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Anthropology 512
Research Proposal
19 March 2007

The Changing Role of the Mexican US Border: Economics or Ideology?

Introduction

The two-thousand-mile-long Mexican-US border is perhaps the largest and most well known structure exhibiting the economic inequities of global capitalism. The striking economic contrasts between Mexico and the United States have exemplified this border's purpose and function over the last several decades. Capital and elites have flowed increasingly freely across this border. Meanwhile the less affluent in Mexico have been discouraged from crossing this structure by militaristic and legal displays of power while being simultaneously enticed by higher paying wage labor in US industries on the other side of the border. Undocumented migration has been highly lucrative for US industries, as this labor has often been exploited at below market value. However, recent escalations of structures preventing this migration may have created a situation whereby the undocumented labor which US industries have come to rely on seems to be increasingly scarce and therefore more expensive than it has been in the past. If the border no longer serves as a semi-permeable barrier to Mexican labor for exploitation, what is its function? It is the intent of my research to discover if the border is still functioning as a means to exploit Mexican labor for US economic gain, or if it is now serving another purpose.

Statement of Purpose

The primary purpose of this study is to gather data to understand what and where the border is, why the border exists, how the border functions, whom the border serves and whom it affects, and how or if this has changed with recent events. Is the US-Mexican border a mere

physical structure at an arbitrary political line from Texas to California or is it an ideological and economic barrier between groups of people born on either side of that line despite their current physical location? Does this border function to serve economic and political elites in the US to the detriment of disenfranchised Mexicans or does it have another purpose? Although this border has been studied extensively over a period of several decades (Stoddard 1976a, Stoddard 1976b, Rivera-Batiz 1986, Kearney 1991, Heyman 1995, Andreas 1998, Andreas 1999, Chomsky & Dieterich 1999, Eschbach, Hagan, Rodriguez, Hernandez-Leon & Bailey 1999, Chang 2000, Heyman 2000, Cornelius 2001), the policies and structures of the border change periodically. This is particularly true in the recent past, as the United States has been engaged in an escalating buildup of physical structures, militaristic tactics and laws that further prevent people from migrating across the border to the United States under the guise of homeland security since 9/11/01.

The past literature on the border has shown that the migration across it is mainly due to economic inequity and that undocumented migrants serve as an inexpensive, easily exploitable workforce for US industries. However, in my initial study of this phenomenon the results showed that although economic issues were still a factor for these migrants in their desire to migrate across the border, it was not the sole reason concerning their migration. Moreover, US industries, and agriculture in particular, appeared to be suffering economic losses due to the increase in border enforcement and a subsequently perceived scarcity of migrant labor. (This may be one of the reasons why US industries have lobbied heavily for policy changes to allow foreign guest workers into the US and President Bush is now pushing Congress for new immigration reforms to allow such workers to obtain legal working status). This study will investigate the topic further to discover whether or not economics are still the primary issue surrounding border enforcement,

or if factors such as ideology have superseded economics as the primary reason behind the increases in border enforcement.

Review of Literature & Theoretical Perspectives

As this particular mass migration has been documented in past studies as being mainly economic in character and it is across a political boundary, I use a political economic theoretical framework as a point of departure. As labor is flowing from ‘peripheral’ nations whose economies cannot accommodate their labor power into a ‘core’ nation in the global capitalist system, I will incorporate dependency theory in my approach to the phenomenon. To synthesize political economy and dependency theory, I use world systems theory as the basis of my economic analysis. The relationship between strong core states, such as the US, and weaker peripheral and semi-peripheral states, such as Mexico, is based on an unequal exchange. The goal in this relationship is for the stronger core state with economic, political and military advantages to exploit labor and resources in the peripheral states to further capital accumulation for elites in the core (Straussfogel 1997). My research will discover if the recent policy changes at the border continue to benefit these elites, and if so how. If it no longer benefits these elites, whom is it benefiting?

Further, the systemic structures that both cause and feign prevention of this migration incorporate structural violence against migrants. This type of violence is not overt but rather results from the inequity inherent in the global capitalist system. These structures include, but are not limited to – the formation of nation-states and militarization of borders, colonialism, national debt and free-trade agreements. The socio-historical processes of colonialism and the chronic indebtedness of peripheral nations put individuals from these areas at an extreme economic disadvantage and they are often forced to migrate toward areas of greater economic prosperity.

Global capitalism espouses the doctrine of free trade throughout the world and the disintegration of the borders that define nation-states to allow their capital and assets to move without barriers, yet it also encourages the militarization of such boundaries to keep marginalized populations desperate enough to work for the lowest wages possible. In this way, the global market encourages structural violence against the poor of the periphery to allow core elites to accumulate more capital. Structural violence is caused by social conditions that inherently favor particular groups of people to the detriment of others (Høivik 1977). Accordingly, the paradoxical structures in place that force migrants to leave their home territories in the peripheral states of the world to seek wage labor in the core states, also seek to prevent them from doing so with consequences including arrest and possible death. My initial analysis of the US-Mexican border is that it has exemplified these concepts of structural violence and although it likely continues to do so, it has become increasingly unclear as to who is now benefiting from these structures. My research will investigate the matter further to discover the beneficiaries and the indigents within this structure in a post 9-11-01 context.

My research will draw on studies conducted at the Mexican-US border, both before and after 9-11-01. After the attacks on that date, the US government restructured the agencies that serve the border. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) became Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Border Patrol was renamed Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), and these new agencies were reorganized under the newly created Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Such agencies are an integral part of the overall structure of the border and are therefore considered as border bureaucracies.

Likewise, the border has become increasingly militarized. Although this militarization began earlier (Andreas 1999), recent news reports have shown an increasing use of surveillance

technologies and fencing as well as more security patrols in the region (Arizona Star 2006, BBC 2007, Christian Science Monitor 2006). A number of vigilante US citizen militias are also operating along the border apprehending migrants (Smith-Spark 2005). These deterrents appear to have caused labor and economic problems for US industries such as agriculture, as wages for farm labor have gone up and some crops are being lost due to a lack of labor (Bowers 2007). Although several academic studies concerning migration across the border have been done in a post-911 context, I have not encountered any that deal specifically with the border and its overall function since this bureaucratic restructuring and the subsequent border policy changes.

Many previous studies have suggested that the border and its support structures have acted as a mechanism not to prevent migration, but to discipline migrants to work hard and accept low wages under threat of arrest and deportation (Kearney 1991, Chang 2000). Although some ethnographies have shown that Mexicans often migrate in search of an ideological “American Dream” (Rivera 2004), this dream often includes economic success. Several economists have correlated increases in migration with larger differentials of wages between the US and Mexico (Hanson and Spilimbergo 1999, Rivera-Batiz 1986). While one of these studies showed that the US operated *maquiladoras* on the Mexican side of the border actually created more immigration (Rivera-Batiz 1986), others suggest that mechanisms such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) may help to alleviate migratory pressures by decreasing this wage differential (Hanson and Spilimbergo 1999). However, despite US government claims to the contrary, particularly in the Clinton administration, other studies have documented the detrimental effects NAFTA has had by economically undermining Mexican businesses and farms. This has displaced many Mexicans from their traditional means of subsistence and caused more migrants to come to the US in search of wage labor (Andreas 1996,

Andreas 1998, Chomsky & Dieterich 1999). Although Mexican migrants have historically been mainly from rural and agricultural areas, NAFTA has increasingly displaced urbanites as well and they are migrating in larger numbers (Fussell 2004). An increase in border enforcement after the NAFTA agreement also caused more migrants to go through less populated areas along the Rio Grande or in the Sonoran and Mojave deserts resulting in a large increase in deaths during this migration process (Cornelius 2001, Eschbach, Hagan, Rodriguez, Hernandez-Leon & Bailey 1999). My research will incorporate these studies and see if and how the situation for migrants has changed since the increased militarization of the border and the restructuring of the border bureaucracies.

Although the public discourse on border policies has often revolved around migrants draining public resources through their use of public services, the economic implications show that migrants contribute enormously to the US economy by providing labor and paying taxes without the legal right to such services (Chang 2000), and also through the purchasing of taxed US goods (Brown 1997). Due to these economic incentives, the border has often served to facilitate migration. Migrants have been released voluntarily by Border Patrol to return to Mexico, which they may or may not do, and this gives the appearance that the border is being enforced for US public consumption while their undocumented labor status allows them to be exploited by US employers who face few if any consequences for utilizing this 'illegal' labor (Stoddard 1976a, Stoddard 1976b, Heyman 1995, Heyman 2000). I plan to discover whether or not the restructured border bureaucracies and increased enforcement of border policies have changed this economic situation for employers and laborers.

The border region itself has often been referred to a separate legal and economic entity that is administrated from Washington DC and Mexico City (Brown 1997, Bersin 1996).

Mexican and US policy at the border is contradictory in that the US has been unable to enforce their restrictive border policies unilaterally, while Mexican law allows their citizens to come and go as they please (Bersin 1996). These administrative entities often do not adequately understand the border region and think of it as being polluted with toxic waste and drugs, though it is in actuality a functionally intertwined economic and cultural system with populations on both sides of the border relying on one another for goods and services and sharing many similar cultural characteristics (Villenas 1989, Brown 1997, Bustamante 1992, Rubin-Kurtzman, Ham-Chande, Van Arsdol Jr. 1996). My study will explore some of these interconnections and how they may have shifted with the recent changes in policy.

The border has become a symbol for many Mexicans and Mexican-Americans and their views on the border have changed over the years. Mexicans once imagined themselves as being in a state of labor diaspora and thought they would return to Mexico. They later believed that they might integrate into US society but found this was difficult due to pervasive racism. Some have more recently thought that the border should not exist and that Mexicans should retake the southwest border region that was lost in the 19th century (Clifford 1997, Garcia 1985), while others have viewed the border as a new iron curtain or Berlin wall (Andreas 1996, Andreas 1998). This tension of many migrants between settling in an often-hostile community or returning to Mexico has frequently remained (Chavez 1991, Chavez 1994). My study will discover whether or not Mexican and Mexican-American migrants' views on the border have shifted after the recent policy changes and how this has affected them.

Research Questions

The Mexican-US border represents the collision between the dominant economic and military force in world politics with that of the peripheral nation-states of the third world. The

demonstration of power along this border by the US is evident in its use of walls, fences and militaristic patrols and surveillance techniques to prevent the entry of people from outside. Despite this show of force, people from south of this border migrate across it anyway. The migration of peoples from south of the US-Mexican border into the United States is one of the largest mass migrations in history. Reports state that undocumented migrants face considerable risks in crossing this political border with consequences including arrest, worker exploitation, poverty and even death. With such considerable risks, why would so many choose to undertake this journey? What physical, legal and economic obstacles do these migrants face during this process? How do they navigate through these obstacles? Why don't they go through the US legal framework to migrate? To understand these questions, an investigation of structures on the US side of the border must also take place. Who benefits from this border? Why does it exist in the first place? What types of structures exist to control and/or prevent this migration? Do these structures prevent the migration or actually contribute to it? Is the border escalating its prevention techniques, and if so why? Who is benefiting from the increased prevention? The purpose of this study is to answer these questions and to understand the border as a structural phenomenon by exploring the issue of migration across the border from multiple perspectives. I will accomplish this by investigating a variety of sites, sources and target populations.

Research Design & Methodology

My research will be a multi perspective study on the current border situation to assess the impact or lack thereof, of the post 9-11 federal policy and bureaucracy changes. In order to explore the impact of these policy changes along US-Mexican border, the views of all interested parties must be incorporated. Bureaucratic structures, employers, immigrant rights groups, anti-

immigrant groups, legislators, the general public on both sides of the border, as well as migrants themselves must all be investigated.

In order to discover the reasons why migrants migrate, they must be asked. I will obtain the life histories of 30 or more migrants both documented and undocumented and this will allow for a variety of stories and reasons for migrating to surface. These life histories will help to reveal the obstacles they faced and the issues concerning their reasons for documented or undocumented migration. These histories will also aid in assessing the impacts of recent policy and structural changes at the border.

Likewise, I will incorporate the views of employers into the study. By interviewing 15 or more employers in a variety of industries, my research will reveal a number of issues concerning their role to surface. I will also engage in participant observation by working at a place where large numbers of migrants are employed, such as in agriculture or service work that will aid in this investigation. I will need money for subsistence from some form of wage labor regardless, so this labor might as well be related to my research goals.

Interviewing and observing bureaucracies in action will also be useful in this study. The three key bureaucracies I will investigate are Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Social Security Administration (SSA). CBP and ICE are both parts of the Department of Homeland Security as of 2002 and were formerly known as Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and Border Patrol. These agencies may have changed with their names or they may be very similar in function to the previous agencies. I will interview 5 or more members of each of these institutions at varying levels in their hierarchies and observe their functions at their bases of operation. As a Social Security card is the primary way in which people obtain work authorization, I must also investigate the Social Security

Administration. Again observation and interviews conducted with 5 or more members from this agency will give an overview of the issues they face and give insights as to how they operate.

In order to begin to understand the overall social discourse, I will investigate 3 or more anti immigrant and immigrant rights groups. Interviews will be conducted with several members of each group to get an adequate data set and range of opinions. To better understand public attitudes, I will conduct more interviews and a survey to discover the views of the general public on both sides of the border. This survey will have at least 50 respondents from each side of the border to get an adequate range of opinion.

Finally, once research questions are adequately explored and refined, I will interview several state and/or federal legislators to gain insights into their role in these processes and policies. Do they merely see themselves as enforcing policies that the public demands or do they have other roles? My investigation into their role will also include documentary research on their voting record and the policies they have supported.

My methodology will rely primarily on interviews of individuals in each category. This will allow my research to be focused on areas that may yet be unexamined. My participant observation at workplaces will aid in gaining rapport as well as seeing migrant labor and employer behavior in action. My research will cross check the interview data gathered with documents from relevant sources when appropriate. I will also observe appropriate areas such as fences and walls at the physical border, as well as the actions of border patrol and customs enforcement at these physical structures. I will also observe the actions of persons associated with other border bureaucracies. Surveys will be used to gather data on general feelings within public populations to gauge the overall opinions of the larger border society.

Research Site & Availability of Data

I will base my research at a major US city near the US-Mexican border. Possible research sites include Tucson, San Diego, Yuma and El Paso. Any of these US cities will suffice for my research base as they are all near the border and have major Mexican cities on the opposite side of the border – Nogales, Tijuana, San Luis Rio Colorado, and Juarez respectively. Although particular issues in these locations may be somewhat different, border structures and the migration across them will remain somewhat similar and therefore, it will not affect my research questions and goals to a significant degree. The particular city at which my research will be based will depend on family issues, particularly where my wife finds employment.

My research will take place among Mexican migrant communities near this location as well as with American born citizen populations in the area. I will also interview employers in a variety of industries in this area. My research into bureaucratic structures will take place at field offices and ports of entry along the border. I will also conduct research along the actual border to observe the buildup of physical structures such as fences and in towns on the other side of the border to discover the views of Mexican nationals.

Data on this issue will be readily available in towns near and along the border as cross border migration occurs in these areas. The numbers of migrants living near the border in the US are significant. By investigating towns on the Mexican side of the border, both migrants and Mexican public opinion will be available. Many pro and anti immigrant groups are also based in these areas making their views accessible. Opinions on the migration issue are also very prevalent in the general public in these areas due to the proximity to the border. To study bureaucracy, border patrol and immigration have several regional offices near the border to investigate, as well as numerous ports of entry.

Researcher Qualifications

Despite not living in the area and therefore being unable to establish initial rapport with key informants, I am familiar with both the Southwestern US and much of Mexico through extensive travels in both areas and have initial contacts in several areas. My family and I plan to relocate to the area at least semi-permanently. I speak basic conversational Spanish and intend to brush up on the language for several weeks in Mexican immersion classes prior to fieldwork, while simultaneously doing initial research on the topic of migration from the Mexican side of the border. I have done initial studies on this issue in Western Oregon by interviewing several migrants, immigrant rights activists, and employers. I have also conducted initial documentary investigations into the legal and enforcement bureaucracies of US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), as well as extensive academic research.

Ethical Issues

As many of the populations and individuals to be interviewed during the course of this research may be vulnerable to legal, physical or economic actions taken against them, no identifying information about such individuals will be recorded or revealed in this study. All persons with such vulnerabilities will remain confidential and their whereabouts, names and identifiable historical information will remain unrecorded, except in my head. Persons with these vulnerabilities include the migrants, employers, the public and informants from bureaucracies. Members of the other groups to be studied may also choose to have their identities remain confidential and I will honor such requests.

Significance of Data

If the data gathered suggests that the reasons for migration are generally economic in character, and that employers are still benefiting from this labor force, then circumstances have remained generally the same and the border still has essentially the same functions and characteristics that previous studies have suggested. If however migrants are now migrating for other reasons and border enforcement is no longer benefiting US employers and therefore the US economy, then circumstances have changed and a new approach must be investigated. Is border and immigration law enforcement benefiting a party other than employers, and if so who and how? Is enforcement mainly due to the political concerns of the public or anti-immigrant groups? The answers to these questions can only be discovered by verifying or falsifying that the migration is still economic, and that employers are still benefiting from the migration. If the vast majority of employers are not benefiting from changes in border policy then it is serving some other, likely non-economic purpose such as the ideology and/or xenophobia of the public or interest group constituencies. This can be verified by the public surveys and the interviews with immigrant rights and anti immigration groups as well as with the investigation of legislators and their policies.

Conclusion

The US-Mexican border is one of the preeminent representations of global economic inequity. This structure influences the lives of millions of people on both sides of it. Its very existence generates controversy across the political spectrums and throughout all levels of the societies on both sides of it. As the structure changes with policies and events that occur both nearby and far away from it, it requires constant investigation. This is particularly true given the massive structural overhaul that the border bureaucracies have undergone in recent years, the escalation of militarism at the physical border, and the considerable public and political

discourse on the structure that has occurred in the wake of security and terrorism concerns after 9-11-01. My research will add to the wealth of literature on the border and provide a perspective on the latest changes in the border's policy and structures and how those changes have affected the people whose lives are intimately intertwined with the border. My research will discover if there have been changes in the very purpose and function of the border structure and will uncover the beneficiaries of this structure and determine how they benefit from it and whom they affect in the process. Although migrants are likely the most directly affected by this border, ultimately, as citizens of a nation-state on one side of this border, preventing people on the other side of this border from entering, this border affects us all.

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Schedule

This research will take place over the period of 4 months beginning in September of 2007. By the end of the first month, a significant portion of the data on migrants both documented and undocumented will be gathered as well as much of the data on employers. In the

second month the research will focus on bureaucracies and immigrants rights and anti immigrant groups while continuing research on the previous two categories. In the third and fourth month the research will move toward a synthesis of data and begin work on the public and legislators. I will begin writing the thesis in January of 2008, through the fifth and sixth month, and will have a draft done by March of 2008. I plan to present the research by the end of May 2008.

Budget

At \$1000 a month for rent and utilities plus another \$1000 in salary, \$400 a month in travel expenses and \$350 a month in informant gathering activities such as meals and beer, the total would be \$2750 a month for 4 months or \$11,000 total.

Month/ Activity	September	October	November	December
Living Expenses - Rent/Utilities, etc.	\$1000	\$1000	\$1000	\$1000
Salary	\$1000	\$1000	\$1000	\$1000
Travel Expenses	\$400	\$400	\$400	\$400
Informant meals, payments, gifts, beer, etc	\$350	\$350	\$350	\$350