

Notes on the Mexico-U.S. Cultural Border

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This essay is an invitation to think about the northern border from the ecological sphere, from the standpoint of the historic references of occupation of Mexico's northern desert, to the social sphere, both in terms of territorial limits and in the way that geographical borders also became cultural borders.

Given the diversity of groups they found in their path, the people who took it upon themselves to "conquer" the inland territories began by deciding what could be conquered: defining the "other," delineating it in a culturally homogeneous, conceivable space, making it visible. But by implementing colonial policies to control space and subdue its inhabitants, an infinite number of definitions emerged to reveal

the heterogeneity of the native population, their linguistic diversity, the multiple forms of political organization, the ways of appropriating space, the alliances and conflicts.

Since the origins of Mexico as a nation-state, the North has expressed its dual nature, that of being an imposing border and also of being extremely arid. The desert region, called the great Chichimeca, which later became a clear international divide, was conceived of as a no-man's-land, susceptible to conquest, the land of rebellious, unruly Indians. The use of the space traced by the original inhabitants was not recognized by the Spaniards, who considered it a territory to be conquered.¹

Hunters and gatherers optimally exploited a large part of the Sonora desert from season to season. They also defined the space in which the tribe or society could use natural resources. The Spaniards not only changed the original

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Photos by Hernán Salas Quintanal.

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territoriality, but also sought to modify the relationship of the indigenous with it by confining them to villages, thus destroying their foraging and hunting cycles and their food systems.

In the strict sense, desert means an abandoned, unpopulated, uninhabited space. In its ecological sense, it is a large body of land where vegetation and humidity are scarce and the harsh climate makes life difficult. Aridness comes both from the lack of rain and the soil's inability to preserve humidity; plants' permeability, evaporation and transpiration; and the intensity and length of sunlight, heat, atmospheric humidity and wind. Thus, in regions characterized by factors that limit the establishment of large populations of organisms, human beings have developed a culture—called a desert culture—with strategies oriented to dealing with environmental restrictions.²

In the desert culture, the arid environment establishes strict limits. However, when human society appropriates the space, it defines its borders, changing natural conditions into cultural resources. When a group faces a hostile environment it does so with its cultural arsenal, its values and forms of behavior, with its organization and technology, changing behavior patterns and resources and developing knowledge to help it adapt. This actually involves a profound transformation of the habitat, re-signifying its ecological

meaning with the incorporation of culture into the geographical space.

The bigger the limitations imposed by aridness, the more human beings have increased their capability to transform the environment. The most significant expression of this has been the processes of artificiality, accompanied by a high degree of mechanization and application of technology to agricultural, fishing, hunting and gathering activities. In Mexico's northern desert, the border is a recurring concept. It points to territorial limits as well as divisions in disciplines or group, class, ethnic and gender demarcations. Its definition has both conceptual and empirical bases with social, humanistic or cultural perspectives.

The 1848 shift to the south of the U.S.-Mexico border is another moment in the territorial fragmentation of the indigenous groups living in the area. The ferocious resistance of the region's peoples to the imposition of the Spanish conquistadors paradoxically managed to establish a certain social and socio-economic equilibrium, a specific way of handling resources and a sedentary life-style sustained by the combination of activities like hunting, fishing, gathering and agriculture.

This resistance, first to colonial policies and then to those of the republic, led to both countries militarizing their border areas and the indigenous groups apparently accepting a sedentary life. The form this process took on the U.S. side, confining the Indians to reservations, was not very different from the indigenous communities and *ejidos* that the Mexican state used to impose pacification.

The border is not a simple dividing line that the local inhabitants just accepted, leaving behind complex histories of relationships and social move-

ments. From that starting point, concepts like sovereignty, citizenship, nation-state, race, countryman or foreigner began to take on meaning, becoming run-of-the-mill terms in a region that had rapidly become bi-national. For both countries, the border was the self-confirmation of specific, significant traits. For Mexico, it was also a great region that separated and distanced it from its powerful northern neighbor.

A border is the work of two countries fighting to impose their nation-state projects. In both cases, the idea was to decimate and subdue the native population, make them speak the imperial language (English and Spanish, respectively), and impose specific forms of control and distribution of the land, a system of production based on agricultural exports, a single school system and subject them to a central government. The indigenous groups in Mexico's North ceased active resistance in the form of armed rebellion, but using their bi-nationality and ancestral mobility that eventually becomes trans-border mobility, they have developed resistance strategies to preserve their identities.

Yesterday, the Pápagos, Pimas, Yumanos; today the Zapotecs, Mixtecs, Nahuas. Cultural differentiation seeks to analyze combined processes of resistance, adaptation and change, from the perspective of great demographic and socio-economic dynamism, leaving to one side the reductionism of notions like Westernization, Hispanicization and acculturation. For that reason, the border should be defined from a multidimensional standpoint in which diverse cultures, societies, ethnic groups or modes of production enter into play.

Before the political-administrative border was established, these areas were situated on the margins of the burgeon-

ing national states, alien to economic interests, outside state control, an attraction for outsiders, non-conformists, migrants and colonists. Far from the center of power, from that time, they were established based on significant cultural and social diversity; the ever-changing line between settlements that pointed to the advance of civilization. However, they became key for the formation of the national states.

Today, the borders are a significant part of Western society's expansionism, which dismantles civilizations and cultures, fed by power relations. From the time that Frederick Jackson Turner's definition of the American border became famous in the political sphere, it has been analyzed as an unmovable, a-historical space separating two supposed socio-cultural realities: civilization and barbarism, a dichotomy that continues to function as a historic justification that allows the United States to proclaim itself the guardian of Western civilization creating a border as the universal example for separating the order of sedentary peoples from the disorder of nomadic peoples. Since that time, the migratory process has been instrumental: Mexico's poverty facilitates the attraction of abundant, cheap, unskilled, disciplined labor over long periods of time.

The desert's nomadic cultures were part of this border space. This is what the first colonizers who came from Sonora thought, as well as the Americans who later began the colonization of the Southwest, conceived as the nation in its infancy.

According to Carlos González, nativist ideology originated in the eighteenth century and, from its inception, preached the "natural" superiority of white Anglo Saxons over any other human group.³ In the nineteenth century, it was adopt-



ed by the economic, religious and political elites who saw the U.S. indigenous population and the waves of immigrants as a challenge to the racial and cultural purity of the Anglo-Protestant group that then governed the nation.

U.S. nativism spread into the government itself and was key in designing the country's most important migratory policies. Both Europe and the United States for the first time defined the "white race" as a privileged social group in world history. Nationalism developed as a result of these ideas, growing throughout the nineteenth century with tacit agreement on the part of the political and economic elites of Northern European extraction and academics, who from the institutions of higher learning and the press, created a narrative discourse that "propped up" the idea of Anglo-Saxon superiority.

The U.S. border is the farthest part of the pioneer settlements and also the dividing line with free lands. It is a region capable of returning to Man his purity; it is an area of violence and regeneration, the creator of a new man and a new, specifically American, nation.

This radical nativism based on the cultural limit of the border took on

the form of "Anglo-Saxonism" or white nationalism that gradually began to center its "doubts" on the immigrants pouring in from the south and Eastern Europe.

In Mexico's historical-cultural tradition, the northern border has been a rather undefined far-off space, a fearful place, "a land of savage Indians, nomadic groups who live from robbery and thievery," making up an ambiguous and perhaps conflictive relationship between Central Mexico and the North, which is recognized as part of the nation's territory, but as a heritage that is peripheral to the country's spatial and cultural heartland. The border context forced the emergence of a complex process of relationships and alliances that often makes it possible to question the weight of identity limits in the sense of cultural belonging, blurred in the face of complex social distortions that arise out of diverse policies and economies.

Today the material gap between the two nations is so vast and produces so many imbalances that any effort to turn the border into a place of great cultural wealth due to the multiplicity and variety of its exchanges and syncretisms becomes an offensive attempt to romanticize something that of necessity is conflictive. On the border, material and symbolic violence is a daily occurrence, stemming largely from the fact that the power relations and subordination

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crisscrossing the links between an imperial nation and a peripheral one are concentrated in a relatively small space, of a complexity and tension irreducible to peaceful, harmonious, easily understood border areas.

Given the complexity of what the border separates, it almost always takes on a material form. But, above all, it is a cultural construction that sparks events and situations present in daily life, in which many specific societies are articulated and interact. Crossing the border becomes, then, a challenge for those who, full of hope, seek a better life, even though it means living in the shadow of xenophobia. These are the paradoxes of the border and its transgression, which cannot be reduced to the material existence of a line or fence, which barely represents its symbol. The procedures for achieving it can never be simple or spontaneous. They always imply a certain dose of material and symbolic violence and the exclusion of some by others.

In contemporary societies, with the advent of telecommunications and the instant, simultaneous transmission of data and information, people's reasons for moving increase and accelerate. In that sense, the idea of geographic unity as elementary for understanding culture and society becomes obsolete.⁴ Territoriality is fragmented: the meaning of territory is transferred to contemporary

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nomads, is re-imagined and increasingly acquires a specific plasticity. Like a membrane, the border is asymmetrical-ly porous for human beings, information, knowledge, practices and goods, all of which have an impact on the plurality of individual and collective experiences and, of course, on development policies.

Today's desert inhabitants have built some borders and re-built others in order to both survive economically as individuals and achieve the survival of the ethnic group as such. To do this, they re-design their original nomadism in a transnational context, and design a multidimensional collective identity that makes it possible to deal with different situations.

The idea of the border linked to identity conceives of human groups separated from one another—or against one another—with each one occupying its territory, so that the migratory dynamic becomes central. In a transnational context, migrants re-design a difficult-to-explain break between the rural world and the rapid emergence of an urban industrial economy evident in almost all the states of the U.S. West, including California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, which to a great extent owe their economic vigor to a convenient proximity to Mexico and its abundant cheap, disciplined workforce kept in line by being undocumented. The populations re-signify an original mobility and conceive a collective identity that goes beyond parochial identifications of ethnic group, tribe, band or lineage. In that sense, the cultures of northern Mexico are pioneers in transposing ethnic-territorial, national and ethnic-cultural borders and in developing resistance strategies based on their transborder mobility and on the constant alteration of their identity,

which ends up by being inclusive, based on the principles of belonging to culturally, politically and socially imagined communities.⁵

The cultural mosaic of the construction and experience of the northern border is such that it cannot be dealt with as a geographical-social entity constant throughout history: quite to the contrary, it is a broad field in which cultural diversity is an expression of a socio-historical complexity that does not admit generalizations, much less simplistic explanations oriented to homogenizing the abstraction "north" in time and space. One of the fundamental dimensions of the concept "border" refers to the processes of identity, which do not necessarily correspond to territorial criteria; that is, they are based, rather, on a sense of belonging to a group and then what separates is being Indian or *ladino*, savage or civilized, national or foreign, native or stranger.

These are, then, cultural borders designed, imagined, negotiated and rethought by people who are geographically spread out in their day-to-day existence, indifferent to the material crossing of the line. In that sense, the concept of border regions emerges, in which particularly diverse societies are established. The nearest example is Mexico's northern border, which since it was created has been made up of a society of migrants that goes beyond the neighboring nations, characterized by the breadth of its territory, its economic dynamism and the existence of networks that change the operation and results of production processes, power and culture, a society based on the flows that individuals build to circulate toward, from and inside the region. The main characteristic of these movements, which have functioned as a trampoline, a bridge, a tunnel and a turn-

around point for migrants who are trying to get to the United States, is that their influence as such is greater than the flows of power.

Given the real possibility that this multi-culturalism could become a risk, states are forced to decide on rules for behavior within their borders, taking into account that the future co-existence of many social groups will be marked by ethnic and cultural pluralism, in which the issues of citizenship and pluralism will become central under rules that recognize individual and collective rights for all.

The border region, then, is made up of a materiality and an environment, a scenario in which social relations play out that include both a sense of localness and a sense of globality by involving different nationalities, cultures, lifestyles and languages. In this sense, the border space is the heritage of those that build it, live, move through and experience it, practices in which groups create their own identity and recognize themselves as situated, where they organize daily life around significant places, in such a way that borders stop being

simply a dividing line and become a space in which different societies converge, creating their own territorial dynamics.

Globalization brings us face to face with homogenization, which presupposes that all polyphonic elements are fated to be absorbed into a uniformity through cultural convergence as part of the political and social project of the dominant groups. Far from that uniformity, the global fluidness of symbols, messages and goods has sparked responses and resistance where the meanings are developed and recreated in specific local contexts. In this sense, the border continues to be as vital as it has been since its origins and throughout its development.

Politically speaking, it has created territorial and group divisions that have resulted in many forms of violence and social movements. Economically speaking, it has permanently changed its survival strategies, imposing constant challenges and opportunities that the groups living there have had to take advantage of to establish themselves and turn the region into a place of important resources

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that at some points have been very attractive. Culturally speaking, historical discontinuity has sparked different identity processes and scattered the population located in the region, which is experienced and inhabited by subjects with plural and sometimes contradictory identities and strategies that in daily life combine conflict, violence and social and environmental deterioration.

The lack of a developmental vision has turned the potential wealth of the meeting of different cultures into a cultural mosaic whose results sometimes question the nationalist strategies of the historical projects on both sides of the border. ■■■

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¹ For research about border groups living in arid areas, see the articles in Hernán Salas et al., eds., *Desierto y fronteras. El norte de México y otros contextos culturales* (Mexico City: IIA-UNAM/Plaza y Valdés, 2004).

² For information about the Mexican North's desert cultures, see *Revista Culturales* II, no. 3, January-June 2006, published by the Baja California Autonomous University (UABC).

³ Carlos González, "Purificando la frontera: eugenesia y política en la región," Hernán Salas et al., eds., *op cit.*, pp. 429-446.

⁴ Renato Ortiz, "Otro territorio," *Antropología* no. 12 (Madrid), October, 1996, pp. 5-22.

⁵ Everardo Garduño et al., *La frontera interpretada. Procesos culturales en la frontera norte de México* (Baja California: UABC, 2005).

