

American views of the border with Mexico

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Transnationalism and nationalism

“Do you take pesos?” When I ask this question in shops around San Diego, the response is usually one of disbelief and shock. The cashiers politely give a firm no but they often deliver it with the care and forbearance we reserve for people who we believe to be “not all there.” There are some places along the US border with Mexico where businesses accept pesos, but the more middle class and Anglophone the neighborhood, the less likely it is and the more likely they are to see the idea as outrageous. It is an interesting question because the responses tell us a lot about American views of the border. Up to the fence, it is all US—US money, US policies, US control. It is not an unreasonable view given that the border is an international boundary separating two sovereign nations. Each country has the right and the obligation to exercise its sovereignty and to define the limits and rules on its side, including acceptable currencies. The problem, however, is that when national perspectives are applied to the border, they frequently do not serve regional interests and, ironically, they often undermine national interests as well.

Another question I like to ask is addressed to bicultural, bilingual (Spanish-English) students in my classes at San Diego State University: “Do you think of yourself more as a US citizen or a Mexican citizen?” This is a sensitive issue, filled with the potential to scare some students and deeply personal for all of them. I only ask if I get to know them individually and we develop a sense of trust and understanding. The question points towards the phenomenon of a growing transnational society and economy along the border. Many Americans either miss this, or they feel threatened by it, or if they are aware and unafraid, then they often have not thought about its meaning and implications for border communities.

The responses to both questions explain a lot about American views towards the border. They tell us about the things most US citizens don’t see and about the categories we use to think about the border. The first question tells us how we think about the border, how we evaluate and understand it in national terms, with fixed, hard national boundaries neatly dividing US and Mexican interests. The second question opens a dialogue about the most hidden and unacknowledged fact of the border, namely that it has become a transnational society and economy. Taken together, these two points are what we misunderstand and what we fail to see. As a result, we misconceive the border.

Stories about the border play an important role in perpetuating our misconceptions. Stories of violence, corruption, and poverty, reinforce a set of national stories about Mexico’s failure to become rich, like the US. Often, the US national story about Mexico lacks a sense of its history, institutional complexity, and cultural diversity. In the border region, these stories become an obstacle to regional prosperity, on both sides, as they undermine and call into question the benefits of cross-border cooperation.

This short essay argues that our lack of awareness of the growing biculturalism and bilingualism of border society and economy causes us to frequently overlook the limits to national policies when dealing with border issues. This is particularly important, not only to the border, but to both nations as well, given the surprisingly large share of US-Mexico integration which is geographically located in the border region. That is, when we fail to get border policies right, it imposes a high cost not only on border communities, which feel the greatest effects of US national policies, but on the entire US-Mexico relationship.

Transnational society and economy in the border region

I don't know how many bicultural students there are at San Diego State University and other border universities, but the numbers and the growth rates seem significant. When I get a chance to ask students the question about their identities, their answers are often to the effect that they feel like Americans in the US and Mexicans in Mexico, but they vary because the nature of their lives on each side of the border varies according to their family history and their reasons for crossing the border. There are as many personal stories as there are people, from those who are mostly Mexican but with some connection to the US, to mostly US identity citizens with some connection to Mexico, and all combinations in between.

People that cross the border frequently are not the only ones subject to the influence of Mexico and the US on each other. Even people with no interest in crossing the border may listen to English language media on the Mexican side and eat tacos and listen to Latin jazz on the US side. In the US, we see the Mexican presence, but Americans who never cross the border may not know that there is also an increasing presence of US citizens in Mexican border communities, including owners of second-homes on the beaches, Anglophone and Mexican American retirees who have returned to the "old country," children of divided families, workers and students who want to save on rent, philanthropists and social service providers, and artists and lovers.

The common story about the US-Mexico border is that cross-border differences are greater than those along any other border in the world, from language, to the built environment, to income, to institutions. This is partly true, but overstates the differences between the US and Mexico in places that are immediately adjacent to the border. The architecture and institutions are different in the communities on each side, but consider language. Language is a good marker of culture and in this case, the gap between the US and Mexico is smaller than many people imagine. Looking at the 10 most populous US counties touching the border, 51 percent of the population 5 years old and over speaks only English at home, while 41.6 percent speaks Spanish.ⁱ That amounts to nearly 2.6 million people whose primary language is Spanish, out of a 10-county population of 6 million people, age 5 and older.ⁱⁱ

Border states are not as transnational, overall, as their border counties but they too are becoming more so, and recent changes are dramatic. In 1990, a little over 20 percent of the population of the four US border states spoke Spanish at home; by 2005-07, the percentage had grown to almost 28 percent, with very significant changes in every border state except New Mexico. The upshot is that in the case of language, the US-Mexico gap is smaller on the border than national averages would have us believe, no matter whether we define the border as border states or border counties.

Consider income, another marker of differences and a key component of development and prosperity. The assumption is often made that the US-Mexico gap in income per person is a good measure of the development gap between the US and Mexico. Mexico does not routinely report income at the level of its municipalities, but in a previous work, a colleague and I attempted to compare US county level income per person with the equivalent figure for Mexican *municipios* (Anderson and Gerber, 2008). When adjustments are made for price differences so that real living standards are compared, US national income per person is usually estimated to be approximately 4 times the comparable Mexican national average. In 2000, the most recent year of our estimates, we found that US border counties were about 85 percent of the US national income level while Mexican *municipios* were around 130 percent of the average Mexican national level. The net result is that cross border income differences are around 2.4 to 1, rather than the 4 to 1 national comparison.

Mexico's border region is relatively prosperous by comparison to most of the rest of Mexico, in large part due to its concentration of manufacturing activity on the border. The growth of the export processing sector, or maquiladora industry, began in 1965 but gained momentum in the 1980s and continues to be a major source of jobs and incomes for Mexican border residents. Nowhere along the US side of the border can one find a regional economy with the same intensity of manufacturing activity, yet the growth of border manufacturing in Mexico has pulled automotive production into Texas, stimulated the US electronics industry, and spilled across the border into the retail sector.

The economic structure of US border cities is different from Mexican border cities, but the differences show their connection. US cities on the border tend to have a much larger share of their employment in retail than the US as a whole, largely as a result of the fact that they frequently service a much larger area than the US city where they are located. Residents of Nuevo Laredo shop in Laredo, people from Tijuana shop in San Diego, and so forth across the border. This gives the US cities a deeper base in retail sales, adds to tax revenues, and ultimately, makes them dependent on economic conditions in Mexico. When the peso collapses, as it did in 1978, 1982, and 1994-95, most US border cities suffer, often dramatically, from the loss of retail sales.

The border as some other place

People that move within the transnational economy and society spanning the border are familiar with many of the points made in the previous section. They may not have numbers at their fingertips, but they understand how economic activities and social networks are not limited by the international boundary. They visit friends and relatives, attend religious services, work, shop and eat, go to the dentist or the doctor, and enjoy life on the “other side.” In some places along the border, the Lower Rio Grande Valley, for example, transnational networks are geographically thicker and extend farther north into the US. In other places, such as San Diego, they are thinner and many of the Anglophone residents in the northern half of the county have never been to Mexico and know little about the border other than what they read in the news or hear on TV.

Mexico is an exotic country for many Americans, and the problems of development are alien to a majority, so that from a distance, the border appears to be the gateway to a very strange place. Stories of corruption and economic chaos undermine US confidence in our neighbor’s ability to create prosperity, particularly when Mexico’s story is told, as it often is, without institutional detail or cultural knowledge. Our story about the US, however, is based on a deeper understanding of the limits of direct action and the constraints on power, and therefore is told with greater complexity and more nuance.

Consider the current story of drugs and violence. Mexico’s failure to stem drug violence is often portrayed as a result of poverty and the corruption in policing and government. This is a simple, easy to understand story about economic, institutional, and moral failure. The US demand for drugs, and the gun sales that arm the narcos, are more complicated stories, involving social and legal problems with a number of institutional and philosophical choices, including uncertain tradeoffs between public safety and personal liberty. In the US, we have forty years of failed drug policies, but most people implicitly accept that we cannot change them because a complicated and difficult political situation prevents us from trying something radically different. In other words, the dominant discourse is that our situation is complicated, the Mexican case is straightforward.

The over-simplification of Mexico’s culture and economic choices in the context of a deeper appreciation of our own situation often causes us to be suspicious of Mexico and the border. In effect, the “otherness” of the border allows us to project our own fears and worries. There are many examples of this, beginning with our current worries about terrorism. We have hardened the border, making it more difficult for people to cross, out of a reasonable set of concerns for our physical safety. Yet, there is no evidence of a threat to the US crossing from Mexico, only the idea that it is possible. Consequently, a national problem such as terrorism is easily projected onto the border which becomes a potential source of danger. This is an old pattern and a traditional way for many Americans to see the border. In 1952, for example, San Diego’s leading newspaper ran a four-part story about the potential for communist infiltrators to enter the US while hidden among undocumented migrants. In 1954, critics of the Bracero Program argued that the temporary visas

granted to Mexican guest workers was a path for subversives to enter the US. Even more recent concerns about disease and swine flu are echoed in earlier concerns about rabies emanating from Mexico and the need to harden the border.

In addition to disease and terrorism, there is a large list of US worries about foreigners or “foreign morality” harming the US that have been projected onto Mexico and the border. For example, the anti-Chinese campaign which began in California and ultimately was embedded in national policy to limit Chinese immigration (the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882) singled out the border with Mexico as a source of illegal entry by Chinese immigrants. In 1903 and 1934, serious attempts were made to hire “Chinese inspectors” at ports of entry with Mexico. In the 1950s and later in the 1960s, when the US became concerned about juvenile delinquency, the border was again viewed as a source of the problem. In 1950, unescorted teen crossings from north to south, were halted and a second attempt was made in the 1960s. In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, the concern was jobs and the economy. The border was labeled a place where alien workers were smuggled into the US, including undocumented Chinese workers. And when drug usage became a national concern in the 1960s, President Nixon targeted the border as a main source of our problem. Even the 1994 California initiative to deny social services to undocumented immigrants (Proposition 187) finds a precursor in the 1960s with our national concern about “welfare cheats” who might abuse our social services after entering the US from Mexico with green card work permits. These worries about social service usage are completely reminiscent of current concerns about the high costs of health care which are partly laid at the feet of illegal border crossers who seek to enter in order to give birth to children.

The geographical locus of US-Mexico integration

It is surprising to learn how much of the integration between the United States and Mexico is a border phenomenon. We tend to think of economic integration in national terms, so we may not stop to realize that it has a geographical component. Some non-border states have significant trade with Mexico—Michigan, for example, due to the rationalization of the automobile industry across Canada, the US, and Mexico—but the bulk of US trade with Mexico originates in border states. Texas (41 percent), California (13 percent) and Arizona (4 percent) jointly account for 58 percent of all US exports to Mexico.ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, the vast majority of trade in both directions moves overland by truck, making the infrastructure, logistical, warehousing, and support services of a few key border communities a primary determinant of the efficiency of trade between the US and Mexico.

Similarly, a large share of Mexican born residents of the US live in the four border states, even as the flow of Mexican migrants to non-traditional states increases. According to the American Community Survey, 65 percent of US residents born in Mexico lived in California (38 percent), Texas (20 percent), Arizona (5 percent) or New Mexico (1 percent).^{iv}

In spite of the importance of border communities and border states in overall economic relations between the US and Mexico, it is not too difficult to show that national policies work against the long-run tendency for the border region to become more integrated and by doing so, they undermine NAFTA and other components of US-Mexico integration. Imagine walls with 2 hours wait times between Los Angeles and Anaheim, Phoenix and Scottsdale, Albuquerque and Santa Fe, and Dallas and Ft. Worth. The impact on the economies of those cities would be catastrophic yet that is exactly the situation along the border. Tijuana and San Diego, the two Nogales, Juarez and El Paso, Laredo and Nuevo Laredo, McAllen and Reynosa, and Brownsville and Matamoros, and a large number of smaller communities suffer significant economic losses as a result of the hardening of the border.

Most likely, Americans outside the transnational economy or society have given little thought to the costs of fences, border checks, and the long delays associated with crossing the border. Anyone who crosses the border more than once a year is aware of the situation, however. According to a recent study done by El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF), 79 to 94 percent of cars took longer than an hour to cross, south to north, at the four of the busiest ports.^v And 20 to 54 percent took longer than an hour and a half. It is difficult to measure with confidence the enormous cost that this imposes on border communities, but both the COLEF study and another by the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) have attempted estimates. COLEF put the price tag at \$7.5 billion in lost output and 296,400 jobs, while SANDAG used a different method and only looked at San Diego-Tijuana and a smaller crossing at Tecate, also in California, to arrive at a figure of \$6 billion in lost output and 51,000 jobs. Both studies were conservative estimates since they cannot take into account foregone investment.

To one degree or another, Americans support efforts to guard against terrorism. Yet the incredibly slow, disorganized, inefficient, and overlapping mechanisms used to implement security arrangements leave border communities at the mercy of planners located in distant capitals. For example, a recent study of a new toll crossing that is planned for the San Diego sector has uncovered 7 federal agencies in the US and 6 in Mexico that must be part of the planning process. This is in addition to the 11 state and local agencies in the US and the 6 state and local agencies in Mexico, and does not take into account the large number of private, non-state actors with interests in the outcome.^{vi} Other ideas to speed up the flow of south-to-north border crossing, such as doubling the agents and booths at each gate which would effectively double the number of inspectors, will take years to implement, while doubling and tripling the number of fences takes only a few months of planning, regardless of the environmental impacts and other concerns.

National policies and market forces

International economic integration can be supported and advanced by policies but it is often the result of market forces set in motion by changes that have nothing to do

with a desire to create integrated economies. In the border region, integration is market driven as opposed to institution driven. That is, it is happening as a result of the individual decisions made by businesses, families, and communities that need to communicate and work cooperatively across the international border, and is not the result of a set of explicit government decrees or rules designed to foster integration. Mexico's policy shifts in the 1980s were not designed to integrate its economy with the US, and the flow of migrants, both temporary and permanent, are largely outside the control of policy makers. New cross-border social networks are not the result of explicit policy interventions, universities do not seek cross-border regional ties as a result of North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and emergency responders are not driven by a vision of integrated markets.

This goes against conventional wisdom that tells us that NAFTA is the source of most new trade between Mexico and the US. Most economists who have looked at this issue agree that NAFTA is secondary and put greater emphasis on Mexico's unilateral opening in the 1980s. That shift in trade and industrial policies rearranged the incentives for Mexican producers by removing or changing many policies that discriminated against exports. At the same time, it created significant new opportunities for firms and investors in the US, Europe, and Asia. As a consequence, the growth in trade and foreign investment begins in the late 1980s, several years prior to negotiations and implementation of NAFTA. Yet, the conventional view of NAFTA is understandable given its political visibility and the long and contentious debates it triggered, particularly in the US. That view also reflects our tendency to believe that visible and dramatic gestures are more important than the indirect results of policy shifts or the slow but steady accretion of changes due to long-run, subtle shifts in demography or society.

Similarly, we tend to view national policies and concerns, as reflected in a national discourse, as the locus of real change. Yet, what the emerging importance of our transnational border region shows us is that the national discourse is often irrelevant to the real changes happening along the 2,000-mile line separating Mexico from the United States. We discuss a national trade agreement, or a hardening of the security apparatus on the border as if we are in control of the forces that began integrating the two economies long before NAFTA.

Conclusion: Nations and regions

There appears to be a great deal of goodwill between the United States and Mexico. Each new president expresses a desire to work together for a common good and public opinion in the US favors cooperation. Yet, on many fronts, the US and Mexico are unable to resolve some fundamental issues. Trucking, arms smuggling, undocumented migration, illegal drugs, watershed usage, and other issues are contentious but demand collaboration and cooperation just to prevent further deterioration. Meanwhile, in many respects, relations between the US and Mexico have not progressed since the signing of NAFTA. Other than Mexico's willingness to extradite narcos, gains in the areas of commercial, social, and political cooperation

are limited while the implementation of NAFTA has been less than agreed to under the terms of the treaty. In part, this is because both countries have neglected their border regions.

One of the keys to a more dynamic and mutually beneficial relationship between the US and Mexico is a smoother, more efficient, border. The obstacles are many, not the least of which is the lack of confidence many Americans have in Mexico. Stories of border violence, drug trafficking, and most recently of swine flu, convey a sense of fear and uncertainty and are used by politically motivated individuals to undermine closer relations, even as demographic and market forces slowly generate more transnational ties and deeper integration.

Many people in the border region and many others who are far removed have worked tirelessly to promote a healthier, more productive, cross-border relationship. Yet even those who work for a more efficient border often fail to grasp the significance of the growing transnational economy and society, and specialists in US-Mexico economic relations often overlook the geographical concentration of trade, investment, migration, and other indicators of economic integration. Consequently, US national policies rarely take into account the transnational economy or the geographical concentration of US-Mexico relations. As a result, our border policies are not adapted to the specific circumstances of the region and US-Mexico relations suffer.

Endnotes

ⁱTwenty five US counties touch the border, but over 96 percent of their population is in just 10 counties. The counties are Imperial and San Diego counties in California; Cochise, Pima, and Yuma counties in Arizona; Dona Ana county in New Mexico; and Cameron, El Paso, Hidalgo, and Webb counties in Texas. The data are from the Census Bureau's mid-year population estimates. See US Census Bureau, 2007. American Community Survey. Available: <http://www.census.gov>.

ⁱⁱ The data are 3 year estimates for 2005-07. See the US Census Bureau, 2008. American Community Survey. Available: <http://www.census.gov>.

ⁱⁱⁱ See TradeStats Express, State Export Data. Available: <http://tse.export.gov>.

^{iv} The data are 3 year estimated averages, 2005-07. See the US Census Bureau, 2008. American Community Survey. Available: <http://www.census.gov>.

^v The four ports are San Diego-Tijuana, El Paso-Juarez, Laredo-Nuevo Laredo, and Nogales-Nogales. See El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF), 2007, December. Estudio de Puertos de Entrada México-Estados Unidos: Análisis de Capacidades y Recomendaciones para Incrementar la Eficiencia, Resumen Ejecutivo.

^{vi} See San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), 2005. Otay Mesa-Mesa de Otay Binational Corridor Strategic Plan. Available: <http://www.sandag.org/programs/borders/binational/projects/presentation.pdf>