

# Reviews

## **Wetback Nation: The Case for Opening The Mexican-American Border**

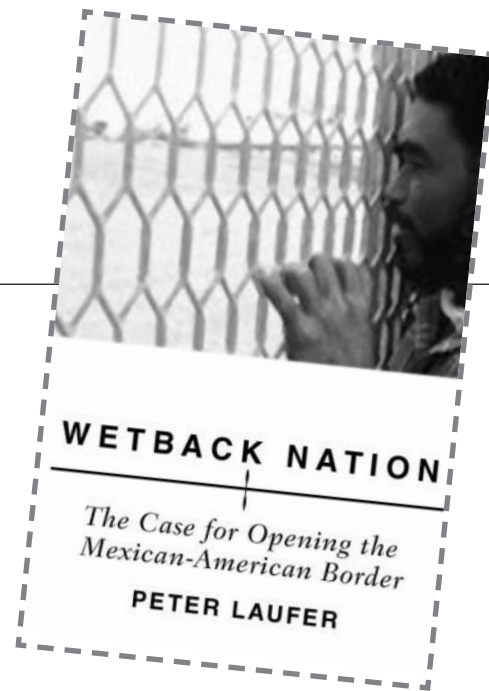
*Peter Laufer*

Ivan R. Dee, publisher  
Chicago, 2004, 302 pp.

MEXICO-U.S. CONNECTEDNESS  
A FASCINATING PARADOX<sup>1</sup>

It has always been thought that borders would be fertile if not pure spaces for the virtue and harmonious understanding between supposed equals, between countries that have to face common problems. For a long time, however, the border between Mexico and the United States has simultaneously been a wound, a window of opportunity, a space for the meeting of two worlds as immense as they are diverse and asymmetrical, limited and deeply troubled in their daily interaction. The border will nevertheless continue to be the possibility of reaching agreements about the many pending issues that require the best determination and intelligence on the part of both government and society to be solved to the satisfaction of all parties. But, above all, it continues to be a space that has prompted writing and reflection about a wealth of varied topics.

Authors from both countries have dealt with and analyzed this critical connectedness from the vantage point of journalism and academia. In both cases, the testimonies have allowed us to explain—but above all to elucidate—the immense complexity of our common existence. Both the explanations and the facts are a reflection of this complexity's having been constructed over a period of many decades, partially fed by the vision and the position that we Mexicans and Americans assume *vis-à-vis* the *other*. This is a link that takes the form of a paradoxical fascination, particularly on the Mexican side, an enchantment related in the first place to the process of modernization, always defined *vis-à-vis* the United States, whether favorably or not. As Octavio Paz says, the result has been that the passion of our political class and of some sectors of society “for U.S. civilization goes from love to bitter rancor, from adoration to horror.”<sup>2</sup> All this shows that connectedness is a historical category that gives a new and extraordinary dimension to the exegesis of the border and is, in addition, the immediate example of this universality. In today's United States, we Mexicans could see a vision of our future: “A mirror teller of tales: like the stepmother's mirror in the fairy tale. Every time we ask to see ourselves in it, it shows us the image of the other.”<sup>3</sup>



In *Wetback Nation's* 24 chapters, Peter Laufer offers a finely drawn picture of the border's turbulent activity. He does this using the fresh approach of free reporting, including fascinating testimonies, the mark of good journalism, representing a varied group of micro-histories that go to make up the great history of the saga of Mexican migration to the United States. If Laufer's book shows anything, it is that our complex and fascinating relationship with the Colossus of the North is not only unavoidable, but also can be taken good advantage of. What is more, by virtue of the enormous past that unites, inserts and positions Mexico and "what is Mexican" in the United States, more than that of the United States in Mexico, ours is a connectedness with many more links between societies than between governments. This is due to the several generations of Mexicans living in the United States and the constant pilgrimage of our countrymen to that country; all of this means that Mexico has a significant presence in U.S. daily life, an even greater presence than recalcitrant members of U.S. political and academic life accept, and of course, much greater than U.S. migrants in Mexico have.

Laufer's book demonstrates what has been a palpable fact since the nineteenth century: Mexicans have undertaken an interesting process of obtaining territorial, economic, cultural and political spaces, above all in the U.S. South, and with this dynamic, they are forging a vigorous sub-culture.

*Wetback Nation* —an undisputable, provocative title— is at the same time a premonition. Of the 12 million undocumented migrants who live, work, consume and pay income tax and social security, almost 78 percent are of Mexican origin. This book also underlines that this population is increasingly integrated and adapted to cultural diversity in U.S. territory. Other aspects of the phenomenon could not be underestimated and strong chapters explain the great suffering "wetbacks" face when trying to enter the country. The book also proposes through testimonies of Mexicans residing in the U.S. that the only way of regularizing their status as "wetbacks" will be with a broad, realistic migratory accord that takes into account the conditions existing in a migratory dynamic based to a large degree on the supply of and demand for cheap, irregular labor.

In effect, now that the discussion has taken place in the Senate about migratory reforms, testimonies like Laufer's could be key reference points for decision making in Washington. U.S. politicians would be wise to take advantage of the opportunity offered by the critical moment regarding migratory issues and, just as they quite rightly recognize the importance of promoting legal migration to their country, accept that border crossings and irregular Mexican migration to the United States are not the product of human whim. They are part of a world dynamic, which, in the specific case of these two nations, has essential economic explanations —among many others— that shed light on this phenomenon and this moment in history. **MM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A version in Spanish of this book was published in Mexico by Editorial Diana last February, under the title *Nación de mojados*. [Editor's Note.]

<sup>2</sup> Octavio Paz, *One Earth, Four of Five Worlds: Reflections on Contemporary History* (London: Carcanet Press Ltd., 1985), p. 141.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.