The background of the book cover is a photograph of a chain-link fence. Through the fence, a beach scene is visible, including waves, a sandy shore, and a lone figure in the distance. The fence is in the foreground, creating a grid-like pattern over the landscape.

Third Edition

THE U.S.-MEXICAN BORDER TODAY

Conflict and Cooperation in Historical Perspective

PAUL GANSTER

with David E. Lorey

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in Historical Perspective

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PREFACE

The U.S.-Mexican Border in Global Context

As we note in our collection of readings published in 2004, *Borders and Border Politics in a Globalizing World*, the continued importance and divisiveness of borders throughout the world present an intriguing paradox for the twenty-first century. Globalization is proceeding everywhere at an astounding pace, merging economies and cultures through world trade, regional economic integration, new forms of mass media carried into hundreds of millions of homes by cable, satellite, and the Internet, and ever more mobile populations. And yet, at the same time, political borders separating peoples remain pervasive and problematic. Rather than being purposefully erased by humans or dissolving of their own accord as other boundaries between economies and cultures are weakened, borders between nations, cultures, and ethnicities appear to be as strong as ever—and are perhaps growing stronger.

We have become convinced that, in the twenty-first century, humankind will face mounting challenges at both international borders and at subnational boundaries where human populations meet in conflict, challenges that will demand responses from regional, national, and multilateral governments and authorities. Challenges will range from resolving political conflict and managing migrant flows to dealing with transboundary environmental issues such as toxic-waste disposal, air pollution, and the overuse and pollution of freshwater resources. The varied effects of global climate change will likewise have ramifications for border regions and the interface of adjacent political and social systems. The most serious of these many border-related issues will be those that have the potential to lead to deadly conflict within regions, war between nation-states or ethnic groups, public health crises, and irreversible decline of natural ecosystems.

We can begin to prepare for these challenges, which will affect people far from borders as well as those who live in close proximity, by seeking to better

understand the complexities of border regions—how they function, how they can become dysfunctional, how they create tensions, and why they demand cooperation. In this volume, we present a survey of the historical development, current politics, and daily life of the U.S.-Mexican border region. In this preface, we seek to place the U.S.-Mexican border, briefly, in the wider global context in order to provide a broader perspective for the themes and issues we cover. As the single best documented and most thoroughly studied case of a border region, the U.S.-Mexican border is the best-known illustration of the paradoxical continued importance of borders in our globalizing world.

There are many ways in which the U.S.-Mexican border provides a paradigmatic case of global border development. We will proceed here by very briefly sketching a list of what we see as ten of the most significant characteristics that are shared by the vast majority of borders and border regions. The following chapters on the long-term historical development of the U.S.-Mexican border flesh out these and other unique and important border characteristics.

First, even if borders occasionally appear to follow the natural features of a landscape, they are fundamentally human constructs. This fact is most obvious in the case of walls, both ancient and modern. Hadrian's Wall, for example, was constructed in the early centuries of the Common Era by the Romans across one of the narrowest points of Great Britain in order to control the marauding tribes to the north and thereby provide stability for the Roman province of Britannia to the south. The Great Wall of China, another defensive structure designed to protect the Chinese Empire from neighbors to the north, extended more than thirteen thousand miles and took centuries to complete. The Berlin Wall, built beginning in 1961 to separate the Soviet-controlled portion of Berlin from that controlled by the United States and its allies, symbolized the division of Europe into two spheres during the Cold War (1945–1989); its destruction in 1989 symbolized the end of the Cold War and the fall of Soviet socialism. More recently, Israel and the United States have installed formidable structures along parts of their borders to deter unauthorized immigrants, smuggling, and terrorist activities. Water boundaries perhaps best highlight the negative impacts and insensitive nature of human-made borders. Rivers, although frequently used to demarcate boundaries between people, represent the approximate middle of vast watersheds that are, in fact, best managed as single entities.

Second, given the arbitrary nature that stems from their human construction, borders rarely make clear and simple divisions between or among peoples. Goods, services, and people flow across borders in spite of the division they imply. Interestingly, the people who live at and along borders



The port of entry from Tijuana to San Diego at San Ysidro, where most pedestrian and passenger vehicle crossings take place. On a typical weekday in 2005, more than two hundred cars were in line waiting to cross, with delay times of an hour or more. By early 2015, new lanes and other infrastructure significantly reduced pedestrian and vehicle wait times for northbound crossings. 2005.

tend to ignore them when that serves their interests and to take advantage of their existence when that is more convenient. The most obvious example of this is transboundary trading, where both merchants and consumers become extremely savvy about short-term and short-distance variations in prices created by a border.¹ Similarly, regular and customary transboundary population movements also show people taking advantage of, and thriving in, situations of created boundaries. At the U.S.-Mexican border, for example, only a tiny percentage of the people crossing the border on a regular basis do so without proper authorization; yet this percentage frequently constitutes the only border story deemed worth reporting in the mass media of both Mexico and the United States. Compared to the dozens or hundreds who may cross illegally every night, approximately forty thousand people cross from Tijuana to San Diego to work every day, and another eighty thousand cross to shop, visit friends and family, or enjoy the many attractions of the San Diego and Southern California region. There were more than 170 million legal crossings each way in 2014.² Ironically, then, borders generally bring people together at the same time that they separate them.

Third, borders and the border regions they define tend to be very diverse along their length and from one region to another, with different areas showing different realities.³ Border scholar Oscar Martínez has identified four “ideal types” of borderlands. First, we can identify *alienated borderlands*, border regions in which transboundary exchange is either nonexistent or very modest, principally due to animosity between peoples on both sides of a border. The second ideal type is what Martínez terms *coexistent borderlands*. Here, relations between peoples on either side of a border are characterized by regular contact and generally friendly relations between two polities. In the third type that Martínez describes, *interdependent borderlands*, peoples on both sides of the border are involved in a symbiotic relationship characterized by significant flow of goods, services, and people across the boundary. In Martínez’s fourth ideal type, *integrated borderlands*, practically all barriers to trade and human movement have been eliminated.⁴ One of the great advantages of Martínez’s typology is that it can be applied to both international borders and various other sorts of borders, including those between ethnicities and religious groups. The typology works well, for instance, in comparing and contrasting the very different kinds of borders between the French and English (across a so-called natural water boundary), between the English and the Scots or Welsh, and between English-speaking Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland.

Fourth, borders are hardly ever static for long. Borders have distinct histories, emerging and becoming more rigid over time and then eventually disappearing or even reemerging through a process of rebordering. Borders made by humans existed before the emergence of nation-states and, apparently, can exist just fine when nation-states are suppressed. The European Union is an excellent example of this latter point: a unified western Europe now struggles not so much over internal boundaries as with the incorporation of new members—eastern European and other countries beyond the borders of the present union. However, even within the European Union, new borders have emerged, as in the case of the blue line separating the northern Turkish and southern Greek portions of the island nation of Cyprus. Although borders are established for distinct purposes, their creation and development frequently have unexpected and unintended consequences. As we will see, the U.S.–Mexican border region is an excellent example of how the historical process of border development can unfold and how, in a relatively short period, major transformations can take place.

Generalizing—and there are many exceptions—we can identify a three-part chronology shared by many borders. First, a frontier period, or a period of multiple, interpenetrating frontiers, lasts from first contact between peoples to the point where contact becomes a mixing process. Second, a borderlands

era, during which peoples intermix and interact without attention to or from national powers, develops. Third, there is a period during which a distinct border region is formed with clearly demarcated boundaries and definable social and political responses to the boundary. In addition to these three periods of border development, we might add a fourth stage of dissolution. In the long run, many borders are erased or dissolved. Although we tend to think of borders as being immutably fixed in time, in fact the most common ultimate outcome for an individual border is its eventual dissolution.⁵

Fifth, border regions are diverse within. Economic, social, political, and cultural borders frequently fall in different places. As a result, there are generally subregions within a given border area that only relate loosely to international or interethnic boundaries. U.S.-Mexican border phenomena are now experienced as far from the international boundary as Chicago, New York, and Atlanta.⁶ To deal with this complexity, Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel have identified three essential regional units of analysis for border study. One is the *border heartland*, which abuts the border and is dominated by its existence and where social networks are shared directly by the border. A second category is that of the *intermediate borderland*, a region that feels the influence of the border but in intensities ranging from moderate to weak. Finally, there is an *outer borderland*, which only under specific circumstances feels the effects of an international or interethnic border.⁷ The long-term trend favors border regions that continue to expand in social, cultural, and psychological senses. Social networks are created and cultural patterns established that constantly shift the boundaries of the border world outward.

Sixth, borders everywhere are characterized by amazing social complexity. In *Border People* Oscar Martínez has developed a schema for understanding the complex social landscape of the U.S.-Mexican border world that is also useful for understanding other borders, both national and subnational. Martínez includes in his typology the following groups: transient migrants (people residing only briefly in the border region), newcomers (people newly arrived in the border region), nationalists (long-term residents of the border who purposefully do not partake of the culture of the other side of the international boundary), uniculturalists (people who live wholly in the culture of one side or the other of the border), binational consumers (persons whose main experience of the other side of the border is commercial), settler migrants (people who move to the border region and remain for a long time), commuters (people who move back and forth across the border on a regular—frequently daily—basis to work), biculturalists (persons, generally bilingual, who have roots and live adult lives on both sides of the border), binationalists (people, frequently businesspeople and professionals, who live and do business on both

sides of the border, operating at a very high level of transboundary social integration), and permanent residents (people, frequently retirees, who live permanently on the other side of the border).

Seventh, border politics are easily as complex as border social realities. Baud and Van Schendel provide a useful typology of border politics. The *quiet borderland* is one in which nations, regional elites, and local populations are combined into a coherent power structure with relatively low tension. Territorial control by either state does not lead to major confrontations in the borderlands. The Dutch-Belgian borderland since 1830 can be termed harmonious, while the border between North and South Korea since 1953 is an enforced version of the quiet borderland. An *unruly borderland* exists when power structures are less coherent and neither the state nor the regional elite has established a commanding position over local border populations. Local people resist the new social and territorial boundaries and the rules that come with them. The authority of the regional elite is sometimes weakened because it serves as an agent of the national state rather than a protector of local rights and concerns. Northern Ireland is a classic case of an unruly borderland, where in the late 1960s a Protestant elite backed by the British state lost its ability to control a local population. Finally, we can speak of *rebellious borderlands*, where regional elites side with local populations against national states that seek to impose authority on the border. Rebellions can be regionalist, separatist, or irredentist in their objectives. An example of a rebellious borderland is the golden triangle straddling the borders of China, Laos, Thailand, and Burma, where various guerrilla groups have been fighting state armies and each other for decades in attempts to establish separate states. Complicating this typology is the fact that different sides of the border can fall into different categories: for example, one side of the border can be quiet while the other is rebellious—for instance, the Yugoslav (Kosovo)/Albanian borderland in the 1980s.⁸

Eighth, borders are the central flashpoint for social and political conflicts over migration, immigration policy, and migrant rights throughout the world. Migration across borders is occurring everywhere at an unprecedented pace. Political unrest, famines and drought, the effects of climate change, economic disparities, shifting labor markets, demographic trends, improved communications and transportation, and globalization of the economy have all contributed to increasing flows of people from poor areas to less poor areas. Nations with expanding populations and little economic opportunity see tens of thousands of their citizens cross borders in search of better lives in more developed countries. Every highly developed country is faced with significant flows of legal and undocumented, or unauthorized, immigrants that are exacerbated by regional political unrest, pandemics, and natural disasters. No country has