of Alatlahuca to Etla political chief (jefe político), 5 September 1908, RA (Repartos y Adjudicaciones) 10/4/1908. The district political chiefs were appointed by and reported to the state governors, and were responsible for implementing laws and maintaining order in their districts. All of the primary
important historical and political fact: in retaining possession of communal property, the villagers of Alatlahuca had ignored or defied a half-century’s worth of state and national laws, decrees, court decisions, and constitutional provisions mandating its privatization and distribution to village residents or sale to tenants or other interested individuals. The experience of Alatlahuca was far from unusual. Many villages throughout Oaxaca managed to maintain some of their land as communal property, and they continue to do so today (Reina 1988a; 1988b). Almost sixty per cent of Oaxaca's total surface area is held under communal titles by 674 state-recognized entities called comunidades agrarias (Stephen 2001).

The privatization of communal land was a central component of a broader program of state and nation building in nineteenth-century Mexico. Private property would serve as the engine of economic development and prosperity, and the registration of private land titles would facilitate the collection of property taxes by the state. Together with state-sponsored secular education, privatization would also 'civilize' the Indian villagers, weaken their communal and religious identities, eliminate the 'savage' customs associated with those identities, and transform them into virtuous and hardworking citizens of the Mexican Republic. For liberal intellectuals and state officials, the Mexican nation-in-the-making was to be based on economic individualism and individual citizenship in a liberal political order. The construction of this nation required that the villages become places where individuals happened to live, rather than their primary sources of cultural and documents cited in this article come from the Archivo General del Estado de Oaxaca All translations from Spanish sources are my own.
political identification and loyalty. In the course of the struggle over the liberal land reform, however, Indian villagers and their legal representatives continued to advance economic and political claims as 'sons of the pueblo' (hijos del pueblo), that is, as members of particular villages/peoples whose rights to land and other resources were derived from their birth in, and service to, those villages/peoples.² Their relative success in pressing these claims limited the extent to which the liberal land reform could be implemented in Oaxaca, and frustrated liberal efforts to replace communal identities with a national one based on economic and political individualism.

What does the persistence of strong local identities tell us about the historical and political processes through which national identities are constructed? Much of the literature on nations and nationalism contends that national identities

² In this context, the term pueblo connotes both village and people, the latter in the sense of a distinct people different from all other peoples. For this reason, I use the expression 'sons of the pueblo' without translating the word pueblo. Hijos can mean either sons or children. Given that women were not considered to be full members of the pueblo (nor are they now), I translate the term here as sons. In letters to state officials, villagers most often identified themselves as hijos del pueblo, vecinos (residents) of particular pueblos, or Indians of particular pueblos (naturales). They also referred to themselves as citizens (ciudadanos). They did not use broader ethnic categories (such as Zapotec or Mixtec), nor did they refer to themselves as part of a larger group called Indians. Ethnicity played little or no role in inter-village conflicts, which were intra-ethnic as well as inter-ethnic.
are constructed and imposed from above, and (ultimately unsuccessfully) rejected and resisted from below, particularly by peasants, held to be an unusually obstinate social group incapable of or unwilling to participate in national politics or to identify with a national community. This top-down understanding of national identities is based on a set of conceptual dichotomies in which the traditional is opposed to the modern, local communities to central states, and authentic and objective local identities to inauthentic and constructed national ones. But the interactions of Oaxacan villagers and state officials in nineteenth-century Mexico simply are not explicable in these terms. Local identities and institutions survived precisely because Oaxacan villagers actively employed national identities, discourses, and institutions in order to defend and legitimate them. Most notably, they claimed the rights of citizenship in the Mexican nation for themselves as individuals and for their villages as social and political entities, above all the right to pursue land claims as litigants in the judicial system. In so doing, they were not defending local identities and rejecting a national one, but rather articulating an alternative political vision of the Mexican nation in which both individuals and communities shared rights and obligations with respect to the state. Local identities, then, were embedded in and shaped by an emerging national identity based on citizenship, even as they remained rooted in particular villages and peoples. The actions, initiatives, and identities of local groups, in turn, forced liberal state makers to refashion their vision of the nation, making room, however reluctantly, for collective as well as individual rights.
Similar negotiations of the nation continue in Mexico today. Contesting both the dominant revolutionary view of the nation (in which the state acts as guardian of the people and the national patrimony) and the newer neo-liberal one (like its nineteenth-century predecessor based on economic and political individualism), indigenous organizations call for respect for Mexico's many cultures and languages, the right to follow 'customs and traditions' in local governance, and state recognition of their historical claims to land and other natural resources. Within this indigenous movement, however, different groups imagine quite different nations, in terms of the relationships between local communities, ethnic groups, regions, and the state (Stephen 1997; 2001; Mattiace 1998). These different 'nation-views' (Duara 1996) reflect diverse histories of agrarian and political conflict at the local and regional levels, including the struggles over the liberal land reform in the nineteenth century.

In this article, I argue that we need to rethink the conventional polarity between local versus national identities, in order to better comprehend the politics of state and nation making: local identities (communal, ethnic, regional, religious) can only be understood in terms of how they relate and respond to national identities and state institutions; national identities and state institutions, in turn, are in part constructed by subordinate groups whose understanding of the nation is informed by their own local identities, cultures, and histories of political conflict. Furthermore, nation making needs to be understood as an ongoing arena of political contestation that continues long after a national identity has been embraced by the great majority of the population living within the territorial boundaries of particular states. Indians
have surely been transformed into Mexicans (Frye 1996), but what it means to be Indian and what it means to be Mexican are understood in quite diverse ways by the many different imagined communities that make up the Mexican nation today.

The first section of the article critiques the basic assumptions and conceptual bases of the conventional top-down approach to state and nation making, and points to a new and growing literature that presents a fundamental challenge to this approach. The next two sections turn to the empirical case of Oaxaca: section two briefly summarizes the liberal land reform, focusing on liberal efforts to eliminate the legal personality of the communities and to resolve boundary disputes outside of the judicial system; section three looks at how Oaxacan villagers responded to the reform, highlighting their employment and manipulation of national discourses and institutions in defending local claims against the state and other villages. In the conclusions, I link these nineteenth-century negotiations of the nation to late twentieth-century ones, in order to demonstrate the constructed nature of local identities, and the ways in which these imagined communities at the local level inform, and are informed by, ongoing political disputes over the meaning of the nation.
The local and the national in the making of nations

According to Hobsbawm (1990, p. 3), it is only nationalists who believe that nations are awakened rather than created. While this is something of an exaggeration, the primordialist understanding of nationalism (e.g. Connor 1994; A. Smith 1991) being

3 The terminological and conceptual chaos in the literature on nationalism is notorious, particularly when it comes to distinguishing nations from other sorts of human collectivities. I follow M. Weber (1946, pp. 172-179), Hobsbawm (1990), and Anderson (1991) in defining nations in relation to states: nations are groups of people who either seek to form a sovereign state or, more commonly, live within and identify themselves as citizens or subjects of an existing sovereign state. Apart from the desire to form a state, or identification with a state, the nature of the national community is an empirical rather than a definitional question. Nations have been, and are, defined by various criteria, ranging from ethno-linguistic homogeneity to common citizenship. With this conceptualization of nations, nations may be stateless (Kurds, Palestinians) and states may be essentially nationless (Nigeria). Unfortunately, since Mexico is a federal system, the words 'national' and 'state' must have two meanings here, referring to the national-level of government in Mexico City, as opposed to the state-level in Oaxaca, as well as to the national identity and community linked to the Mexican state, which had institutions at the national, state, and local level. When villagers defended their claims with reference to state (Oaxacan) and national laws, they were employing national identities and institutions in the sense of claiming rights as citizens within the Mexican nation, identified with the Mexican state.
quite alive and perhaps making something of a comeback, there is a fairly broad consensus in the literature that national identities are constructed, invented, forged, produced, and/or imagined by states or dominant elites acting through states. Nationalist movements have, of course, led to the creation of sovereign states, but most often it has been states that have created nations, particularly insofar as the identities and allegiances of non-elite populations are concerned. As Eley and Suny (1996a, p. 9) write, 'a fully developed national consciousness—one in which national identifications are strong enough to override regional, religious, and even class loyalties for most of the population most of the time, at least under certain circumstances—tends to require systematic propaganda or political education, normally but not invariably by a centralizing state and its agencies'.

Modernization theorists were among the first to argue that states preceded and created nations rather than the reverse. Looking at the newly independent states of Africa and Asia, it would have been difficult to argue otherwise. In this literature, local identities are clearly opposed to national ones: national identities are seen as products of the processes of socio-political modernization, including industrialization, urbanization, secularization, and the development of mass communications, national markets, universal public education, and state institutions. As modernization proceeds, traditional (or local) identities based on kinship, clan, the village, ethnicity, religion, caste, and so on are replaced by national identities based on citizenship in and loyalty to territorially-based states (e.g. Lerner 1958;
The more recent literature on state formation builds on the insights of modernization theory, although starting from quite different political and normative assumptions about the nature of states. Here the construction of national identities is seen as the cultural dimension of the long-term historical process of state making, through which states are able to secure control over the people living within their boundaries, in order to extract from them, without the regular application of coercion, taxes, military service, and compliance in a host of matters large and small. A central concern of this literature is hegemony, and the ways in which national identities obscure relations of domination, through the negation of difference and the claim of political equality (e.g. Tilly 1975; Corrigan and Sayer 1985; Cohen and Toland 1988; Hobsbawm 1990). Verdery’s (1990, p. 83) formulation with respect to Romania is, perhaps, unusually explicit in this regard but not atypical in its understanding of the nature of states and nations: 'talk about the Romanian Nation', she writes, 'served partly to consolidate state power by constructing a nation subject to state policies; it also represented the masses in a way that silenced them and opened them to surveillance, control, and reform by the state and intellectuals'.

In this literature, then, nation making is depicted as a 'top-down' and 'center-outward' phenomenon (Sahlins 1989), in which states and ruling elites impose national identities, cultures, and institutions on resistant populations, in the process

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4 See Eley and Suny’s (1996a) discussion of the innovative nature of modernization theory with respect to nations and national identities.
eliminating local ones, in order to secure widespread loyalty and obedience to the state. The state formation literature, in particular, emphasizes that successful nation making must involve mystification, false consciousness, and the naturalization of the artificial (Nugent 1997), because it is presumed to hurt the interests of local and subordinate groups, while fostering those of state builders and other dominant elites (Colley 1986). Subordinate groups may resist their own nationalization for a time, but eventually their local identities will be eliminated or at least greatly weakened in social and political salience. Peasants will, at some point, be turned into Frenchmen (E. Weber 1976), but they are almost always the last social group to be incorporated into the nation (Hobsbawm 1990). However much they figure into the discussions of intellectuals about the essence of the nation (Verdery 1990), they are acted upon, rather than actors, in the process of state and nation building (Berger 1972).

The persistence of local identities, when and where they do persist, is explained in equally top-down and state-centric terms; local groups, by and large, remain the objects rather than the agents of political transformation, except insofar as they resist national identities and cultures.5 One argument is that the preservation

5 Primordialists would argue that however much states may promote national identities, as they obviously do, such national identities must be based on primordial ones, above all ethnicity, in order to take root. Otherwise, new and relatively weak states will not succeed in transferring popular loyalties from the local and the primordial to the national (Geertz 1963; A. Smith 1986; Connor 1994). However, too many 'successful' national identities are not based on ethnic homogeneity (e.g. the United States), and while ethnic identities may be stronger than national ones,
of strong local identities is sometimes functional for states, if such identities facilitate control over potentially unruly social groups. Dennis (1987), for example, contends that the Mexican state actively fosters boundary disputes between Oaxacan villages, precisely in order to perpetuate village-based identities and hence to divide the peasantry and prevent collective action along class lines. Others consider local identities to be the products of successful, if partial, resistance to state and nation making (e.g. Lemarchand 1982; Laitin 1985; C. Smith 1990; Chatterjee 1993). Thus LeBaron (1993) argues that the modern Maya of Guatemala came to identify themselves as Maya, rather than as members of individual communities, through their common resistance to the Guatemalan state’s project of cultural assimilation (and later genocide); speaking over twenty mutually unintelligible languages, their cohesion as a self-defined ethnic group required them to adopt Spanish as a common language. Finally, instrumentalists, a sub-set of the constructionist camp, argue that if the construction of national identities serves political ends, so too does the mobilization and perpetuation of local ones (e.g. Cohen 1969; Gusfield 1971; Gourevitch 1979; Kasfir 1979; Bates 1982; Kramer 1993). Bates (1982), for example, contends that modernization intensifies the importance of ethnic identities, organizations, and conflicts because political elites are likely to mobilize their

they are no less constructed, in the sense of being products of the broader social, cultural, political, and institutional context in which they are embedded. For a few examples of a huge literature on the constructed nature of ethnicity, see Lonsdale 1977; Haidar 1988; Vásquez Léon 1992; Kramer 1993; Kratz 1993; LeBaron 1993; Hall 1996; Saynes-Vázquez 1996; Stephen 1996; Rubin 1997; and Gould 1998.
followers along ethnic lines in order to compete for the scarce but valued goods of modernity, including the resources of the state. Within the top-down approach then, subordinate groups, at best, resist the state and reject its nation; more commonly, they are depicted as the dupes of political elites who use them for their own political ends.

In keeping with a more general interest in history and politics from below, a number of recent works have challenged the top-down approach to nation making, highlighting the political agency of local subordinate groups and their active embrace of nationalism. Colley (1986), for example, rejects the conventional wisdom that the British state encouraged the development of a nationalist consciousness between 1750 and 1830, on behalf of the ruling elite and with the objective of maintaining the existing social order. A national identity, she argues, was embraced by plebian classes as a means of articulating and strengthening class-based economic and political challenges to that social order. With reference to Mexico, Mallon (1995) argues that peasants saw themselves as patriots, defending the national territory against the French invasion of the 1860s, and as citizens, members of a participatory, inclusive, and egalitarian state and nation-in-the-making. Like Colley, Mallon sees popular nationalism not as the product of false consciousness or of mystification, but rather as a potent challenge by subordinate groups to the prevailing social and political order. Her work, along with that of others on nineteenth-century Mexico (e.g. Thomson 1991a; 1991b; di Tella 1996; Guardino 1996; Salinas Sandoval 1996; Thomson and LaFrance 1998) does much to refute the dominant image of the peasantry as a recalcitrant and resistant group,
incapable of imagining or participating in the nation. But it leaves open a number of questions with respect to local and national identities. If Mexican peasants so thoroughly embraced national identities and institutions, why did they actively and adamantly defend local identities and institutions as often as they did?  

The answer lies, I would argue, in the complex and interactive relationship between local and national identities, a relationship that requires us to break down the supposed dichotomy between the two. Bringing peasants (or Indians or workers) 'back in' is insufficient, if we simply turn them into French, Mexican, and English men and women in our analyses of popular nationalism, losing sight of their local identities and the ways in which these identities informed and were informed by their understandings of the nation. In the Pyrenees, Sahlins (1989, p. 9) argues, rival villages invoked French and Spanish identities in the course of their boundary disputes with each other, long before those states made their presence felt in the region. National identities, then, emerged 'less as a result of state intentions than from local processes of adopting and appropriating the nation without abandoning local interests, a local sense of place, or a local identity'. In his study of the Peruvian Andes, Nugent (1997) makes a similar argument about the interaction  

6 Thomson (1998) raises this point in his review of the books by Mallon (1995), Guardino (1996), and Salinas Sandoval (1996). He argues that the answer lies in the variance between liberal discourse and practice. Inclusionary, participatory, and democratic in rhetoric, the liberal state in practice remained exclusionary and authoritarian, allowing very little autonomy and very few rights to the Indian pueblos.
between the local and the national, describing how indigenous peasants invoked
notions of popular sovereignty and the rights of citizenship in their very particular
struggles against local officials and landowning elites, retaining and modifying local
identities as active and quite unmystified participants in the making of state and
nation in Peru. Likewise, Vandergeest (1993, pp. 134-35) argues that Thai peasants
employed the 'language of national citizenship' in the course of local conflicts, and
in the process 'transformed the terms of the struggle between rulers and ruled, and
changed the form of the imagined national community'.

Oaxacan villagers, like their counterparts in Thailand, France, Spain, and
Peru, neither rejected a national identity nor abandoned local ones. Rather, they
selectively and creatively employed national discourse, laws, and institutions in the
course of local conflicts with each other, with large landowners, and with the state.
Their success in doing so perpetuated boundary disputes and the strong local
identities that were both a cause and an effect of those disputes. In the process,
however, the ways in which they articulated local identities were transformed, at
least for instrumental purposes, to include notions of citizenship and the rights of
citizenship with respect to a centralizing state.7 Thus local identities cannot be

7 The extent to which identities are 'affective' or 'instrumental' is quite difficult if
not impossible to determine, for contemporary as well as historical actors, and the
distinction may be a somewhat artificial one. The identities mobilized and
expressed through political action are, after all, most often products of both deeply-
rooted cultural meanings and particular political opportunity structures (Tarrow
1998). From the historical record, it is possible to say that Indian villagers routinely
understood apart from an emerging national identity in nineteenth-century Mexico, and that national identity, in turn, cannot be understood without reference to the local groups that contested and helped shape it. The next two sections provide empirical support for this argument, drawing on case material from the district of Etna, located in one of the central valleys near Oaxaca city, capital of the state.

**Making Mexicans out of Indians**

In Mexico, as elsewhere in Spanish America in the 1820s, independence brought an end to the 'dual-nation system of colonial rule' (Thurner 1997, p. 5), in which the *pueblos de indios* had a distinct legal status as compared to non-Indian towns and villages. During the colonial period, the Indian villages enjoyed the dubious blessing of the Crown’s protection. Most notably, they were granted a certain amount of inalienable communal land, exempted from most forms of taxation, and left to choose their own local authorities. Non-Indians, meanwhile, were prohibited from owning property or living in the Indian villages. Often violated in practice, these measures allowed the villages to retain some degree of social, political, and cultural autonomy, and gave them much-utilized access to colonial courts as a means of redressing grievances. This right to pursue grievances, as collective political entities, was one of the defining features of *pueblo*-state relations during the colonial period, and goes some way in accounting for the relative peace of the Mexican countryside during the 300 years of Spanish colonial rule, as compared to employed the language of citizenship and rights associated with the modern national state in pursuit of their claims against the state, individuals, and other communities.
the rebelliousness of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth (Tutino 1986). The legal personality of the Indian villages was abolished shortly before independence, a measure confirmed in the Mexican constitution of 1824. Indians were thus declared to be citizens rather than wards of the state, subject to the same rights and obligations as individuals of Spanish and mixed descent. In order to become true citizens, however, Indians would have to be civilized through a set of reforms aimed at the transformation of village life, including the introduction of the civil registry, state-sponsored secular education, and the privatization of communal land.

Communal property was of particular concern to liberals in Oaxaca, where the majority of the population lived in Indian villages. First, liberals argued that revenues generated by communal property were either appropriated by unscrupulous local officials or squandered on the numerous fiestas that were an integral part of popular religious practice. Second, communal ownership was seen as an obstacle to individual initiative and productivity. Individuals, private title in hand, would be motivated to work harder and produce more, knowing that such efforts would benefit themselves and their families rather than enriching local officials or being wasted on frivolous expenditures, most notably religious practice and litigation over boundary disputes. Finally, Oaxacan liberals were convinced

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8 See Benito Juárez, Memorias Administrativas, 1852.

9 As Governor Martín González put it in 1899, in explaining a recent expansion in agricultural production: 'once hardworking men, both national and foreign, could appropriate for themselves the proceeds of their own labor, without facing obstacles,
that the villages held title to enormous tracts of land that they either could not or
would not cultivate. According to José Esperón, leading liberal, Minister of
Government in the early 1860s, and himself a large landowner, 'this state will never
progress, nor will it prosper, if its vast territory remains as it is now—
uncultivated—and this terrible state of affairs will continue until the lands possessed
in common by the villages are turned into private property'. To that end, four
major privatization laws were issued in Oaxaca—in 1862, 1864, 1890 and 1894—in
addition to the national disentailment law of 1856, known as the Lerdo Law, and
any number of decrees and circulars at both the state and the national level.

Communal property, however, could not be privatized until its legal
ownership had been established, and in Oaxaca this was no easy matter, requiring as
it did the resolution of innumerable boundary disputes between villages and

they have done so in large numbers and with great determination'. Memorias

Administrativas, 1899.


11 The privatization of corporate property was mandated at the national level for the
first time through the Lerdo Law of 1856. After the promulgation of this law,
individual states issued their own privatizations laws which, while they were
intended to implement the Lerdo Law, often differed from it and from each other in
important particulars. Since implementation was carried out at the state level,
villagers and their legal representatives usually directed themselves to state-level
officials (most often the governor). See Purnell (1999) for a more detailed analysis
of the liberal land reform legislation.
between villages and individual landowners. Many such disputes were decades if not centuries old, involved three or more parties, and had left in their wake any number of contradictory court decisions and administrative orders as well as histories of violence. Liberals tended to see these disputes, like popular religious practice, as frivolous and wasteful obstacles to modernization, perpetuated by local authorities and their lawyers for their own personal gain. In 1878, Governor Francisco Meixueiro declared that such disputes must be cut short, for the good of the villages and society at large. 'Without bringing any real benefits to the opposing parties', he declared, 'they are, as a rule, a seedbed of discord and of rivalries between them, and a source of unending profit and exploitation for their patrons who are not always guided by the best of intentions. Without affecting the communal rights of the villages…a precise period of time should be set…for the definitive termination of this class of litigation'.

But what were the communal rights of the villages? On the one hand, liberals argued that only individuals had rights, the legal personality of the villages having been long, and repeatedly, abolished. On the other hand, the villages held communal title to their property and would continue to do so until it was privatized. If boundary disputes had to be resolved prior to privatization, how could the villages be denied legal standing in litigation generated by those disputes? On the one hand,

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12 Francisco Meixueiro, Memorias Administrativas, 1878. As an added benefit, the governor noted, the disappearance of this type of litigation would reduce the attractiveness of legal careers, and Mexico's educated young men would apply themselves to more useful professions.
liberals argued that only individuals had rights, the legal personality of the villages having been long, and repeatedly, abolished. On the other hand, the villages held communal title to their property and would continue to do so until it was privatized. If boundary disputes had to be resolved prior to privatization, how could the villages be denied legal standing in litigation generated by those disputes? The resolution of boundary disputes must have looked quite straightforward to the authors of the 1862 and 1890 laws: the district political chiefs were to convene meetings of all of the parties to any given dispute, collect evidence as to which party was in possession of the land on a stipulated day, draw up maps, mark boundaries, and distribute private titles, all within a matter of months. The district political chiefs, being closer to the ground, were far better informed. It was seldom clear who had possession of a particular piece of property, let alone on a particular day, and the setting of boundary markers was no stroll through the countryside, given that all of the parties to the dispute were quite likely to show up well-armed and ready to defend their points of view. A good many district political chiefs managed to ignore the meticulously detailed instructions on the resolution of boundary disputes repeatedly sent to them by officials in the Ministry of Government.13 When they did not, they found their authority under constant challenge by the villagers whose pueblos lost out under the political chiefs’ decisions. Employing liberal discourse with respect to citizenship, and displaying great facility with the complex provisions of the state

13 See circular 10, 27 January 1862; circular 24, 1 May 1878; circular 42, 10 July 1890; circular 36, 19 September 1891; and circular 9, 24 February 1893; Ministry of Government.
and national privatization laws and related decrees, circulars, and constitutional provisions, villagers and their legal representatives successfully claimed the rights of citizenship for themselves and for their villages as a whole. The success of the villages in obtaining legal injunctions against the actions of state officials (most notably the district political chiefs) and in pursuing land claims through litigation led to the perpetuation of boundary disputes rather than to their resolution. The perpetuation of boundary disputes, in turn, impeded both the privatization of communal land and the eradication of communal identities, two key components of the liberal project of state and nation building. The next section examines how this process unfolded in the course of attempts to implement the land reform in the district of Etla, where almost every Indian village was engaged in boundary disputes with at least one, but quite often more, of its neighbors.

**Citizens and sons of the pueblo:**

**the politics of the reform in the district of Etla**

In resisting the full implementation of the liberal land reform, Oaxacan villagers were not rejecting private property per se. Nor were they defending some egalitarian existence against the inequalities inherent in an economy based on private property. Many villages appeared quite willing to privatize land cultivated by individual families under longstanding and well-entrenched use rights. Such land was already viewed as a form of private property, albeit one subject to a degree of communal control in matters such as fences and fallow periods, and the registration of private titles with the state need not alter existing patterns of
Furthermore, politically powerful families were the ones most likely to have disproportionate access to this type of communal land, and it was in their interest to secure their claims to it through the acquisition of legal private titles. There was much greater resistance to the privatization of pasture and woodlands, since these were subject to common exploitation. Given that this type of property was exempt from privatization under Oaxacan law except during the period of 1890 to 1894, villagers had some legal ground to stand on here, in spite of the existence of numerous national laws and circulars mandating its privatization.

In Oaxaca, the key issue in the struggle between villages and liberal state officials was the resolution of boundary disputes, prior to the land reform’s implementation in any of the villages that were parties to the disputes. Villagers might be willing to privatize land cultivated by individual families under use rights, and they were almost certainly indifferent to decisions made in other villages except

14 The Etla political chief informed the Ministry of Government that 26 villages in his district had privatized some such land by the end of 1856 in accordance with the Lerdo Law (4 December 1856, RA 9/26/1856).

15 These disputes involved quite variable amounts of land, often but not always on the peripheries of the villages. The parties to the dispute would usually try to cultivate or otherwise exploit the land in question, since the current 'occupants' of the land were afforded certain protection from state officials as long as the matter was subject to ongoing litigation. This frequently led to violence between members of different villages, as each tried to stake their claim by building houses, planting fields, pasturing animals, and cutting wood, moving closer and closer to the disputed boundary area.
insofar as those decisions affected them. But they wanted to ensure that all of the communal land that they claimed, subject to privatization or not, was recognized as belonging to them, before the reform was implemented in either their own or in neighboring villages. These inter-village disputes were further complicated by the involvement of tenants, often large landowners, who might claim their legal right to purchase communal land rented from one village and claimed by others. In the next two sub-sections, I employ two such sets of disputes to demonstrate the complex interaction of local and national identities in the course of struggles of the liberal land reform, paying particularly close attention to the ways in which villagers employed the language of citizenship, applying it to themselves as individuals and to their pueblos as particular villages/peoples with membership in the Mexican nation and hence with rights and obligations vis-à-vis the Mexican state.

San Pablo Huitzo, San Juan del Estado, and José Inés Díaz Ordaz

San Pablo Huitzo and San Juan del Estado, neighboring villages in the district of Etla, had disputed the ownership of a parcel of land since at least 1839. The conflict between the two villages intensified in 1857, when José María Díaz Ordaz, at that point governor of Oaxaca, claimed the right to purchase the disputed land, which he had for some time leased from San Juan.16 San Juan del Estado opposed the sale,

16 In Oaxaca, a distinction was made between a reparto (distribution), in which land was divided up and distributed to village residents without charge, and an adjudicación, which refers to a sale made to an individual (resident or non-resident) who claimed communal land under one of the many relevant provisions in state and national legislation. Under Oaxacan law, for example, individuals could claim the
claiming the right to privatize and distribute the land among village residents, and attempted to obtain an injunction to overturn it. But it was unsuccessful in doing so, the Lerdo Law and subsequent circulars being relatively clear on the rights of tenants to purchase leased communal land. In 1863, the village signed an agreement with the Díaz Ordaz family, at that point represented by José Inés Díaz Ordaz, whose father, José María, had been killed in the civil war unleashed by the liberal reforms. In this agreement, the residents of San Juan promised to respect the property rights of the Díaz Ordaz family, and the family agreed to make regular interest payments on the capital owed to the village as the result of the sale.17 As was often the case, the agreement was not respected by either party, the residents of San Juan apparently viewing it as more of a holding action than a binding obligation.

Twelve villagers from San Pablo Huitzo also attempted to have the sale annulled, on the grounds that they had purchased the land as individual residents of that village with the approval of both local authorities and the district political chief, shortly after the promulgation of the Lerdo Law and well before San Juan del Estado’s sale of the same land to José María Díaz Ordaz. It is not clear whether the twelve men were acting on behalf of San Pablo Huitzo as a whole, or truly were claiming the land for themselves as individuals. One of them, José Antonio Sosa, right to buy communal land if it had not been privatized within a certain period of time.

was San Pablo’s *síndico*, the local official in charge of communal lands, and, in that capacity, he would later claim that the land in question belonged to the village as communal property. Claiming rights as individuals in 1863, however, offered Sosa and the others a certain strategic advantage, since the prevailing 1862 law gave the villages only limited rights to pursue litigation and legal injunctions.\(^\text{18}\) It also allowed them to employ liberal discourse with respect to the expected benefits of the reform: they were the upright and hardworking citizens the liberals had hoped to create in the villages. Of course the government would recognize their claim rather than that of José Inés Díaz Ordaz, they wrote, because the 'philanthropic, political, and social objective of the [1856 Lerdo Law] was to mobilize communal property and divide it among the residents of the villages, not to assign it to a single individual'. The state’s recognition of the rights of village residents would 'convert workers into small proprietors' and 'stimulate the rapid development and prosperity of the villages', 'creating an interest in liberty among all classes…and fostering morality and a spirit of hard work and economy'.\(^\text{19}\)

\(^\text{18}\) As individuals, under the 1862 law, they would have the legal standing to pursue litigation with José Inés Díaz Ordaz or the *pueblo* of San Juan del Estado, should San Juan’s ownership be recognized and the sale to Díaz Ordaz overturned. The village of San Pablo Huitzo could not, at this point, initiate a lawsuit against San Juan.

\(^\text{19}\) Juan Antonio Sosa and José Martín García, on behalf of themselves and ten others, San Pablo Huitzo to Governor, 19 January 1863, RA 10/33/1863.
Charging that José María Díaz Ordaz had abused his power as governor in purchasing the disputed land from San Juan del Estado, Sosa and the others also argued that they had a 'double right' to the land under the 1862 law: as small proprietors who purchased the land from the village of San Pablo Huitzo in accordance with the Lerdo Law, and as the land’s current occupants, whose rights were to be protected by the district political chief until such time as the matter was resolved by the courts, the disputes involving individuals (themselves) and a village (San Juan del Estado), rather than two villages (San Pablo Huitzo and San Juan). Finally, they defended their claim to the land with reference to their identities as sons of the pueblo, whose families had farmed it since time immemorial, and as tax-paying citizens of the Mexican nation: 'on these lands, we, like all of our forebears, have dedicated our care, our toil, our industry and our resources' in order to 'provide a subsistence for our families and the income necessary to support the obligations that weigh upon us as citizens in this society to maintain the government[.][20]

San Juan del Estado, through its legal representative, disputed both the facts and the legal arguments advanced by Sosa and his associates. 'The pueblo of San Juan', the lawyer wrote, 'has possessed this property and a great many others since an era so ancient as to be lost in the obscurity of time'. As evidence, he cited San Juan del Estado’s possession of a colonial title issued by the Spanish Crown, as well as two court decisions confirming San Juan’s possession of the disputed land, one issued in 1842 and the other in 1856. San Pablo Huitzo had appealed the 1856 decision, but the higher court had neither rejected nor confirmed the lower court’s

20 Ibid.
decision. Finally, the lawyer directed the Ministry of Government’s attention to a particular clause in the sales agreement between San Pablo Huitzo and Sosa and his associates, which stipulated that the sale would go into effect only if San Pablo Huitzo was successful in its appeal. Since this was not the case, the 1856 court decision stood, and the 1862 law directed the district political chief to respect existing court decisions in resolving boundary disputes between villages.21

The Ministry of Government informed the Etla political chief that neither village had legal standing in the matter, and that the dispute involved individuals—the Díaz Ordaz family on the one hand and Sosa and his associates on the other. San Juan’s sale to José María Díaz Ordaz was neither annulled nor confirmed, and both parties were instructed to pursue their claims, as individuals, through the courts.22 San Pablo Huitzo (and probably San Juan del Estado) continued to occupy the land, however, and, in 1872, José Inés Díaz Ordaz requested and received an order from the Etla political chief prohibiting the residents of San Pablo from cultivating or otherwise exploiting his property. The municipal authorities of San Pablo Huitzo promptly invoked the village’s right to litigate boundary disputes through the courts.23 The municipal president denounced the political chief’s order

21 José Inés Sandoval on behalf of San Juan del Estado to Ministry of Government, 24 February 1863, RA 10/33/1863.

22 Memorandum of the Ministry of Government, 26 February 1863, RA 10/33/1863.

23 Given that the 1864 state law was now in force, the villages had recourse to the courts in disputes with individuals and other villages.
as an 'illegal dispossession' on the grounds that it deprived the 'sons of the pueblo' of their legal and legitimate rights. Díaz Ordaz, he continued, was trying to secure ownership through an administrative order, when the prevailing law required that all boundary disputes be settled by the courts. 'I respect and esteem, as I must, the orders of this office', he wrote, 'but under no circumstances can my pueblo agree to giving up its rights'.

Juan Antonio Sosa, now writing as the municipal síndico and no longer claiming that he or anyone purchased the land as individuals, likewise argued that the political chief’s order was an arbitrary and illegal abuse of authority: 'with a stroke of his pen he proposes to deprive San Pablo of the use of its lands, when there exists a judicial authority, the only authority that can and should claim competence with respect to this class of demands'.

It is not clear how or if San Pablo Huitzo’s dispute with the Díaz Ordaz family was legally resolved. What is clear is that the family was unable to make much use of the property in question. In an 1884 letter directed to the governor, José Inés Díaz Ordaz complained that residents of both San Pablo Huitzo and San Juan del Estado stole crops and livestock from his fields and wood from his forests, planted ever larger extensions of his land, and generally acted 'as if they, in effect, were the owners of the property'. The local authorities of San Juan del Estado, at

24 Municipal president of San Pablo Huitzo to Etlá political chief, 30 June 1872, CL (Conflictos por Límites de Tierras) 58/1/1872.

25 Juan Antonio Sosa, síndico of San Pablo Huitzo to Governor, 8 July 1872, CL 58/1/1872.

26 José Inés Díaz Ordaz to Governor, 9 July 1884, CL 58/1/1872.
some point, ceased to recognize the sale of communal property to Díaz Ordaz in reports submitted to the district political chief. In 1908, for example, they claimed that no communal land whatsoever had been sold to any individual claimants. The underlying dispute between San Pablo Huitzo and San Juan del Estado remained equally unresolved.

Santiago Suchiquiltongo and neighboring villages

Santiago Suchiquiltongo was engaged in boundary disputes with virtually all of its neighbors, including San Pablo Huitzo and San Juan del Estado. As was the case with those two villages, the municipal authorities of Suchiquiltongo employed a shifting array of legal and political strategies in its claims against its neighbors, invoking the collective and individuals rights of the village and its residents. In 1876, for example, the municipal authorities of San Pablo Huitzo convinced the Etla political chief to issue an order prohibiting the residents of Suchiquiltongo from invading land claimed by both villages and at that point occupied by San Pablo. A year later, four men from Suchiquiltongo were arrested for violating that order. In response, the municipal authorities of Suchiquiltongo argued that the political chief’s order was illegal, given that the 1864 law, then prevailing, had transferred jurisdiction over boundary disputes between villages from the district political chiefs to the courts. 'I am afraid to lay this matter before your honorable office', the municipal agent of Suchiquiltongo politely informed the Etla political chief, 'because we believe that any decision made by you could be attacked for lack of jurisdiction'. Disputes between villages were to be resolved by the courts: 'only this ____________________

27 Reports on the sale of communal land in the district of Etla, 1908, RA 10/4/1908.
authority can render and execute decisions, and the division between the legislative, executive, and judicial powers is a fundamental principle of our constitutional rights; it is quite evident that in the case of litigation and counter-litigation [between pueblos], the judicial authority is the only competent one (see articles 7, 26, and 94 of the Constitution of the State of Oaxaca'). The municipal agent concluded by requesting that the political chief send all relevant documents to the district court, so that he could 'make use of the rights that belong to my pueblo'.

Having acquired a powerful political patron capable of influencing the decisions of the district political chief, Suchiquiltongo adopted a different strategy in its disputes with San Pablo Huitzo and other villages in the 1890s. In 1893, the municipal authorities of Suchiquiltongo requested that the political chief carry out the privatization of its communal lands, in accordance with the provisions of the state law of 1890. As the first step in the process, the political chief was to survey the lands claimed by the village and establish provisional boundary lines with its neighbors. Once this was done, all of the villages involved had twenty days to present testimony and documents challenging the political chief’s decision. After that official examined the evidence, he was to render a definitive decision as to boundaries and proceed with the privatization. The Etla political chief duly surveyed the land claimed by Suchiquiltongo in January 1893, and established the provisional boundary lines in mid-May of the same year. But he had not issued a

28 Municipal agent of Suchiquiltongo to Etla political chief, 9 June 1877, CL 58/2/1877.
definitive decision by the time the state law of 1894 was issued, abrogating that of 1890 and returning inter-village boundary disputes to the jurisdiction of the courts.

Suchiquiltongo’s neighbors protested the political chief’s provisional decision, and continued to exploit, or attempted to exploit, the communal land they claimed as their own. In 1898, the municipal authorities of Suchiquiltongo wrote to the governor, asking him to order all of the neighboring villages to respect the boundaries established by the political chief in 1893. While that office no longer had jurisdiction over boundary disputes between villages, the political chief’s decision had been made in accordance with what was at the time the prevailing law, and should be enforced until such time as the various disputes were resolved by the courts. Should the governor decline to issue such an order, the residents of Suchiquiltongo might be forced to resort to violence, since they could neither abandon their land as demanded by their neighbors nor afford to initiate any new litigation in the courts.29

The rationale for Suchiquiltongo’s insistence on the legal authority of the district political chief is clear in the letters written by its neighbors, in response to queries from the Etla political chief (now a different individual) on behalf of the Ministry of Government. Far from indifferent to state and national politics, villages actively sought out powerful political patrons to advocate on their behalf, in exchange for political (and sometimes military) support. Suchiquiltongo had found such a patron in the person in Guillermo Meixueiro, a regional strongman who

29 Municipal authorities of Suchiquiltongo to Governor, 10 February 1898, CL 59/16/1899-1900.
wielded a great deal of political power in the central valleys and highlands to the north both before and after the Mexican revolution (Garner 1988). According to Suchiquiltongo’s neighbors, Meixueiro had exerted his influence over the Etxla political chief, who accordingly drew the provisional boundary lines in Suchiquiltongo’s favor. The municipal agent of the village of Tlaltinango provided the most compelling account of the events of 1893: the Etxla political chief rendered his decision as to boundary lines on 15 May, after which followed the twenty day 'period of proof' in which that decision could be contested. But the political chief declared the proceedings suspended on 31 May, under the direction of Francisco Cortés, a lawyer and ally of Meixueiro, on the grounds that it would be impossible to resolve all of the competing claims within a twenty day period. The municipal agent pointed out that the 1890 law required the villages to present evidence in support of their claims within twenty days, not that the disputes be resolved in the same time period. He then went on to write of the political chief and Cortés:

> What really happened was that upon being presented with so much testimony and so many documents by the aggrieved villages, they were stupefied, especially Señor Cortés who perhaps hoped that the pueblos would abdicate their rights like humble lambs, yielding to the influence of the main lawyer of Suchiquiltongo, Guillermo Meixueiro…but seeing their hopes dashed they did not have any other recourse than to suspend the period of proof, and that is the state the matter is in today.  

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30 Municipal agent of Santo Domingo Tlaltinango to Etxla political chief, 14 June 1898, CL 59/16/1899-1900.
Quite likely influenced by the power of Suchiquiltongo’s patron as well, the Ministry of Government issued the order requested by the village, instructing all of its neighbors to respect the boundaries established by the Etla political chief in 1893. As was so often the case, the order was either unenforced or unenforceable. Boundary disputes between the villages continued unabated in spite of this and other such orders, state-brokered agreements between villages, and litigation. As the municipal president of Suchiquiltongo put it in a 1908 letter to the governor, a succession of state officials had been unable to resolve the conflicts between villages 'because its is a very well established fact that these types of disputes are prolonged indefinitely'. As was the case with San Pablo Huitzo and San Juan del Estado, Suchiquiltongo’s boundary disputes with its neighbors outlasted the state, continuing well beyond the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

**Conclusions**

Much of the literature on nations and nationalism implicitly or explicitly considers local identities, especially communal and ethnic ones, to be more authentic and objective than national ones. But as Balibar (1996) and Duara (1996) remind us, this contrast between real communities and imagined ones is inaccurate and

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31 Municipal president of Suchiquiltongo to Governor, 8 December 1905, CL 59/16/1899-1900.
Like the Mexican nation, the sons of the pueblo constitute an imagined community, even as they do meet face to face, and even as their community does have a finite material existence in the form of houses, garden plots, plazas, churches, fields, forests, and boundary markers. If 'the essence of the nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things' (Renan 1996: 45), the same holds true for identities based on locale: to assert rights and obligations as the sons of the pueblo is to claim a common ancestry, history, solidarity, and set of interests, while obscuring, at least in the context of specific conflicts, relations of domination and difference based on class, kinship, ritual status, and gender. Communal identities, like national ones, are political and historical constructs: they are built, maintained, and altered over time by the people who claim them and in response to changes in the broader social and political context in which they are embedded, above all the actions and institutions of the state. Thus the usual polarity between local and national identities makes little sense: neither local nor national identities can be understood except in terms of the complex and interactive relationship between them. Furthermore, political conflicts over the meaning of the nation, and its relationship to non-national but equally imagined communities, continue well after national identities have been widely embraced among the populations of particular states (e.g. Dominguez 1990; 32 Since Anderson (1991) is most closely associated with the term 'imagined community' it is important to point out he does not argue that nations are distinct because they are imagined, but rather in the way that they are imagined.

[T]he way in which the nation is imagined, viewed, and voiced by different self conscious groups can indeed be very different. Indeed we may speak of different "nation-views", as we do "world-views", which are not overridden by the nation, but actually define or constitute it. In place of the harmonized, monologic voice of the Nation, we find a polyphony of voices, overlapping and criss-crossing; contradictory and ambiguous; opposing, affirming, and negotiating their views of the nation.

Claiming the rights of citizenship for themselves and for their villages as a whole, nineteenth-century Oaxacan villagers were not defending the local and rejecting the national, but rather advancing an alternative understanding of the relationship between individuals, different types of communities, the nation, and the state. Whereas liberal elites attempted to construct a nation based on economic individualism and individual citizenship, the nation envisioned by Oaxacan villagers included both individual citizens and the pueblos as distinct and rights-bearing peoples/villages. Similar negotiations of the nation—both literal and figurative—continue in Mexico today, and the dynamics of these negotiations are shaped by previous ones, including—and in some regions, especially—those that occurred in the context of conflicts over the liberal land reform. In February 1996, representatives of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation and the Mexican state reached a provisional agreement that stipulated that the state would recognize political entities called pueblos de indios, afford them formal political representation
as such, and allow for the exercise of indigenous 'customs and traditions' at the level of local government. As Stephen (1997) argues, the nation envisioned in this agreement is multi-dimensional, including mono-ethnic (Tzotzil, Tzeltal, etc.), multi-ethnic ('indigenous'), and non-ethnic (citizenship) identities. President Ernesto Zedillo rejected the agreement, on the grounds that it violated the basic premise of another understanding of the Mexican nation, that based on the legal equality of all citizens, and threatened to undermine the sovereignty of the Mexican state.33

More generally, Mexican indigenous organizations have, in recent years, focused on the demand for 'autonomy', a term taken to mean state recognition of and respect for indigenous cultures, languages, forms of political organization, customary law, local government, and historically-rooted claims to land and natural resources. At the heart of the demand for autonomy is a vision of the nation which includes citizens with individual rights and different types of communities with collective rights (Mattiace 1998). But indigenous organizations are split when it comes to the territorial and political level at which autonomy would operate, reflecting different 'nation-views' grounded in different historical experiences of agrarian and political conflict. One 'autonomy project' calls for the creation of

33 Shortly after assuming office in December 2000, President Vicente Fox submitted a bill before the Mexican Senate that proposed a set of constitutional amendments providing for what appears to be a significant degree of indigenous political autonomy in matters of local governance and the exploitation of natural resources.
regional governments with control over development projects and public revenues; such regions would include different indigenous peoples as well as mestizos (people of indigenous and European descent) and would allow for municipal and communal autonomy in cultural, economic, and political matters. A competing project advocates communal or village-level autonomy, focusing on the cultures and institutions of individual pueblos and the relationships between those pueblos and the Mexican state.

The regional version of the autonomy project is strongest in the state of Chiapas, where a long history of resistance by multi-ethnic subordinate groups to elite political and economic domination makes it possible to imagine multi-ethnic regions as an integral part of the Mexican nation-state. Advocates of the communal view, in contrast, are strongest in Oaxaca, where an equally long history of inter-village conflict, both inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic in nature, has made it much more difficult to forge ethnic and multi-ethnic alliances or identities (Stephen 1997; Mattiace 1998). The sons of the pueblo in Oaxaca remain, as they were in the nineteenth century, very particular peoples from very particular places, even as they also imagine themselves to be members, individually and collectively, of the Mexican nation.

To paraphrase (quite loosely) Marx on history, we may construct our own identities, but we do not construct them just as we please. The national imaginations of Oaxacan villagers are not unbounded, but rather constrained by their local histories of inter-ethnic, intra-ethnic, and intra-class conflict, as well as by the discourses, laws, and institutions of the Mexican state. These discourses,
laws, and institutions may be stretched a great deal at the margins, and they certainly may be employed for ends not envisioned by state makers, but they do tend to set the acceptable parameters of political discourse and practice. The pueblos de indios that lie at the heart of the Oaxacan autonomy project are, after all, in large part products of the colonial state; the collective rights claimed by those pueblos in the second half of the nineteenth century were defined in terms of citizenship within the liberal nation-state. But states are also constrained in the nations that they attempt to construct by the actions and reactions of subordinate groups, a lesson learned by liberal, revolutionary, and neo-liberal nation-state makers in nineteenth and twentieth-century Mexico in the course of their efforts to turn the sons of the pueblo into individual and individualistic citizens of the Mexican nation.
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