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**Electric Revolution:
Energy, Environment, and the State in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico**

This paper traces the material and spatial practices of state formation and nation building in the early twentieth-century through the approval, promotion, and construction of one of Mexico's earliest large-scale hydroelectric dams, as well as the process of grid expansion which followed. Proposed in 1905, La Boquilla was completed on the Rio Conchos in Chihuahua as revolution raged along Mexico's northern border. This project emerged from a confluence of diverse interests – venture capital from the banks of Montreal and Toronto, U.S. electrical expertise in the form of various General Electric holding companies, and the hydraulic engineering of British construction and oil magnate Weetman Pearson. Seeking to stamp state authority along Mexico's porous northern border, the concessionary land and water policies of autocratic president Porfirio Díaz created spaces primed for change.

As the living link between Porfirian dreams of electrical modernization and expanding North Atlantic flows of capital and technology, the powerful Terrazas family of Chihuahua were the prime movers in the hydroelectrification of the Rio Conchos. Formally linked to Mexico City through the state government of Chihuahua, this family was engaged in a broad range of informal activities upon which state power was built – infrastructural promotion, landholding, mining, and the international diplomacy necessary to all these activities. Yet the dam at La Boquilla operated in a scale which far exceeded any of these other activities, transcending national frameworks and fundamentally transforming society and the environment upon which it relied. Operating in this borderland space of productive difference – of property law, of economic means, and of natural resources – the Terrazas and their associates operated as brokers of state power.

The project at La Boquilla would outlive the Porfiriato, the Terrazas dynasty, and even the U.S. copper interests the dam was built to serve, further complicating the link

between infrastructural projects and state power. Like any large energy project, the dam not only represented change, but also produced the potential for change by an order of magnitude. La Boquilla was not simply an artifact of state, but also a constitutive element of state power, a fact which was not lost on post-revolutionary regimes. While the revolution had presumably rejected the Porfirian relationship with foreign capital, La Boquilla was spared, and remained in private hands until midcentury. With mines abandoned and excess power diverted southward to Torreón, the infrastructure built by this Porfirian conglomerate of investors and engineers continued to produce new social and political meanings and material realities in the decades following the revolution.

The case of La Boquilla calls into question the appropriate analytical scale of the state, its limits, and the range of practices through which it is defined. This attention to scale is intended to present such formally “external” processes of capital investment and technological change as normative elements of state formation. This also challenges the common framing of empire as inimical to the state, especially where empire is used to represent the imposition of one constellation of state interests upon another. Instead, this study seeks to highlight the practical commonalities between the practices of state and empire against the impulse to compartmentalize processes as either national or foreign.

By inserting materiality into the conversation, this paper seeks to describe infrastructures as sites of economic interests, social contestation, technological expertise, and political power – sites which then might be seen as analytically rich in the understanding of state practices. Environment is central to this project, as infrastructures represent sweeping spatial claims on resources, as well as the productive potential of these spaces. As such, energy regimes cannot be understood separately from the spaces in which they operate, nor the relationships of power through which they are produced and reproduced. In thinking through the state as a matrix of relationships, rather than a thing, it is hoped that some small insight might be brought to conversations of the chaotic revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods of Mexican history. More broadly, this paper seeks to assess the mutual shaping and reshaping of the material world at the interface between society and the state as a valuable methodological approach to understanding change over time.