

# The Mexico-Guatemala, Guatemala-Mexico Border: 1983-2013

## La frontera México-Guatemala, Guatemala-México: 1983-2013

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### ABSTRACT

This article historicizes the emergence of border studies in the south of Mexico, and offers an interdisciplinary perspective on the formation of the Mexico-Guatemala border. From a historical and anthropological perspective, we illustrate Fábregas's (1994) thesis that "All México is a frontier," with examples of the regional dynamics generated by narco trafficking, the migration of undocumented workers, the circulation of tourists and indigenous traders, and the political ecology of conservation agencies in border areas, all of which demonstrate transnational connections between northern and southern Mexico. The text offers a holistic view of both sides of the border with a review of important bibliographic sources.

*Keywords:* 1. Mexico, 2. Guatemala, 3. frontier, 4. anthropology, 5. interdiscipline.

### RESUMEN

En este artículo se traza una historia del surgimiento y desarrollo de los estudios fronterizos en la frontera sur mexicana y se presenta un panorama interdisciplinario de fuentes para el estudio de la formación de la frontera México-Guatemala. Desde una perspectiva histórico-antropológica se ilustra la tesis de Fábregas (1994) en torno a que "todo México es frontera", con ejemplos de las dinámicas generadas por el narcotráfico, el trasiego de trabajadores indocumentados, la circulación de turistas y comerciantes indígenas, el conservacionismo en zonas de selva y frontera, observando la conexión transfronteriza entre el norte y el sur de México. Se ofrece una visión holística de ambas fronteras revisando las fuentes bibliográficas pertinentes.

*Palabras clave:* 1. México, 2. Guatemala, 3. frontera, 4. antropología, 5. interdisciplina.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1983, on the Mexican side of the Mexico-Guatemala border, a multidisciplinary group of social science researchers began studying Mexico's Southern Border—the Northern Border as seen from Central America—from an ecological-cultural and historical-critical perspective. That year, there were no courses available in the anthropology syllabuses of Mexican universities and higher education institutes for students to reflect on or discuss the role of borders in shaping nation-states in Latin America or the dynamics of border societies and the type of cultural situations associated with these processes, which are important to analyze from an anthropological point of view. This situation was compounded by the indifference of the Mexican state and society towards the south, expressed, among other factors, by the widespread perception that the country had only one international boundary: in the north, with the United States. Indeed, for most Mexicans, the word “border” was a reference to the international boundary between Mexico and the United States. In this imaginary, the north was, and remains, a door to achieving a better future and a life of prosperity, rather like the biblical image of the land of milk and honey. For thousands of migrants, the northern border is an obstacle that must be overcome to enter paradise.

In this sphere, Manuel Ángel Castillo undertook a pioneering study that identified key aspects of the southern border, linking the concepts of region and border and including a systematic exploration of migration (Castillo, 1989, 1995, 2002). Castillo analyzed Mexico's southern border using theoretical proposals related to the historical definition of territoriality including the concept of region and space, through which he discussed the southern border as a specific region in its historical development. He completed his discussion by examining the case of Soconusco as a region and a border to describe international tensions and the importance of understanding the processes of a border such as the one between Mexico and Guatemala (Castillo, 2002).

In terms of contemporary academic research, in the 1980s, anthropologists in Mexico had not yet begun reflecting on the southern border. In the field of historical inquiry, Jan de Vos produced the groundbreaking work *La Paz de Dios y del Rey* (1980). But in general, Mexico's southern border was absent from the concerns of anthropological research in Mexico in the early 1980s. It is in this context that a research group was set up, led by Andrés Fábregas Puig, under the aegis of the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología

Social (CIESAS), with financing from the Borders' Cultural Program operated by the Under Secretary of Culture of the Secretariat of Public Education.

In the late 1970s, Mexico's southern border, particularly the international border with Guatemala, emerged on the national stage due to three factors that anthropological research from 1983 to 1984 disseminated throughout the country: 1) the wars in Central America, which intensified in the early 1980s. As a result of these conflicts, Mexico received a large contingent of peasants—mostly Guatemalans—crossing rivers in search of refuge, in the states of the South-southeast, particularly in Chiapas. This was a new type of immigration in the country that had been characterized by receiving mass immigration such as that of the Spanish Republicans and subsequently politically persecuted Central and South Americans, in all cases, with a predominance of professionals, intellectuals or academics with various specializations. However, the displaced Central Americans in the late 1970 and early 1980s were contingents of peasants who scattered throughout Campeche, Chiapas, Tabasco and Quintana Roo to rebuild their lives; 2) The discovery of large oil fields, especially off the coast of Campeche where the Cantarel well and its wealth made President José López Portillo exclaim, “This abundance must be administered.” Thereafter, the Mexican states bordering Central America and the Caribbean proved to have the main energy sources in the country. In addition to the oil wells, the construction of hydroelectric dams in Chiapas, work on which began in 1970, was planned to generate the energy that would be required to supply the country's industry and lighting for Mexico City; 3) The establishment of a plan to set up tourist resorts able to compete with Miami and the Caribbean. The most famous and successful of these centers is Cancún, in the state of Quintana Roo, which borders Belize and a small part of Guatemala. Among other consequences, the conversion of a tiny island inhabited by fishing families into one of the most popular resorts in the Caribbean, led the country to acknowledge its border with the *mare nostrum* in which island territories characterized by linguistic and cultural variety, in addition to various political situations, are located (Fábregas, 1984).

The year 1983 marked the start of the characterization of the southern border of Mexico, together with the explanation of the concept. An analysis of the historical formation of this border was therefore regarded as essential. This analysis revealed that the notion of Mexico's southern border encompassed a multiregional reality containing several borders, including: the Mexico-Guatemala and the Mexico-Belize borders and the still diffuse boundary with the Caribbean (Fábregas, 1984).

Given the national and international circumstances in which the anthropological study of the southern border of Mexico began, the concept was prioritized as a general framework, even though studies were undertaken in various locations in Chiapas, Tabasco, Quintana Roo and Yucatán (Fábregas *et al.*, 1985, 1990). The results of this initial research on the southern border of Mexico opened up new topics and permitted the founding of the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social del Sureste (CIESAS-Sureste) in order to continue anthropological reflection on the border and relations between Mexico and Central America. The topics that emerged from the results of the 1983-1984 project are: the importance of natural resources, the religious issue, the settlement of the rainforests in the Mexican southeast, the importance of the political configuration of nation-states on either side of the border and the issue of uneven regional development. Over the years and from different perspectives, these and other topics have been studied not only at CIESAS-Sureste but by a broader set of institutions covering the entire South-southeast of Mexico. In addition to these axes, there is one more: migration, which became extremely important approximately twenty years ago.

This paper presents a review of the literature seen from both sides of the Mexico-Guatemala, Guatemala-Mexico border. The text was written with the aim of showing the reader the complexity acquired not only by the study of borders, but also by the processes that shape them. The authors have restricted their analysis to these two topics, given the nature of this text and the space limitations on academic journals. It was also written to mark the 25th anniversary of the *Frontera Norte* journal.

### *THE MEXICO-GUATEMALA BORDER*

One of the important factors in shaping Mexico's southern border is the colonization of the large tropical forests characterizing the South-southeast. Revel-Mouroz had examined this process from a geographical perspective, but without introducing the analysis of the border as a factor for explaining colonization (Revel-Mouroz, 1980). Moreover, his study did not use the concept of borders to shed light on the Mexican nation-state's interest in emphasizing international boundaries, particularly with Guatemala. Nevertheless, Revel-Mouroz's research is important since it is an inspiring, groundbreaking study that reveals the settlement of the Mexican tropics of the South-southeast as a process of expansion of

the internal border of the Mexican nation-state and a reaffirmation of the border with Central America and the Caribbean. In this regard, Frederick Jackson Turner's (1893) conception of the border as a front for expansion was useful for perceiving this process, which Fábregas called, "The movement of the Mexican Nation-state toward the rainforests of the South-southeast". Revel-Mouroz's study combined this approach with that postulated Owen Lattimore (1956) about setting boundaries on the basis of the encounter between different cultural ecologies, until he posited a process in which induced colonization is a strategy by the Mexican nation-state for consolidating and securing the border with Guatemala and Belize (Fábregas, 1988, 2012). Jan de Vos added key approaches in his book *Las fronteras de la frontera sur* (1993), when he examined in greater detail the historical depth of the formation of the borders between Mexico and Guatemala and Mexico and Belize. These works by Jan de Vos, which form part of his project to write the history of the Lacandon Rainforest in Chiapas, predate those published by Mario Vázquez Olivera, referred to below.

In the Third International Conference on Borders in Latin America, held in the border region of San Cristobal, Venezuela and Cucuta, Colombia in 1992, Andrés Fábregas once again posited the importance of understanding the colonization of the rainforests of South-southeast Mexico as a movement that emphasized the border with Central America and the Caribbean on the basis of the expansion of the internal borders of the Mexican nation-state. He emphasized the dissimilar historical processes that shaped Mexico's northern and southern borders, suggesting that in the latter case, a border of convergences had been formed between Latin American histories while the northern border established the boundary between the world of high economic and technological development, the political center of contemporary colonialism and the realities of Latin America and the Caribbean. In this respect, Fábregas stated that the whole of Mexico is a border. (Fábregas, 1994). In this same vein, the analysis of the formation and consolidation of Mexico's borders is related to the consideration of how nation-states were configured in Latin America as political projects. In this context, the case of the state of Chiapas is striking in that the political processes involved in shaping that state culminated in a plebiscite that determined its federation to Mexico. This is the only case in which a referendum within the context of the formation of a Mexican nation-state has determined the federation of a state. Whereas in the north, the war with the United States shaped the border, in the south, a political process determined the border between Mexico and Guatemala. The political background

of this complex process is precisely what is clarified in the work of Mario Vázquez Olivera in his book *El Imperio Mexicano y el Reino de Guatemala* (2009) and in another text entitled *Chiapas, años decisivos* (2010). Through these books, Mario Vázquez clarifies the political processes that led to the establishment of the border between Mexico and Guatemala in particular, but also between Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean. Guatemala joined the Mexican Empire in the context of a conflict of interests that Mario Vázquez reveals, in addition to explaining why the state of Chiapas subsequently emerged as a political entity federated to Mexico once Iturbide's Empire came to an end and Guatemala emerged as a nation-state. Both works leave the horizon of historical research open to other crucial aspects of these processes that make the 19th century an era that framed the formation of the territoriality of the Mexican nation-state. Mario Vázquez's historical approach is transborder, which lends it particular relevance. It is from this historical background that one understands the importance of the political factor in a border arising between nation-states with a common origin in the shaping of the colonial order. The historical formation of the southern border is a factor that emphasizes the importance of understanding Mexico as a political community, something that is currently in effect, as shown by the work coordinated by Jorge Ramón González Ponciano and Miguel Lisbona Guillén, *México y Guatemala: Entre el liberalismo y la democracia multicultural* (2009). The coordinators of this work compiled papers that break away from static visions of border events or those that reduce political development to electoral moments, to show the importance of understanding the processes to which Mario Vázquez refers and how drawing the border also changed the political channels of South-southeast Mexico and Central America. Mario Valdez Gordillo writes about these processes, undertaking a meticulous historical analysis from 1985 to the late 1940s (Valdez, 2006). Valdez Gordillo weaves a story in which social relations and power relations play a leading role in shaping the histories of borders that frame the destruction of rainforests or the perpetuation of forms of domination and labor relations that have etched the profile of societies in both Mexico and Guatemala.<sup>1</sup>

In his 1984 and 1985 texts, Fábregas highlights the importance of natural resources in understanding the performance of the Mexican nation-state in the South-southeast and the relevance of the borders with Central America and the Caribbean as a factor guiding Mexican policies. He emphasizes the significance

<sup>1</sup>Valdez Gordillo is currently working on the period from 1950 to 1996.

of natural sources of energy such as oil and water from large rivers during that period. Edith Kauffer has explored this topic from at least the beginning of this century, in addition to introducing new topics concerning natural resource management in border areas. As for natural resources, Kauffer has focused on water uses in border contexts between Guatemala, Mexico and Belize, coining the term “hydropolitics” (Kauffer, 2004). The concept allows Edith Kauffer and the researchers who use it to analyze the relationships established by the Nation-states of Mexico, Guatemala and Belize regarding water. One of the most appealing aspects of this analytical approach is the interplay between the local and the international, as a framework for the shortage of water in the communities while streams flow along the borders. The examination of hydropolitics involves social organization, trade and power relations in areas that are local or transborder. It is an interdisciplinary analysis that has also managed to reveal contradictory processes and knots of interest in contexts where the degradation of natural resources is part of hydropolitics (Kauffer, 2011). Moreover, Edith Kauffer illustrates the complex relationship between the presence of water on the border between Mexico, Guatemala and Belize and migration flows in an original, thought-provoking way (Kauffer, 2010). The studies framed in this line of analysis are prolific, constituting one of the most dynamic research strategies in the current state of research on Mexico’s southern border.

The religious issue on the Mexico-Guatemala border was present from the beginning of anthropological research from 1983 to 1985. In the national context during that period, there was a discussion about the presence of the Summer Institute of Linguistics and its role in facilitating the proselytism of various evangelical churches. The discussion had several nuances and involved various theoretical and political currents. The importance of the issue was justified because at the time, the change from Catholicism to the acceptance of certain forms of evangelical or Bible groups was an intense process. It was reflected, among other things, by the speed with which evangelical churches advanced, siphoning off the faithful from the Catholic Church. The mass acceptance of biblical proposals made evangelical churches appear as a relatively new presence in the various regions encompassed by Mexico’s southern border. Not so. There were a number of well-established churches, at least from the late 19th century onwards, such as the National Presbyterian Church. Jehovah’s Witnesses, who do not belong to the set of Evangelical Churches, have also been present since the early 20th century. But it was in the 1970s that the expansion of evangelical churches and other faiths

different from Catholicism experienced a boom. This was one of the results of the changes that took place in Southeast Mexico as a result of processes triggered by the nation-state. The alteration of local cultural ecologies and in several cases, their destruction, encouraged the expansion of evangelical churches, which also found support in the biblical texts translated by Summer Institute of Linguistics missionaries, which, without being associated with any of the Evangelical churches in particular, paved the way for their expansion. These facts led to explosive situations, such as the expulsion of evangelical groups from their hometowns, causing division and violence in various communities. This was exemplified by San Juan Chamula, in Los Altos de Chiapas. Those expelled from this town built new settlements within the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, such as the La Hormiga neighborhood.

The religious issue was the subject of CIESAS-Sureste's first collective project. The results were published by Casa Chata in a series of seven workbooks, from 161 to 167 (1988-1989). Workbook 161, discussing the sociographic and statistical aspects of non-Catholic religious presence in Southeast Mexico, was written by Gilberto Giménez (1988). The following workbooks published the work of pioneering researchers at CIESAS-Sureste in the order given below:

Workbook 162 (Chiapas): Andrés Fábregas, Carlos Guzmán Böckler, Jorge Luíz Cruz Burguete and Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo (1989a and b). Workbook 163 (Chiapas): María de los Ángeles Ortiz Hernández and Elizabeth Juárez Cerdi. Workbook 164 (Campeche and Yucatán): Alicia Espinosa Ortega and Ivan Vallado Fajardo (1989) Workbook 165 (Yucatán): Patricia Fortuny Loret de Mola (1989a and b). Workbook 166 (Quintana Roo): Cuauhtémoc Cardiel Coronel and Martha Herminia Villalobos (1989). Workbook 167 (General Discussion): Gilberto Giménez Montiel, Marinella Bianco Borruso and Luis Guzmán García (1989).

These studies were forerunners of contemporary work by authors such as Carolina Rivera Farfán, María del Carmen García, Miguel Lisbona Guillén and Irene Sánchez. Manuela Cantón wrote a text about Guatemala, which has been useful for studies of religion in Chiapas and in general on the South-southeast of Mexico, *Bautizados por fuego* (1998). Thanks to the early texts, the process of religious change in the states of the Mexican southern border has been documented. They also spawned a broad discussion on the causes of the conflict in the South-southeast of Mexico, which the current work have discussed in depth, associating them with the transformations of local societies due to multiple fac-



tors. But the most important finding is perhaps the fact that religious diversity per se is not the cause of the conflicts that have characterized the South-southeast Mexico, but rather that the latter are the result of multiple factors. Religious diversity is associated with other diversities, in addition to the fact that conflicts due to this cause are not widespread. The most important work in this respect was written by Carolina Rivera Farfán, María del Carmen García, Miguel Lisbona and Irene Sánchez Aguilar, *Diversidad religiosa y conflicto en Chiapas* (2011).<sup>2</sup> Another key text, by Rosalva Aida Hernández Castillo, is entitled *Sur profundo* (2012). No less important is the work by Gabriela Robledo Hernández, who has reflected on the reasons that led to the peoples of Los Altos de Chiapas to cross the religious border and adopt some of the variants of Protestantism (Robledo, 2012).

One aspect that has been systematically examined by scholars of the border between Mexico and Guatemala is the political issue. This is associated with the integration of Mexico and Central America, usually sought by nation-states through the linking of their market economies. A key example of this type of work is Daniel Villafuerte's *Integraciones comerciales en la frontera sur* (2001), on the processes between Mexico and Central America. Villafuerte points out the effects of a trade agreement between Mexico and Central America, expressed in the concentration of land, the extreme vulnerability caused by over-specialization in production and the intensification of emigration, as in fact happens. In 1979, María Emilia Paz wrote a paragraph predicting the political importance of relations between Mexico and the South and the Caribbean: "In the coming years, not only the future of the political system that currently governs the country, but also its sovereignty and independence could be at stake in this region" (Paz, 1979:16). In other words, from the experience of the research on the southern border in general and on the links between Mexico and Guatemala in particular, the issue of economic integration has been raised from the political perspective of each national government, which, from the first outlining of their borders, gave rise to nationalisms strengthened by the need to assert themselves as multicultural political communities. This is why they are so sensitive to nationalisms on either side of the southern border. In addition, they are located opposite the global hegemonic power, which forces them to emphasize their borders. The conflictive relationship with the United States is one

<sup>2</sup>This book was banned during the administration of Governor Juan Sabines Guerrero in Chiapas (2008-2012).

of the central aspects in maintaining the political issue as a basic aspect of relations between Mexico and Central America, seen from the South.

Along the border between Mexico and Guatemala today, migration plays a key role in shaping border dynamics. A recent book coordinated by Daniel Villafuerte and María del Carmen García (2011) discusses this aspect together with associated factors such as safety, violence and human rights. These are current issues on the border between Mexico and Central America. The articles in this book show the continuous changes characterizing the border dynamics between Mexico and Guatemala, the importance of the historical traces from the early stages of formation of the nation-states in the area, the reconfigurations of identities, and the deepening inequality with its attendant marginalization and discrimination. As notes Alain Basail, the southern border of Mexico is experienced as a violent area, with all kinds of trafficking and illegality, businesses protected by confusion and corruption, all of which creates a problematic, apparently chaotic border, although what it actually reflects is the way society operates on both sides of the political border (Basail, 2011:329).

While migration is not the only factor involved in the current configuration of the Mexico/Guatemala border, it is one of the most significant ones. Migration flows are increasingly intense. These travelers are heading for the U.S. The passage of Guatemalans and Central American meant that states such as Chiapas, traditionally a receiving rather than a sending state, began to be a source of migration. Thus, the current border dynamics has turned Chiapas into a crossing point, a place of origin and destination of migrants. What is new is the mass migration of Chiapas farm workers, most of whom are indigenous. The U.S. Migration Policy Institute reports that in 2008, 14 percent of Mexican immigrants to the United States came from Chiapas, as opposed to 0.8 percent in the year 2000. According to the Comisión Estatal de Población de Chiapas (Coespo), 330 000 out of a total of four million residents of Chiapas live in the United States. According to this source, the age of Chiapas migrants oscillates between 15 and 49. In 2010, information sources indicated that between 30 000 and 50 000 Chiapas residents migrated to the United States annually. Remittances are another indicator of the importance of migration in Chiapas: 500 million dollars entered Chiapas in 2004. This sum is equivalent to the total value of the corn, mango, bean and banana harvests. These amounts reported for remittances were maintained in 2009 (Instituto Nacional de Migración, 2009). A migrant from Chiapas pays smugglers between 1 500 and 2 000 dollars to be

transported to the U.S. (Pickard, 2005). A large, increasingly noticeable colony of Hondurans has settled in Tapachula. The migration of Chiapas residents to the U.S. is a border factor, together with migration flows from Guatemala in particular and other Central American countries in general.

The notion of southern border is an attempt to encompass a situation involving several states in southeastern Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. In the early days (1983), the goal was to draw Mexico's attention to the importance of that multifaceted border, overshadowed by the northern border, for the reasons stated above. The notion has become a concept, an instrument of social science research, in addition to its historical status as political reality. That border is not only a geographical but also a cultural, economic, political and social sphere. It is a border that can be seen as Mexico's southern border with Central America and the Caribbean, divided into the Mexico-Guatemala Border (since this country is Guatemala's border), the Mexico-Belize Border (since this country is its northern border with Mexico, while to the west and south, it adjoins Guatemala) and Mexico's border with the Caribbean. This is the reality encompassed by the concept of Mexico's southern border with Central America and the Caribbean.

Due to this border process (Fábregas, 1985), what were small Mexican or Guatemalan border towns have grown at the same rate as migration flows and the establishment of "trade regions" like the one that has emerged as a result of the merging of the Chiapas city of Comitán de Domínguez, a center encompassing another city in Chiapas, Las Margaritas (Cruz and Robledo, 2000) and the Guatemalan town of La Mesilla. The latter, which was no more than a village in 1983, is now a city with chaotic growth, commercially linked to Comitán, a city where large chains of commercial centers with international capital have been set up, which encourages a daily flow of people that come and go across the border. In the far southeast of Chiapas, in Soconusco, the border cities of Ciudad Hidalgo (Chiapas) and Tecum-Uman (Guatemala), separated by the waters of the Suchiate river, comprise a single city crossed by the border. They are symbiotic, disorderly cities, which receive migration flows going to the United States (Villafuerte, 2009). Tourism joins migration as a factor that is spreading along Mexico's border with Guatemala. The Lacandon groups in the Chiapas rainforest and other sectors of the population living there adapt to the new requirements of tourism, becoming hoteliers and tour operators and leaving behind their traditional cultural practices (Pastor and Gómez, 2010; Cano, Erosa and Mariaca, 2009; Güichard, 2010). The

movement of motor vehicles is increasingly intense in the rainforest, whose its green floor will shortly be replaced by asphalt. The presence of Maya cities such as Bonampak and Yaxchilán encourage tourism, which has become a source of income for groups such as the Lacandon. As a result of these processes, the Mexican nation-state has consolidated the border with Guatemala. Thus, Mexico's border with Guatemala has acquired features that show the importance of urban expansion, the peasantry's attraction to cities and the increase in migration flows, both internal and external. It is no less important is to draw attention to the growing importance of organic crops such as coffee, which have been consolidated, not only providing new sources of income, but also configuring international settings and cultural changes (Hernández and Night, 1998).

In addition to these features are those of the Mexico-Guatemala border, drawn through the Sierra Madre, with the Tacaná volcano as its axis. It is a broad habitat of peoples divided by political boundaries, such as the Jakalteco, Kaqchiquel, Mam, Mocho and Q'anjoba'l, residents of the municipalities of Amatenango de la Frontera, Motozintla de Mendoza, Mazapa de Madero and Tapachula. They are towns linked on a everyday basis, with shared businesses and religious festivals and common languages and identities (Hernández, 2012). The same is true of the Chuj people, who inhabit the border towns of Las Margaritas and La Trinitaria, making the border a limit that cuts through the town (Limón, 2009). The pioneering work of Jorge Luis Cruz showed the importance of ethnic reconfiguration in peoples who were expelled from their original territories in Guatemala as a result of the war and settled in the border zone, as in the case of the Chuj (Cruz, 1998).

On January 1, 1994, the armed movement of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) drew attention to Southern Mexico in general and the Maya peoples of Chiapas in particular. Without discussing this event or even the concept of Maya people, an admittedly uneven literature as regards reflective depth has been produced that is only slightly linked to the border factor. In this respect, Andrés Fábregas published a text in which he pointed out the relationship between the events of January 1 and "the movement towards the rainforests of the South-southeast of the Mexican nation-state," as a reaffirmation of the border with Guatemala (Fábregas, 2001). Readers interested in the subject of the EZLN may consult two contrasting books: one coordinated by Marco Estrada and Juan Pedro Viqueira (2010), the other by Bruno Baronnet, Marina Moya and Richard Stahler-Sholk (2011).

### *THE MEXICO-GUATEMALA BORDER*

On the Guatemalan side, from the 19th century to the present, the border with Mexico has been present in official speeches, the media and the popular imagination, which periodically repeats the anecdote that this border was the result of an unsuccessful negotiation by General Justo Rufino Barrios (1835-1885). The truth is that for the definition of Guatemalan international borders, the memory of the formation of the border with Mexico has obviously been overshadowed by the unresolved border dispute with Belize, since although Guatemala officially recognized Belize's independence in 1991, it has called for the return of over half the area occupied by the former British colony, arguing that England failed to fulfill an agreement it signed in 1859.

In order to understand the border dynamics between the three countries and the rest of Mesoamerica, one cannot overlook the pre-Hispanic, colonial and republican influence, or the roads and border areas and crossings used in long-distance trade networks, which have been studied by Carlos Navarrete (1973 and 1978), Thomas A. Lee (1978), Charlotte M. Arnauld (1990), Laura Caso Barrera and Mario Aliphath Fernández (2006), or the cross-border approaches of Mesoamerican archeology put forward by John Fox (1980 and 1981), Richard Blanton and Gary Feinman (1984), and Robert Carmack and Sylvia Salgado (2006). Hence the importance of using transborder approaches to understand Mesoamerican linguistic complexity, the links between the highlands and lowlands of the Maya area, and Nahua and Teotihuacan presence in Central America, investigated by Otto Schumann (1987 and 1990), Terrence Kaufmann (1988), William Fowler (1985) and Nora England (2003).

The pre-Hispanic substrate served as the basis for relations between the General Captaincy of Guatemala and the Viceroyalty of New Spain (Gerhard, 1991), which survived despite the divestiture of Chiapas from the Captaincy in 1824 (Gutiérrez, 2004). In his historical and ethnological research on the rainforest, indigenous people and the border, Jan de Vos (1980, 1988, 1993, 1994), referred to the "green desert". Gabriel Aarón Macías (2004) and Pedro Bracamonte, among others, explored the history of colonial indigenous resistance and interimperial and national disputes over control of the Belize-Mexico border region. Their analysis of the "territorial vacuum" imposed by the colonial and modern state to justify public policies of reduction, suppression, logging and colonization, is in many respects valid for the study of the Guatemala-Mexico border.

Previously, in 1957 and 1961, Gordon Kenyon published two articles on the historical link between Mexico and Central America, while Miles Wortman (1976) wrote about the Mexican Empire and Central America. Arturo Taracena (1991, 1997 and 2002) has explained the construction of the country, the process of regional and border formation in western Guatemala between the 18th and 19th centuries and in 1997, convened by Dauzier Bovin, other mostly French authors published their own approach to the borders and societies of southern Mexico and Central America. Toussaint, Rodriguez de Ita and Vásquez Olivera (2001) and Jürgen Buchenau (1996) examine the contradictions between the foreign policy of Mexico and the United States in the isthmus, and the relationship between the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, and the governments of Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles with their Central American peers.

In recent years, research by Guatemalans on the history of border relations with Mexico has been limited, most being published in Mexican academic journals. Examples of this situation include the aforementioned works by Manuel Ángel Castillo who, from El Colegio de México, has helped expand the global and regional study of cross-border migration; those by César Eduardo Ordóñez (2002, 2006) on the economic integration of the border between Guatemala and southeastern Mexico, and by González Ponciano on the rainforest and the border (1995, 1995b, 2008, 2009, 2010). The reason for the lack of publications by Guatemalan researchers is the human and institutional destruction caused by state terrorism during the second half of the 20th century, which particularly affected the Universidad de San Carlos, the largest in the Central American isthmus. Despite this, and although there is no comparison with what has been published at Mexican, American and European universities, the Universidad de San Carlos, the Universidad Rafael Landívar and the Universidad del Valle, together with the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales-Guatemala, the Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales, the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica, and the Asociación de Investigación y Estudios Sociales, have produced a number of theses and materials of interest for border studies, such as, for example, the characterization of the Guatemala-Mexico border by J. Jacobo Dardón (2005), published by FLACSO. Also worth mention is the excellent study by Chilean anthropologist Beatriz Manz (2010) *Paraíso en cenizas, una odisea de valentía, terror y esperanza en Guatemala*, showing the overlap between the agricultural frontier and the international border in the vicinity of the Guatemala-Mexico boundary.

### *BORDERS AT THE DAWN OF THE 21ST CENTURY*

In general, in both Guatemala and Mexico, there is broad consensus about regarding the border as not only a line that separates, but also as the space where people coexist and on the basis of which relations of coexistence, negotiation, sharing, interdependence and conflict are created (Adelman and Aron, 1999; Baud and van Schendel, 1997). In this regard, Fábregas Puig has said, as noted earlier, that “the whole of Mexico is a border,” a geopolitical thesis summarizing the drama of a country crippled and mongrelized by a distant neighbor, which annually serves as a through route for over 200 000 undocumented workers from Central America, South America and Asia. It is migration that overheated northern nativism regards as a factor in the “war of civilizations” (Huntington, 1996), especially in the so-called American “New South” (Mohl, 2003), where Mexican migrants and mexicanized Central Americans (Castañeda, Manz and Davenport, 2002) reaffirm their mestizo otherness in the face of the Anglo-Saxon society that discriminates against them, reconceptualizing the territory as a usurped space open to reconquest.

For now, it is clear that territorial control of several stretches of the Mexico-Guatemala border has been left in the hands of criminal coalitions and drug cartels. The pistolization of the border and migratory movements are not new phenomena in the region’s history. They confirm the importance of cross-border links between the northern and southern borders in Mexico pointed out by Fábregas since the 1980s, when he criticized the fact that border studies in Mexico are primarily concerned with the relationship with the United States (Fábregas, 1984, 1992, 2005, 2009). For a long time, the Mexican border with Guatemala and Belize and border formation processes in the rest of the continent were left in the background. It should also be noted that within this southern dimension, most research tended to focus on Chiapas-Guatemala relations and more space is required to study the area shared by the rainforest municipalities in the two countries, and the trilateral border link between Mexico, Guatemala and Belize, painstakingly examined by Castillo, Toussaint and Vásquez (2005).

### *THE RAINFOREST AND THE BORDER*

Much of the Mexico-Guatemala border is mountain and rainforest terrain, with several blind passes used to cross from one side to the other in Chiapas, Tabasco

and Yucatán. In the rainforest part, most of the research conducted in the past decade concerns the Maya Biosphere Reserve, which borders Mexico and is the largest of its kind in Central America. Encompassing an area of five million acres, it contains five national parks and four biotopes that are home to 111 mammal, 442 bird, 107 reptile and 22 amphibian species. This reserve also boasts the only freshwater reef in the hemisphere, 3 000 species of plants, including red mangrove, a native pine dating from the Ice Age, cenotes and at least 200 archaeological sites among which Tikal.

A partial review of recently published research on the Maya Biosphere Reserve yielded a study of ecotourism and archeology at Cerro Cahui by John C. Ickis and Jorge Rivera (1997). Charles Clark (2000) analyzed property rights, irregular invasions, the difficulties experienced by indigenous cooperatives in legalizing their land rights and governmental and non-governmental efforts to halt settlements on the reservation. Avrum J. Shriar (2001) described the contradictions between farming systems, deforestation, rural development and the conservation of tropical forest; and in the same biosphere, Juanita Sundberg (2003) examined the relationship between environmentalism, democracy and citizenship. Robert R. Hearne and Alejandro Santos (2005) discussed the challenges of ecotourism and local development; David Carr (2005) reported on the deforestation process conducted by the settlers, and from a broader regional perspective, Mary Finley-Brook (2006) studied the relationship between “green neoliberalism,” the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, globalization and the benefits expected to be produced by protected areas in Central America, a problem that reveals contrasts between Costa Rica, for example, where the state has total control of protected areas, and Guatemala, which promotes joint administration by conservation transnationals. In the name of the need to preserve the forest, conservation transnationals, says Camilo Salvado (2008), demand the eviction of landless peasants who come to these areas, which are then handed over to oil and mining companies for exploration and exploitation. Laura Carlsen and Gian Carlo Delgado Ramos of the Centro de Estudios para el Campo Mexicano de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (Enciso, 2003) have criticized this “green neoliberalism” and the consequences of handing over the zone to foreign capital area with support from the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. Along these same lines, Luis Solano Ponciano (2005) reveals the network of foreign, oligarchic and military interests dating back to the 19th century, which currently favor transnationals and their Guatemalan officials, among which Basic



Resources, Perenco, Exmibal, Montana, the Ixtahuacan mining companies and Glamis Gold's Marlin project in Sipakapa, San Marcos, which have concessions in areas bordering Mexico.

The construction of roads, power lines, ports, fiber optic communications, pipelines, hydro, water and dry canals, pipelines, industrial corridors, mining and contract manufacturers will continue but little is being said at academic and political forums on how profits will be distributed (Pfeffer, Schellas and Meola, 2006). The development of highway projects is, however, the initiative that has been most heavily criticized by conservation transnations, insofar as it poses the threat of ecological disaster resulting from destroying the connectivity inside wooded areas. The *Roads in the Mayan Forest: An Environmental and Economic Analysis* report states that these roads will hasten the destruction of the Maya Biosphere Reserve (Reynolds, 2008; Wallace and Diamente, 2005). On the subject of conservationism, tourism, the Maya Biosphere Reserve, and border interactions in the Naranjo-Ceibo corridor, in his doctoral dissertation, Luis Alfredo Arriola (2005), emphasizes the construction of territoriality and the social control of space in that border area on the basis of a pattern that left ample leeway for local society, conservation agencies and criminals (Ankersen and Arriola, 2001). Under the law of "accept a bribe or face murder", settlers are recruited by drug dealers as informants, receiving between 5 000 and 20 000 quetzals a month. Profits from operations are so high that operators can afford to abandon their light aircraft since according to some settlers, in 2003 a kilo of cocaine in the Mexico-El Peten Guatemala line cost 5 000 and placed on the U.S.-Mexico line commanded 18 000 dollars. In addition to drug dealers, foreign security agencies, undocumented workers and tourists, other key actors in this Mesoamerican border context include indigenous Guatemalan street vendors, many of them Quiché from Quetzaltenango and Quiché who go to and fro across the border, transporting goods that are valued, scarce or cheap along the boundary between the two countries (González, 2010).

There is reason to believe that the gradual implementation of public policies to reverse the extreme poverty and inequality in Mesoamerica, coupled with the recovery of territorial control by the state, especially at crossings along the Guatemala-Mexico border, will contribute to the intensification of trade relations, educational and social exchange, and more fluid movement of tourists interested in enjoying nature and the cultural heritage of the peoples living in the area.

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