

The Mexico-Guatemala Border: *New Controls on Transborder Migrations in View of Recent Integration Schemes?*

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ABSTRACT

The Mexico-Guatemala border has historically been the site of many continuities and discontinuities: economic, demographic, environmental, cultural, ethnic, and political. However, recent transformations—due generally to political conflicts on both sides of the border—and economic integration—mostly trade-related—raise serious challenges to traditional mechanisms for the control and regulation of border dynamics. From a “national security” perspective, officials in both countries are calling for crime control in the area of drug, merchandise, and weapons trafficking. Most importantly, the Mexico-Guatemala border has confirmed its historical role as a place of intense population mobility, which requires appropriate regulation that will not impede the human or labor rights of migrants nor the well-being and sustainable development of the regions of origin and destination. Hence, governmental policies and international relations become focal points for discussion at both binational and multilateral levels.

Keywords: 1. border, 2. migrations, 3. integration, 4. Mexico, 5. Guatemala.

RESUMEN

La frontera México-Guatemala ha sido históricamente un ámbito de continuidades y discontinuidades: económicas, demográficas, ambientales, culturales, étnicas y políticas. En la época actual, transformaciones recientes y procesos de integración económica plantean serios desafíos a los mecanismos tradicionales para el control y la regulación de la dinámica fronteriza. Pero más importante, la frontera México-Guatemala ha confirmado su papel histórico como un ámbito de intensa movilidad poblacional, la cual requiere una regulación apropiada que no atente contra los derechos humanos o —en su caso— laborales de los migrantes, ni tampoco contra el bienestar y el desarrollo sustentable de las regiones de origen y de destino de estas personas. Por lo tanto, las políticas gubernamentales y las relaciones internacionales se convierten en elementos críticos de discusión, tanto en el nivel binacional como multilateral.

Palabras clave: 1. frontera, 2. migraciones, 3. integración, 4. México, 5. Guatemala.

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*INTRODUCTION*¹

This article will discuss the challenges the Mexico-Guatemala border faces in view of recently adopted and ongoing integration processes. Trade agreements will undoubtedly affect traditional local relations but will also have an impact internationally and regionally. Therefore, the analysis will move from a macro- to a micro-level, and it will also consider a meso-level that addresses the framework of continuities and discontinuities that have arisen during the historical process that shaped the border as a unique region, in contrast to other areas in Guatemala and Mexico.

Life in the Mexico-Guatemala border region has traditionally been distant from international and binational processes. Trade and population mobility came about primarily as part of a set of local activities, in a context of little or no regulation. International relations and trade have been increasing in importance, exerting an influence, both regionally and locally. These recent changes led to a scenario of challenges to a legal and institutional framework, which is increasingly being overwhelmed by the dimensions and characteristics of phenomena such as transborder migrations.

Specifically, population mobility has increased not only because of factors external to the border environment but also because it occurs in a more complex context in which processes intertwine to make regulation harder. Traditional and local mechanisms suffer from crises in international markets. For example, the current crisis in the international coffee market, which is continuing beyond the duration of its historical cycles, has disrupted the long-tolerated, scantily controlled temporary movements of Guatemalan agricultural workers, who harvest coffee on plantations in Southern Chiapas. The military, police officers, and other agents often subject routine border crossings to searches, using the argument that this is necessary to control criminal activity, even though no evidence exists of links between illicit activities and migration or migrants.

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ON INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARIES AND BORDER REGIONS

Border regions are territories with specific features. The nature and attainments of these regions are primarily defined in terms of their role as boundaries with other entities. This dimension does not necessarily refer to external or international borders, States neighboring other States, which leads some authors to speak of internal borders. The latter relate to differential conditions inside a country, that is, inequalities in the nation as a whole. This creates a notion of “foreigners in their own land” or of regions that are isolated or marginalized from national development.

Nevertheless, the constitution and development of nation-states² have led to the consolidation of boundaries between national entities³ whose definition is anchored in the concept of sovereignty. Moreover, some authors hold a formal and limited concept of borders, as a strictly political notion regarding the territories in which States exert sovereignty, understood as the power of the State in all its political dimensions (see also Foucher, 1986:56-58).

For some authors, we are currently living in “a world where borders, boundaries, and boundary regions have become zones of development, and where state and local governments are developing their foreign policies” (Zaretzky and Rosenberg, 1998:3). Hence, tension exists between the State and the borders it controls. Added to the inequalities resulting from national differences, border regions are subject to particular burdens and responsibilities. They are responsible for the defense of values, national identity, and even more importantly, national security. They are burdened with specific and special regimes that are not always advantageous for the inhabitants but rather may contain the elements of dissatisfaction and conflict.

For other authors, functional relations must be resolved and coexist within the framework of conflictive relationships (Ricq, 1983b:67-68). By extension,

²According to Peter Taylor (1994:151), “All social institutions exist concretely in some section of space, but State and nation are both peculiar in having a special relation with a specific place. A given State does not just exist in space, it has sovereign power in a particular territory. Similarly, a nation is not an arbitrary spatial given, it has a meaning only for a particular place, its homeland. It is this basic community of State and nation as both being constituted through place that has enabled them to be linked together as nation-state [...]”

³According to Immanuel Wallerstein (1987:316), “We live in states. There is a society underlying each state. States have histories and therefore traditions. [...] They have the boundaries, inside of which factors are ‘internal’ and outside of which are ‘external’. They are ‘logically’ independent entities such that, for statistical purposes, they can be ‘compared.’”

one can hypothesize that borders are the limits of people's identity or of their sense of nationality (Ricq, 1983a; Bustamante, 1989; Lozano R., 1990). According to Foucher (1997:24), "Beyond the technical problems, the problem of borders mirrors the challenge of the relationship with the Other and also with oneself, with the founding and the destroying myths of national identity" (author's translation).

Nationalism is a consequence of the process of the constitution of sovereignty and its role in the ideological formation of territories.⁴ Nevertheless, the theoretical conceptualization of such cultural elements is a matter of intense debate. This is due not only to its subjective nature but also to its formation as a historically conditioned process (Habermas, 1994; Entrikin, 1994:230-231).

Another substantial issue for the formation of borders is that, historically, they arise from a political definition and central decision, frequently disregarding or setting aside the interests of the divided areas and populations. This underlies the debate about the nature of borders as contexts for continuities and discontinuities. These arise primarily from the commonalities that existed before the delimiting of a border region and from the subsequent appearance of distinctions, which inevitably develop as a result of the border's role as a divider.

More recently, another issue has raised new questions about the changing nature and dimensions of borders. The characteristics of the so-called globalization process demand a rethinking of the role border regions play in the context of new economic relationships.⁵ This emerging role for border regions leads to tensions among local societies, regional authorities, and central governments. Local societies are concerned, primarily and understandably, with the concrete effects on their day-to-day activities and environment. Central governments principally respond to what they assume to be national interest concerning their position in international markets and relationships. Regional governments, pressured by the other two, constantly opposing forces, display a range of actions.⁶

⁴According to Alexander Murphy (1991:29), "Nationalism is [...] a territorial ideology since it is at heart an argument about the relationship between a people and geographic space."

⁵Nancy Zaretsky and Mark B. Rosenberg (1998:1) put it this way, "But even as globalization blurs the limits of territoriality, local and regional issues have gained new urgency as central governments become less capable of addressing these concerns."

⁶As Roxanne Euben (2002:24) mentions, quoting Featherstone (1990:6), "Although 'globalization' is often defined in primarily economic terms, it also entails the 'extension of cultural interrelatedness [...] linking together previous isolated pockets of relatively homogeneous culture which in turn produces more complex images of the other as well as generating identity-reinforcing reactions.'"

*HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE
MEXICO-GUATEMALA BORDER*

The current Mexico-Guatemala border has a long history of changeable and, at times, intense relations, many of them as old as the ethnic groups living in the area since the pre-Hispanic era. Nevertheless, one must remember that during the colonial period, boundaries between the two territories—the Viceroyalty of New Spain and the Capitanía General of Guatemala—reflected the administrative needs of the conquerors. New Spain and the Capitanía General were established as administrative units to separate two areas that operated under the control of distinct institutions and rules, although both depended primarily on the Spanish Crown (Castillo, 1997:8).

Following the independence of both these colonial territories, regional social dynamics led to the definition of a new border region. It was not a fluent and easy process, since it contributed to the tensions between two emerging and, from that time on, asymmetric societies (Giroto and Granados, 1997:290). There were times when limits were set with the use of force. After Mexico's annexation of the province of Chiapas and the subsequent incorporation of the neighboring province of Soconusco, the Mexican government sent military expeditions to confirm the extent of its new territory. With the signing of treaties at the end of the nineteenth century, the borders were finally delimited; both countries have progressively come to respect those boundaries (Toussaint, 1997).

No matter how different the historical paths Mexico and Guatemala have followed, an undeniable communality exists in many senses and dimensions on both sides of the border (Cruz Burguete, 1998). The descendants of the pre-Hispanic indigenous groups in the region maintain and express shared cultural features. International borders have long been something far from their daily dynamics and are, therefore, a meaningless obstacle for developing their interrelationships. As a result, kinship and community links between the two sides of the border have disregarded the increasing distance between the two societies.

One of the hypotheses sustained by the author is that, by the early twentieth century, continuities and discontinuities along the border began to shape its subsequent condition. This article will not test that argument but will posit it as a general context necessary for understanding the nature of changing trans-

border relations. Contrasts in the political, economic, and social development of the two countries ultimately resulted in asymmetries and considerable inequalities, which found their meeting (or breaking?) point in the border region.⁷ Officials sent from the political centers (capital cities) to manage the international boundaries followed guidelines and rules, which eventually created borders for those territories that previously had constituted only arenas of loose regional social dynamics, and for the ties existing among the inhabitants.

A RECENT HISTORY OF CONFLICTS AND NEW TENSIONS

The Central American countries experienced severe turmoil during the 1980s. Although social conflict reached critical levels in three countries—Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala—the crisis affected the whole region, and neighboring countries experienced economic, social, and political effects (Castillo and Palma, 1999). Perhaps one of the most important was the displacement of large populations, especially those fleeing war-torn areas.

In that context, the northern edge of the Central American region was the Guatemala-Mexico border. Those who pointed to warning signs expressed concern, based on the questionable assumption that the social conflict might cross this border and spread like an epidemic. U.S. supporters of the “domino theory,” in a line of argument strongly fed by Cold War ideology, maintained that the “revolutionary fire” would spread across the southern Mexican border, cross its territory, and reach the southern border of the United States.

History showed that deeply rooted, structural conditions of inequality as well as a lack of social justice and democracy were closely related to, and might even explain, the Central American conflicts. The expressions of armed conflict were largely due to the absence of democratic spaces for the expres-

⁷Many historians and analysts of Mexico's modern history argue that the southeastern territories did not benefit equally from the 1910 Revolution's conquests in the economic, social, and political ambits. However, evidence shows that although social, economic, demographic, and political indices for these areas are the lowest of any in Mexico, they have systematically been much better than those of their Guatemalan neighbors. (For some of these indices, see Ordóñez, 1997).

sion of social needs. Powerful groups developed and installed authoritarian regimes to preserve systems of domination and exploitation of large masses of the population, giving rise to repressive schemes that persecuted and silenced dissenting voices (Castillo, 1996).

Consequently, the Guatemala-Mexico border became the northern limit of the conflict, and it was, indeed, the dividing line between two quite different political and social systems. In previous decades, the Mexican government and society had received Central American individuals and families who had to leave their countries because of direct persecution and well-founded fears for their security and lives. The Latin American tradition and instruments of asylum proved to be a useful basis for granting protection in such cases.

However, the conflict in the final decades of the twentieth century was very different in terms of fleeing populations. Although a large part of the Central American displaced population moved only within the region, Guatemalans soon started to cross the Mexican border. Shortly afterward, other Central American nationals followed the same route, under diverse modalities and circumstances. Among these increasing flows of anguished people fleeing their place of origin were those recognized as Guatemalan refugees, most of whom left borderland communities and crossed the international boundary, seeking protection and settling, especially, in the state of Chiapas.

The sudden presence of a large number of foreigners living under difficult conditions—and, above all, for an indefinite period—raised concern in several sectors. Positions varied, ranging from those who immediately expressed and performed acts of solidarity to those conservatives who felt that the situation would become a national-security issue and might extend the conflict into Mexico itself. Fortunately, civil society and the international community soon emphasized that this was an issue of humanitarian assistance, in which the government and society of Mexico had a definite role to play in accordance with universal principles, even though Mexico was not a signatory to the United Nations Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (see also Comar-Acnur, 1999; Acnur-Mexico, 2000).

In spite of political reorientation, the border region was subject to continuous tensions. Refugees wanted to stay close to the border, as that meant being close to their places of origin, which might make it easier to return as soon as circumstances changed in their countries. Meanwhile, the military—which

had developed the counterinsurgency campaign that had led to the refugee crisis—accused the refugees of collaboration with the guerrillas. Soon, arguments circulated that refugee camps in Mexico were sheltering wounded or pursued insurgents. This claim constituted the basis for attacking some of these camps, which involved crossing international boundaries to trespass on Mexican soil, in open violation of Mexican sovereignty.

One can easily understand that the position of the Mexican government was complex. Internally, pressure was growing to strengthen controls over the southern border and to declare related issues a matter of “national security,” a label ambiguously used and even less clearly defined in Mexican political discourse. On the other hand, the government had promoted an active foreign policy oriented toward solving the regional conflict through a pioneering role in international forums, such as the Contadora Group. The search for coherence between Mexico's foreign policy and its position regarding not only the refugees but also the surveillance of its southern border finally resulted in a policy of humanitarian refugee assistance combined with lax border control.

Pacification processes ended open conflicts in the Central American countries, and, before the signing of the peace agreements, led to the return of large numbers of refugees to their home countries. However, their presence in the receiving countries, and especially in the places where they settled, left indelible marks and deep-rooted relations with the local populations and communities (Kauffer, 2000). Their contribution to local and regional economies is indisputable: The sudden presence of the refugees, supported by international aid-organization funding, enhanced the dynamics of local markets and trade while simultaneously contributing to a reorganization of, and increase in, productive activities.

The social and cultural maps of the border region gradually but substantially changed, and a feasible hypothesis is that—in spite of the return of the migrants—new social links along the border formed from this life experience. Moreover, as a significant proportion of former refugees remained in their places of settlement, now transformed into Mexican towns, new conditions of life arose, along with, in many cases, the search for citizenship. However, those who remained did not rupture their bonds with their compatriots who had returned home. This is part of this new, complex set of emerging transborder relationships (Castillo, 1999).

A NEW SCENARIO FOR CROSS-BORDER RELATIONS

Economic links across the Guatemala-Mexico border—and, by extension, with the rest of Central America—have not traditionally been very strong. Asymmetries between the size and diversity of the economies primarily account for a lack of more dynamic trade. However, during the last decade, changes occurred that were unfavorable for Central American countries: Imports from Mexico have systematically increased and the trade balance is increasingly positive for Mexico (Chanona and Martínez, 2001:81-85; Pape, 1997:241).

Beginning in the first half of the twentieth century, Mexico significantly transformed its production, through a growing industrial sector and the services associated with this kind of economic development. Central American countries, in contrast, maintained the colonial model of agricultural exports. Their economies rest mainly on labor-intensive activities, and they are largely dependent on international markets, with their unstable prices and demand levels.

Mexican economic policy had to provide extensive infrastructure to support industrial growth and modernize some agricultural activities. Likewise, an important social infrastructure also contributed to improving conditions of life for large sectors of Mexico's population, leading to meaningful broadening of its middle class, strengthening of the internal market, and support for the intense dynamism of its growing economy.

Meanwhile, the Central American countries generally did little to transform their economies and almost nothing to change their unequal income-distribution schemes. The Central American Common Market experiment of the 1960s was successful in creating opportunities mainly for foreign investment, which took special advantage of a broadened regional market. However, the integration model soon reached its saturation point because the failure to modify the income-distribution schemes effectively restricted the internal markets. The failure to integrate the set of the small Central American economies, combined with the national and regional political conflict of the 1970s, led to a regional economic crisis (León, 2001).

In this context and from a macro point of view, the Mexico-Guatemala border became the concrete reference point for the increasing discontinuities and asymmetries between both countries and more broadly, with the neighboring region. Nevertheless, in local and regional terms, the border maintained a rela-

tively dynamic trade relationship, albeit one that was persistently favorable to Mexico's interests (Castillo and Palma, 1999:303-6; Chanona and Martínez, 2001).

THE NAFTA PERSPECTIVE IN THE 1990S

A series of debates in the signatory countries preceded the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). One of these discussions, but surely not the most important one, dealt with the likely evolution of the emerging economic bloc's area of influence. Another highlighted the macroeconomic benefits of the Agreement, but also emphasized the likely regional effects,⁸ some of which could result in “losing” regions and economic sectors and sharpening the prevailing inequality (Williams, 1990).⁹

Some of the analysts and actors involved in the NAFTA negotiations expressed their views regarding the likely fate of Mexico's southern border after the Agreement's implementation. NAFTA supporters suggested—usually implicitly, although some stated so openly—that beginning in 1994, the boundaries of “the First World” would shift to the southern end of the new economic bloc (Flores A., 1993:367, citing a statement attributed to an unidentified source in the Mexican embassy). This position was fed by the view that Mexico's participation in trade liberalization and economic exchange would certainly improve its economy, and therefore, to the well-being of its population, despite structural and long-time inequalities and contrasts with regard to the United

⁸The NAFTA has created a new system for the exchange of goods and investment in North America that emphasizes connections and transborder interaction. Not all NAFTA subregions will benefit evenly nor will they remain as they appear today (Zaretzky and Rosenberg, 1998:9).

⁹Rafael Tamayo Flores, in an assessment of the NAFTA's impacts on local economies, focusing on the state of Oaxaca as a case study, affirms, “In Oaxaca, as well as in Chiapas and Guerrero, the other southern states, there was a slightly above-average growth performance for GDP per capita between 1993 and 1995.” In a footnote, he remarks, “However, it should be noted that if the period 1985-1993 is considered, which actually represents the stage of dramatic economic opening preceding and consolidated by the NAFTA, Oaxaca's GDP per capita underperformed [...] A similar but less dynamic trend was recorded, however, in all northern states. [...] In part, the answer lies in the inter-state population growth differentials and the influence of inter-state migration flows. [...] In sum, Oaxaca's experience overall is consistent with conventional expectations regarding the relative performance of lagging regions in the face of economic integration given their disadvantages in terms of lacking the conditions for the attraction of investment on a large scale [...] Further analysis is certainly needed [...] Nevertheless, it is very likely that the case of most other lagging Southern states, particularly Chiapas and Guerrero, would be highly consistent with Oaxaca's scenario” (Tamayo Flores, 1999, 25-26).

States and Canada. It was argued that the gap separating Mexico from its trade partners would shrink in the medium term, whereas Mexico would distance itself from its southern neighbors, especially the nearby, but weak, Central American economies.

The terms of commercial opening in the recently signed Generalized Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) also supported that line of argument. Those who had openly advocated the liberalization of the Mexican economy since the mid-1980s, mainly as a recipe to counter the effects of the economic crisis at the start of that decade, dominated the internal debate. The firm belief that trade opening was urgently needed in order to break with the prevailing model, which constituted an obstacle for the growth of the economy, supported their position. They believed that protectionism restrained the progress of the Mexican economy and its success in international markets, as well as limiting increases in productivity levels, which would mean less competitive schemes for its products. Another encouraging argument was Mexico's admission to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Nevertheless, after seven years of the NAFTA, data do not show the anticipated improvements: Whether in economic or social terms, marked differences remain between the northern countries and their partner south of the Rio Grande. An analysis of wages, an indicator of inequality commonly used when comparing economies, show that the U.S. labor market offers wages that are more than four times higher than those of the Mexican market (assessed in terms of minimum wages).¹⁰

It may be questionable to use data that are more comprehensive concerning the average living conditions of these populations. However, economic conditions aside, some indices confirm notable differences between the Mexican population and those living in the other NAFTA countries. For instance, Mexico's Human Development Index (0.784, based on figures for 1998) places the country in 55th position, which is in the Medium Human Development group, whereas Canada (0.935) and the United States (0.934) are first and third respectively, in the High Human Development group (PNUD, 2000).

¹⁰The index was estimated to be 4.87 in 1996. Two projections—based on two hypotheses, one high (relatively moderate unemployment rates) and the other low (stable or declining GDP growth rates)—predicted that the index could reach 4.1 and 6.01, respectively (Conapo, 1999: Table 1, 43).

Obviously, this is not an encouraging situation, since a decade ago, the gap was less pronounced. Around 1987, Mexico's index was 0.876, placing it 40th, in the High Human Development group. Canada (0.983) and the United States (0.961) ranked 5th and 19th respectively (PNUD, 1990). Methodological differences and the general reliability of sources aside, the situation expressed by the indices seems to confirm that little has changed to favor the reduction of the gaps between the living conditions of Mexicans in comparison with those of Canadians and Americans.¹¹

The GDP per capita is another index that expresses the differences in development levels. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) has labeled the 1980s as "the lost decade," which was evident in the general performance of this index for the Central American countries and Mexico. Nevertheless, the 1990s were touted as a period of overall economic recovery, especially because peace agreements were signed in the countries in conflict during the first part of the decade. However, figures show the unstable and fluctuating behavior of these economies, making it impossible to claim the achievement of the goal of reactivating production, and with it, employment generation.¹²

In addition to comparing data on national economic performance and average living conditions, an analysis must consider the specific meso- and micro-level situations for the populations on each side of a border. Important factors include each nation's overall political reality and its relationships with its border partner as well as the historical background of each country and the tempo or rhythm of processes arising from economic agreements. The NAFTA established a gradual calendar for progressive, step-by-step implementation of its instruments, which led people to argue that positive effects would appear

¹¹One should use these indices with care. Their design and construction entail conceptual and methodological problems: Regardless the advances achieved, they can also have other kinds of problems, due to source of the data they employ. Notably, despite the short periods under consideration, since the 1998 report (based on figures for 1995), a sharpening of inequality between the analyzed countries is visible. In 1995, Canada and the United States ranked 1st and 4th on the Human Development Index, while Mexico was in 49th position, which still placed it in the High Human Development group (PNUD, 1998). However, by 1997, inequalities had grown more acute: the United States and Canada now ranked 1st and 3rd, respectively, but Mexico had dropped to 50th, placing it in the Medium Human Development group (PNUD, 1999).

¹²The case of Mexico is a little different. The "crisis of 1994" strongly affected the Mexican economy, so that the recovery immediately after (US\$3,470, the highest, in 1998) only reached the index value recorded for 1981 (US\$3,480).

only gradually, over a long period. However, these progressive achievements have yet to materialize, and on the contrary, worrisome signs exist, such as the case of Mexican agriculture, which has not only slowed but may be stagnating or definitively lagging behind.

THE MOST RECENT INTEGRATION PROCESSES

Despite Mexico's incorporation into the NAFTA, the ideology of opening markets as a way to re-launch its economy has led the government to consider other integration schemes. These have included the attractiveness of reaching free-trade agreements with countries as geographically distant as Chile, and more recently, an understanding with the European Union, which is currently deemed to be the "alternative" or "option" for Mexican exports, given the imminent U.S. economic recession.

These developments are all very new, making it hard to uncover the reasons and priorities behind the process of trade-agreement negotiation between Mexico and the Central American countries (Tercer Seminario-Taller, 2000). The social, rather than the physical, proximity to Costa Rica may have favored the initial steps toward, and solidification in 1995, of the first trade agreement with a Central American country. In 1997, Mexico reached a second arrangement, this time with the weak Nicaraguan economy, devastated after more than a decade of political and armed conflicts.

However, the most drawn-out process and potential source of tension was an agreement with the so-called Northern Triangle, comprising Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Although negotiated as a single multilateral agreement, the final arrangement consisted of three bilateral agreements taking effect in March 2001. Obviously, the main factors that these negotiation processes must address are the asymmetries between the Central American countries and Mexico (Tercer Seminario-Taller, 2000; Cepal, 2000). The refusals and resistance arise from disadvantages inherent in the overwhelming size, and consequent differences between, the powerful Mexican economy and the weak Central American economies. In contrast, "Mexico's importance as a gateway to NAFTA for the region's other countries is notable, as is the expectation that it will maintain a degree of autonomy in relation to U.S. foreign policy" (Demyk, 1997:239; author's translation). I would add that Mexico may also maintain a

degree of autonomy in regard to the positioning of the Central American nations as they face negotiations for the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas.

Furthermore, the history of economic exchanges between Mexico and all the Central American countries reflects deep inequalities between the former and the small economies south of the Suchiate (Chanona and Martínez, 2001:82, 85). An issue under debate is that—as presented in NAFTA—trade and derived investments could contribute in the short or medium term to closing the gaps, especially through job creation, development of new productive activities, lessened dependence on the extra-regional markets for traditional products, broadening of the internal market without an income-redistribution scheme, and joint equity ventures, among other things.

Some analysts argue that in order to benefit from integration processes, strong political decisions and action are required to overcome traditional barriers and surpass structural constraints (Guerra Borges, 2001:262-264). Parallel mechanisms of cooperation—such as those derived from the Tuxtla process started in 1991¹³—are judged meaningful actions to help Central American countries face the challenge (Solís Rivera, 2001). However, Central American economic statistics on international trade relationships show the need for deep reforms and policy changes to develop a strategy to participate in future integration processes (Ramírez López, 2001).

THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL POPULATION MOVEMENTS ACROSS BORDERS

Borders are, as a rule, backdrops for a variety of interactive processes between the societies that they separate. However, their condition is a byproduct of historical processes whose consequences surpass their function as borders. This is the

¹³The Tuxtla Process has been praised as “the most authentic demonstration of the new climate of understanding and cooperation between Mexico and Central America, [...] [which is] a modality of political dialogue at the highest level that began in the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez [Chiapas, Mexico] [...] and deepened in later encounters” (Solís Rivera, 2001:212; author's translation). According to Luis Guillermo Solís, the Tuxtla Process comprises three dimensions: 1) a framework for the settlement of a new regional agenda of cooperation; 2) a process of institutionalization of bonds; and, 3) a forum for political dialogue. However, a preliminary evaluation of the scant achievements of the Tuxtla Process should consider the difficulties stemming from the unstable situation in the Central American economies and political systems, as well as Mexico's clear and explicit strategy of political dialogue and cooperation toward its southern neighbors. For a description of the Tuxtla mechanism, see also Bermúdez Torres, 2001:173-177.

case of the Guatemala-Mexico border, which, precisely because of historical relationships, illustrates the role of ruptures and of continuities (Mañach, 1970:26, 29). Historically based, existing community relations create links that persist and surpass, to different degrees, the role that territorial limits fulfill. It is perhaps relevant to restate the question Vanneph posed (1997:29) as to whether the

border region can also become [...] something else, an emerging transborder region, when market forces overcome the obstacles people conventionally set and lead to economic and migratory dynamics, inducing on both sides of the border evolutions, solidarities, and convergences (author's translation).

Therefore, the boundaries and border region of Mexico with Central America, and especially with Guatemala, have historically been the backdrop for various population movements of diverse intensities, compositions, volumes, and modalities, depending on the moment and place. Unquestionably, population mobility is an essential part of the richness inherent in interactions between neighbors, specifically in border regions. The Mexico-Guatemala border has experienced fluctuating and changing population mobility in accordance with the intensity and oscillations of the relationship throughout its history.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the introduction of coffee agriculture in the region of Soconusco, Chiapas, was immensely important because it contributed to agricultural exports, thus attracting foreign currency. From the beginning, coffee production led to temporary movements of a segment of the Guatemalan labor force, which traveled to the region to fulfill labor demands and sustain production, especially during the harvest. By the second half of the twentieth century, this movement had grown, from one with relatively low flows of workers, primarily from Chiapas's Los Altos region, to a major stream, mostly of Guatemalan workers. Today, the workforce in coffee-producing farms and *ejidos* is composed almost entirely of Guatemalan workers,¹⁴ who are essential for the production of the crop. Notably, no matter the

¹⁴The *ejido* is an agricultural institution stemming from the Mexican Revolution, established as a response to the demands of the peasants for productive land. Originally, it was both a collective modality for access to land and a model of an organization operating for the benefit of each of its members. *Ejidors* remained the property of the Mexican government, with clear restrictions on sale or leasing of their lands. However, at the start of the 1990s, constitutional reform allowed *ejido* members to sell land or enter joint enterprises with private capital. In Chiapas, the *ejidos* supply a significant portion of coffee production, mainly in certain micro-regions. However, they face major disadvantages—in terms of volume, quality, variety, use of machinery, financing, payment of wages, and in general, better production conditions—when compared to privately owned farms.

changes experienced by the Mexican economy and production, life in the Soconusco region continues to depend on this plantation economy as well as on labor-intensive forms of production (Castillo, 2000a).

On the other hand, as is often the case in border areas, the presence of people moving in both directions and for a variety of purposes has fortified this region. The importance of regional and local trade, based on exchanges advantageous for both economies, is indisputable, mainly because of the complements between agricultural products, primarily Guatemalan vegetables, and Mexican manufactures. As already noted, border dynamics are not limited to economic relationships; historically, processes of exchange and interconnection between people, families, and communities have existed, favored by bonds of continuity prevailing among populations sharing many common features.

RECENT TRENDS IN AND PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSBORDER MIGRATIONS

Until now, transborder population movements have been the most intense along the boundary between the Mexican state of Chiapas and the neighboring Guatemalan *departamentos*.¹⁵ Historical factors, in addition to recent economic, political, and cultural events, explain the placement of the greatest interaction in the coastal areas and the foothills on each side of the border.

Like other border activities, migratory dynamics have substantially changed in recent years. Economic growth, despite longstanding inequalities, has opened the way for greater trade and growing and more complex population mobility. Additionally, strong flows are beginning to come from other, more distant regions. The presence of diverse populations has introduced new features into the region, as it has become a transit zone for large numbers of people of different origins and heterogeneous profiles. In that sense, it is likely that the region is continuously reaffirming its role in what Faret (1997:40-41) calls the “migratory moment.”¹⁶

¹⁵The *departamento* is the second level of political-administrative unit in Guatemala, somewhat similar to the state in other countries, although lacking autonomy from the central government. It comprises *municipios*, the smallest units of local government.

¹⁶“It encompasses the importance of the experience of migration at a personal level [...] since for many, crossing a border for the first time turns out to be a particular moment in their lives, an experience where risk, loneliness, and fear mix. In that moment, the migrant lives for him(her)self the experience found in the stories of so many others about the border and its crossing” (Faret, 1997:40-41; my translation).

Two main flows have increased recently. One is the traditional movement of border populations—commuters, daily transborder crossers, and others—who, in many cases, have settled in Mexican communities and villages along the border, with the prospect of remaining there permanently, something common in many border settings. Another increase is visible in the seasonal movements of agricultural workers employed on the coffee plantations. We also should not forget the relatively sudden and, in many senses, dramatic influx of a segment of the Guatemalan rural population fleeing for their lives into Mexican territory at the beginning of the 1980s. Because of Guatemala's internal armed conflict (which was witnessing the military's highest-ever levels of aggression against its border communities), these migrants were soon labeled as *refugees*, although that was a nonexistent category under Mexican law. The proximity of those communities to Mexican territory was a determining factor in their search for humanitarian protection and assistance.

The presence of the refugees—most of the Guatemalans have resided in Mexico for more than 15 years—had a far-reaching impact on the settlement area. Researchers have documented the social and cultural exchanges and trade between the Guatemalan refugees and the people in the surrounding communities, who supplied unconditional solidarity and support in the first stages of refugee settlement (Freyermuth and Godfrey, 1993). Later, new types of economic, social, and cultural relationships emerged as links developed, stemming from the stability of the so-called *campamentos* (refugee camps) and the local dynamics of Mexican communities (Freyermuth and Hernández, 1992; Hernández Castillo *et al.*, 1993).

During the 1990s, two remarkable processes determined the future of this refugee population. One was the organized repatriation, which began in 1993 when, with international mediation, the refugees and the governments signed an agreement. Second, the Mexican government's implementation of the Program of Migratory Stabilization led to the progressive, definite settlement of those who had decided to stay in Mexican territory, nearly one third of the total “recognized refugee population” (Castillo, 2000b).

Nevertheless, people of different origins—primarily, although not exclusively, from the neighboring Central American countries—in transit through the region to the United States represent the migratory flow that generates the greatest concern, both internally and internationally. This major undocumented or unauthorized flow began to appear in the mid-1980s, with the intensification of social and political conflicts in the neighboring region. By then,

the flow of refugees—mostly Guatemalans—had reached a level of stability in terms of volume and mobility, so that this other flow was recognized as somewhat different in terms of its social composition and the means of transit it adopted.

During the 1990s, this migratory flow changed and exhibited remarkable growth. Due to its nature, it has been very difficult to measure its dimensions or establish the migrants' profiles. However, indirect evidence indicates that it is both diversifying and increasing. Statistics from Mexican authorities on deportation or *devolución* (turning back)¹⁷ of undocumented or unauthorized individuals and groups, primarily in the border region, illustrate this.¹⁸ These figures are only an indirect indicator of migration behavior: They respond to or are influenced by specific events, actions of migration officials, and even the efficacy of operations, which is frequently determined by available or assigned resources. Throughout the 1990s, with the exception of one year, the Mexican authorities annually performed more than 100,000 deportations and rejections, an average of nearly 10 000 per month and more than 300 per day. Preliminary annual figures for 2 000 register more than 140 000 events.

For the Mexican government, the issue of migratory flows is a high priority because it influences the relationship with Central American countries and, in particular, the binational border agenda with the Guatemalan government. The increase in population mobility—under very troubling conditions—has brought about the adoption of various measures. Some have questionable consequences from the perspective of the security and protection of human rights and dig-

¹⁷The terms Mexican authorities use to refer to these actions have changed with time, and the author's translations are personal interpretations that differ significantly from the terminology employed by other countries' agencies, that is, those the INS and U.S. legal and administrative entities generally employ. *Devolución* is the term currently used for the immediate removal of a person who is in Mexico without authorization. This is a form of "turning back," that is, a kind of expulsion, but not a "voluntary return under safeguards," which is the closest equivalent action carried out by the Border Patrol on the Mexico-U.S. border (INS, 1997, 169). The term *rechazo* (rejection) is applied when authorities impede the entry of foreigners who—in their opinion—lack adequate migration documents or who do not fulfill current requirements.

¹⁸Castillo (forthcoming) contains the most complete and current statistics of deportations and devolutions available. However, the most outstanding features of these statistics are that they reflected sustained high levels—150 000 events per year (10% of the number performed by the INS agents on the U.S.-Mexico border)—and almost 50% of the migrants apprehended declare themselves to be Guatemalan nationals, followed by citizens from Honduras and El Salvador in that order.

nity, while others may be encouraging, as is the case of the creation of the so-called Beta Groups.¹⁹

Recently, displaced populations have increasingly transited ever more isolated routes, extending to other neighboring—and previously unused—regions. For a long time, the state of Chiapas was the border entity per excellence and, therefore, the communications link with Central America, favored because of its infrastructure and exchange relationships. It was an obvious choice as the privileged area for the entry and transit of migrants. Nevertheless, policies aimed at controlling and deterring undocumented migrants, in addition to other actions aimed at pursuing criminals, have displaced migrants to extremely risky border zones, such as northern Chiapas, and to the states of Tabasco and Campeche and neighboring territory in Guatemala.

POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF MIGRATIONS

Hence, the migratory issue is obviously a current and future priority for the Mexico-Central America border, specifically for Guatemala and the state of Chiapas. However, one should recall that as the NAFTA went into operation, an armed uprising took place in the region, bringing about one of Mexico's most important national political events in recent years. The active presence of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) accomplished its aim of attracting the attention of not only the international community but, in one way or another, every social sector in Mexico.

Since the armed movement and its social bases of support emerged, the Mexican government has encouraged and pursued a series of actions parallel to its unsuccessful efforts at dialogue and bargaining. These initiatives have ranged

¹⁹The Mexico-Guatemala border in recent years has been—the scene for enforcement of surveillance and control of people in transit. Although the measures adopted differ from those the U.S. government uses along its border with Mexico, similar effects are being observed: Unauthorized migrants are using different, riskier routes, and seeking the assistance of individuals—not necessarily “traffickers”—as guides along those routes, sometimes with lethal consequences for the migrants. The Beta Groups, squads combining officials belonging to different agencies, do not exercise migration control over undocumented people but protect them from criminals and corrupt agents, as well as providing information to protect them from additional risks while in transit.

from large investment and social development programs to the intimidating presence of the military, all of which have inevitably affected daily life in the region. Therefore, given the resources the “center” (the central government along with dominant sectors in central Mexico) expends on the border region, it cannot afford to view the migratory phenomenon as an external issue.

Analysis of the regional situation should also consider the frequent connections made between migrations and migrants and a variety of criminal practices, such as drug trafficking, prostitution rings, trafficking in minors, smuggling, and arms trafficking. These connections have no clear foundation in reality but rather are a byproduct of a vague ideology of “national security.”²⁰ The scenario is even more complex since the need to pursue “migrant traffickers,” as they are widely known, is a justification for many operations and actions. From my point of view, the profile officials have constructed of these traffickers has been, and is still, partial and insufficient. Moreover, those who truly benefit from the traffic in migrants undoubtedly have a connection to networks of corruption.

Until now, the overwhelming importance of Mexican emigration to the United States has relegated to a secondary position the issue of immigration into Mexico. Oddly, something similar has happened in the Central American countries, where governments are primarily concerned with the eventuality of the deterrence or even the reduction of remittances sent by their successful emigrants, whether due to a mass deportation of those residing in the United States or a more efficient U.S. containment policy.

More recently, the migration issue has gained importance with reforms to U.S. immigration law, which now subjects immigrants assumed to be involved in criminal activity to deportation and treatment that may violate their human rights. The return, sometimes under very shameful conditions, of these detainees to their countries of origin attracted the attention of public opinion and demanded action by the Central American governments to ensure the integration of returned nationals and to guarantee them a dignified life, all of which was covered in detail by the mass media.

²⁰This ambiguity leads to an increasing participation of the armed forces. As Andreas and Price note, “With security policy focusing increasingly on policing, the traditional distinctions between external and internal security—so central to the old paradigm—begin to break down [...] In short, there is a growing fusion between the world of military affairs and the world of police affairs” (Andreas and Price, 2001:52).

At the regional level, a forum to address the growing and interconnected phenomena of Central American migrations to the North was established in 1996. Representatives from the governments of North America, Central America, and the Dominican Republic meet periodically in the Regional Conference on Migration (originally known as “Proceso Puebla”) to examine and discuss the regional dimension of migratory processes. Although it is not a decision-making forum, the high stature of its members (vice ministers of the Interior and Foreign Affairs) has created an adequate environment to focus on the causes, impacts, and conditions in which regional migrations occur. Participants have given special attention to the links between migration and both human rights of migrants and the broad concept of development. A specific and notable feature of the process is the growing and critically important direct participation of civil organizations involved in migration issues in the region's countries, which have organized themselves under the umbrella of the Regional Network of Civil Organizations for Migration (Bermúdez Torres, 2001:179-181; Castillo, in print).

However, little has been said regarding the internal effects of emigration from the Central American societies. The few available studies on the profile of emigrants lead to an obvious conclusion: Most are old enough to participate in the workforce and, thus, their ongoing departure is costly for national capacities in terms of human capital.²¹ Moreover, a series of collateral effects exist, especially concerning family disintegration, whose consequences start to emerge in different ways, mainly in family abandonment as well as behavioral irregularities, especially among the most vulnerable members of the family unit. On the other hand, the sending of remittances—considered to be an achievement for migrants who manage to insert themselves into the U.S. labor market—may be more than just the first step on a path leading to a growing dependence on an external economy: It may also exacerbate social inequalities.

Economic indices illustrate, in general, signs of a weak and fluctuating recovery by the Central American economies following the start of the peace processes in the region. The growth rates for per capita GDP reflect both a limited capacity to reactivate productive capacities as well as the existence of a persistently expanding population that poses a challenge for development while

²¹Castillo (forthcoming) analyzes the primary sociodemographic characteristics of Central Americans residing in the U.S. as reported by the Current Population Survey (CPS, 1998). This survey, carried out by the U.S. Census Bureau, emphasizes the traits highlighted here.

presenting a notable force for economic reactivation. For other reasons, Mexico, in turn, has also experienced changes in its economic performance, especially after the so-called crisis of 1994. Although the measures adopted may have led to a meaningful recovery in recent years, figures in the area of general development indicate the prevalence of huge shortages and inequalities. Visible is an almost immediate effect of those limitations in regard to employment, which affects practically every country in the region, as much in terms of structural unemployment and underemployment, as in the near-term challenges now posed by high rates of population growth that occurred in earlier decades.

CONCLUSION

The current situation along the Mexico-Guatemala border—after more than seven years of the NAFTA, an average of six years of trade agreements with two Central American countries, and upon implementation of free trade with three other Central American economies—falls far short of confirming the vision of a displacement of the boundary between the industrialized and the developing world. Mexico's southern border continues to show the great social, economic, and political backwardness. In this context, the region appears to reaffirm the features of continuity with neighboring Guatemalan and Belizean border areas, which constitute, especially in the case of Guatemala, a zone of inequalities and shortages.²²

In the short-term, it is hard to establish the direct effects of free-trade agreements on population—and especially, labor—mobility (Bustamante, 1995; Santibáñez, 1999). As mentioned before, one of the arguments in Mexico's debate to support its entrance into the NAFTA was that the integration scheme would attract investments, create jobs, and improve living conditions of native-born populations, thus indirectly stemming emigration flows. However, the staggered implementation scheme makes it difficult to assess the Agreement's success in diminishing emigration. We will only be able to appraise the full

²²This article has deliberately not considered the case of the Mexico-Belize border, which expresses other types of continuities and ruptures, although perhaps, according to a recent observation, the latter are more remarkable in view of the diverging paths both societies historically followed. However, recent changes experienced by the young country of Belize, especially since its independence from Britain and the reception of Central American immigrants since the 1980s, have informed its general approach to Mexico.

effects in the medium and long term. However, systematic estimates of migration flows after seven years of NAFTA operation underline the prevalence of undocumented migrants moving to the United States at steady average rate of 350 000 people per year.

On the other hand, the Mexican-Guatemala border region, especially in the state of Chiapas, has consolidated its position as a transit zone for people of various origins, whose mobility has been systematically increasing, especially during the 1990s. These flows are a matter of concern because they consist overwhelmingly of undocumented individuals, who are vulnerable vis-à-vis those actors whose indisputable goal is to take advantage of the migrants' defenselessness and their ignorance of their new surroundings.

The reasons for emigration seem to have outweighed the expectations for change and improvement in the Central American economies that followed the negotiation of formal peace. The increase and diversification of migratory streams seem to announce the insufficiencies in the region's current economic models, including the incapacity to create jobs.

The policies in the countries of origin show the lack of concern for the conditions of their nationals, whether abroad or at home. Evidence of this disinterest is visible in the prevalence and expansion of the reasons driving individuals to migrate, as well as in the tepid position of the governments in regard to their obligation to protect and defend the fundamental rights of their citizens (whether in transit or at their destinations).

Meanwhile, receiving countries and transit countries have privileged the control and enhancement of border operations under different justifications. They have shown their inability to deter flows, similar to the ineffective results that the U.S. has experienced with Mexican immigrants along its southern border, where flows continue unabated but under ever riskier conditions. The tougher measures applied on the Mexico-Guatemala border have had similar consequences, especially concerning heightened risks along the routes that migrants are increasingly obliged to transit.

The recent signing of free-trade agreements in the region revealed the somewhat limited capacity of governments to negotiate and reach a level of consensus regarding economic exchanges. However, the prevalence of deep insufficiencies—in economic opportunities (*i.e.*, employment) and social services (*i.e.*, real and broad access to good quality health and educational programs)—is certainly a part of the persistent factors impelling the emigration of

large sectors of these populations. No evidence exists of solid efforts, parallel to trade negotiations, in terms of public policies and programs to counteract the negative effects of increasing emigration flows.

One hopeful experience at the regional level involves activities developed within the framework of the Regional Conference on Migration (Proceso Puebla), which since 1996 has tried to focus on the complex dimensions of migration in the region. A Plan of Action comprising a variety of activities—workshops, seminars, and technical meetings—has initiated a broad and open debate among the governments. One would hope that these activities would include the active participation of civil organizations working to protect migrants through advocacy, lobbying, and assistance on a wide spectrum of migration issues.

Economic as well as social, political, and cultural issues show the increasing intertwining of international relationships. Thus, we urgently need to re-define bilateral and multilateral official and non-official agendas to include a serious stance concerning regional migration issues. The vulnerability of migrants, not only undocumented people but also a wide spectrum of populations that are mobile, especially across borders, demands that governments fulfill their obligations as laid down in national laws as well as international conventions protecting the human and labor rights of migrants and their families.

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