The U.S.-Mexico Borderlands: 
A Review of Recent Literature

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The United States of America has two land borders, one with Canada and one with Mexico. The U.S.-Canada border – separating two rich counties – is not much of an obstacle. The movement of people, goods, and capital between the two flows relatively smoothly, a phenomenon which has existed since well before the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was ratified.

Matters are more complicated on the southern land border of the U.S.A. At one time both sides of this border fell under Spanish (and later Mexican) jurisdiction. In the nineteenth century, triggered by the westward expansion of the United States, the northern territories of Mexico became the American states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Over time, the U.S.-Mexico border has become a sharp dividing-line between the ‘developed world’ and the ‘developing world’. As Alan Riding aptly described:

> Probably nowhere in the world do two countries as different as Mexico and the United States live side by side. As one crosses the border...the contrast is shocking – from wealth to poverty, from organization to improvisation, from artificial flavoring to pungent spices. But the physical differences are least important. Probably nowhere in the world do two neighbors understand each other so little.¹

The U.S.-Mexico border constitutes an abrupt transition from one world into another. Many harsh things have been said about ‘the border’, e.g. the poverty gap, urban blight, inept service delivery systems, ill-functioning zoning regulations, dirt and danger. Among Americans there is a long-standing perception of the Mexican border as a trouble zone (automatically) associated with crime, prostitution, drugs, undocumented migrants, environmental pollution, corruption. As a consequence, there is a tendency in the U.S. to approach the southern land border with caution, diplomacy and (evermore) policing.²

Since the mid-sixties the development of the U.S.-Mexican border area has
drawn enormous attention from policy makers, scholars and journalists to better understand the ongoing processes of socio-economic development, to find out about border culture, and to study migration. In 1993, students of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands were pleasantly surprised with the publication of a solid study on the Mexican border cities. In the best tradition of U.S. social geography, Arreola and Curtis probed the rapidly changing urban structures of the larger Mexican cities of the border, zooming in on housing, commerce, industry, and tourism. Although Arreola and Curtis did pay attention to the historical dimension of border city growth, it remained a thinly treated aspect in their book. The recent publication of Kearney and Knopp's *Border Cuates. A History of the U.S.-Mexican Twin Cities* fills the gap. This welcome contribution to the (comparative) history of the border cities is a noteworthy study which systematically takes into account both sides of the border.

The authors are historians from south Texas at the University of Texas at Brownsville. *Border Cuates* is well-written and takes the reader at high speed from the founding days of the border cities to the NAFTA-era, admiringly blending formal historical facts with lively anecdotes. Kearney and Knopp give ample space to local detail, from the sparse line of settlements on the Spanish frontier, through the painful period of Republican Mexico, the Gilded Age and the secession of territories, to the incipient NAFTA period.

The merit of *Border Cuates* is undisputed. There are, as always, a few 'buts'. Depth of analysis has apparently been sacrificed to the authors' choice for the narrative. The inclusion of a clear-cut conceptual framework would have added to the value of the book, as well as city-by-city historiography and an extensive appendix. All the same, this highly useful volume should trigger off more historical studies of 'the urban' on 'the border'. The recently published community history of Brownsville, Texas, may just be such an example.

*Divided Waters* by Ingram, Laney and Gillilan is a good example of an environmentally oriented study. It focuses on water use and water management in the thirsty landscape on the border between Arizona and Sonora. The book resulted from a large project on the border environment carried out under the auspices of the Udall Center of the University of Arizona, and deals with the twin cities of Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Sonora (commonly referred to as *Ambos Nogales* - both Nogales). The brief introductory chapter outlines the importance of water as a resource. Chapter two portrays the major development trends of the two cities, highlighting population growth and the emergence of the interdependent economies. Chapter three, aptly called 'The Troubled Waters of Ambos Nogales', surveys the available natural water resources in both cities, their water resource systems and the problems of water quality. Without being too technical, the reader is made to understand the intricacies of water needs, water supply, waste water and available alternatives. Chapter four, 'Divided Neighbours', deals with the inhabitants of both cities, their perceptions and attitudes about water and the elements which unite and divide them. Starting from the water-related interpretations of four families (two on each side of the border), the argument carefully leads up to the community level. Chapter six offers a fascinating sample of institutional issues in a bi-national context characterized by such differences in interests and means that local government officials on both sides are virtually powerless to effectively tend to communal problems. The final chapter calls for a different approach to
the management of bi-national water resources, and stresses the need for the intensification of concerted and integrated actions within in a participatory framework. *Divided Waters* is a thorough study and a very good introduction to a complicated topic. It is precisely this complexity which leaves one with the feeling that, no matter how correct and justified the recommendations are, implementation will take quite some doing.

Kathryn Kopinak’s *Desert Capitalism* deals with the *maquiladoras*, manufacturing plants on Mexican territory, which (sub)assemble imported components to (semi-)finished products for export. Originally, their emergence in Mexico (intimately related to the ongoing internationalization/globalization of manufacturing production) was facilitated by the Border Industrialization Program (*Programa de Industrialización Fronterizo*). Although the maquiladoras will eventually fade away as separate (legal) entities under NAFTA, it is unlikely that this form of ‘tax haven’ or so-called ‘offshore’ production will become extinct in the short run². *Desert Capitalism* deals with the maquiladora phenomenon in the Mexican state of Sonora, especially the border city of Nogales and the smaller, more distant town of Imuris. Kopinak staged her study in North America’s western industrial corridor, a term she borrowed from Barajas Escamilla. This may be a bit overstated, considering the region’s manufacturing structure. A demanding writing style handles a breath-taking number of topics in seven chapters: the phenomenon of maquiladoras, the economic restructuring process of the maquila industry, the maquiladora labor market, production technology and the organization of work, workers’ reactions to maquiladora employment, and the households of maquiladora workers.

Unfortunately, a systematic conceptual framework for the study is lacking. *Desert Capitalism* tries to link maquiladora production to the local labor market and the household. It is an ambitious goal. Whether *Desert Capitalism* has succeeded here is open for discussion. Without a conceptual framework, it is not clear what the author’s argument is precisely. Questions remain about the maquiladoras under study here, their production processes, their (material) inputs and outputs, their corporate decisionmaking. There is no detailed and controllable picture of (the sample of) workers and their households, how they survive, what the role of the maquiladora is for them, or the relationships among households, maquiladora labor and migration.

Though one may mutter about unclear or absent elements, *Desert Capitalism* is a ground-breaking study which demonstrates that ‘the factory’, ‘the household’ and ‘the worker’ can be integrated into the same research framework. Stating the problem more clearly and editing the text rigourously would have made the argument more powerful; nevertheless, *Desert Capitalism* is in many ways a pleasant surprise.

Political scientist Kathleen Staudt from the University of Texas at El Paso has published a real gem. *Free Trade? Informal Economies at the U.S.-Mexico Border* combines culture, politics and the informal economy of the border, focusing on the contiguous and bi-national cities of El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua. A conceptual framework is set up in chapter one in which the thinking of Antonio Gramsci is pivotal. This framework is returned to in the final chapter, taking it to a higher level by adressing the consequences of the study for the U.S. heartlands.
Nicely written and carefully argumented, *Free Trade?* has surprising density of information. Though its scope is broad, local details make the book come alive. Basically, the book deals with the poor people who live in six different neighborhoods, three in each border city. Staudt tries to understand how these people make ends meet, how they get housing and work, and how politics and bureaucracies on both sides of the border constrain them in their struggle to survive.

The data-oriented chapters of the book relate to work in and across the border (Chapter 4), access to land and shelter (Chapter 5) and public services (Chapter 6), and how local governmental and non-governmental authorities deal with informality (Chapter 7). From the very beginning it is clear that the author is interested in the inner workings of the informal sector on both sides of the border. Of course, the prevalence of the informal sector in Ciudad Juarez is predictable, considering the vast amount of literature in Mexico about it. But Staudt also offers stunning information on the size and the shape of the informal sector on the U.S. side of the border, by and large among American citizens. Staudt illustrates that the underlying principles of informality are the same on both sides; moreover, they are intimately related.

The informal economy of the U.S.-Mexico border is a world in itself, completely separate from the formal sector's offices in skyscrapers and industrial estates. Regrettably, the author seems to shy away from investigating the relationships between the formal and the informal sector in the households she interviewed. At the political level, Staudt shows how Mexican and U.S. policies seem to constrain the poor instead of improving their living standards. A comparison with the work of Hernando de Soto, for example, would have been a nice addition here. In the final chapter, an excursion into the informal structures of Los Angeles or New York would have broadened the book enormously. Notwithstanding, *Free Trade?* is very rewarding and now compulsory reading for students of mine who plan on doing fieldwork in these borderlands.

When considering the literature which deals with the U.S.-Mexico border, one quickly discovers that some topics such as undocumented migration, female labor, maquiladoras, urban development, and environmental pollution have been the subject of much attention. Other topics such as cross-border shopping and the use of cross-border services are still remarkably underexposed. There is also an urgent need to better understand the role and the functioning of self-help housing projects on both sides of the border, especially since the problem of 'spontaneous' and partially illegal housing development is booming on the U.S. side. Indeed, the Mexican experience in self-help housing on the border might offer alternative approaches for U.S. citizens and authorities.

Another salient characteristic of the literature on the U.S. and Mexico is the prevalence of studies which deal with only one side of the border, despite their sometimes very broad titles. Furthermore, they are often one dimensional, that is, they frequently focus almost exclusively on either economic, sociological, or political aspects. And certainly very important, students of 'the border' do not extensively incorporate secondary sources from 'the other language', i.e., from either Spanish or English.

Today's study of the borderlands calls for more integrated approaches because both sides share certain aspects of heritage and culture, and because both
economies, also as a consequence of NAFTA, are becoming more intertwined. To understand the development processes in the U.S.-Mexico border area, studies should take both sides into account, not stopping at the limits of a single discipline. The accumulated knowledge in the U.S.A. and Mexico should be seriously considered.

The books discussed here are the frontrunners of a new generation of studies on the region. To better understand the further development of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, creative approaches are needed which are interdisciplinary and cross-cultural.

Notes


2. John W. House in his Frontier on the Rio Grande, A Political Geography of Development and Social Deprivation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) has called attention to the political imperative in this respect. Oscar Martinez has also dealt with it in his aforementioned Troublesome Border, as well as in his Border People. Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994).


7. A good example in this respect is Dianne C. Betts and Daniel J. Stottle, *Crisis on the Rio Grande, Poverty, Unemployment and Economic Development on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), which turns out to be almost completely devoted to the Lower Rio Grande Valley in Texas, without equally dealing with the neighboring (riverine) area in the state of Tamaulipas.