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Demographic Atlas, San Diego/Tijuana, Atlas Demográfico, The San Diego/Tijuana Planning for Prosperity Fund, 1995, 104 pp.

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IT is possible to discern two basic political-intellectual currents of thought in the United States concerning the US/Mexico border. One of these views the border as barely containing the chaos that is threatening to spill over at any time. The border is primarily a law enforcement problem. How does the US keep illegal immigration, drugs, and crime from crossing over? How can the socio-economic integrity and sovereignty of the United States be protected from a potentially limitless assault by the poverty-ridden masses to the south? Or in more basic terms, what can be done to make the border a more effective barrier?

The other position holds that the border is a problem too, but not because of its porosity. It sees the border as a problem precisely because of its effectiveness as a barrier, hindering the realization of many different socio-economic goals. The borderline is a logistical and technical complication. The resolution of mutual problems, such as environmental contamination, and the pursuit of mutual planning initiatives are hindered by the line. The line also inhibits commerce; the millions of person-hours spent annually waiting to cross could be more economically spent working or consuming. The border is viewed as a barrier to mutual understanding, cultural interchange, and neighborly cooperation.

Recently, it has been the first view which dominates the public debate in the United States. This is in large part due to the appeal of illegal immigration as a political issue. Adopting a “get tough” posture on border-enforcement, and with the economic crisis, on Mexico itself, is too tempting for most politicians to resist. The issue has bipartisan appeal; Republican Pete Wilson seemed to have had a lock on it with his prominent support of Proposition 187 in the 1992 election. But President Clinton countered by increasing Border Patrol and INS resources and sending Attorney General Janet Reno to inspect the San Diego district on two occasions. Other Republicans such as Pat Buchanan hope to join Wilson in making the issues of illegal immigration and the integrity of the border pay off politically in the 1996 presidential race.

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Meanwhile, an emerging force of regionally based academics, businesspeople, planners, and politicians are emphasizing the need for cooperation in dealing with problems along the border. These groups and individuals eschew confrontational rhetoric, focusing instead on the complex interconnections which characterize the political economy of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. The recent publication of the San Diego/Tijuana Demographic Atlas is a landmark event in this context. The result of a joint effort by the University of California-based San Diego Dialogue, El Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana, and several other individuals and organizations on both sides of the border, the Atlas takes the radical step of treating Tijuana and San Diego as a single metropolitan area. Beautifully laid out with color maps and an abundance of graphs and tables, the Atlas utilizes 1990 census data from both countries to create a detailed portrait of the metropolitan "corridor" at the census-tract and área geoestadística básica level. The resultant book serves both as an extremely useful research and planning tool as well as a revealing picture of two closely linked, but very different, cities.

The data presented in the Atlas are organized around two analytical themes: a comparison of the San Diego/Tijuana corridor with other U.S.-Mexico border metropolitan areas and cross-border counties such as Juárez-El Paso, Matamoros-Brownsville, and Laredo-Nuevo Laredo; and a comparison between Tijuana and San Diego. From the first set of comparisons we learn, for example, that San Diego/Tijuana is the most populous and wealthiest border zone. Compared to the rest of the border counties taken as a whole, it has the best housing stock, the largest percentage of houses with sewerage connections and running water, and a higher percentage of individuals with at least 8 years of schooling. Compared together against the other border pairs, and compared individually with their counterparts on each side of the border, San Diego and Tijuana have lower percentages of low-income population and higher percentages of middle and high-income population. In sum, based on the data presented in the Atlas, the San Diego/Tijuana corridor is quite different from its counterparts to the east, though not startlingly so.

However, analyzing the contrast between San Diego and Tijuana produces a much different picture. A mere glance at the map of the urban corridor evinces the vast difference between the two communities on either side of the borderline. When the entire municipio of Tijuana is compared with an area roughly the same size adjacent to it in the United States, almost 80 percent of the population live south of the border. In other words, almost a quarter of the population of the corridor live in an area which is close to a fifteenth the size of the corridor as a whole. This easily discerned difference in population density is a clear reflection of the contrast between the poverty-driven urban crowding of Tijuana and the relatively more affluent suburban sprawl of San Diego.

Yet while the Atlas clearly shows the difference between the two sides in terms of population density, there are some curious choices as to what areas are included and not included as part of the corridor. Most importantly, why is Rosarito, which at the time of the creation of the Atlas was part of the Tijuana municipio and qualifies as an "urban place" (over 2,500 inhabitants), not included? Rosarito and the coastal areas immediately north and south of it are geographically-integral parts of the Tijuana urban zone.

Admittedly, the inclusion of Rosarito would have had little impact on the population density and some other comparisons between the two sides. But this demographically and economically important area, with its high concentrations of American retirees, vacation homes, industry, and recreation-based development, should have been included. Contrast this with the marine base at Camp Pendleton, a vast wild area with an admittedly large but highly concentrated and transient population, which is in the Atlas. There may have been potent reasons for the exclusion of Rosarito, but they are not given in the text. The overall impression that one is left with is that the laudable intent of including San Diego and Tijuana in the same urban corridor, while good in concept, will be very difficult to achieve in substance. No amount of wishful thinking or cross-border communication will erase the stark inequalities between the two cities which are detailed in the Atlas. It is not only the difference in geographical size that is shocking on first view, even to someone accustomed to the area. In virtually every measure of prosperity and quality of life presented in the Atlas, such as education, available housing amenities, and income levels, Tijuana is severely disadvantaged compared to San Diego. But hopelessness and hostility are not realistic responses to these problems. It is important and necessary for all the citizens of the area to struggle to achieve a binational consciousness, and to seek points of view and solutions to problems that at least attempt to treat the San Diego/Tijuana urban corridor as a singular whole. The San Diego/Tijuana Demographic Atlas is an important contribution to this effort. But we should not blind ourselves to the real situation of the region. So while the stated purpose and likely effect of the Atlas is to “facilitate trade and economic development opportunities” and to “assist business and government to plan more effectively for the future,” it also serves, in a quietly eloquent way, as testimony to the limitations of nationalism and global capitalism.