

**Borders of the South Border: territorial  
(re)organization and systems of (in)mobility in Mexico**

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## **Translator's note**

Over the last decade, I've had the good fortune of living, studying, and working in Mexico.

Here, in my experience, the work of theory takes place in conversation: over tacos in a family restaurant, on a bench outside a migrant shelter, at a bookshop, during a blockade, on a long bus ride, at someone's kitchen table, or while taking a breather during a search for the disappeared.

It is through the collective pulling and loosening of our words, through the weaving of intellectual communion in periods of grief and loss, and through vital memory work carried out by those who came before us that we attempt to make sense of a world turned on its head.

"Theory is a moment of struggle," is a saying I've often heard in this context, which owes a great debt to the Zapatista rebellion that emerged into the public eye in 1994. As I sat down to write this introduction to this remarkable text, I was reminded of the words of scholar Jasper Bernes, who writes:

... theory is more a map than a set of directions: a survey of the terrain in which we find ourselves, a way of getting our bearings in advance of any risky course of action ... Theory is a map produced by the lost themselves, offering us the difficult view from within rather than the clarity of the Olympian view from above.<sup>1</sup>

Such a map is urgently needed in Mexico, where over half a million people have been murdered or disappeared since the drug war was ramped up in December 2006, and killing and violence continues at an astounding rate. Internal displacement is on the rise, and military forces are now deployed in

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<sup>1</sup>Bernes, Jasper. 2013. "Logistics, Counterlogistics and the Communist Prospect." *End Notes* 3 (September). <https://endnotes.org.uk/articles/logistics-counterlogistics-and-the-communist-prospect>.

record numbers around the country. Armed forces involvement in key logistics and transportation infrastructure has become commonplace.

People transiting north toward the United States face unspeakable cruelty and violence, exemplified by army, police and paramilitary massacres of migrants as well as the fire at a migrant prison in Ciudad Juárez in March 2023. The men inside, who were from Central and South America and imprisoned for the crime of being poor and undocumented on the streets of the border city, cried for help as the flames and smoke filled their cells. Mexican migration officials watched as 40 men burn to death, refusing to unlock the cell doors even though they had the keys on hand.

Official discourse has long suggested the dead, the displaced, the disappeared in Mexico were criminal elements somehow deserving of their fates, and that the fault is with the drug cartels, which have overpowered the government, and that militarization is the only response.

Claudia Sheinbaum, Mexico's first woman president, uses leftist discourse while presiding over increased militarism and an economic plan focused on attracting foreign direct investment, mass tourism and the wholesale industrialization of Indigenous and peasant lands.

For obvious reasons, a great deal of attention is paid to Mexico's northern border with the United States. And though there has been important journalism revealing the push to move the border south, much of the discourse around the border between Mexico, Belize and Guatemala has remained frozen in time.

*Borders of the South Border* by Abbdel Camargo Martínez and Sergio Prieto Díaz, who are based in Chiapas and Campeche respectively, is an impressive effort to remedy these gaps. The authors seek to push back against received wisdom about the causes and outcomes, not only of migration policy, but of the impacts of a centralized, macroeconomic vision for Mexico's south.

As I translated and revised this essay, I entered into deeper dialogue with the authors. It became clear to me that their efforts to communicate what's changing in the region are informed by extensive processes of conversation, deep listening, and sense-making, by the kind of intellectual communion I

mentioned at the top: the praxis of sharing a meal, of reading and reflecting, writing and re-writing, rehearsing, erasing, and trying again.

Their intervention is a place-based effort urging people outside the region—whether in Mexico City, Minneapolis or Madrid—to interrogate our preconceived notions of the border as a line on the map separating Mexico from Guatemala and Belize, or a row of national guard soldiers forcing back migrants with shields and clubs.

Instead, the authors urge us to re-imagine the border and the various methods of control it manifests through the dense territory of Mexico's south. They call us to differentiate how we understand bordering processes in the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca from the dynamics that are at work in adjacent states of Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatán and Quintana Roo. To move from a conception of a homogenous south border to a broader notion encompassing the borders of the south border, plural.

Prieto Díaz and Camargo Martínez suggest southern region of the south border is best understood as a *hot border*, in which migration control takes place primarily through punitive actions, including imprisonment and direct repression, as well as drawn-out administrative procedures that create legal bottlenecks and prevent non-Mexican migrants from leaving the southern states.

This region is the largest migration corridor in the world. Diaz Prieto and Camargo Martínez make clear that the wickedness of the militarized anti-migrant policy the Mexican government is dispensing so as to stay in the good graces of Washington is best understood as a response to caravans of mostly Central American migrants that began moving northward in late 2018.

These caravans took place in a context in which the right to asylum was already severely eroded and violence against migrants on the rise. The authors note that the collective nature of the caravans broke with previous efforts by migrants to pass through Mexico undetected and dared to position migrants as collective subjects deserving of rights.

Then Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador did not hesitate to make use of migrants as a bargaining chip to gain favor during the first Trump

administration, deploying tens of thousands of National Guard and army soldiers against them. López Obrador also pushed two key infrastructure projects in the southeast, which his government explicitly positioned as barriers to northward movement.

The south border region is geographically strategic because of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which is 15 times narrower than the US-Mexico border. The Isthmus is home to a militarized megaproject known as the Trans-Isthmus Corridor, meant to speed the movement of commodities from Pacific to Atlantic ports, while also transforming the region into a manufacturing hub. The Trans-Isthmus corridor is operated by Mexican marines, an elite armed group which over past decades has become the favorite of the US (at least one in three of its members have trained there).

Then, there is the region to the north of the south border, which extends into the Yucatán Peninsula, which the authors consider a *cool border* where human mobility is controlled primarily by means other than direct repression.

This control looks like specialized visa programs that allow migrants to stay as low waged workers in the tourism sector, as well as militarized megaprojects like the Peninsular Train (officially called the Tren Maya), which promises employment for locals and migrants alike, while at the same time threatening communally owned Mayan lands and the delicate ecosystems that define the region.

The authors introduce the notion of a migratory vortex, suggesting an approach to social and territorial dynamics that accounts for multiple and overlapping population flows and movements, pushing beyond closed approximations that focus purely on processes of human mobility toward the United States.

*Borders of the South Border* portrays a complex, dense territory in the northern region of the south border such that we begin to understand how the displacement of Mayan Indigenous people in the region is connected to the movement of migrants and the construction of megaprojects, which in turn spurs demand for specialized workers, who arrive from other parts of Mexico and elsewhere, creating new urban demands and dynamics.

By unraveling some of the social and territorial dynamics at work, this essay pushes beyond orthodox analysis of the border in myriad ways, creating an important set of instruments for further analysis.

It breaks new ground in thinking through the border and its violences, and which—despite the lack of resources made available to researchers in Mexican public universities—demonstrates the authors' sustained engagement with activists, Indigenous land defenders, migrant justice organizers and migrants themselves.

It is my hope that this translated essay can help animate more productive conversations about what is taking place in Mexico today, which can lead us to ask better questions, and contribute to growing meaningful internationalism and resistance to empire, militarization, and state violence.

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## **Territorial (re)organization and systems of (in)mobility in Mexico**

In this essay we explore, analyze and reconstruct the meanings, scope and contradictions of the connections between territories, borders and human (in)mobilities in the frontier space of southern Mexico and Central America. Based on this exercise, and with an eye to potential futures in this border space and that of other border regions in the global south, we propose an analytical framework consisting of two conceptual elements: *dense territory* and *migratory vortex*. These concepts condense our theoretical and methodological approach to the interrelation between borders and human (in)mobilities.

To this end, Mexico's south is deconstructed into two specific and particular—but intimately connected—border spaces: the south of the southern border, in the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca, home to processes of human (in)mobility; and the north of this border space, in Quintana Roo, Yucatan, Campeche and Tabasco, where the impact of ongoing territorial reorganization exemplify the need to reconsider the traditional idea of a border.

Forced displacement and human (in)mobility are on the rise worldwide. These events have been produced by the development of the modern, industrialized world. Inequalities, violence and conflicts derived from the struggle for control over land and the extraction of wealth have led to displacement, destroying the possibility that people can remain in much of the Global South.

The theoretical frames associated with industrial and modern development and the social conditions of impacted populations, their identities and cultures, the places they reside, and the circumstances in which displacements—voluntary and forced—take place have manifested over time in a diversity of policies and projects.<sup>2</sup> Critiques of these projects have transited from Marxist notions of original accumulation, to accumulation by dispossession, and finally to accumulation by extermination.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See: Canales, A. (2013). Migración y desarrollo en sociedades avanzadas. Una mirada desde América Latina. *Polis, Revista Latinoamericana*, 12, 35, 85-117; and Zibechi, R. (2016, 8 de julio). Acumulación por exterminio. *La Jornada*. Disponible en <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2016/07/08/opinion/019a1pol>

<sup>3</sup> Harvey, D. (2004). El nuevo imperialismo: acumulación por desposesión. En L. Pantich, y C. Leys (eds.), *El nuevo desafío imperial* (pp. 99-129). Buenos Aires: Merlin Press, CLACSO.

The creation, presence and multiplication of human collectivities in exodus has fomented a series of complex and often violent dynamics,<sup>4</sup> as migratory flows, systems and corridors are configured on the basis of existing historical processes. This has attracted new actors and driven the redesign of institutions, legislative frameworks and migration policy paradigms, with positive and negative outcomes in society at large and in geographically specific ways.<sup>5</sup>

These phenomena are not new, rather they are processes in continuous transformation, shaped by multiple experiences and subjectivities linked to contextually specific and structural dynamics that constantly intertwine the local, regional and global scale.<sup>6</sup>

Our initial hypothesis is, following Harvey, that unequal “spatial forms” materialize in geopolitical and geoterritorial disputes, and that forms of (in)mobility play a central role in processes of territorial reorganization.<sup>7</sup> These spatial forms, which are unequal but complementary, are particularly explicit in the region known generically as “Mexico's southern border.”

Within this historical logic, one of the most significant examples of the link between disputed territories and human (in)mobilities can be seen in the implementation of mega-projects, which can also be called “territorial reorganization projects.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Violence here refers to the violence present at the origin—the driver of mobility—in transit, and even upon return, as is the case with deportations. State violence challenges the global paradigm of “legal, orderly and safe” migration, as well as the doctrine of governance and the notion of human security. Other threats are related to climate change or disasters, including hurricanes, earthquakes, and volcanoes.

<sup>5</sup> People from different backgrounds in different situations of mobility, civil society groups, volunteer organizations, pro- and anti-immigrant communities and movements, corporations, government institutions, religious organizations, international organizations, media, and academia. See: Domenech, E. (2013). *Las migraciones son como el agua: hacia la instauración de políticas de “control con rostro humano”*. *Revista Polis*, 12(35), 119-142.

<sup>6</sup> Düvell, F. (2003). *Globalization of Migration Control*. En H. Holger (ed.), *Crossing Over: Comparing Recent Migration in the United States and Europe* (pp.23-46). UK: Lexington Books.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory, D. (1989). *Areal Differentiation and Post-Modern Human Geography*. En D. Gregory y W. Rex (eds.), *Horizons in human geography* (pp. 67-97). London: MacMillan.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the megaprojects considered include: transportation infrastructure, mining, oil, hydraulic fracturing (fracking), gas pipelines, hydroelectric plants, renewable energies, conservation programs, monocropping, agrochemicals, real estate and mass tourism. See: Márquez Covarrubias, H. (2010). *Desarrollo y migración: una lectura desde la economía política crítica*. *Migración y Desarrollo*, 14, 59-87.

This text proposes to examine and deepen our understanding of the interconnection between projects of enormous (physical and symbolic) magnitude and varied processes of human (in)mobilities in the area connecting Mexico and Central America, which is a paradigmatic transition space between global norths and souths.<sup>9</sup>

We consider *territory* as a multidimensional space endowed with sense and meaning that has allowed for the evolution of the natural environment, human societies, and social reproduction. The term “territoriality” is used to capture the ontological struggle and dispute between different visions of land tenure and use and the interplay between ecology and the exercise of sovereignty, through the creation, justification and naturalization of multiple borders in ways that go beyond the administrative notion of bordering.

We believe processes of territorialization are intimately linked to those of bordering: both are subject to relations of domination and control and the struggle between internal sovereignty and external hegemony. This position requires recognizing the impacts of governmental, international and private interests in the implementation of strategic programs and plans and the relationship these programs establish with social groups that reside in the territories in question, who are often removed or forced to relocate, at the same time as others are attracted to these same spaces in order to insert themselves in specific labor markets.<sup>10</sup>

These are the kinds of linkages connecting geopolitics (and the geostrategic value of territories) with systems of population (in)mobility. In doing so, they sustain the neoliberal regime and the paradigm of securitization in the region.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> By global south (and north) we refer to a characterization of the world that is not geographic but geopolitical, emphasizing the maintenance of power and hegemony by some regions over others, either as nation states, or as regions within a nation state. Accordingly, there are *souths* in the north, and *norths* in the south (De Sousa, 2011). This analytical framework recovers elements of Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on colonialism* (Martinique, 1950), Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the earth* (Martinique, 1965), the Economic Commission on Latin America's “dependency theory” (Gunder Franck, Marini, Furtado, Cardoso and Faletto, 1950-1970), Raúl Prebisch's “center-periphery theory” (Argentina, 1949), Enrique Dussel's *Philosophy of liberation* (Argentina, 1973), Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (Brazil, 1968), and even Wallerstein's “world-System theory” (1974), all of which are canonical referents in Latin American decolonial thought.

<sup>10</sup> Estupiñán Serrano, M. L. (2014). Migration Management: a propósito del gobierno de las migraciones a escala global. *Sociológica*, 29(81), 263-281.

<sup>11</sup> Monmonier, M. (2012). No Dig, No Fly, No Go: How Maps Restrict and Control. *Progress in Human Geography*, 36(2), 282-289.

It is from this perspective that we share conceptual proposals that make the link between territorial planning and population redistribution in the border space of southern Mexico visible. In doing so, we seek to emphasize the emergence and interconnection of multiple forms of (in)mobility and bordering processes.

Our analysis of the border is focused on the transformation, adaptation and interrelationships between human (in)mobilities and regional territorialities. This is a future-looking text in which we methodologically review and recover key elements toward a renewed approach to the processes and characteristics at play, allowing us to propose a new framework for interpretation that considers processes that are usually analyzed separately.

The paper is divided into four sections, followed by some general conclusions.

In section one and two, we attempt to demonstrate the complexity of territorial dynamics related to the border and their articulation with processes of human (in)mobility in the region in order to illustrate how bordering takes place.

In the third section, we describe the particular characteristics and fields of interaction and complementarity in the two border regions of Mexico's south: the coastal zone (south) and the peninsular zone (north), in which differentiated processes of territorial organization and population redistribution occur.

In the fourth section we present a series of theoretical and conceptual proposals before ending with some general conclusions.

## **Population (In)mobility and borderlands**

The history of the expansion of modernity around the world is the history of the dispute, differentiation and distribution of the control of land.<sup>12</sup> This expanded from the territorial to the symbolic through the universalization of ideas, perceptions, imaginaries and particular socio-cultural constructions including ethnicity, social class, gender or racial difference. Through this process, territory became linked to

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<sup>12</sup> We understand modernity as the ideological project emanating from a matrix of Eurocentric thought that has sought to impose itself through supposedly universal imaginaries such as "democracy", "development", "progress", "poverty", among others. This premise underlies Indian decolonial thought, which has been recovered by Latin American decolonial thinkers. See: Chakrabarty, D. (n/d). *Una pequeña historia de los estudios subalternos*. In *Anales de Desclasificación, Documentos Complementarios*. Chicago: Universidad de Chicago. Accessed via: [http://www.economia.unam.mx/historiacultural/india\\_subalternos.pdf](http://www.economia.unam.mx/historiacultural/india_subalternos.pdf)

the notion of limits that differentiated and consolidated the frontiers of nascent nation-states. The traditional border, a physical expression of sovereignty and state-centered power, can be understood as an administrative separation based on the exercise of authority over different sections of territory.

Borders constitute privileged physical and ontological spaces from which to understand social phenomena and processes that take place in territories that are in dispute, including through the reproduction of the dynamism and complexity of relationships between human collectivities and communities, political nations and ecosystems.

Borders are both paradox and paradigm: they delimit differentiations between Us and Others, they define the edges in the exercise of state power, and they construct distinctions between belonging and exclusion (citizenship and foreignness) via the control of national limits.

The notion of bordering (and the border) articulates and connects geopolitical and semantic space, giving meaning to processes that occur in surrounding territories.<sup>13</sup> For Canto, borders are dynamic spaces.<sup>14</sup> This points to the importance of historicizing and contextualizing the study of borders, which are forged by the practices and identities that converge in those spaces.

Hernández and Campos write that borders “do not represent a fixed point in space or time, instead symbolizing a social practice of spatial differentiation.”<sup>15</sup> The political-administrative dynamics of the creation of nation-states are linked to the delimitation of what belongs and what does not. Territory is marked so as to inscribe the notion of what is “ours” upon it. From a historical perspective, one of the central functions of borders has been to establish and structure difference. In the American continent, for example, borders were imposed as mechanisms to “order the new world” based on emerging power relations oriented by an ideology that normalizes difference: center and periphery, development and backwardness, white and non-white.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Nail, T. (2016). *Theory of the Border*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Canto, N. A. (2016). *Frontera Sur de Mexico. Los retos múltiples de la diversidad*. Mexico: CASEDE.

<sup>15</sup> Hernández, A. H., Campos Delgado, A. (2015). *Líneas, límites y colindancias a las fronteras desde América Latina*. Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte. pp. 45.

<sup>16</sup> Popescu, G. (2011). *Bordering and Ordering the Twenty-first Century: Understanding Borders*. Washington: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

To do so, it was necessary to endow certain ideological attributes to territories and peoples, which were imagined and represented either as idyllic, empty and unused, or as marginal, backward, conflictive and ungovernable.<sup>17</sup> These attributes would later be used to justify and legitimize centralized interventions and external interference.

The control of territories and the strategic resources (natural or human) within them, has fostered the emergence of bordered-others. This means the border is continuously remade, taking shape through the presence and transcendence of complex processes of human (in)mobility.<sup>18</sup>

Thinking from here allows us to consider a broad spectrum of possible population movements, with an emphasis on building a historical and structural analysis that goes beyond current events.

These multiple forms of human (in)mobility ought to be considered alongside an analysis of regulatory frameworks or institutional architectures or infrastructures set up for the maintenance, control and management of border flows and territories.

Thinking through (in)mobility also requires considering spatial factors, as territories themselves also move, generating new territories or geographical images—at origin, transit and destination—in which the border plays a central role.<sup>19</sup>

## **“Overflowing” traditional borders**

Territory and border are intertwined in a manner that tends towards conflict, since both can be understood as socio-political fields related to the measurement and fragmentation, distribution and control of land. This follows the modern, state centric conception of national territory as an abstract, two-dimensional, homogeneous, measurable, continuous space clearly delimited by linear borders that provide a sense of demarcation.

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<sup>17</sup> Amilhat, A-L. y Rouvière, L. (2009). Des dynamiques transfrontalières au bilan d'aménagement du territoire: Innovations et blocages dans les Andes centrales (Chili-Pérou-Bolivie). *Reveu Mosella, N Especial "Fronteras y desarrollo"*, 32, 181-196; Camargo Martínez, A. (2020). Migraciones laborales y su lógica de representación: Apuntes para la comprensión del desarrollo de los sistemas migratorios regionales. En L. Gandini (coord), *Temas y aproximaciones actuales para el estudio de las migraciones y movilidad en las Américas* (pp. 35-59). Mexico: SUDIMER UNAM.

<sup>18</sup> Gustafson, P. (2009). Mobility and Territorial Belonging. *Environment and Behavior*, 41(4), 490-508.

<sup>19</sup> Claval, Paul (1999). Los fundamentos actuales de la geografía cultural. *Documents d'anàlisi geogràfica* no 34, pág.: 25-40.

This is the case of Mexico's southern border. Here, beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, key events have influenced discourses and practices related to territory and security, and therefore, to the movement of populations and border management.

A new stage of border dynamics in the region began in the 1980s, with the arrival of refugees fleeing armed conflict in El Salvador, and later, in greater numbers, of Guatemalans fleeing the same.

During this period, populations from northern Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua) settled in the southern region of Mexico, and especially in the state of Chiapas, creating and using family and historical ties in the border region so as to be able to remain there. Subsequently, Central American migrants were relocated to the states of Campeche and Quintana Roo with the support of the Mexican Commission for Refugee Aid (COMAR) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Memory of the movement of people has been consolidated in the region ever since, as migratory and labor dynamics defined historical and cultural relations there.

The memory of migration that accompanies border spaces took another turn in the 1990s. That's when Chiapas border towns of Talismán and Ciudad Hidalgo became the most important points of entry along Mexico's southern border. This expanded in the 2000s to include Tenosique, Tabasco, where thousands of migrants in transit, mainly from Central America, and later from South America, the Caribbean, Asia and Africa, entered Mexico to make their way to the US and Canada. This region has been subject to tensions and conflicts related to the management of resources and population dynamics ever since.

In conversation with Basaíl, we are interested in “carrying out an examination and update of meanings and narratives of the border by proposing an analysis that considers the Mexican border with Guatemala and Belize as a southern border of the global north, with a complex territorial grammar.”<sup>20</sup> To this end, we propose considering “the border” as a category that defines processes of—tense—interactions between individuals and groups, territories, institutions and historical relations with dynamics that go beyond national boundaries.

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<sup>20</sup> Basaíl Rodríguez, A. (2018). Reconfiguraciones geopolíticas de la Frontera Sur de México: Crítica de sus gramáticas transnacionales. Cuadernos de Nuestra América, XXVII, 51. pp. 105.

To do requires moving from the concept of a rigid border as a determinant of the sovereignty of states, to the consideration of “bordering” processes (Grimson, 2003) in which spaces contiguous to international dividing lines are themselves changing and reproducing in multiple ways, both within countries and regionally (Besserer et al., 2008).<sup>21</sup> Historically, the deeply rooted interdependence between nations and border-territories in bordered spaces has been taken for granted, at the same time as the differences between territories and processes experienced on one or the other side of the boundary lines between countries hardens, harking back to the specific origin of nations, each with their own historical processes, linguistic, national and regional identities, racialization of populations, productive activities and economic divergences, among others.

These fields of “differentiation” enable the distinction between societies, cultures and territories, on the basis of ideological narratives materialized in “naturally” discontinuous fields such as racialized identities, nativism, skin color, religion or nationality.<sup>22</sup> We refer to the complexity and dynamism of this “discontinuity” as *border gospel*, since it is taken for granted that differentiation is the constituent form of relations existing in border territories, giving meaning to a series of bordering processes associated with separation, rupture and difference.

We use the category *frontier* to signify a node that is a metaphor for the limit where the seemingly contradictory notion of contact is forged, as is the differentiation between nations and disconnected territories. The creation of what we define as frontier-spaces and their reconfiguration over time are of key political-geostrategic relevance. *Bordering* connects territory to limits, to control and exploitation, to government policy that shapes and defines it, and to the populations that inhabit, abandon, occupy or transit these spaces.

The complexity and dynamism of *border gospel* as developed on Mexico’s southern border facilitates the establishment of a historical relationship between key fields: bordering, frontier-spaces, population (in)mobilities and the experience of collectivities of migrants and residents. Here, the notion of bordering overflows that

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<sup>21</sup> Grimson, Alejandro (2003). Disputas sobre las fronteras. En *La teoría de la frontera: los límites de la política cultural*, David E. Johnson y Scott Michaelsen (comp.) Ed. Gedisa; Besserer, Federico, Rocío Gil, Daniela Oliver (2008). "El mundo como frontera y la (re)fronterización mundial". En: Sariego, Juan Luis (Comp.) *El Norte de México: Entre Fronteras*. CONACyT-INAH-ENAH. México.

<sup>22</sup> Gupta, A. y Ferguson, J. (2008). Más allá de la “cultura”: Espacio, identidad y las políticas de la diferencia. *Antipoda. Revista de Antropología y Arqueología*, 7, 233-256.

of the confines of the nation, and is understood as a relational node in macro-processes with regional and hemispheric meaning.

We consider territory in two complementary ways: on the one hand, in its material quality as a spatial referent, in which the border is materialized in its geographical dimension and endowed with so called “natural” resources and goods; and on the other, in its relational dimension, in which processes, history, items, beings and experiences of mobility and permanence interact, as do the experiences of populations (residents and migrants) who live and have lived in this physical space in transit, permanence, containment and even as an imagined territory.

Population mobility in Mexico is subordinated to a model that regulates population flows according to a geostrategic interest centered on the US and the global bloc of northern countries. Population flows connect mobility and immobility along both of Mexico’s borders. This dual process is characteristic of Mexico’s border zones and is best understood as part of a global phenomenon of human mobilities and displacements, as well as taking place in the context in which mobility is managed based on confinement, control and deportation.<sup>23</sup>

Border territories have become de facto intermediary nodes that connect migratory chains—local, regional, national and international—which take different forms (via irregular migration, deportation, and forced displacement that include but are not limited to refugees and statelessness) with a variety of economic, productive and geostrategic elements.

These territories thus acquire attributes of *density*.<sup>24</sup> It is important to record the experiences and memory of individuals (and the groups to which they belong) that contain histories of mobility, settlement, rootedness and violence in these dense frontiers where people live/have lived, transit/have transited, sleep/have slept, or where they are obliged to stay. This is a long history, with origins in colonial times, whose meaning has deepened following the implementation of an economic model that forces a large part of the world to live on “the margins.”

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<sup>23</sup> Velasco, L., Zolniski, C. y Coubés, M.L. (2018). *De Jornaleros a Colonos: Residencia, trabajo e identidad en el Valles de San Quintín*. Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte.

<sup>24</sup> The idea of density and its functions and characteristics is developed as a conceptual proposal in section three of this document.

## **From Mexico's southern border to the borders of the south border**

Technically speaking, Mexico's southern border is 1,138 kilometers long, of which 962km are shared with Guatemala, and 176km with Belize, as established in boundary treaties at the end of the 19th century. The Guatemalan departments of San Marcos, Huehuetenango, Quiché and Petén share a border with the Mexican states of Chiapas (654km), Tabasco (108km) and Campeche (194km). Further north, the Mexican states of Campeche and Quintana Roo border the districts of Corozal and Orange Walk in Belize.

As a whole, the southern border stands out for its cultural and natural diversity and wealth. On the Mexican side are Cakchiquel, Chol, Jacalteco, Konjabal, Lacandón, Mame, Mochó, Tojolabal, Tzeltal, Tzotzil and Zoque peoples and languages in Chiapas; Chontal and Chol languages in Tabasco; and Peninsular Maya in Campeche and Quintana Roo. Guatemala's north border is home to speakers of Maya Q'eqchí, Chuj, Mam, Kanjobal and Ixil. And in Belize there are speakers of Spanish, English, the Mennonite variant of Flemish, Mayan and a variant of Chinese.<sup>25</sup>

Mexico's 1990 census (INEGI, 1990) registered a population of 1,336 312 people in Chiapas (61.3% of the regional population), Tabasco (7.1%), Campeche (18.6%) and Quintana Roo (12.9%). By 2010, the population of the south border region was estimated at 1.6 million people, 74% of them in Chiapas (42% in the cities of Tapachula and Ocosingo alone), 7% in Tabasco, 4% in Campeche and 15% in Quintana Roo.<sup>26</sup>

The population of these four states represents eight percent of Mexico's population and 11% of its national territory, with an extremely high value in terms of natural wealth including: 19 of 50 main rivers and hydrological regions; 70% of the biodiversity of North America, 80% of the biodiversity of Mexico, 90% of the diversity in of native domesticated species; 69% of the fresh water available in Mexico, and

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<sup>25</sup> Fábregas Puig, A. (2013). Vivir la frontera sur de México. In P. Bovin (ed.), *Las fronteras del istmo: Fronteras y sociedades entre el sur de México y América Central* (pp. 343-349). Mexico: Centro de estudios mexicanos y centroamericanos, Mexico. Accessed via <http://books.openedition.org/cemca/641>.

<sup>26</sup> INEGI (2010). X Censo de Población y Vivienda. Mexico: INEGI. En <https://www.inegi.org.mx/programas/ccpv/2010/>

99% of available hydrocarbons.<sup>27</sup> Low population density in regions of rich and diverse natural resources has been used as a justification to promote programs toward occupation by settlers and the establishment of economically productive activities in these territories.<sup>28</sup>

The territory along Mexico's southern border has historically been categorized as a “backward or unproductive region,” a “wasteland” and a “demographic vacuum,” at the same time as it has been regarded as a source of resources. It stands out for its ecosystemic, historical, social and cultural diversity, and has a complex historiography linked to demographic processes and conflicts around occupation and territorial control, as well as migratory dynamics.

The traditional (administrative) border with Guatemala and Belize, considered a “porous and ungovernable border” due to its geography, has been de-territorialized and reconceptualized on at least three occasions.

The first was the shift to consider Mexico in its entirety as a “vertical border” or a “border-nation” in which migration control policies are not applied along a horizontal separation line, but rather from south to north throughout the entire territory.<sup>29</sup> This notion was expressed in the proliferation of so-called “control belts” during the six-year term of Vicente Fox (2000-2006), which were implemented in three areas of intense policing of the routes taken by migrants.

The second was the idea of Mexico as a “stopper-country” through the application of the Southern Border Plan during the six-year term of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018). During this time, surveillance of “The Beast” was increased,

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<sup>27</sup> Comisión de asuntos fronterizos sur del senado. (2016). Programa de trabajo 2016. Mexico: Senado de la República. Recuperado de

[https://www.senado.gob.mx/comisiones/asuntos\\_fronterizos\\_sur/docs/Programa1\\_LXIII.pdf](https://www.senado.gob.mx/comisiones/asuntos_fronterizos_sur/docs/Programa1_LXIII.pdf);

CONABIO (Comisión Nacional para el Conocimiento y Uso de la Biodiversidad). (2020). Corredor biológico mesoamericano. Mexico: CONABIO. Accessed via <https://www.biodiversidad.gob.mx/corredor/corredorbiomeso.html>;

CONAGUA (Comisión Nacional del Agua). (2018). Estadísticas del agua en Mexico. Mexico: CONAGUA. Recuperado de [http://sina.conagua.gob.mx/publicaciones/EAM\\_2018.pdf](http://sina.conagua.gob.mx/publicaciones/EAM_2018.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Ceceña, A. E. y Prieto Díaz, S. (2020). Mirando al Sur: megaproyectos, fronteras e (in) movilidades. Mexico: ECOSUR, Grupo CONACYT Territorios del Tren Maya.

<sup>29</sup> Sandoval, J. M. (2009). Integración regional subordinada, saqueo de recursos estratégicos, migraciones forzadas y lucha por la soberanía en el continente americano. En R. Álvarez de Flores y J.M. Sandoval Palacios (coords.), *Alternativas de regionalización Vs. integración subordinada en América Latino. Más allá del neoliberalismo* (pp. 17-40). Mexico: Universidad de los Andes e Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

exacerbating policies of migratory control and detention in the south of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.<sup>30</sup>

The third was the militarization that occurred during Andrés Manuel López Obrador's six-year term (2018-2024). In the face of various difficulties regarding the expulsion of migrants, Mexico became a "prison-country" in which border spaces operate as territories of waiting and confinement, resulting in the kinds of (in)mobility experienced today.

The coexistence of multiple possible regionalizations and overlapping territorializations demonstrates the complexity and analytical conflicts that exist in the delimitation and analysis of different borders and the projects that impact them.<sup>31</sup> By using a map we better approach this complexity by showing not only national borders but also by including the contours of three major megaprojects in the Mexico's south: the Mayan Train, the Trans-Isthmus Corridor, and the federal program Sembrando Vida in its "Border Strip" variant.<sup>32</sup>

By tracing the outlines and underlying logics of these projects, we will outline how a series of other-borders, concrete and symbolic, emerge, contrast and interrelate, and how they are linked to the varied processes of human (in)mobility that constitute them. This is one of the reasons we recover the notion of *borders of the southern border*, and use it as a starting point, updating and adapting it in a manner that emphasizes human (in)mobilities.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>The name of the freight train that connects the borders of Mexico, which was used by migrants on their journey to the US. The Beast is a manner of referring to the great danger the train represents, as migrants can be kidnapped, assaulted, raped, and otherwise targeted while they ride it. Until the six-year term of Enrique Peña Nieto, with the renationalization of the Chiapas-Mayab route, the train operated in a way that made it an exception to the reinforcement of migratory controls of previous administrations, although it has long been subject to control by organized crime groups.

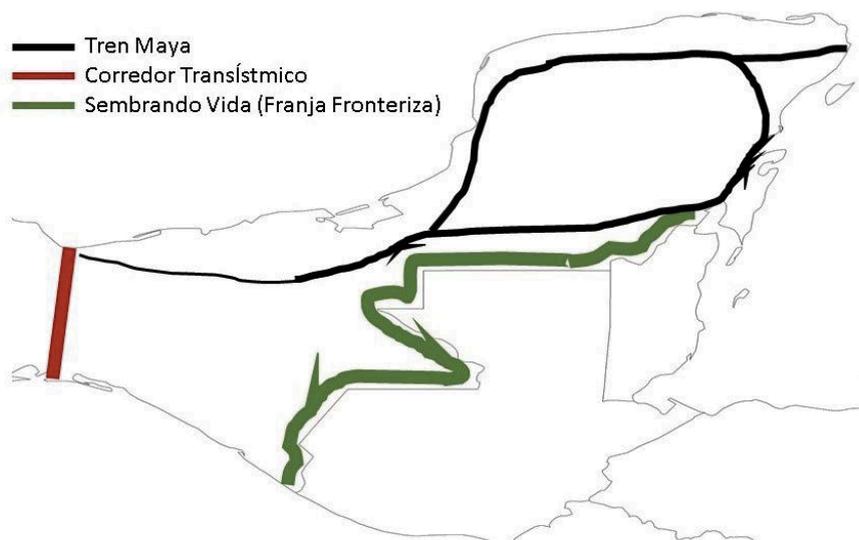
<sup>31</sup> Prieto Díaz, S. y Benítez, J. (2020). Vías de comunicación, reordenamiento territorial y reconfiguración de las (in) movilidades humanas en la Península de Yucatán/ Frontera Sur de Mexico. En J. Benítez y S. Escalona (coords.), Impacto de las vías de comunicación sobre la fauna silvestre en áreas protegidas. Estudios de caso para el sureste de Mexico (pp.168-204). Mexico: ECOSUR.

<sup>32</sup> In addition to these three large megaprojects on which we decided to focus, the region is impacted by a multiplicity of others, including wind farms in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, large scale pig and chicken farms in Yucatán, tourist resorts in the Mayan Riviera, agricultural activities of Mennonite colonies in Campeche, illegal logging in Campeche and Chiapas, among others.

<sup>33</sup> De Vos, J. (1993). Las fronteras de la frontera sur: reseña de los proyectos de expansión que configuraron la frontera entre Mexico y Centroamérica. Mexico: Universidad Juárez Autónoma de Tabasco- Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social.

This map shows Mexico's border territory, from the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz towards the Guatemalan and Belizean departments adjacent to the border line. It incorporates not only delimitations between states, but also the lines created by the territorial reorganization projects that are underway. These lines, like dirt roads through wild territories, are at once roads and borders.

The map allows us to visualize how the geography of southern Mexico favors its function as a space for the containment of human movement: the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (where the Trans-Isthmus Corridor megaproject is located), would become a border 15 times narrower than the northern border of Mexico with the US, while also serving as a geostrategic space for global trade that is less porous and more governable than the state-centric administrative border. The region to the south of the Isthmus, which has a strong tradition as a region from which the local population is ejected, would become a zone of confinement for local people who wish to migrate as well as for caravans on their way to the US.



**Figure 1.** Southern border and other-borders of the southern border. Image prepared by the authors as part of the Cartography of cross-border complexity project (UC - MEXUS - ECOSUR).

At the same time, this zone is organized in a manner that attracts industry, including *maquilas* (manufacturing sweat shops), private investment, tourism, urbanization and real estate speculation, all of which is promoted so as to attract populations without access to the labor market, or displaced by ecological and cultural changes, or by violence. In addition, it is configured as a circulation zone *within which* recent arrivals who are confined will be allowed to move as needed.

The configuration of zones of expulsion, of attraction, of enclosure and of limited circulation between the Isthmus and the traditional border is a snapshot of the multiple articulations between the territorial density and migrant vortex suggested

in this paper, as well as of the diversity of margins and the particularities they contain. These border territories and the processes of human (in)mobility that traverse and characterize them deserve deeper attention.

The term “southern border” hides a diversity of border situations that, far from being antagonistic, connect to and complement each other in various ways. The contemporary manner of delimiting “the border” (and the “southern border”) merits a renewed perspective that takes into account previous theoretical-conceptual developments, while remaining open to an organic and flexible interpretation that is adaptable to changes in local, regional, hemispheric and global contexts.

To do so, we begin by questioning the traditional notion of “Mexico's southern border” by considering cross-border processes in the “borders of the south border”: the south (Chiapas and Oaxaca), which is characterized by strong internal and transnational processes of (in)mobility, and the north (Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatan and Quintana Roo), which is home to a proliferation of megaprojects aimed at territorial and populational re-organization.

## **The south of the southern border: (in)mobility and population control**

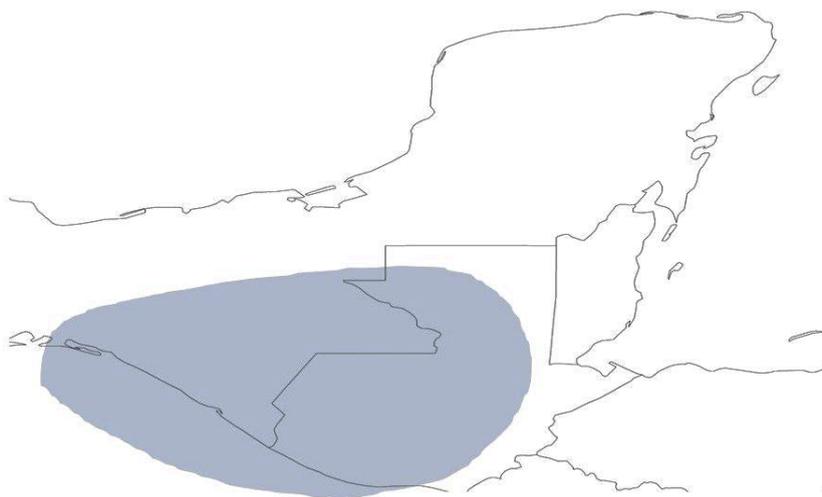
Before October 2018, the imaginary around migratory flows in Mexico's southern border was influenced by the clandestine manner in which people entering the country did so, as well as by their common destination: the US. These groups attempted to go unnoticed by locals and government agencies, who criminalized or persecuted them. They were often seen walking through parks and public squares alone or in small groups, asking for money on street corners and at crosswalks, and continuing northward atop The Beast.

These movements were part of a response to deep economic and political crises in northern Central America, whose residents set out in search of better living conditions. This imaginary remained dominant for far too long, staying fixed even as the composition of migrant flows began to vary in significant ways. Migrants stopped traveling atop The Beast in 2014 with the implementation of the Southern Border Plan, which ushered in a new stage of containment of migratory flows in response to demands for control imposed by northern countries, specifically the US. Mexico became a filter and a vertical border, charged with regulating and administering continental migratory flows.

When so-called migrant caravans began to be organized at the end of 2018, this perception was transformed, marking a shift in patterns and policy with regard to migration in Mexico—and in the region—and generating impacts we are still far from fully understanding. In particular, Mexico's southern border represents a key node in the transformation of collective movement in the regional migration system, as well as its articulation with continental patterns of mobility.

In fact, the phenomenon of caravans, which we understand as a form of organization of coordinated mass movements of migrants, is not new. Since 2010 there have been a series of collective movements of migrants in Mexico. One example of this were the events dubbed “caravans of mothers of missing migrants” which, every year for at least the last 15 years, traveled the country in large groups searching for their children, who were disappeared or went missing while transiting through Mexico. In addition, in early 2018 there was a march called “Viacrucis migrante,” formed by hundreds of people of Central American origin who decided to leave together and cross Mexico in groups in order to seek asylum in the U.S.

But the migrant caravans represented a new modality in the composition of these groups and in the politicization of population flows in the region. The more recent caravans took place in the context of the strengthening of an increasingly restrictive migration policy focused on containment, as well as the weakening of the system of asylum in the US and Mexico.



**Figure 2.** The southern region of the south border. Source: authors.

This weakening was consolidated with the arrival of the extreme right to the White House in 2017, and the installation of a narrative of hatred and increasing

criminalization of migrants not only with respect to nationals of Mexico, but also of Central America.

This took place alongside the change of government in Mexico that was marked by the arrival of Andrés Manuel López Obrador to the presidency in December 2018. During this period, Mexico promoted contradictory narratives and practices in its treatment of migrants.

On the one hand, Mexico showed signs of relaxing its borders and respecting the human rights of migrants, in particular through adherence to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration that sought to make migration safer and more dignified, in December 2018.

On the other, Mexico established a series of agreements with the US government to strengthen migration controls and militarize the southern border by deploying thousands of members of the recently created National Guard. The deployment of military force to control and manage population flows marked an important turn in regional securitization policies.

The first contemporary caravan of Central American migrants took place in October 2018. There was a great deal of expectations and media coverage in Mexico and internationally, due to the novelty of the call through social networks as well as to the arrival of about 7,000 people at the border bridge between Tecún Umán City in Guatemala and Hidalgo City in Mexico.

The group sought to enter Mexico as a large and visible contingent, reversing traditional clandestinity. The composition of the groups was also new: they were made up of families, with small children, toddlers, babies, and even elders, mainly from Honduras. Initially, the attitude of the Mexican government appeared to be confusion and astonishment; even so, its first reaction was to violently stop the families at the border by sending federal security forces to prevent them from entering.

After arriving through the state of Chiapas, many members of the group were taken to a temporary shelter at the Mesoamerican Fairgrounds, which functioned as an extension of the XXI Century Migratory Station, where many were subsequently moved. Some began to apply for refugee status in Mexico, while others ended their journey due to fatigue and the adverse conditions they faced on their route. The large group was broken down through bordering processes implemented throughout the region: in Chiapas, in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Oaxaca state) and continuing

toward the center of the country, diluting and dispersing the group by the time it reached the border territory of northern Mexico.

Even as the power of the organized group weakened, the pressure exerted by their movement echoed in public opinion with regards to the treatment of migrants in Mexico, generating a bifurcated vision that began to polarize society.

Signs of solidarity and support were evident along much of the route. But the presence of a large group of migrants exerted pressures at a local level and began to have impacts on daily life. Asylum seekers who had initiated their proceedings in the city of Tapachula found it impossible to leave the entity and were forced to remain there.

In addition, in November 2018 the Mesoamerican Fair was closed and dozens of people were left stranded in the streets. Rents rose and many were left to fend for themselves in public spaces, particularly in parks, in migrant shelters and in housing. The impossibility of movement was forged along the border, creating an (in)mobility that has defined state management of human mobility flows in the region, making Mexico a “buffer country” and a territory-in-waiting.<sup>34</sup>

In January 2019, a second caravan was formed. Its composition was more diverse: although groups originating from Central America predominated, people from various other countries in South America and the Caribbean joined, constituting a core group of about 13,000. Once again this group exerted pressures at the local level, exceeding the capacities of government and society and leading to tension and conflict between the population-on-the-move and local residents.

When this caravan arrived in Mexico City, expressions of rejection on the part of the population and public officials became even more explicit. This conflict escalated in the border city of Tijuana, where the group was subjected to threats and aggressions from locals and even from US citizens, who arrived to the city to express their rejection of the caravans, making it clear that they would not be welcomed if they dared to cross the border.

In February 2019, the Mexican government closed the few possibilities it had opened for the management of this collective migrant body, such as the Emergent Program

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<sup>34</sup> Musset, A. (2015). De los lugares de espera a los territorios de la espera ¿Una nueva dimensión de la geografía social? *Documents d'Análisi Geogràfica*, 61(2), 305-324.

for the Issuance of Visitor Cards for Humanitarian Reasons. This would come to represent a major change in the treatment of migrants.

By the time the third wave of large groups began to arrive in April 2019, Mexico's treatment of migrants had been transformed, resulting in a regulatory scheme that was contrary to the international guidelines to which Mexico had subscribed.

The first change implemented by the federal government was to replace the Humanitarian Visitor's Card with a Regional Visitor's Card, in line with the proposal of the Peña Nieto government, which in October 2018 promoted the "You are home" Program, whose goal—at least in theory—was to provide temporary work for Central American migrants who were already in Mexico.

This work would be allowed only in the southeastern states of the country, where a series of development projects meant to invigorate local labor markets and where migrants could also be employed were proposed. In fact, this change in the orientation of migration policy obliged migrants to stay in the south border area. It succeeded in establishing Mexico not only as a border country, but also a country that controls, suppresses, administers and, at times, represses population flows along its southern border.

We do not know what happened to the population that was part of this third migratory wave. Some left to try their luck, others were taken to the Siglo XXI migratory station, others were deported. Thus governmental migratory policy leaned increasingly on municipalities for the confinement of migrants, which became the norm, creating a social and procedural limbo that tired and weakened people in mobility, who could no longer enter or continue northward into Mexico, nor could they return to their countries of origin. Migrants were trapped in this border boundary, and it was possible to observe how the border extended and overflowed towards the interior of the country.

The peak of these migratory movements in May 2019 explains, in part, the contradictory policy of Mexico's federal government regarding migration, in the context of the threat of the first Trump administration to impose tariffs on export products coming from Mexico if migratory flows entering through the US southern border were not controlled. Threats of tariff punishments and the hardening of the anti-immigrant discourse on the part of the Trump administration have only increased since.

The idea of an invasion of the United States entered the US imaginary, criminalizing migrants, classing them as dangerous, and instilling fear in the US population. A policy of terror was enacted via Twitter, and the Mexican government accepted the conditions set by the US as well as the disdain and omission on the part of the Central American leaders regarding the fate of their citizens.

The US government continued to pressure countries in the region to manage and contain population movements. Mexico in particular was to manage the arrival of people intending to reach the United States to seek asylum with a firmer hand. To this end, part of the negotiations between the two countries was the Trump administration's proposal to designate Mexico a "safe third country" for asylum seekers from Central America. This notion assumes that people seeking asylum in one country—in this case the US—can receive the same protections in another country—Mexico—and, therefore, that this other nation would request recognition of refugee status, while said population would remain in its care for the duration of the process.

Mexico has long insisted—again, in discourse—that it rejects and does not accept such a proposal. Even so, Mexico began to receive Central Americans who had requested asylum in the United States but who were returned to a northern border city in Mexico, where they depended on assistance from civil, religious and governmental agencies while waiting to be called for an interview to determine their situation.

Mexico argued that it had accepted returns of non-nationals from the US for humanitarian reasons. From there, this practice, which was meant to be temporary, was extended. This program became known as the Migrant Protection Protocol or "Remain in Mexico," and increased the vulnerability of returned migrants, who were forced to wait in Mexico for their asylum proceedings in the United States.

The demands and challenges that this program created in Mexico have been well documented: in 2019 alone, 64,144 Central American and other Latin American migrants were registered in the program. This has made the already difficult situations facing these populations even worse: waits for interviews and hearings—based on seemingly endless, informal lists—have become even longer. As individuals and families signed up to try to access the program, they were in legal limbo in Mexico, and uncertainty about their cases in the United States grew.

As a result, many people gave up on their applications. The long wait times put hundreds of thousands of people under severe economic, health and employment pressure. Some were kidnapped by organized crime groups in Tamaulipas, Sonora and Baja California, extending the spiral of violence even further. Although Mexico technically refused to be a Safe Third Country, US pressure on Guatemala and Honduras continued, and both yielded, becoming areas where containment, shelter and the return of third country migrants could occur. Territorial density increased, and the image of an overflowing border became reality in some parts of the region.

The declaration of a global pandemic in 2020 due to the SARS-COV-2 virus brought the social and economic inequalities in the world into stark relief and established a series of restrictions on the entry and stays of people on the move globally. Calls to shelter in place and practice isolation and self-confinement were recommended by governmental and health authorities, flying in the face of the pressing needs of large groups of people including migrants, refugees and displaced persons to move. It made the crisis in the asylum and refugee system explicit, spurring pandemic border and mobility management globally.<sup>35</sup>

Land and air borders were closed, and rapid fire deportations put people on the move in even more precarious situations. State narratives and practices fostered health-related notions of risk and danger related to migrants and those seeking international protection. This process was most clearly observed in the region following the application of Title 42 in the United States. This measure, invoked by the Trump administration, denied entry of persons and goods to US territory on the grounds of preventing the spread of communicable diseases.

Title 42 empowered US Customs and Border Protection to expel undocumented migrants in an expeditious manner, avoiding the recognition of the right to seek asylum, and violating related international treaties. The Mexican government extended the Remain in Mexico program, accepting the return not only of its own nationals, but also of people from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras who were removed from the US to Mexico's northern border.

Sixty percent of the expulsions from the United States took place under Title 42, saturating mechanisms of humanitarian attention along the entire northern border region, and exposing those returned to Mexico to robbery, extortion and

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<sup>35</sup> Anna Mary Garrapa, Mariela Paula Díaz et al. (2021). (Trans) Fronteriza: Gobierno pandémico de las fronteras y las moviidades: realidades comparadas a nivel internacional. - 1a ed. - Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: CLACSO

kidnappings. The Biden administration attempted to reverse this law, but legal statutes regulating the rejection of migrants and refugees remained in place until 2022.

The processes described above demonstrate the crisis of the asylum systems in the region, the weak responses of the governments of countries of origin, and the increase in the precariousness and risk within which many thousands of people move and cross borders. So it is that Mexico's southern border and current bordering processes have become key nodes in contemporary continental flows.

## **The north of the southern border: territorial reorganization**

The north of the southern border includes the Mexican states of Campeche, Yucatan and Quintana Roo, territories where population (in)mobility has been historically important: Mayan populations from the Peten region (present day Guatemala) settled here in pre-Columbian times; Iberian contingents arrived during conquest; and populations from other regions of the country and the world (including Mennonites) arrived with the goal of settlement and control of the border after colonial independence; among others.

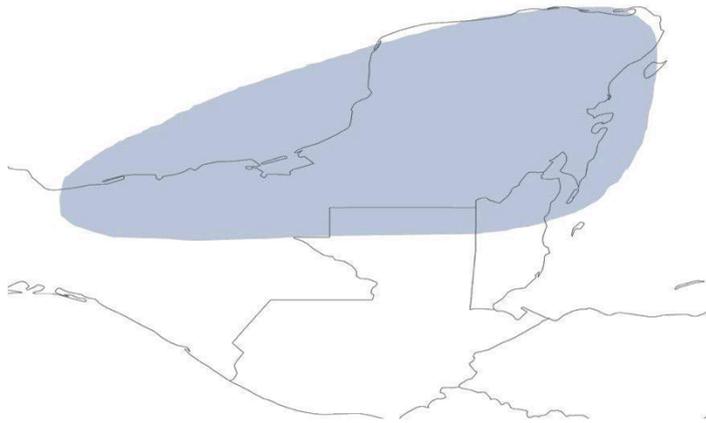
The present-day relevance of processes of international migration in this region is much less intense than that of traditional routes, which are concentrated on the Pacific coast, in central Chiapas, and to a lesser extent, in Tenosique, Tabasco.

By contrast, the north border region is, in terms of migration and in the words of migrants themselves, a "cold border."<sup>36</sup> Megaprojects in the region are symptomatic *and* paradigmatic of how processes of mobility in the south border region interact with a series of geostrategic and territorial reconfigurations in the northern region of the south border.

The north of the south border region stands out due to the emergence and concentration of megaprojects that are articulated in different ways with processes of human (in)mobility in the south of the southern border. Structurally it serves as a way to settle migrants, creating "walls of wellbeing", "development curtains" or "zones of prosperity," to use some examples of government discourses.

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<sup>36</sup> Prieto Díaz, S, (2017). Cartografías de la subalternidad migratoria: bestialización, inhumanidad y contrahegemonía en el contexto del Plan Frontera Sur de Mexico (PhD Thesis). Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana.



**Figure 3.** The northern region of the south border. Source: authors.

This dialectic demonstrates the orientation to—and functionality of—the control and instrumentalization of groups of migrants who are directly transferred, or indirectly sent, from the points where they enter Mexico to places where they can be controlled. This can be seen in already existing infrastructures and institutional capacities operating under the logic of surveillance and control, including checkpoints, detention centers and migrant holding centers, all of which are packed to the brim.

People are and have been detained in different areas under a multiplicity of figures: administrative detention (if they are awaiting resolution of their asylum applications), judicial detention (if they are in prisons), sanitary detention (through preventive quarantines), among others. This leads us to ask: what do migrants detained in the region who are unable to continue, and who do not want to—or cannot—return to their place of origin do?

We use the concept of megaproject to get around using specific names and justifications, as well as specific contextual frameworks, which are in continuous flux. Even so, the term is politically and ideologically charged, which can prevent us from establishing a comprehensive view of its many aspects. We prefer to use the term “territorial reorganization project” in our analysis, so as to highlight how these projects create frontier spaces or zones in a manner that is entwined with processes of population (in)mobility.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, these kinds of projects relied on dynamics of violent appropriation and dispossession of common goods (land, territory, language, culture, seeds), while simultaneously causing the deterritorialization, proletarianization, and displacement of resident populations. They also operated as mechanisms of expulsion, attraction, retention and instrumentalization of local and foreign

populations, cohering with the zones of enclosure, control, circulation and attraction we've already discussed.

It is from this long-term historical and geopolitical perspective that the interrelation between megaprojects and (in)mobilities must be approached. We suggest that every territorial reorganization project is associated with at least two processes of population redistribution. There is no more explicit example of the scope of this assertion than John Gast's 1872 painting "American Progress", which illustrates historical processes and their contemporary continuity: as modernity advances, territorial reorganization expels, attracts and articulates multiple types of (human and more-than-human) (in)mobility.

The symbiotic relationship between improving the living conditions of the population so that they do not migrate and the exploitation of their territories by large projects continues to guide public policies in the region. It is worth noting that many of the mega-projects that are underway—despite being focused on sectors like communication, transportation, commerce, industry, or tourism—are connected with processes linked to human (in)mobilities. For the purpose of this essay, we will present the most relevant territorial reorganization projects underway in a concise and summary manner before proceeding to analyze them.<sup>37</sup>



**Figure 4.** "Modernity" between megaprojects and (in)mobilities. John Gast, American Progress (1871).

The megaprojects at issue are enshrined in Mexico's National Development Plan, and are also presented as interconnected, designed to serve as scaffolding for the Comprehensive Development Program for Southern Mexico and Central America. The Mexican government developed this program in late 2018 (as migrant caravans

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<sup>37</sup> This is not the main focus of this chapter, and in future writing we will strive to show a more complex problematization—spanning several centuries—in which the structural link between territorial reorganization and population redistribution processes, constitutive of these border spaces of southern Mexico is explicit, while also developing a comparative perspective with other continental border spaces.

and tariff threats from the U.S. government were ongoing). In May of 2019 it was adopted and championed by the Economic Commission on Latin America (ECLAC).<sup>38</sup> Mexico has assumed a leading role in the consolidation and expansion of the program, which also involves Central American countries. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) began to participate overtly in this program in 2021, since then it has been referred to as “Sowing Opportunities.”

This program seeks to catalyze the development of Central America through cross-border territorial reorganization is linked to the expansion of mega-projects,<sup>39</sup> helping to channel processes of population redistribution and strengthen the right to remain, as opposed to the need to migrate. This program incorporates two territorial reorganization projects in the territories with which we are concerned: *Sembrando Vida* and *Tren Maya*.

*Sembrando Vida* is a federal public program that proposes monthly payments to people with 2.5 hectares of land used for commercial cultivation of fruit trees and timber, as well as other basic crops for self-consumption. The program has a “Border Strip” version, which incorporates components of migratory control and insertion of migrants into the precaritized labor market. Despite the lack of analysis regarding its effectiveness in Mexican territory, *Sembrando Vida* has been proposed as a cross-border policy, allowing for geostrategic collaboration with Central America. Proponents claim it takes into account the environmental and socioeconomic variables that are constitutive and characteristic of processes of migration.

The *Mayan Train* (TM) was the most important infrastructure and development megaproject under the López Obrador government. It reveals an extremely paradoxical and paradigmatic interrelationship between territorial reorganization

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<sup>38</sup> This program has been called the “Comprehensive Development Plan for Central America and Mexico”, the “Comprehensive Development Plan for El Salvador-Guatemala-Honduras-Mexico”, when ECLAC presents it, or the “Comprehensive Development Plan *Sembrando Vida y Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro*” (when Mexico does).

<sup>39</sup> The Program proposes the development of five mega-projects over a five-year period, including the expansion of the *Tren Maya* project to Central America. Guatemala has already announced the construction of its own twin project, the *Guatemala Rapid Rail*, which under a similar logic and justification would link the country’s 22 departments with the main ports and customs houses through a high-speed train that would cross the from *Tecún Umán* in *San Marcos*, to *Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa*, in *Escuintla*. Other megaprojects in this program include a power plant in *Puerto Cortés* (Honduras); electrical interconnection between Mexico and Central America; a highway network along the Mexico and Guatemala border; and an almost 1000km gas pipeline between Mexico and *San Pedro Sula*, Honduras.

projects and population redistribution.<sup>40</sup> The 2019-2024 National Development Plan (PND) includes the TM among six regional programs that will “guarantee employment, education, health and welfare” through the creation and connection of new development poles from the Yucatan peninsula to the coast of Chiapas.<sup>41</sup>

It is also worth mentioning the critical role of the so-called Transisthmus Corridor, which seeks to link the ports and commercial nodes of Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz, with Salina Cruz, Oaxaca. This project includes the construction of a train (which would connect to the Mayan Train), highways, fiber optic cables, and a whole network of land concessions for the expansion of ports and industrial activities.

The geographical characteristics of the Isthmus and of the train across it, which will be overseen by the Secretary of Marines—apparently due to its geostrategic character—and fenced off, supposedly due to its speed, evidence another contradiction: the infrastructures to speed up trade will entail the construction of a wall that complicates (in)mobilities as they had previously existed.

In this way, the connection between territorial reorganization on the border, megaprojects and population distribution processes acquires a distinctive regional character, which is articulated around certain infrastructures (with emphasis on railroads), a specific public policy program (Sembrando Vida), and a transversal, although apparently secondary, area of focus on processes of human (in)mobility.

These perspectives allow us to reconsider the univocal space of the border in general—and of “Mexico's southern border” in particular—as “a permeable area, neither limited nor limiting, where processes of conflictive connection between spaces characterized by heterogeneous productive and reproductive dynamics are concentrated.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Deniau, Y., Flores, A and Prieto Díaz, S. (2019). *El Tren Maya: un nuevo proyecto de articulación territorial en la Península de Yucatán*. Mexico: GeoComunes/Consejo Civil Mexicano para la Silvicultura Sostenible; Ceceña, A. E. and Prieto Díaz, S. (2020). *Mirando al Sur: megaproyectos, fronteras e (in) movilidades*. Mexico: ECOSUR, Grupo CONACYT Territorios del Tren Maya.

<sup>41</sup> Gobierno de Mexico. 2019. “Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2019-2024.” May. <https://lopezobrador.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/PLAN-NACIONAL-DE-DESARROLLO-2019-2024.pdf>. pp. 20.

<sup>42</sup> Trincherro, H. H. (2007). *Aromas de lo exótico (retorno del objeto): para una crítica del objeto antropológico y sus modos de reproducción*. Buenos Aires: Colección Complejidad Humana, Editorial SB. pp. 192.

## **Conceptual proposals for approaching border complexity**

The flexible and dynamic character of how we conceptualize “the border” and its scope in terms of the human (in)mobilities that cross it, require a particular analytical framework and renewed categories to account for the complexity, dynamism, adaptability and symbiosis in territorial, migratory and socio-environmental processes in a manner adapted to the current moment, while also taking into account existing contributions to this discussion.

In this context, zones of expulsion, attraction, confinement and circulation located between existing political borders and the new frontier in the Isthmus suggest a confluence and interrelation of processes of human (in)mobility in these territories, which we have denominated boundary spaces. We are interested in defining boundary space in terms of how it has been experienced through history, including through narrated memory and people's experience, as well as multiple processes of territorial organization.

These spaces are in constant dispute and permanent redefinition. Here, the logics of appropriation, dispossession and administrative control over territory, populations as well as the dispute for resources are concretely manifested. Although boundary space—traditionally considered a frontier—is contained within a space previously defined as a limit to national sovereignty, it may also be made up of numerous borders that are sometimes antagonistic to each other.<sup>43</sup>

These dynamics and their impacts are replicated in particular ways in other countries in the region, and for that reason it is pertinent to establish connections between territories that may not be contiguous, but in which strategically interrelated policies and visions are crisscrossed by social processes such as migratory movements or regional development plans.

In practice, boundary-spaces and current mobility patterns can be linked to the development of a transnational labor market produced by the economic integration of North America, which is defined by a continuous increase in competitiveness through the precaritization of labor, the qualification (or precarity) and mobility of the labor force, and the flexibilization of labor processes, all of which exist in part due to the implementation of the aforementioned development programs in the region, which operate in various modes and at different scales.

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<sup>43</sup> Nievas, F. H. J. (1994). Hacia una aproximación crítica a la noción de “territorio.” *Nuevo Espacio. Revista de Sociología*, 160(1), pp. 1-19.

Boundary-spaces are not limited to traditional border lines, rather they operate in the multiplicity and complexity of the border gospel that has been narrated here, and of the deployment of forms and processes of bordering which materialize in the other-borders we are seeking to make visible.

These spaces are animated by the presence of diverse actors—public and private, legal and illegal—state practices, the complexity of the population flows at any given moment, and the processes of territorial planning intended to connect, manage and control them.

Through the rollout of material and symbolic mechanisms promoting the notion of development in Mexico's south, the entire country is configured as a border zone, with even more density along traditional borders. We locate this density geographically and maintain that it is in these dense territories where complex processes involving state action and land and resource related disputes by diverse actors and interests take place.

We understand density as the accumulation and interconnection of a multitude of enormously complex events and processes that occur in a given space, in this case, in the boundary spaces of Mexico's south, which is home to multiple processes of bordering.

Our use of the concept of density implies a multiplicity of routes, networks, platforms, dynamics, structures, public policies, and imaginaries, and is complemented by the concept of a migratory vortex, which we borrow from the natural sciences, where it is used to refer to the circular or rotational movement of large masses of air or fluid around a single point or area. The meeting of many currents produces a tendency to move towards optimal spaces for its reproduction. We believe the metaphor of a vortex holds great potential for transdisciplinary analysis.

We adopt and adapt the concept of vortex so as to problematize and visualize how different types, scales and intensities multiply and connect between territorial systems (infrastructures, legislation, markets) along the borders of the south border.

The idea of a migratory vortex allows us connect the passage of migrants originating from the global South, who have been immobilized, detained, deported, transferred, or are otherwise experiencing the application of border control measures; visitors and crossborder workers, mostly from Guatemala; the arrival of skilled foreign workers from transnational companies that have won concessions to build and

operate megaprojects; the internal displacement of Indigenous populations within Mexico to precarious labor markets in the tourism sector of the Riviera Maya, or their relocation (with or without consent) by megaprojects or the dynamics associated with them; the arrival of National Guard soldiers from other states of Mexico, mobilized both by the geostrategic relevance of the megaprojects and by dynamics of violence and various forms of trafficking associated with them; and the impact of mass tourism and urban and rural gentrification. This perspective aims to de-center any *particular type of movement* as the dominant structuring factor. Instead we seek to understand the whole by considering its articulation in the dense territories generated by bordering processes: the concentration, connection, and simultaneity of a diversity of (in)mobilities in a particular territory allows us to (de)draw the overflowing of the traditional border and (re)draw emerging borders

The concept of migratory vortex also allows us to problematize and visualize the onslaught of territorial reorganization projects connected to new forms of human (in)mobility which build up and connect with established patterns—internal, regional and international—and expanding routes, directions, temporalities, intensities and scales. Each of these relationships creates de facto limits and diverse borders, both physical and symbolic.

Although at first glance the notion of a vortex may appear as conflictual (due to the common association of this figure with hurricanes or violent natural phenomena), by decentering our anthropocentric interpretation of these phenomena we can approach them instead as an analytical space within a broader framework of socio-ecosystemic equilibriums.

As a summary and corollary, by using the notion of migratory vortex we emphasize the interconnection—not always violent, not always peaceful—produced between the spaces of the north and the south of the south border as something that articulates between projects of territorial reorganization and overlapping processes of population redistribution in the dense border territory between Mexico and Central America.

## **Conclusion**

Although the borders between countries and regions remain more or less stable, at least in the temporalities that we can experience as humans and social subjects, they exist in a world in constant motion, which means territories and borders are constantly transforming. Human activity in border territories is constant, generating

a multiplicity of other-borders outside a state-centric administrative register. There can be no doubt that processes of human (in)mobility are one among the most important social processes that take place in border territories.

These human and socio-political actions, which are oriented to the occupation, control and production of territories and therefore to the delimitation of different types of borders, form the edges of a great project of reorganization that is not only territorial or economic, but that is also population-oriented.

This is the case not only in the Mexican south/southeast, but also in many other global souths, as a renewed expression of a historical dynamic emerging from an ideological project that seeks the colonization of territories and their subordinated insertion into global commercial circuits.<sup>44</sup> These processes of territorial reordering produce, attract and interact with a wide range of forms of population redistribution most clearly identifiable in the border spaces that concern us here, but that can also occur elsewhere.

It should be emphasized that these territorial reorganization projects are justified by appealing to the supposed backwardness these territories maintain with respect to the ideal of development, whether this is embodied in “best practices” or in comparison with other territories and their macro and microeconomic variables.

The imaginary around this notion, together with discourse around the wealth and resources in Mexico’s south aligns with centralist views on what “must be done” and therefore, on “how and where to organize” that which appears disorderly. It seems logical to assume that by organizing the territory—and particularly a territory that is the largest migratory corridor in the world—human (in)mobilities will also be reordered. This would be consistent with the contemporary global mantra of “legal, ORDERLY and safe migration.”

The strategic character of border space is reinforced, in our case, by the geopolitical importance of “the southern border” as an area in permanent dispute: between bordering countries at the time of its creation; between *de facto* powers inside and outside the modern state (as well as inside and outside legality) for its control and exploitation, and even between hegemonic and dependent countries for their

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<sup>44</sup> Prieto Díaz, S. y Benítez, J. (2020). Vías de comunicación, reordenamiento territorial y reconfiguración de las (in) movilidades humanas en la Península de Yucatán/ Frontera Sur de Mexico. En J. Benítez y S. Escalona (coords.), Impacto de las vías de comunicación sobre la fauna silvestre en áreas protegidas. Estudios de caso para el sureste de Mexico (pp.168-204). Mexico: ECOSUR.

sovereignty. Concentrated within this border space are a variety of agendas, sometimes coordinated, other times contradictory, but almost always in juxtaposition, which generates the sensation of a space that is “out of control,” when in fact it is excessively controlled, and that it is control that is constantly in dispute.

The growing complexity in the constitution, characteristics, directions and meanings of human mobility processes globally are made explicit in these territories, which today play host to migrants from neighboring countries, from the region (Central America and the Caribbean), as well as from South America and other regions of the global south, including Asia and Africa. This is in addition to internal mobility processes linked to other states of Mexico as well as a growing number of tourists and privileged migrants from the global north.

Each of the processes of human mobility in the region is in turn linked to bordered limits: each nationality is charged with different temporalities, histories and administrative characterizations that can make it easier or more difficult for citizens to obtain documents allowing them to continue in transit and determining what is possible in terms of mobility. But this situation is not definitive: if there is one thing we know for sure it is that, in the face of limits and borders, migrants end up finding holes and cracks through which to keep moving forward.

Transformations in frontier spaces have specific impacts on migratory processes, which can be traced back to territories of origin, since in many cases they too are part of articulated processes that give rise to a migratory ecosystem. Territorial reorganization projects can be cause and origin of population displacements, forming a symbiotic relationship in many cases: processes of forced displacement, be they due to imbalances and inequalities in living conditions, the impact of a megaproject, or a natural disaster, are articulated in multiple ways with the territories people in mobility traverse. This could take the form of urban and rural speculation and gentrification, policies of displacement and population control, articulation with drug markets, arms, or organ trafficking, or the formation of dual labor markets in new development poles.

As an example, wages for manual labor jobs due to the high supply of precarious workers (local and regional migrants) can fall alongside the arrival of highly specialized and highly paid extra-regional migrant working populations, fueling dynamics and conflicts of intercultural coexistence in highly competitive environments. A forecast carried out by UN-Habitat, estimated that by 2030 the Mayan Train region will have 17.3 million inhabitants, almost 15 percent more than

in 2022. It will receive more than 34 million tourists by 2030, a 25% increase over 2020.<sup>45</sup>

These are just a few elements of the cross-border complexity we wish to identify and problematize as we seek to make analytical proposals that allow us to understand this region. This is an early approach that draws attention to the structural elements that underlie the urgency of the context, which makes it necessary to renew the frame we use to understand these changing spaces.

We need a frame that goes beyond disciplinary frameworks within social sciences in order to contribute to a transdisciplinary reflection in which social elements interact, communicate and influence natural and ecological processes in territories, this paper is an attempt to do just that.

Our proposal is tentative, and it suggests not only thinking through how we approach territories and social processes, but also the methodological proposals we employ to approach and rethink the articulation between territories, borders and (in)mobilities. This is no longer simply theoretical or methodological. It is profoundly political, with deep social and environmental ramifications.

We seek to provide innovative approaches to understanding regional processes by proposing concepts including dense territory and migratory vortex. In doing so, we seek to update and deepen our analysis and understanding of these borderlines and (in)mobilities in multiple other-borders currently being configured.

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<sup>45</sup> We understand that this calculation is also in itself a hypothetical scenario, as the data was released at the beginning of November, 2020. It is also somewhat misleading, as 2020 was an atypical year in terms of tourism and mobility due to the COVID-19 pandemic.