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Comments: How to Build a Perspective on the Recent Past

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The contemporary historiography on Mexico has developed in the last decade beyond journalism, political fiction and testimonio. Fourteen years ago Stephen Niblo noted the ‘barren historiographical landscape’ on Mexico after 1940. Today that is clearly not the case. New studies are emerging that make systematic use of archives, combine local, national and international frameworks and drastically revise the interpretations inherited from social sciences on the political changes that led to the defeat of the PRI in the elections of 2000. A large part of the impulse for this innovation comes from the determination, among historians and other users of those archives, to find the truth about the abuses of an authoritarian regime that tried to resist opposition with extralegal means. Perhaps because of that imperative, and the inevitable proximity of events and people from that recent past, the historiographical landscape still lacks a paradigmatic interpretive framework—which might not be such a bad thing, after all. Before turning to the documents and interpretations presented in this issue, these comments will point to some historiographical themes and works relevant for the interpretations they propose but also as examples of the difficulties involved in writing the history of the pasado inmediato and uncovering some painful aspects of that past. As Alfonso Reyes wrote, a few years after the end of the Revolution, ‘Recent history is always the least appreciated’. In part, he thought, because it was difficult, if not impossible, to establish a single acceptable perspective: ‘A certain amount of ingratitude always accompanies progress’. This was inevitable for him given the cost of the revolution for his family and the success it brought him.

Several schools of interpretation about the regime that emerged out of the 1910 Revolution provide the basic framework to understand the changes since 1940. The traditional approach centres on the institutional and social structure consolidated under President Lázaro Cárdenas from the blueprint of the 1917 Constitution. The last years of that system are explained in terms of the arch from authoritarian corporatism to the partial transition to democracy under a weakened presidentialist regime. These accounts, many of them written by political scientists, are based on newspapers, official publications and interviews with important actors. Although many of them were conceived and published before 2000, they still provide a good framework to enclose the sixty years after 1940 in which the familia revolucionaria, the close-knit political elite, took a turn to the right but maintained the structures of political control that secured stability and capitalist development. A variation of this interpretation would place the arrival of neoliberalism, particularly with the government of Miguel de la Madrid (1982–1988) as the true end of the system, rather than the electoral victories of the PAN.

Studies of state formation published after the 1990s focused on the process of state building, and presented alternatives in terms of interpretation and method up to the
Cardenas years, with greater interest in the combination of cultural and political phenomena. Yet their impact on the post 1940 era has been stronger in building a transnational perspective that uses the Cold War as the canvas where Mexican politics and culture can be meaningfully situated. These studies are sensitive to Mexican particularities but still risk the subordination of local and national processes to the polarity of global powers, particularly as ‘globalisation’ becomes a dominant rhetoric in US views of the rest of the world. During the Cold War, however, the PRI regime was able to combine nationalist discourse with a close partnership with the United States. In the terrain of politics, the meaning of communism, socialism and ‘the left’ in Mexico referred to a post-revolutionary past in which religious, labour and agrarian struggles and corporative organisations allowed for the survival of leftist rhetoric and forms of activism that seemed to contradict Mexico’s proper place in the battle between the two superpowers. The process of cultural Americanisation and diplomatic complicity with anticommunism, in other words, would be insufficient to describe domestic political changes since World War II.

The views centred on global politics and corporative structures have the advantage of seeming to provide a totalising explanation, a framework where everything will fit. Yet they have the common problem of stressing the national scale of analysis. In politics, this would mean that the federal government exercised power equally across the country, when recent work has shown that a lot went on at the subnational level that neither the Mexican president nor the United States could control. This has been clear when examining electoral struggles but also class ideologies, caciquismo, ethnicity and even the meanings of the nation itself. Just as with the nineteenth century, the importance of regional or local variation in constituting the national has been a central reference for revisionist and post-revisionist histories of the revolutionary period—including a healthy dose of scepticism about the capacity of the post-revolutionary state to impose its political, cultural and even economic project. A younger cohort of historians has delved into local archives and newspapers to continue undermining the grand narrative of the PRI as a dictadura perfecta.

When we focus on the last decades of the century and go beyond works published in English, the pasado inmediato centres on the meaning of the student movement of 1968. In the years after 2 October, and particularly among a generation of academics and writers who were close observers or participants in the movement, and who went on to have considerable influence on the political discourse and historical narrative of the left, 1968 meant the beginning of the end of the post-revolutionary regime, the moment when the true authoritarian nature of the presidency and the PRI was unveiled and radicalised. It could be an effect of perspective, as Reyes suggested when writing about 1910 from 1939, but the fact is that, seen from the 1990s and 2000s, el sesenta y ocho undermined the myth of national progress that had been part of the post-revolutionary legitimacy. Development and democracy did not seem to march together toward a future in which Mexico would be more like the developed countries. The violence unleashed on the student movement was a revelation for a generation that came of age politically in the midst of the ‘economic miracle’ that had characterised economic growth for several decades. They were part of an ascending but anxious middle class who felt that they could not find the appropriate channels to make their voices heard and thus to influence the political system. Public memory of the movement framed it in terms of erosion of the belief that first-world status was within reach. The disappointment (we had our Olympic Games, they thought, but we did not become Japan, host of the games in 1964, or Germany, host in 1972) foreshadowed a similar general bitterness after the abrupt fall of the Salinista dream in 1994.
This is, at least, the story as preserved in public memory. But, according to that
generation, 1968 also interrupted political silence. As unexpected as the repression were
the size and creative invasion of public spaces by the student movement. As the years went
by and the commemorations of 2 October changed tone, it became clear that 1968 was not
only an end marked by the tragedy of Tlatelolco but also a midpoint, the most visible part
of a process of cultural and political transformation in the public sphere. With time, 2
October became an official commemoration, participants lost the monopoly over the
narrative of the movement, and new generations of scholars approached the subject as part
of their attempt to understand democratisation rather than dictatorship. The movement and
the violence used against it became the best example, rather than the culmination or the
only case, of the popular movements of resistance that fought the PRI regime all along,
going as far back as the railroad workers and the Navistas in San Luis Potosí in the late
1950s or even the Henriquistas in the 1940s.8 The Zapatistas in Chiapas evoked the spirit
of 68 as a paradigm of imaginative social revolt met with repression. It was, at the time, an
appropriate historical reference, as 1994 was also the end of the Salinista dream of first-
world development.9

The events of 1968 acquired great importance through a causal argument in which
memory and history came in contact. The bullets and tanks of Tlatelolco, it is often argued,
pushed that generation, or at least the most courageous among them, to the choice of the
armed struggle against the regime. Here again we are not really talking about a beginning
but a continuation, as we know that guerrilla activity was part of Mexican politics well
before 1968. In the sierras of Guerrero, Morelos, and the streets of Guadalajara, guerrilla
organisations were prompted by local reasons as much as by the frustration of Mexico City
students—whose impact, at least in the latter case, was largely neutralised by local pro-
government student organisations.10

For the writing of recent history, I would argue, 1968 is more important from a
methodological point of view than as a chronological marker. As its telling shifted from
personal and collective memories to historical narratives, the episode demonstrated that
the state-centred model and the emphasis on corporative organisations inherited from the
Cardenista years limited the sources and the themes that could be examined in a historical
perspective—that is, with a clear awareness of actors, change and continuity, and of the
multiple meanings of the past, even if some ‘ingratitude’ is involved. Thinking about 1968
from the perspective of its potential effects on state reform seemed to limit the study of
social movements and emerging political actors: the leaders and their relation with the
state (as prisoners, informants, employees, critics) would seem to matter more than
collective action. But thinking about it from a more complex vantage point required new
tools: the student movement, because of its dispersion and spontaneity, and the guerrilla
militancy, because of its secrecy and defeat, made it imperative to systematically use oral
sources.11 The result was interest in new sources and perspectives that were not in the
official record or the press, or even in the established accounts of the 1968 generation that
were becoming official history. As the discourse of the state toward the events of
Tlatelolco evolved, particularly since 1997, when the left was in government in Mexico
City and congress had an opposition majority, the confluence of history and memory was
problematised by new projects of critical commemoration. The best example is the project
sponsored by the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in a new museum
at the site of Tlatelolco. The challenge there was to respond to parallel demands to
preserve the experience of non-state actors and to understand the historical meaning of
events. The curatorial response was to combine personal interviews with presentation of
the broader historical framework.12
The emergence of 1968 as a historical theme had two other consequences. One, that resonated with other social science research, turned the attention of historians to perspectives that had been absent from the dominant narrative, mostly regarding the importance of gender to understand politics and, more generally, about the relation between individual stories and the grand history in which each rebel student or guerrillero wanted to enter gloriously. Even though 1968 changed political subjectivities—youth, imagination, humour, and courage acquired relevance—here again 1968 was less of a break from and more a continuity of old views about gender and even class that the Mexican left was particularly reluctant to jettison along with other customs of authoritarianism. Struggles within the struggle, some simmering for years, and complex histories of militancy became visible this way, reinforcing the sense that 1968 was not a parteaguas but one among several juxtaposed processes and movements of change. As Ariel Rodríguez Kuri noted, writing about the beginnings of the movement, ‘Teleologies are preventing us from recovering the freedom of the historical actors’.13 Students, women, the victims of repression, the disappeared and their relatives, even the internal dissidents of the left became historically meaningful subjects because they revealed important questions beyond the structure of political control—not only because they helped revise the history of the left, although that was important too.14

The second consequence of 1968 was less the product of reinterpretations and new interests and more of the need to adapt to the lack of sources about the recent past. The accounts produced by the participants in the movement raised difficult problems in this regard: how to contradict someone who not only ‘was there’ but also shaped the movement itself? How to use multiple sources in a critical way when many of these earlier interpretations challenged the validity of each other? Gustavo Guevara Niebla, for example, dismissed the possibility of using official documents, given the failures of investigations and the mendacity of police sources.15 As the PRI’s ownership of the presidency was interrupted in 2000, human rights groups demanded accountability, truth and justice about the acts of 2 October and the dirty war of the 1970s. They extracted from the new regime the double promise of opening up the archives and investigating the responsibilities among those who survived President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964–1970). Thus, as Padilla notes in this issue, intelligence documents for the last decades of the twentieth century became available before other, less overtly political state archives, like those of the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP). Documents emerged, including testimonies of army officers, that demonstrated not only that there were many victims at Tlatelolco, as the government and the PRI had tried to deny out of discipline rather than conviction, and that the order to kill came from the top and involved the participation of the armed forces.16 But the promises made by President Vicente Fox in 2000 turned into disappointments. The investigation, in charge of a special prosecutor, rather than a public truth commission, fizzled out without achieving any punishment—probably, some argue, because of self-defeating mistakes. Access to documents used during this investigation was only partial, some of them documenting abuses of the Army in different areas of the country.17 Yet exposés did not fundamentally revise the authoritarian corporatism-to-democracy framework, even as they put names, dates and other hard facts to the history of intolerance and brutality condensed in the events of Tlatelolco.

In this regard the books by Sergio Aguayo are worth a closer look, not only because they are important empirical and conceptual contributions to the dark side of the pasado inmediato, but also because they exemplify the difficulty of establishing a perspective that Reyes had warned about. In his book about 2 October (which Guevara Niebla condemned in bitter terms), Aguayo used new sources, mainly coming from Gobernación archives but
also interviews with anonymous participants. His careful reconstruction does not dispel the uncertainty about who was ultimately responsible and who pulled the trigger but demonstrates how confusion was in itself an instrument of those who conceived the suppression of the student movement. The massacre of Tlatelolco becomes a demonstration of the tight yet largely uncoordinated connection between intelligence and repression within the Mexican government. In a revealing moment, soldiers and paramilitary agents are shooting at each other. All believed they were responding to a serious threat of rebellion—although Aguayo shows that the protest was high in verbal violence against the president and the regime but in practice little more than the forceful resistance of some schools and neighbourhoods against the Federal District’s police.  

La charola is a history of the services of intelligence, mainly the Dirección Federal de Seguridad (DFS). It portrays the legal and illegal methods of political policing under the PRI, the reality of torture, murder and disappearances, and the efforts of modernisation in the intelligence community that followed the mid-80s collapse of the DFS. The agency was victim of its own alleged success dismantling guerrilla groups; for its members and leaders, 1968 was an important year as it seemed to reveal the size of the threat. This ‘success’ paired with the legal limbo in which the DFS was created in 1946 to facilitate the impunity and corruption of its agents. The book is also a history of Guadalajara as a battlefield between young men and women who in the 70s decided to use violence against the regime, the foundation of the Liga 23 de Septiembre, and the spiral of violence that deeply hurt not only the left in the city but also governance itself, opening the field for the entrance of powerful drug traffickers who made Guadalajara their capital in the 1990s. 

Aguayo was given access to the agency’s archives because he managed to convince intelligence officials and politicians that a good history of the DFS was necessary to consolidate the ongoing modernisation of the intelligence system. The abuses, he suggests, may have occurred without the knowledge or under the neglect of political authorities, but not because intelligence work was in itself authoritarian.  

Aguayo read the documents but was not allowed to make copies. He had to go through such tight scrutiny and security that it seems virtually impossible for other researchers to do the same. This means that, in spite of his painstaking effort to provide references to the documents and transcribe some of them, his findings would not be corroborated or contradicted in the immediate future. Yet, for Aguayo, opening intelligence archives is not only necessary for the history of the regime but also for the advance of democracy. 

Sources, however revealing, are not enough to build a perspective on the recent past. Aguayo maintained throughout the book that he tried to be objective and support all his assertions with documents or interviews. This is relevant because the history he reconstructed was very close to him—as it is for many scholars in his generation. He grew up in the neighbourhood of San Andrés, in Guadalajara, and was friends with some of the young men who fell to government repression in the 1970s. He described his visit to San Andrés thirty years later, with feelings of regret for the opportunities lost to violence, and acknowledged the emotional toll that the project had taken on him. Since the 1980s he had been a critic of the regime and an organiser of civil society’s efforts to improve the quality of electoral contests and state transparency. At the same time, La charola praised some aspects of the modernisation efforts undertaken by the government after 1985. Aguayo’s critical engagement with the intelligence bureaucracy made him part of this process and facilitated his privileged access to information. The book is ultimately intended to help in the development of an efficient intelligence system at the service of national security. As history, it is critical of past abuses but also a useful mirror in which the Mexican state is meant to look at itself in order to prevent the errors of the past.
One consequence of Aguayo’s attempt to build a perspective is that 1968 no longer needs to be a mythical origin that explains the impossibility of any dialogue with the state—or at least with that state—but a chapter in a relationship between state and civil society that has grown more complex and less authoritarian. *La charola* is a key link in the historiographical revision of the post-1940s era as it straddles two distinct positions: that of the participant who is part of the story and is still invested in the final outcome, and that of the disinterested scholar who can look at the past with critical detachment and risks being perceived as ungrateful. No true history is written in either one of those positions, but the tension between objectivity and emotional involvement sets an inevitable reference for younger historians who want to revise that period.

The authors of these analyses do not come from such closeness to events and actors so they can be more explicit about certain things that Aguayo and other historians/participants of the *pasado inmediato* may have taken for granted. The initial surprise, in our authors’ perspective, is finding that the Mexican state, which was in theory one of rule of law and which did not face major internal or external threats, had developed a muscular, if not always efficient, intelligence apparatus. It is not easy to accommodate this fact with the explanations of the regime as a clientelistic, corporative welfare machine that co-opted almost all meaningful potential adversaries since the late 1930s, as in the traditional state-centred paradigm. The first general question that emerges is whether this was a sign of weakness or strength in the part of the regime and, secondly, whether these intelligence agencies had any real power, and if so, power to do what. There are several, partially contradictory answers, to the first question. Some of the authors place the documents in the framework of a theory about the production of knowledge by the modern state proposed by James Scott. Mapping and classifying can be authoritarian forms of power-building that are inevitably connected to the attempt to create subjects that will accept state authority. Intelligence, in the cases analysed in these chapters, seemed to be as much about knowledge production as about domination. For Aviña, reports and advice on guerrilla groups in Guerrero by federal agents provide insights into the ways in which the state saw society. But he also suggests that the counterinsurgency proposition of the document represents, also citing Scott, a ‘hidden transcript’ of the dominant party. Similarly to Aviña, Muñoz sees intelligence reports, in her case on indigenous organisations, as a ‘tentacle’ of power that manipulated information, mapping civil society for the state to better control it.

Although authoritarian, the Mexican state was not driven by a high modernist utopian vision of society of the kind that is the focus of *Seeing like a State*. It tried instead to ride demographic and economic change and adapt to an evolving civil society that was not as ‘prostrate’ as Scott’s model would require for the deployment of the authoritarian experiments of mapping, classification and social engineering. The post-revolutionary state seemed sometimes disoriented, driven by local disputes and resistance, unable to cope with them without the use of traditional clientelistic tactics. This was clearly the case by the mid-century, and the documents in this volume confirm that, decades later, and in spite of the growth of the intelligence agencies, there were still sectors of Mexican civil society that were stubbornly difficult to discipline and map out: indigenous groups, doctors, peasants—not to mention the attempts at armed resistance that were met with brutal repression in some regions. The sneaky orejas of the Secretaría de Gobernación relied on local knowledge (gossip and rumours, for example) that modernist state designers were supposed to ignore. With their attention to anecdote and specificity they seemed to obstruct rather than enhance the legibility of Mexican political society. As Soto Laveaga shows, for example, *Gobernación* agents tried to infiltrate and manipulate the 1965 doctors’ movement—as they would do with the students in 1968. The use of
infiltration suggests that the state, specifically Gobernación, was not able to turn adversaries into obedient subjects but merely hoped to count, list, identify, co-opt or nudge movements in directions that would make repression seem justifiable, as in 1968, or result in isolation and divisions—the case in 1965, as doctors lacked a revolutionary ideological agenda and the willingness to use violence, and were rather cautious, or naive, in their strategies.

The most telling evidence against the use of an interpretive model centred on state building is the fact, made clear by the analyses of Soto Laveaga, Muñoz, Padilla and Iber, that, for the most part, spies were busy spying on other agents of the state. The document examined by Padilla shows, for example, how teachers played a role in agrarian disputes that eventually may have pushed President Luis Echeverría’s (1970–1976) hand to distribute large tracks of land in Chihuahua. As Aguayo suggested in his reconstruction of the operations leading to and on 2 October 1968, the lack of coordination among state actors was such that it led to violence.26 This might have been an authoritarian state in aspiration but it was hardly effective enough to present a unified façade to an active civil society. This civil society bought into the corporative discourse and used the state to further its goals (as consumers, for example), yet never lost sight, as demonstrated by the middle class opinions collected in Walker’s document, of the conflicting views that separated them from the higher levels of political power. In response to the first question I formulated above, in sum, these documents and the intelligence practices underlying them reveal a weak state rather than one able to easily eliminate dissent. Paranoia is often ascribed to the powerful but to a large extent, in Mexico, it demonstrated a self-fulfilling fear, a lack of focus and a narrow field of vision, and a limited, sometimes counterproductive, capacity to influence events, even those that the state agents themselves produced.

Muñoz, Cedillo and Aviña find in their documents evidence of the state’s use of ‘terror’ in order to maintain political and social control. Violence against populations that might harbour guerrillas was certainly part of the theory and, at least in Guerrero, the practice. Terror was one effect of the deliberately confusing use of violence in Tlatelolco, but this is not enough to classify the Mexican regime in the same category as some of its Latin American contemporaries—a distinction Priístas never ceased to advertise. The use of such tactics in the military dictatorships of the Southern Cone sought to eliminate the opposition by creating a widespread sense of fear, a paralysing kind of violence coming from anonymous sources that would be impossible to counter with the judicial system or other protections to civil rights. In Mexico the use of state violence was more ambiguous: if, as the document examined by Aviña states, the guerrillas were marginal and destined to defeat, then why was it considered necessary to exterminate them, as the counter-insurgency program dictated, and hide the crimes, as Cedillo shows was done? Physical repression was unthinkable in the case of doctors, as Soto Laveaga notes, because of their professional status—a consideration that would hardly have stopped truly authoritarian states, from the Soviet Union to the Southern Cone military dictatorships.

Assassination, disappearance and other forms of targeted violence were never beneath the morality of the Mexican intelligence apparatus. The documents examined here do not provide direct evidence of illegal practices—as they clearly could not if they were to survive the archival purges that preceded their publication. Archives do not speak for themselves, however. In the case of Cedillo’s documents, their publication corrects a version published by Carlos Tello Díaz in which, she states, the circumstances of the deaths of several guerrilla members were adulterated in order to deny their disappearance after capture.27 In spite of their brevity, those documents indirectly confirm that crimes were committed by the state because they complement evidence from other sources.
They have a clear value in the context of investigations about specific victims of state repression and as such contribute but do not replace a historical attempt at understanding. Judges and historians share a common concern about proofs and the truth, although their position relative to the production of the sources is radically different.\textsuperscript{28} It should be the object of further discussion whether, however serious and still deserving of judicial clarification, these acts are enough to demonstrate that terror was used in a systematic way by the PRI to maintain power.

One could certainly read these documents as evidence of an authoritarian state in the making, one in which intelligence and covert operations were effective tools to maintain the stability that the authors of intelligence reports were so keen to demonstrate. The argument of these agents was circular: ‘we have to spy and repress these people to maintain stability,’ they implied, ‘even though in reality they will not be able to undermine that stability’. If we forget this intrinsic tension in these documents we risk validating the centralising, presidentialist interpretation of post-revolutionary Mexican politics that recent historiography has done so much to undermine. But the documents, with all their gaps, uncertainty and eagerness to please superiors can also support the opposite reading: the history of a state that feels less in control—specifically, of an executive branch hard pressed to hide its hand in political events rather than showing the true limits of its power. The agents were sure that spying helped stability, but not so sure those under surveillance were so powerless. The arrival of Aleman to the presidency in 1946 offers an interesting moment to compare the two interpretations. It has been seen as the beginning of an authoritarian cycle—of which the foundation of the DFS was the best symptom. The opposite seems increasingly convincing: as the first civilian in the presidency in three decades, facing opposition from inside the state itself, including the military, Aleman’s rule was paranoid, anxious to quell dissent with violence or cooptation—thus the corruption and \textit{pistolerismo} that were the trademark of his term.\textsuperscript{29} Since then, the objects of spying, if not of repression, were both in the left and the right of the political spectrum, as Walker shows. Can Aleman’s period be seen as an antecedent to the middle-class hostility decades later faced by Echeverria and President Jose Lopez Portillo (1976–1982)? Equipped with the same intelligence tools, the latter two were less fortunate in their ability to ride a long period of prosperity.

Rather than one or the other (weakness or great power) it would be more useful to talk about a system in which not only the enemy was poorly defined but also the limits of presidential power were difficult, or inconvenient, to draw, lest they revealed a narrower reach than the sycophantic rhetoric of public life suggested. In such a regime the distinctions between spying, manipulation and collaboration were vague and shifting. It might have been a paranoid state but it was also one able to inspire a paranoid opposition, not only among guerrilla groups unwilling to countenance any dialogue with the state but also within a labour movement that could see corruption and collaboration even among its most outspoken leaders, like Vicente Lombardo Toledano. In other words, intelligence documents and practices are not testimony of tight discipline and neat political or ideological divides, but of the moral and legal ambiguity of Mexican politics. Niblo sees corruption as a defining trait of post-1940 Mexican governments. Perhaps it is time to go beyond that insight as a negative judgment of value and embrace corruption, so to speak, as a part of the zeitgeist.

The questions above need to be addressed before we set out to critically analyse these sources. Padilla notes that those documents can be read in multiple, overlapping ways, while Avina suggests that the intellectual poverty of the analysis of the spies does not necessarily diminish the richness of the information. At one level, these documents are, as
Padilla reminds us, records, however biased, of political and social reality. They can be useful when set against other forms of evidence. The specific drift of their biases, however, is important to establish.

Are these documents the tools of an all-seeing totalitarian monster, willing to shape reality by describing it? Or, alternatively, are they expressions of paranoia or the desire to feed that paranoia in order to keep the budget flowing in the direction of intelligence agencies? The latter is Aguayo’s thesis: the DFS gained reputation by inflating the threat of social movements that it then helped eliminate with violence. In hindsight, the documents seem to have been successful for the second purpose, although that does not mean they would not have hoped to serve the first. In either case, these documents can be useful to write different histories as long as they are balanced by contextual analyses of the multiple and changing positions of different actors in relation with the state: the everyday life and struggles of middle class consumers or professionals (Walker, Soto Laveaga), foreign policy and the Cold War ambiguities of state and non-state actors (Iber), marginal political organisations that nevertheless represented important sectors of the population and state bureaucracy (Padilla, Aviña), and the opposition to the regime even as it was defeated by violence and isolation (Muñoz, Cedillo).

What are the other sources that can be placed in a productive dialogue with these documents? Several authors have used the press, which is fine as long as one keeps in mind the complex relationship between journalists and editors and the state—the same newspaper, we should remember, could reproduce columns written and paid by political authorities in one section while producing its own, very critical reports of the corruption of the state in another section. The prestigious columnist Manuel Buendía had a badge of the DFS—the institution whose chief was convicted of having him killed. Secrecy and publicity were not opposite realms, at least in the mind of Echeverría: he conspired behind closed doors to influence president Díaz Ordaz and defeat his enemies but he also wrote newspaper articles, under pseudonym, to serve his goals.

Foreign intelligence and diplomatic documents can also be useful, as Navarro, Knight, Katz and others have demonstrated, but such sources tend to have a high degree of parallelism with the Mexican state’s own intelligence materials as they often fed each other. Rafael Bernal’s El complot mongol portrayed with caustic humour the rather claustrophobic circles of spies and pistoleros that, as Iber shows, made Mexico City in the Cold War look like Casablanca—although there were no romantic heroes like Rick Blaine in the Anáhuac. The dialogue with foreign intelligence sources is nevertheless inevitable if we are going to continue talking about the Cold War as a frame of reference for internal and external Mexican politics. The vagaries of DFS and Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales (DGIPS) reports could be as much a correction as a confirmation of the relevance of the bipolar world order to understand Mexican reality: as Bernal’s pistolero Filiberto García did, it was convenient to pitch global enemies against each other, without any concern about ideology, if the goal was to further one’s own agenda of lust and revenge. Lombardo Toledano, as examined by Iber, is a good illustration of this defining ambiguity of Mexican politics toward communism and anticommunism, if one less bloody than García’s: salaries could come from the pro-Soviet side even if the loyal opposition party established by Lombardo Toledano served to burnish the democratic credentials of the regime in front of the United States. Among the middle-class citizens surveyed in Walker’s documents, the Cold War seems to be a rather distant concern: they did find comparisons with Chile relevant but, more than ideological reasons, because of the presence of Chileans in Mexico and of Echeverría’s own decision to make Chilean exiles an example of his leftist leanings and a device to recover some
credit in the left after suspicions emerged about his role in the repression of the student movement in 1968.

Memoirs and other testimonies have also been used productively to contrast against the official silence about repression. These are emerging in good measure thanks to the efforts of oral historians and scholars who have made of interviews key sources. The work of organisations involved in the clarification of crimes committed by the state during the dirty war has also been important. Testimonies of the victims of repression can be powerful reminders of the depths of violence committed by agents of the state.32

Intelligence archives document only one part of the machinery of the state. Comparing them against other sources produced by the state itself (even if concerning less overtly political functions, like education, public health, indigenous culture, to mention only those linked with the documents examined here) can enhance or contradict the perspective of intelligence agencies. Files, for example, from the Secretaría de Defensa Nacional, a reluctant institution when it comes to making documents available, can be extremely productive after persistent research.33 Other archives are mentioned in the introduction to this issue. The tensions between different branches of the government would show that the dilemma strong-vs-weak state is not enough to understand the mechanisms of political negotiation, the incorporation of emerging social actors, and policy changes that, increasingly, seem harder to explain based on presidential choice alone. The documents examined here, even if not intended by their authors to be part of public discussions, had effects beyond the state and confirm that it was hardly a monolithic entity.

Some preliminary guidelines for the contextualisation of intelligence documents can be formulated in negative terms: in post 1940 Mexico, Cold War external forces do not explain all forms of violence; espionage was not just about anti-communism, and violence was not the end-all in politics. In sum, there is more to recover than secrecy, silence and repression: publicity continues to be a relevant, if indirect, dimension of the sources examined in this issue. Reports that were reserved for a few eyes inevitably penetrated the public sphere as leaks, rumours, judicial evidence or eventually, as is the case here, historical sources. Statements obtained under duress in the context of illegal arrests cannot be used, as Cedillo notes, as evidence of actual events, yet it is undeniable that they were intended to become part of the public record in order to place the blame on suspects. Beyond loyalty to el presidente, even spy reports addressed debates that spilled beyond the state’s bureaucratic structure and reached wider audiences in the form of interviews, articles, rumours, and criminal cases in the nota roja. Without making them instruments of terror or Foucauldian knowledge-power exercises, such documents promise to be important pieces of the historiographical puzzle that is growing in front of our eyes as we try to understand late twentieth century Mexico.

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Notes
3. There are too many works to attempt a list. Examples, with relevant variations, would be the works of Arnaldo Córdova and the *Historia de la Revolución Mexicana* edited by the Colegio de México.


12. Álvaro Vázquez Mantecón, ‘Nuevas historias oficiales: el caso del Memorial del 68 en México’, manuscript.


14. In this regard, the work of José Revueltas deserves more attention from intellectual historians. See José Revueltas, *Los errores*, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1964.


22. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.


