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The boundaries of power. The geopolitical configuration of Mexico's borders in the 19th century

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Los límites del poder. La configuración geopolítica de las fronteras de México en el siglo XIX

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This chapter is part of a broader research project on the history of Mexico's political and territorial division, funded by Fondo Sectorial CONACYT-INEGI.

- 1 The 19th century marks the rise, consolidation and decline of the balance of power in Europe as the central mechanism in international relations. Although New Spain, first, and Mexico, later, found themselves on the periphery of European events throughout the period, they were profoundly affected by the realignment of forces between the major world powers that took place at that time.
- 2 This paper discusses the shaping of Mexican territory in the light of the power relations that moulded international politics in the 19th century. To this end, it adopts the guidelines of geopolitical analysis proposed by Yves Lacoste, who stresses the importance of focusing on "rivalries for power or influence over certain territories and their populations" (Lacoste, Y., 2008: 8) in order to understand their consequences, not only in the territories in dispute, but also in geographical points that can be thousands of kilometres away. Based on the notion of scale, Lacoste's geopolitical analysis further emphasises the diversity of power relations that are expressed on the territory in different orders of magnitude (Lacoste, Y., 2008) and invites us to consider the

interconnections between local, national, and foreign political forces in order to achieve a better understanding of the causes and consequences of political conflicts and their territorial expressions.

- 3 While there are abundant and, indeed, excellent in-depth historical studies of Mexico's international relations (see, for instance, the outstanding seven-volume collection, published in 2011 under the coordination of Mercedes de Vega Armijo), as well as of particular landmarks in Mexican history¹, a panoramic view is needed to understand the final configuration of Mexico's borders in the 1800s. Such view is what this paper aims to offer.
- 4 In this work, I wish to advance two claims. The first one is that it is essential to look at the interconnections and interaction between different levels of analysis (scales) if we are to grasp the final configuration of Mexico's borders in the 19th century. The second one is that we need to take a longer historical view in order to understand not only events, but also tendencies, and their impact on the territory over time. Sometimes it is, in fact, only after several years – or even decades -- that the territorial repercussions of events and diplomatic agreements become apparent. By combining an analysis of the interplay between different scales, with a long-term view, spanning one hundred years, the work seeks to offer a fresh and comprehensive reading of the process whereby Mexico's borders –and therefore, Mexico's territory—took shape.
- 5 Following Lacoste's advice (2012/3: 31), the paper focuses mainly on the large (international) and intermediate (national) scales, which span tens of thousands of kilometres and thousands of kilometres respectively. Nonetheless, the local scale, measured in hundreds of kilometres, is also referred to when relevant, albeit in much less depth than would be necessary to offer a full account of the relations of force that were expressed in the Mexican territory at any given time during the period of study².
- 6 The work is divided into four sections. The first covers the period 1808-1824, encompassing the end of the Spanish monarchy in continental America and the emergence of the first federal republic in Mexico. This section emphasises the birth of the Mexican state and outlines the difficulties the young state would later face in defending its territory, particularly in the north. The second section focuses on the years 1824-1853 and highlights the rise of the United States as a regional power; it further stresses the emergence of Manifest Destiny as the ideology underpinning the U.S. territorial expansion, and the impact these two factors had on the configuration of Mexico's territory. In turn, the third section covers the period 1853-1896, and discusses how, in the context of the imperialist struggle for the Caribbean, the territorial conflict shifted southward and linked up with local power disputes, eventually leading to the establishment and delimitation of Mexico's borders with neighbouring Guatemala and Belize. A section of final remarks closes the text.

1808-1824: The end of the Spanish Empire and the territorial bases of the new state

- 7 The 1808 Napoleonic invasion of Spain is often identified as the beginning of the end of Spanish rule in the Americas. A complementary perspective proposes, however, that while the autonomist movements in Spanish America were driven by the apprehension of Ferdinand VII and Joseph Bonaparte's imposition as king of Spain, the independence

of the American colonies was also “the result of the European Seven Years’ War and the bankruptcy it produced in the countries involved” (Vázquez, J. Z. 1997; see also Pierre, G., 2009). According to Josefina Zoraida Vázquez, the need for refinancing created by this war (1756-1763), particularly for England and Spain, led to the reorganisation of these countries’ colonies in America and the imposition of new taxes, which generated great discontent and, some decades later, would end up fuelling the struggles for independence.

- 8 While the Seven Years’ War had already heralded a change in the distribution of power in Europe and thus in the spheres of influence of the major powers, the independence of the United States (1775-1783), the French Revolution (1789-1799) and, in particular, the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) precipitated the realignment of forces that put an end to the old international order and triggered the independence movements in Spanish America. This realignment led to the disappearance of New Spain, the emergence of Mexico as an independent state and the need to reorganise the territory that the new state inherited from the colony.

The decline of the Spanish Empire and the demarcation of the northern territory

- 9 The United States’ independence represented a major transformation in global power relations. Initially, however, this change was most strongly felt on the American continent, where Spain, once the dominant power, was already beginning to experience its decline. In parallel to the 1783 Treaty of Versailles between the United States and Great Britain, which recognised the Thirteen Colonies’ independence, Great Britain signed separate peace treaties with France, the Netherlands and Spain, all of whom had supported the American colonies in their struggle for independence. For Spain this meant the recovery of the Floridas in North America³, the coast of Campeche and the coasts of what would later become Honduras and Nicaragua in the Caribbean, as well as the island of Menorca.
- 10 Suddenly, Spain and the young republic of the United States of America found themselves sharing borders and in need of delimiting their respective territories. Taking as a starting point the boundaries agreed between the United States and Great Britain in 1783, Spain and the United States signed the Pinkney or St. Lawrence Pact in 1795, which set the border along the Mississippi River, whose course would separate the United States territory from those of West and East Florida to the south and Louisiana to the west (Sepúlveda C., 1958).
- 11 Events in Europe soon impeded the realisation of Spain’s interest in retaining the boundary on the Mississippi. Under pressure from Napoleon Bonaparte, and in exchange for a promise to obtain the kingdom of Tuscany, the Queen of Spain ceded poorly demarcated Louisiana to France in 1800. Only three years later, Bonaparte sold Louisiana to the United States. Given the undefined boundaries of this enormous territory, this was the beginning of a long succession of territorial and boundary conflicts between Spain and the United States, first, and, after 1821, between the United States and Mexico.
- 12 The Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) shook Europe and catalysed a profound transformation of power relations, not only in Europe, but throughout the world. As

the main trigger for the independence movements in Spanish America, these wars unleashed major international competition for the territories of the former Spanish Empire, which intensified as Spanish defeat became imminent. According to Rafe Blaufarb, just as Bonaparte's invasions gave rise to an "Eastern Question" in Europe, they also gave rise to a "Western Question", which "was less about [Spanish American] independence per se than about how the conflict would affect the geopolitical order" (2007: 747).

- 13 In addition to precipitating the processes of independence in the Spanish-American colonies, the Napoleonic Wars provided an opportunity for the United States to showcase its aspirations for - at least regional - leadership. The new republic's war against Britain in 1812, when the latter was focused on fighting Bonaparte, highlighted the United States' incipient military might, but also its limitations. In particular, the failed American invasion of Canada and Britain's defence of its North American colony generated in the United States an "apprehension of British power" (Blaufarb, R., 2007), which dampened its aspirations for northward expansion. This did not, however, limit the American drive for westward expansion, which had already manifested itself with the occupation by Anglo-American settlers of the Baton Rouge district in West Florida and the Mobile district in 1810 and 1812 respectively (Ruiz Rodríguez, J. I., 2015).
- 14 Faced with the growing presence of American colonists in the northeast of its American dominions, Spain saw the definition of the boundary with the United States as a priority. It therefore entrusted Luis de Onís, Spanish ambassador to Washington, to negotiate a treaty of limits with the U.S. The Adams-Onís Treaty, also known as Transcontinental Treaty, was signed in 1819. Under this treaty, ratified in 1821, the border between Spain and the United States was fixed at the 42nd parallel north. Although, according to Gerhard, "a line was drawn on a very inaccurate map through territory that neither country controlled" (1997: 62), it was clear that Spain ceded to the United States the territory of Oregon, as well as East and West Florida. Spain further renounced any claim to Louisiana, as well as to navigate the Mississippi. In return, the Spanish monarchy gained recognition of its sovereignty over Texas, a territory that the United States had long been claiming as part of Louisiana (Sepúlveda, C., 1958).
- 15 With the new limits accord, the United States gained an outlet to the Gulf of Mexico, through East Florida and, finally, a much-desired outlet to the Pacific through Oregon. This aroused the suspicion of Great Britain, which not only had ambitions over that territory, but feared that, having acquired Florida, the U.S. would also acquire Cuba and "would extend her views of aggrandizement to Mexico [and] push her frontier from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean" (Wilson in Humphreys, R. A., 1966).
- 16 In addition to generating tensions with Britain, westward expansion set the United States against Russia, which then possessed Alaska and headed the Holy Alliance, the European powers' coalition that had set out to restore the *ancien régime* and re-establish the Bourbon monarchy in Spain's American colonies. It was in response to these European pretensions, and in an effort to consolidate the United States' independence from the British Empire (Sexton, J., 2011), that on 2 December 1823, during his seventh annual message to Congress, President James Monroe warned the European powers that the United States would consider "any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of [the American] hemisphere as dangerous to [their] peace and safety [...and] as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United

States” (OAS, n.d.), thus inaugurating the doctrine that would thenceforward bear his name.

- 17 The Monroe Doctrine claimed – as it is commonly stressed – America for the Americans. Yet, it also issued a warning to England for its interests in the Caribbean, to France for its possible intention to reconquer American territories, and particularly to Russia, whose territories in North America the United States sought to appropriate (Navarrete Sobarzo, E., 2012). More importantly, the Monroe Doctrine heralded the emergence of a U.S. power that would soon have a strong impact on the configuration of Mexican territory and the new international order.

Of secessions and annexations: Territorial configuration in the south

- 18 Mobilisation for independence did not reach Central America until the fall of the Spanish monarchy in 1821. The absence of the colonial power unleashed the competition among regional elites and gave rise to efforts at political recentralisation that were undermined by the centrifugal forces of localism. As Mexico emerged into independent life and sought to secure its interests, its interference in the affairs of the Central American provinces soon became apparent. At the same time, the new Mexican state had to contend with the existence of a settlement of English colonists on the Yucatán Peninsula⁴, a legacy of Spain’s increasing weakness *vis-à-vis* Great Britain, all of which had a significant impact on the shaping of Mexico’s southern territory.

Local powers, conflict and the reconfiguration of territory in the southwest

- 19 The process of territorial and political reconfiguration in the southwest was deeply rooted in local dynamics and began with the proclamation of Mexico’s independence in 1821 and Agustín de Iturbide’s Plan of Iguala⁵, which mobilised regional and local geopolitical interests over the territory of what had hitherto been the Real Audiencia of Guatemala. When they launched the Plan of Iguala, Iturbide and the new leaders of the Mexican Empire were intent on preserving the territory of Central America. On the one hand, they conceived of the new Mexican state as heir to the former Spanish dominions and attributed symbolic value to preserving that territory intact. On the other hand, the interest was much more objective, instrumental and, ultimately, strategic. From Iturbide’s perspective, the defence of the Mexican Empire entailed preventing Guatemala from remaining loyal to the Spanish crown, as well as stopping the Central American provinces from becoming independent and adopting the republican system, something that could endanger the stability of the Mexican monarchy (Vázquez, M. R. 1997). For these reasons, in the summer of 1821, Iturbide began a proselytising campaign in Chiapas - which since 1568 had not been under New Spain’s jurisdiction, but rather under the jurisdiction of the Real Audiencia of Guatemala - as well as in Guatemala itself, to mobilise support for his independence and monarchical project.
- 20 The Plan of Iguala was initially well-received in the Central American provinces of the Spanish Empire. For the elites of these provinces, who were deeply rooted in localism and at odds with the elites at the centre of the colonial government, independence,

rather than representing emancipation from the Crown or Spain, was seen as the best way to shake off the domination of the authorities established in Guatemala City (De Vos, J., 1993). Towards the end of September 1821, the deputation of Chiapas declared itself in favour of joining Mexico. Guatemala, in turn, declared independence from Spain, and the rest of the Central American provinces proclaimed their independence from both Spain and Guatemala. Under pressure from Iturbide, shortly thereafter, Guatemala voted to join Mexico, and on 5th January 1822, it was incorporated into the Mexican Empire.

- 21 When Iturbide abdicated in March 1823, the Central American provinces, with the exception of Chiapas and the Soconusco region, declared their independence from Mexico and formed the United Provinces of Central America. As for Chiapas, a junta was set up in June 1823 to serve as a provisional government until the province's incorporation into either Mexico or Guatemala was declared. It was further agreed that the issue would be decided by free voting. By the end of August 1824, all 104 municipalities in Chiapas had cast their votes. According to Jan de Vos, although most of them voted in favour of the union with Central America, the oligarchy of Ciudad Real (currently San Cristóbal de las Casas) intervened to impose vote counting criteria that largely favoured incorporation into Mexico (1993: 94). Thus, on 14 September 1824, the accession of Chiapas to the United Mexican States was proclaimed.
- 22 Indeed, the Mexican government was not without a role in Chiapas's decision to join Mexico. The Mexican Congress, established after Iturbide's overthrow, was determined to retain Chiapas, a territory whose location made it essential for the defence of the south of the country, especially as the construction of an interoceanic waterway across the Tehuantepec Isthmus was being considered with increasing seriousness. For this reason, the Mexican government had undertaken an active campaign to support the Chiapas annexationists and present the incorporation of Chiapas as "an inalienable point of national interest", justified by "the supposed will of the *Chiapanecos* themselves" (Vázquez M. R., 1997).
- 23 In July 1824, the Soconusco region, which was more integrated to Los Altos and Quetzaltenango (Guatemala) than to the rest of Chiapas, joined the United Provinces of Central America. Yet, it was crucial for Mexico to retain control over this territory because of its strategic location as a gateway to the Tehuantepec Isthmus. Hence, when the Federal Constitution of 1824 was sanctioned, the Mexican Congress opposed Soconusco's separation, arguing that, as a region of Chiapas, it lacked the authority to secede (O'Gorman E., 1994/1937).
- 24 The union of Chiapas with Mexico and the dispute over Soconusco became permanent sources of tension between Mexico and Guatemala. At the same time, they reflected the undeniable reality of disparity in power relations between the new neighbouring states. In the following decades, Mexico would experience the consequences of a much greater asymmetry *vis-à-vis* her northern neighbour.

1824-1853: The rise of the United States as a regional power and the fixing of the northern border

- 25 The three decades following the establishment of the republic in Mexico were years of transition. Externally, Europe was immersed in the process of monarchical restoration;

Spain, a former power, now increasingly weakened, harboured hopes of reconquering its possessions in the Americas, and France sought to put a brake on the United States' leadership aspirations on the continent (Blaufarb, R., 2007). The U.S., in turn, was taking off as a regional power and was clearly interested in expanding its territory to the west.

Loss and definition of territory: the fixing of the northern border

- 26 The Adams-Onís Treaty was only in force for 183 days, as on 24 August 1821 the Treaties of Córdoba, recognising Mexico's independence, were signed. Despite its very short life, the Transcontinental Treaty gave rise to a series of events that would prove decisive in the years to come. Perhaps the most important of these was the authorisation that Spain granted her former subjects to settle in other parts of the empire. One of those subjects was Louisiana resident, Moses Austin, who in 1821 obtained permission to settle in Texas. Although Austin died shortly afterwards, his son Stephen carried out his plans, and by 1825 he had founded the first Anglo-American settlement in Texas (Vázquez, J. Z. 1981).
- 27 After independence, Iturbide's government enacted the colonisation law of 1822, which ratified the authorisation extended by the Spanish government to colonise Texas. Mobilised by both the cotton boom of the early-19th century and the prospects of extending the slave-labour plantation economy beyond the southwestern border of the United States (Torget, A. J., 2015), American settlers moved into Texas in such numbers that, by the late 1820s, they outnumbered the Mexican population by a ratio of nine to one (Fowler, W., 2018).
- 28 Since the early years of the U.S. republic, successive governments had approached the Mexican governments of the day to express their interest in purchasing Texas (Sepúlveda, C., 1958). Far from being exceptional, these proposals replicated the strategy whereby the United States had added Louisiana to its territory in 1803. At the same time, the insistence on acquiring Texas was evidence of a strong interest in acquiring the lands north of the Rio Bravo. This determination would find violent expression a few years later.
- 29 In 1828, Mexico and the United States negotiated their boundaries for the first time, and both countries recognised the line set by the Adams-Onís Treaty as their common border. This line was further ratified in the treaty of limits signed in 1832. However, in 1833, Texas petitioned to become a state on its own. This request was not only denied, but generated enormous suspicion in Mexico City, where, aware of the danger of secession, Anastasio Bustamante's government had enacted a population law in 1830 that sought to prevent further Anglo-American immigration to Texas.
- 30 The internal struggle between federalists and centralists that characterised Mexican political life during the first 35 years of the republic played an essential role in the events that led to the ultimate secession of Texas. In fact, the suspension of federalism in 1835 finally provoked the revolt of the Texans, who declared their independence from Mexico on 2 March 1836. After a disastrous military campaign, Mexican President Santa Anna signed the Treaty of Velasco, putting an end to the hostilities and committing to withdraw Mexican troops south of the Rio Bravo, thus losing all authority over Texas. For his part, U.S. President Andrew Jackson did not immediately annex Texas; nonetheless, before leaving office in March 1837, he extended recognition

to the Republic of Texas, which would continue to exist as an independent state until 1845.

- 31 France and England recognised Texas' independence in 1839 and insisted that Mexico do the same, because – they argued – this would put a brake on U.S. expansionism. Moreover, in their competition with the United States, both countries were interested in establishing privileged relations with Texas, as this would allow them to acquire more cotton and on more favourable terms than those offered by the U.S., thus gaining an advantage in the global textile market (Navarrete Sobarzo, E., 2012). Finally, they believed that the recognition of Texas as an independent republic would hinder its incorporation into the United States and, in consequence, the latter's expansion to the Pacific.
- 32 As it became apparent shortly afterwards, the westward march had begun, and Texas could hardly have provided a buffer zone against the U.S. advance. Moreover, the United States was suspicious of European meddling in its affairs, a threat all too real, as had been evidenced by the French intervention in Mexico in 1838. "Extending the area of freedom" in the face of the onslaught of absolutist Europe thus became an imperative (Weinberg, A. K. 1963) and a moral justification for territorial expansion.
- 33 Texas was finally annexed as the 28th state of the Union in December 1845. By then, what in the early 1840s had been an initial association between the ideal of territorial expansion and the conviction in the moral superiority of democracy, had given rise to Manifest Destiny, an ideology that stressed the exceptionalism of the United States and proclaimed the U.S. not only had the God-given right, but also the duty, to spread over the whole continent in order to propagate democracy and freedom (Merck, F., 1995 [1963]; Mountjoy, S.; 2009: 9-10; Weinberg, A.K, 1963). Enthusiastically embraced by expansionist politicians and congressmen, Manifest Destiny became a way to dispense with legal considerations - clearly opposed to their desires for expansion - and to justify their resolution to seize more territory, by force if necessary.
- 34 And by force it was done. When James Polk became president of the United States in 1845, he was resolute about annexing California. Concerned about England's efforts to acquire that territory (Billington, R. A., 1967), Polk attempted to enter into secret negotiations with the Mexican government for the purchase of California and New Mexico. When those negotiations failed, largely because of the chaotic domestic situation in Mexico, Polk provoked a military confrontation to which Mexico responded by declaring war in July 1846.
- 35 The war was bloody and revealed the deep internal divisions in Mexico, which hampered an effective defence. Defeated after two years of fighting, Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in February 1848. In addition to formalising Texas' annexation to the United States, the treaty established as new boundary lines between the two countries the courses of the Bravo and Gila rivers. As a result, Mexico lost the territories of Alta California and New Mexico, part of Baja California, as well as parts of the states of Sonora and Tamaulipas. Together with Texas, this territory amounted to 2,400,000 square kilometres, a little more than half of the territory Mexico had held – but not controlled – until 1835.
- 36 After the border had finally been demarcated, it became clear that the land north of the Gila River, now belonging to the United States, would not make it possible to connect the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. This led the U.S. government to seek to acquire a new portion of Mexican territory. Faced with the threat of a new conflict, in December 1853,

the Mexican government agreed to sell, for 10 million dollars, La Mesilla, a territory of nearly 77,000 square kilometres between the Gila and Bravo rivers in the northern section of the states of Sonora and Chihuahua (Cruz Miramontes, R., 1979).

Map. 1 The Mexico-U.S. border 1821-1853

Map by Erika León

- 37 In just three decades, the United States had expanded to the Pacific at the expense of more than half of Mexico's territory. This, in turn, altered the balance of power within the American Union itself, leading to a bloody civil war less than a decade later. Be that as it may, by 1853 Mexico's northern border had been clearly and definitively demarcated. By contrast, in southern Mexico the lack of definition prevailed. External actors' interests in controlling transcontinental trade routes were expressed in different ways over the territory, and conflicting power relations between local elites and the governments of Mexico and Guatemala resulted in territorial configurations that would remain in constant flux until almost the end of the 19th century.

Of isthmuses and canals: the struggle for territory in the south

- 38 Southern Mexico's territorial configuration was also strongly influenced by the competition between the European powers and the U.S. for a connection, whether by sea or land, between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Hence the importance that the Tehuantepec Isthmus and control over the Caribbean Sea gained during the whole of the 19th century.

- 39 In this context of great power competition, Mexico inserted itself as a player, clearly less powerful than the European countries and the United States, but undoubtedly with greater capacity than the Federal Republic of Central America (the name given to the United Provinces of Central America after 1824). As in all the cases discussed so far, this disparity of power would end up being reflected in asymmetric territorial arrangements.

The isthmus, Soconusco and the borders with Guatemala

- 40 Both the annexation of Chiapas and the Soconusco question dominated relations between Mexico and the Central American Federal Republic as long as the latter existed. In August 1824, the Central American government decreed Soconusco's incorporation into the Central American federation as part of the state of Los Altos, and, shortly afterwards, it declared that the incorporation of Chiapas into Mexico had been illegal, since it had been carried out under pressure (De Vos, J., 1993).
- 41 In April 1825, Central American troops occupied Tapachula, Soconusco's main city. The Mexican government responded by sending its own forces, and although there was no confrontation, tensions escalated. The Central American government then proposed requesting U.S. mediation to settle the dispute; however, Mexico rejected the proposal and the U.S. government declined to intervene. After the withdrawal of their respective troops, Mexico and Guatemala "tacitly" agreed "to maintain Soconusco in a state of 'neutrality', until a boundary agreement defined its definitive belonging to one country or the other" (Fenner, J., 2019). Since such an agreement was not negotiated until eighteen years later, Soconusco remained in this state of imposed neutrality until 1842, when it was definitively annexed to Mexico as a region of Chiapas.
- 42 Soconusco's annexation must be understood in the context of Mexico's geopolitical interests. In fact, in March 1842, President Santa Anna had granted a private concession for the colonisation and construction of a road in the Tehuantepec Isthmus (Concesión a José Garay, 1842). Although, because of financial difficulties, the project did not prosper, with the annexation of Soconusco Mexico succeeded in re-establishing control over the whole of the territory that would have made interoceanic communication possible. At the same time, however, it had offended Guatemala, which felt deprived of a territory it considered its own.

The canal, the Yucatán Peninsula and the Central American Isthmus

- 43 As had happened in the north, the competition between old and emerging powers in the drive to connect the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans was an important force that shaped Mexico's southern territory in the 19th century. After its annexation of California, the United States turned its attention to southern Mexico, although it was Great Britain which had the upper hand with Belize, its enclave on the Yucatán Peninsula⁶, and the terms it had agreed with Mexico since the early years of the republic.
- 44 In 1825 and 1826 Mexico signed the first Treaty of Amity, Commerce and Navigation with Great Britain, which afforded Mexico no rights as Spain's successor, but made it acknowledge all its obligations (de Vos, J., 1999). This became even more evident after 1836, when Spain finally recognised Mexico as an independent state and Mexico

“officially” inherited Spain’s territory. Despite the fact that none of the previous treaties had granted Great Britain sovereignty over the territory of the colony in Yucatán, and that in 1802 the British had committed to vacating the settlement, Britain invoked the principle of *utis possidetis* to justify not only its continued presence in the territory, but the subsequent claim to sovereignty over it (Macías Zapata, G. A., 1985).

- 45 In its efforts to advance its interests in the region, Great Britain did not hesitate to interfere with Mexico’s internal affairs. When a separatist movement broke out in Yucatán in the early 1840s, a time when – it must be recalled – the Mexican government was dealing with Texas’ independence, as well as with Guatemala’s claims over Soconusco, Britain offered to mediate the conflict. When Mexico rejected the offer, Britain sought another way to gain ground and provoked an incident (Menéndez R., H., 1999), the outcome of which forced the Yucatán government to recognise Belize and made it clear that Great Britain would only grant recognition to the Mexican government, which had already accepted the *de facto* boundaries of the British colony in Belize.
- 46 In 1847 the Caste War, an ethno-separatist movement of the Yucatán Maya, erupted. In contravention of the 1786 treaty, Belizean traders began supplying arms and ammunition to the indigenous rebels (*Cruzo’ob*), and the colonial authorities in Belize found it convenient to turn a blind eye to this smuggling (Paetzold, C., 1994), thereby affecting the balance of power between the Yucatán government, the rebel Mayan population, and the Mexican government. The latter, in turn, did not try to stop the supply of arms from Belize either, as the war with the *Cruzo’ob* weakened the Yucatecans and their aspirations for independence.
- 47 For its part, the United States also recognised Yucatán’s strategic importance, and in 1846-1847, during the second wave of Yucatán separatism, it seriously considered Yucatán’s annexation request, which was strengthened by the close relationship between the peninsula and recently incorporated Texas. While Yucatán’s petition was ultimately turned down, the U.S. maintained its interest in the area.
- 48 Indeed, after the war with Mexico, and especially after the annexation of California, U.S. intentions to build a transoceanic waterway in Central America were strengthened. Since the construction of a canal in the Central American Isthmus was also a British priority, rivalry arose between the two powers. It was mitigated in April 1850 with the signing of the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty that established the creation of an Anglo-American partnership for the joint construction of the canal in Nicaragua (Paetzold, C., 1994), thus bringing the power competition to a temporary standstill.

1853-1896: Imperialist competition and the fixing of the southern border

- 49 The second half of the 19th century was the stage of the liberal revolutions in Europe, as well as the rise of the Second French Empire (1852-1870) and France’s aspirations to extend her influence in Latin America. The United States was, for its part, engulfed in a bloody civil war, which kept it out of global power struggles until 1865. Only after impeding the secession of the southern states could the U.S. government once again address the struggle for raw materials and trade routes that was beginning to unfold around the world.

The delimitation of the southern border

- 50 Having finalised the tracing of the border with the United States through the 1853 Gadsden purchase/La Mesilla Treaty, Mexico needed to establish its definitive southern border. The term “southern border” is, however, a simplification that needs to be problematised. During the last two decades of the 19th century, the delimitation of Mexican territory to the south involved, first, the negotiation of the border with Guatemala; second, the delimitation of that border; and, finally, the negotiation of the border with Great Britain, three different processes that, as will be discussed below, obeyed distinct geopolitical logics.

Local power dynamics, extractive interests, and the Guatemalan border

- 51 Following the annexation of Soconusco in 1842, relations between Mexico and Guatemala remained tense until the early 1870s, when, after an incursion of conservative Guatemalan forces into Soconusco, the Mexican government decided to support the Guatemalan liberals in exchange for a commitment to negotiate the boundaries between the two countries (Castillo, M. A., *et al.*, 2011). Although the liberals emerged victorious from the civil war in 1871, the border issue was not immediately solved. On the contrary, the diplomatic negotiations that began in 1874 made little progress and were affected by recurrent claims of alleged border transgressions in Soconusco. In early 1881, tensions escalated and, in the face of what was denounced as “a formal armed invasion” by Guatemala to recover Soconusco (Pichardo Hernández, H., 2012), the Mexican government mobilised troops to the region, generating alarm over what was perceived as an imminent start of military hostilities.
- 52 The Guatemalan government retreated and began to negotiate with Mexico, while at the same time requesting U.S. mediation. By then, Guatemala’s President Barrios had already made the U.S. government aware of his intentions to reunify Central America under his leadership and had even offered to facilitate the construction of an interoceanic canal on Guatemalan territory in exchange for U.S. support *vis-à-vis* the Mexican government. Once again, however, Mexico rejected U.S. mediation, not least because of her misgivings about Barrios’ reunification plans, which did not suit her, and which, if supported by the United States, would place her in a vulnerable position between a powerful neighbour to the north and a bloc of countries to the south sponsored by that same powerful neighbour.
- 53 Circumstances changed unexpectedly after President Garfield’s assassination in September 1881, which brought about a complete change in U.S. policy. Frederick Frelinghuysen, the new Secretary of State, opposed the Central American reunification project that Barrios intended to spearhead and took a much less proactive stance than his predecessor on the issue of the Mexico-Guatemala border dispute, ultimately tipping the balance in Mexico’s favour (Toussaint, M., 1997).
- 54 In 1882, the Guatemalan government presented the Mexican government with a draft treaty that contemplated the cession of part of the territory of the states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche and Yucatán, in addition to a substantial indemnity (Castillo, Toussaint and Vázquez Olivera, 2011: 54), in exchange for Chiapas and Soconusco. Mexico’s rejection was categorical, and negotiations stalled. Eager to eliminate any circumstance that might hinder the realisation of his Central American Union project,

President Barrios undertook the negotiations himself and renounced any claim to Chiapas and Soconusco, as well as any compensation for those territories. As a result, the Herrera-Mariscal Treaty was signed on 27 September 1882 in Mexico City.

- 55 The terms of the treaty were clearly favourable to Mexico: while Guatemala received territory in Soconusco and northwestern Petén, totaling 5,180 square kilometres, the Guatemalan state definitively renounced its claims to Chiapas and the rest of Soconusco and lost some 15,540 square kilometres in the extreme north of Petén and in the Lacandon Jungle. In the final balance, the Herrera-Mariscal Treaty represented a loss of 10,360 square kilometres for Guatemala, equivalent to 6% of its territory (Castillo, Toussaint and Vázquez Olivera, 2006).
- 56 Boundary conflicts did not end with the signing of the treaty. Although a binational commission was formed in 1883 to map out the border, the delimitation process caused constant diplomatic irritation. Meanwhile, the Guatemalan government continued to issue permits to private – mostly foreign – logging firms in parts of the Lacandon Jungle which, according to the 1882 treaty, belonged to Mexico. This situation generated much friction in the following years, until 1892, when the logging companies on the border strip came into conflict and involved the governments of the two countries. Finally, a violent incursion by Guatemalan soldiers into Mexican territory in 1894 triggered a military response from the Mexican government, bringing the two countries, once again, to the brink of war.
- 57 After a series of negotiations, in 1895 the Agreement between the United Mexican States and the Republic of Guatemala was signed to settle the differences that had arisen between the two countries over the execution of the 1882 Herrera-Mariscal Treaty. In it, Guatemala agreed to compensate the lumber companies for the damages caused by the incursion of its troops, to respect Mexican sovereignty over the disputed area and to allow the Binational Boundary Commission to continue its work, which was finally completed in 1897.

Map 2. The Mexico-Guatemala border 1821-1895

Map by Erika León

Ethnic conflict, colonialism and the border with Belize

- 58 The signing of the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty in 1850 did not entirely eliminate the rivalry between the United States and Great Britain in the Caribbean. On the contrary, over the next five years, tension increased steadily to a point where war loomed as a distinct possibility. Since a war was not in the interest of either country, in 1856 the British and American governments signed the Dallas-Clarendon Treaty, committing themselves to ending hostilities in the Caribbean. Separate article II.1 of the treaty further established that the settlement of Belize was “bounded on the North by the Mexican province of Yucatan, and on the south by the River Sarstoon” (Clarendon Dallas Treaty, 1856).
- 59 Several factors help to explain this withdrawal. On the one hand, for the British government, the advantages of maintaining and expanding the settlements off the coast of Honduras were becoming less obvious; moreover, Great Britain was already involved in a major war in the Crimea and did not need other distractions. The United States, on the other hand, was on the verge of a civil war and sought to preserve its relationship with Great Britain, which appeared threatened by affairs in Central America. But perhaps the most important factor was, “the general decline of Belize as an important trading centre in the Caribbean which rendered the settlement peripheral in the larger policy designed by Foreign Office” (Paetzold, C., 1994: 118). By the end of the 1850s British interest in Central America was essentially dead. As it would turn out, the delimitation of Mexican territory and the British colony in the Yucatán Peninsula would ultimately be determined less by the imperial dispute in the

Caribbean, than by the territorial dynamics of the Mayan uprising in the Yucatán and the changing conditions of international economy and trade.

- 60 In 1858, the *Cruzo'ob* seized Bacalar, the last territory in the east of the Yucatán Peninsula controlled by the Mexican government. The British government then sought to consolidate its control over the region and, in 1859, signed a boundary treaty with Guatemala, in which the latter recognised British sovereignty over “the territory situated north of the Sarstoon River” (de Vos, J., 1999). Three years later, in 1862, Great Britain formally annexed Belize, thus creating the colony of British Honduras. At the time, Mexico was facing the French intervention and could not react. Despite the Monroe Doctrine, the United States was also unable to respond; in 1861, the Civil War had broken out and it would keep the U.S. turned in on itself until 1865.
- 61 The balance of power shifted years later as a result of changes in the international commodities market. The boom in demand for sapodilla resin for chewing gum production, which took place during the last two decades of the 19th century, was a determining factor in this context. Interested in exploiting the southern region of the Yucatán Peninsula to extract gum, the Yucatecan elites requested the federal government's support for the pacification of the Mayan population that was still up in arms. This meant putting an end to the arms contraband from British Honduras that had fuelled the Caste War since its inception in 1847.
- 62 The Mexican government initiated talks with its British counterpart to stop the sale of arms across the borders of British Honduras. While enforcing the arms sales prohibition would entail for Great Britain turning her back on the *Cruzo'ob*, the timber market had already declined and, in the context of the new power relations in the Caribbean, keeping the Yucatán Peninsula in a state of instability had lost its strategic value. Her Majesty's government was therefore willing to negotiate (Macías Zapata, G. A., 1985).
- 63 In 1887, Mexico and Great Britain initiated the negotiation of a boundary agreement. A few years later, in 1892, in response to the need to put a definitive end to the Mayan uprising, the legislature of Yucatán, a state that had previously and adamantly claimed the territory of Belize, submitted a proposal to the federal government to establish the boundaries with British Honduras (Caso Barrera, L., 2014). As a result, the Spencer-Mariscal Treaty was signed in 1893. Without expressly recognising British sovereignty over the territory, Mexico granted legitimacy to the existence of the British colony in the Yucatán Peninsula. In return, Great Britain undertook to effectively prohibit its subjects from supplying arms to the Mayan rebels. As for territorial limits, both sides took the Rio Hondo as their natural boundary and based the demarcation on the 1859 Anglo-Guatemalan treaty.
- 64 When the terms of the Spencer-Mariscal treaty became known in Mexico, they caused great discontent. President Manuel González's government was accused of having completely given in to the British. In particular, the fixing of the border at the Rio Hondo, a British demand, rather than at “the geodesic line, that since 1882, formed the border between Mexico and Guatemala” (de Vos, J., 1999) was seen as an unjustifiable concession. It was not until 8 June 1897, with the signing of an addendum that stipulated the free navigation of Mexican merchant ships in the territorial waters of British Honduras, that the way was cleared for the ratification of the boundary treaty and, therewith, for the definitive establishment of Mexico's land borders.

Map 3. The Mexico-Belize border 1826-1897

Map by Erika León

Final considerations

- 65 Over the 19th century, the Mexican territory was modified on many occasions as a result of power relations. Spain's weakness in the early 1800s not only led to the emergence of Spanish-American states but also conditioned their relations with their neighbours. In the case of Mexico, Spanish weakness at the end of the colonial period bequeathed the new state a conflict with the young emerging power in the north and a British enclave in the south. In both cases, and due to the limitations of the Mexican state itself, these situations would end up being resolved to the detriment of Mexico's territorial integrity.
- 66 With regard to Mexico's northern border, the end of the balance of power as a mechanism for organising international relations and, especially, the emergence of the United States as a regional power with global aspirations, implied a shift of international power from Europe to America. Although the Monroe Doctrine failed to prevent European, especially French, interventions in the Americas, Manifest Destiny did succeed in underpinning westward territorial expansion and endowing the United States – at the expense of Mexico – with the ocean-to-ocean territory to which it had aspired since independence.
- 67 By contrast, the shaping of the southern border resulted from two different logics of power. The border with Guatemala was, firstly, a result of the centrifugal forces unleashed by the dissolution of the Spanish colonial order and the pre-eminence of local elites with an interest in incorporation into Mexico. Secondly, it was a product of

the asymmetry of power between Mexico and the Central American Federation, and later Guatemala.

- 68 Chiapas' annexation to Mexico in 1824 effectively favoured the interests of local elites, while being sponsored by the Mexican government itself in pursuit of its interest in controlling the access to the Tehuantepec Isthmus. Soconusco's annexation in 1842, carried out with greater force, followed the same geopolitical logic. The United States also played an important role in defining the border between Mexico and Guatemala, as an external actor capable of affecting power relations. By staying out of the dispute, or avoiding open support for Guatemala, the U.S. ultimately tipped the balance in Mexico's favour.
- 69 The shaping of the border with British Honduras is best explained in the context of the rivalry between global powers - old and new. The importance of control over the Caribbean for world trade during the 18th and early 19th centuries, as well as the demand for logwood in those same years, explain the existence of the British enclave in the Yucatán Peninsula. The growing weakness of the Spanish crown explains, in turn, its permanence and consolidation.
- 70 For its part, the competition between the powers during the first half of the 19th century to obtain an interoceanic land or sea route increased Great Britain's interest in preserving its enclave in Belize and played off Britain against the United States, which also had aspirations in the Caribbean. The signing of the Bulwer-Clayton Treaty in 1850 helped to reduce tension at first. The restructuring of the two countries' priorities in a new geopolitical and commercial context shifted the rivalry away from the Caribbean and made Belize a regional bargaining chip.
- 71 In the final definition of Mexico's border with Belize, the interconnection of power relations on different scales is clearly evident. While rivalry between the maritime powers explains the existence of the enclave, power asymmetry between Mexico and Great Britain explains its persistence after 1821. Likewise, Great Britain's tacit support for the *Cruzo'ob* from 1847 onwards in an effort to hinder Yucatán's secessionist efforts, which endangered the preservation of British Honduras, significantly altered local and national power relations. Wary of Yucatán's separatist aspirations and its potential influence on Central America, the Mexican government ended up benefiting from the British intervention in the game of power that ultimately drew Mexico's map.

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NOTES

1. The bibliography is simply too copious to register here. Nonetheless it worth stressing at this point that the paper rests on the prolific production of renowned historians published in both Spanish and English. The specific references are included in the relevant sections of the text.
2. The scale of fourth order of magnitude or "local scale", as conceptualised by Philippe Subra (2012/3), will not be addressed in this work
3. After the Seven Years' War, Spain had had to cede the Floridas to England in 1763; however, in return for her support in the war, and by secret agreement, France ceded Louisiana to Spain, rendering the Mississippi River "a priori, the boundary between English and Spanish America" (Gerhard, P., 1997: 61).
4. British clandestine loggers had settled in the southeast of the Yucatán Peninsula since the mid-18th century. With the 1763 Treaty of Paris, Spain formalised this situation. While the Spanish monarchy never granted Great Britain jurisdiction over the settlement, further treaties empowered the latter and consolidated her settlement in Yucatán.
5. The Plan of Iguala declared Mexico's independence from Spain and established a constitutional monarchy in the new country
6. See footnote 2.

ABSTRACTS

This paper discusses the shaping of Mexican territory in the light of the power relations that moulded international politics in the 19th century. Drawing from Yves Lacoste's geopolitical analysis, the work claims, first, that it is essential to look at the interconnections and interaction between different territorial scales; and, second, that we need to take a long-term historical view, if we are to grasp the process that led to the final configuration of Mexico's borders.

Cet article traite de la formation du territoire mexicain à la lumière des relations de pouvoir qui ont façonné la politique internationale au XIX^e siècle. S'appuyant sur l'analyse géopolitique d'Yves Lacoste, ce travail affirme, d'une part, qu'il est essentiel d'examiner les interconnexions et les interactions entre les différentes échelles territoriales et, d'autre part, qu'il faut adopter une vision historique à long terme, si on veut saisir le processus qui a conduit à la configuration finale des frontières du Mexique.

Este trabajo analiza la conformación del territorio mexicano a la luz de las relaciones de poder que moldearon la política internacional en el siglo XIX. Basándose en el análisis geopolítico de Yves Lacoste, el trabajo afirma, en primer lugar, que es esencial observar las interconexiones y la interacción entre las diferentes escalas territoriales; y, en segundo lugar, que es necesario adoptar una visión histórica de largo plazo, si queremos comprender el proceso que condujo a la configuración final de las fronteras de México.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Mexique, frontière, histoire, États-Unis, Guatemala

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