

## Borders as Social Relations (Transvaluation and “Contact Frames”)

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As I am not currently doing any original research on the subject of borders, my presentation is distilled notes from (a) a graduate seminar that I have taught at Columbia on a couple of occasions, (b) a paper that I published on "Contact Frames" in my book *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism* (U Minnesota Press, 2001), and (c) my historical work on the first radical transnational social movement to arise on the US-Mexican border (1904-1922), titled *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón* (Zone Books, 2015), and a series of papers that led up to that book.<sup>1</sup> In other words, there is nothing new in this contribution, but a thumbnail synthesis of a set of discrete points that hopefully can enrich our discussion.

### 1. General Notions.

A. I shall use the term 'border' here to refer exclusively to international demarcations. This does not imply that some of the conclusions reached are necessarily irrelevant for other sorts of political demarcations (e.g., municipal or state boundaries, or parishes or bishoprics, or judicial districts), but I shall not focus on those.

B. Historically, there are complicated relations between borders and actual areas of human settlement and political control. The concepts of *frontiers* and *borderlands* help get at this tension. I understand 'frontiers' to be *horizons of colonization*, while I use the term 'borderlands' to refer to *frontiers where there is an inter-state or inter-imperial scramble for colonization*, such as there were during the 18th and 19th centuries in what is today northern Mexico and the US Southwest, Louisiana, Florida, and the Great Lakes region, to name just a few North American examples.

C. Because borders are internationally agreed upon demarcations, they may cut across frontiers (horizons of colonization), and in those cases, borders can serve to set limits to projects of colonization. When colonization is well advanced, areas around the borders are settled by people

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<sup>1</sup> 2001 'Bordering on Anthropology: The Dialectics of a National Tradition (Mexico),' in Benoit de L'Estoile, Federico Neiburg and Lygia Sigaud (eds.) *Nations and Natives: Anthropology and State-Making*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2005, pp. 167-196; 'Chronotopes of a Dystopic Nation: The Birth of "Dependency" in Late Porfirian Mexico.' in Andrew Wilford and Eric Tagliatozzo (eds.), *Clio/Anthropos: Exploring the Boundaries Between History and Anthropology*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009, pp. 102-138; 'Anti-Semitism and the Ideology of the Mexican Revolution. *Representations* (2010), number 110: 1-28; 2014 'Mexico's first Lynching: Crime, Moral Panic, Dependency', *Critical Historical Studies* 1(1) : 85-123.

who identify as a subjects of a given nation-state or empire. The completion of border settlement-- a process that historian Friedrich Katz once referred to as 'the transition from frontier to border'-- is socially and culturally consequential, so much so that the experience of frontier colonization has at times been adopted as a key to understanding the national spirit (think of the prolonged influence of Frederick Jackson Turner's 'Frontier Hypothesis,' or the importance of the image of the *bandeirante* in forging modern Brazilian national identity).

On the other hand, when a border cuts across a previously colonized area-- as in Peter Sahlins' now classical case-study of a Catalan-speaking valley on the Spanish-French border, processes of differentiation between inhabitants on either side of the border inevitably ensue, albeit with varying rhythms and complicated variations.

## **2. Productivity of international borders ("hot" and "cold" borders)**

A. *Differences across international borders are productive.* This is famously the case around price differentials, that inevitably generate border traffic (e.g., differences in gasoline prices across the Venezuela/Colombia or the Venezuela/Brazil border created intense trade across those borders; or differential prices of medicines cause frequent border crossings between the US and Canada), but the principle also holds with regard to differential access to coveted goods and resources, resulting either from environmental differences across borders, or from differing statutes (classically, prostitution laws, alcohol prohibition, gambling laws, banking regulations, etc). Differences in the funding and efficacy of the state itself can also become productive on the border-- more lax policing can lead to outsourcing of various illegal activities, for instance, and thus to more border crossing.

B. When there are many differences between two contiguous nations, border traffic intensifies; conversely, when life on either side of a border is very similar, there is less stimulus for border traffic. Since similarities and differences change over time (e.g., thanks to the depreciation of a national currency, the discovery of new resources, changing laws and regulations, demographic transitions, economic booms and busts, etc.), borders can 'heat up' or 'cool down.' 50 years ago, for instance, the Mexico-Guatemala border was a relatively 'cold' border-- certainly compared to the US-Mexico border during the same period-- because economies on either side of that border were quite similar, as opposed to the stark and productive differences between Mexico and the United States. In the past few decades, however, that border has 'heated up' due to changing immigration regulations that stemmed from the North-American Trade Agreement, and from various crises in Central America. In short: border traffic is highly sensitive to changing comparative differences between countries.

## **3. Check-points and the enactment of borders.**

A. Borders are generally represented as lines-- on a map, or on the surface of the earth or water-- but lines are two dimensional. To the degree that the purpose of borders is to establish jurisdiction over a determinate piece of land and over the people living on that land, this bi-

dimensionality presents no problem: the two-dimensional border determines what lands belong to which state. However, borders also exist in order to regulate traffic, and to the degree that this is important, a complex border infrastructure must be built, way beyond simple markings on the land and on the map.

B. Border infrastructure is not bi-dimensional. It consists principally of customs buildings, immigration checkpoints, border police posts or military barracks. These buildings are designed as thresholds that border traffic must traverse for goods or people to move legally from one country to another. It is very important to note that these border thresholds need not be located "on"-- or even near-- the border. The geography of checkpoints is often determined by the means of transportation being used to cross borders: international ports and airports can be remote from the border, for example. Being clear on the logic of the checkpoint, however, is critical for understanding the border no longer as a *demarcation*, but rather as a *social relationship* that must be performed.

C. Where, when and how a border relationship will be performed changes along with legislation. So, for instance, when the state of Arizona changed allowed traffic police to ask anyone who they stopped for their immigration papers, traffic violations could now activate or trigger immigration checkpoints anywhere in the state, and undocumented migrants could now be identified and sanctioned by regular traffic police, rather than by employees of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Similarly, when the state of Georgia began demanding that school principals require proof of immigration status in order for children or adolescents to enroll in their public schools, Georgia's schools were transformed into immigration checkpoints.

It is relevant to note, then, that checkpoints can operate flexibly and in vast regions that may not be anywhere near international borders. The function of the checkpoint is quite easy to foist onto bureaucracies that were designed for a different purpose, so that the administration of a goodly number of public goods can be utilized to that end.

#### **4. Border Crossings and Transvaluation.**

A. The notion of 'regimes of value,' that was put forward several decades ago in material culture studies, can be useful when thinking of national economies, and the concomitant processes of transvaluation that can occur as a result of border crossings, particularly when it comes to 'hot' borders, between countries that have very different economies.

The history of the US-Mexican border is rife with examples of transvaluation-- an effect of movement between 'regimes of value.' American copper miners who were brought to US-owned mines in the early 20th Mexico century became part of a labor aristocracy there, where they were at once 'white,' spoke English, and were protected by their US nationality. Conversely, there are examples in the same period of highly educated Mexicans, who upon arrival to the United States were channeled to menial jobs and racialized as 'Mexican,' regardless of their class origin. Products and objects, too, frequently have different assigned prestige and value when they move

across a border. When McDonalds was introduced in Mexico City, in the mid-1980s, for instance, its customers were middle and upper middle class, and people dressed in their Sunday-best to go there, while in the US MacDonald's principal clients were working class, and finding homeless people eating there or drinking coffee was common. As a result, the overall prestige of MacDonald's changed, and consuming its products had contrasting implications in each country's system of distinction.

B. These dynamics of transvaluation foster significant personal change that in turn often feeds into transformative dynamics for the entire social group that is involved in transnational movement. Anthropologist Paul Friedrich, who studied agrarian revolt in a Tarascan village in Michoacán, described the case of revolutionary leader Primo Tapia, a native and monolingual Tarascan-speaker who then migrated and worked in California, and returned to his village of Naranja in the early 1920s, where he now led an agrarian revolt. The story is not unusual. Revolutions, local reform movements, changing gender roles, local fashions, changing food habits, all of these are often connected to 'circular' migratory flows, where the migrants have had the opportunity to experience transvaluation first-hand.

Transnational circulation by way of tourism also is important in the dynamics of self-fashioning, changing consumer habits, idioms of distinction, etc. In short, the dynamics of transvaluation, connected to border crossing, is an important motivation for border crossing, and it has productive economic, cultural, and political effects.

## **5. Contact Zones and Contact Frames.**

1. Beginning in the 1980s, scholars interested in transnationalism, hybridity, cosmopolitanism etc. frequently relied on the idea of 'contact zones,' understood as places in national geographies that were characterized by intense exchanges between 'locals' and 'foreigners'. These contact zones were usually ports or urban market areas, or contiguous areas on either side of an international border; at times, the term contact zone was used for more restricted spaces of (international) stranger sociability, such as bars, dance-halls, or schools... In many instances, urban geographies were organized as segregated spaces-- foreign quarters in late 19th century Chinese cities, foreign enclaves in company towns or plantations in the Caribbean, etc. These spaces of segregation also required the formation of (restricted) spaces of contact, and thus a complex geography of contact zones.

2. The concept of 'contact frames' that I proposed in my 2001 paper on the subject is not centered on fixed places-- bars, schools, ports, neighborhoods...-- but rather on interactions wherein national/foreign identities are socially enacted. The notion of the 'frame' is taken from Erving Goffman's work. *The purpose of focusing on frames (rather than zones) is to identify the ways in which borders are socially enacted beyond the work that is done by government regulators and employees, or their proxies.* The basic thrust of my argument in that paper was that the inherent tension between economic and political geography-- between the idea that the nation state is governed by a sovereign people and the fact that national economies are always part of a wider world economy-- creates situations where marking a person, or a commodity, as foreign becomes productive.

3. Specifically, I identified 4 structural dynamics that condition social actors' creating 'contact frames,' wherein the national/foreigner distinction is performed:

- *International business and imported material culture.* Nation-states are political communities within a world-system of such communities, and yet they are also part of an economy that cannot be contained by national borders. This means that economic innovations, and their agents, can be marked in inter-personal or group dynamics, using national identification and confrontation for specific ends. Consuming commodities or adopting productive techniques that are seen as 'foreign' can be seen as indices of foreignness-- during the Boxer Rebellion, for instance, telegraph lines, railroads, steamships were 'made foreign' as much as Christianity was. Similarly, in early post-independent Mexico (1828), anti-Spanish sentiment was trained particularly against Spanish merchants and their imported goods, manifested in the sacking of Mexico City's Parián Market. In Colombia in the 1930s, local clothes merchants responded to innovative door-to-door peddling and credit schemes introduced by Jewish and Middle-Eastern peddlers by adhering loudly to the anti-Semitic rhetoric that was coming out of Nazi Germany.

Forms of consumption that are seen as corrupting influences have often been 'foreignized'-- drugs have been associated to foreign and degenerate hippies, for instance, or to foreign degenerate Chinese, or to Mexican reefers... depending on the context.

International business constantly creates opportunities for mobilizing national identity because businessmen can credibly be portrayed as furthering foreign or private interests, at the expense of national traditions. Contact frames can then be activated as part of strategic efforts to dominate local markets, or to mobilize constituents in various fashions.

- *Tension between tradition and modernity.* A second sort of contact-frame-generating dynamic emanates from the very logic of nationalism. Nations are meant to be built out of peoples who share a history, a tradition, true, but they are also meant to be vehicles for bringing 'progress' and modernity to that people. As a result, when a national tradition is perceived by foreign travelers to be opposed to modernization, a contact-frame producing dynamic again becomes available.

This dynamic is especially significant around travel that is connected to tourism, or to scientific or professional travel, particularly in contexts where local points of nationalist pride-- monuments to a relatively 'backward' nation's modernizing achievements-- are seen by tourists as unremarkable, uninteresting, or out-of-date, while the 'backward' practices that are locally associated with poverty are found to be the truest representations of that nation. Contact frames are generated by visitors who insist on seeing 'traditions' that locals find embarrassing. When they insist on taking photos of themselves next to a burro, rather than next to a-- to them unremarkable-- automobile.

- *Disorder of modernization.* In a similar vein, the entropy of modernization generates difficulties for nationalists, that can often be manifest in heightened nationalist framing. "Twin cities" that develop along 'hot' borders between highly contrasting national economies are perhaps the most intense sites of this kind. One side of such borders stands for progress,

cleanliness, law and order, the other side stands for poverty, vice, and perhaps also lawlessness and freedom. The contrast can be socially enacted for varying purposes, on either side of the border.

• *Scientific horizon as generative of contact frames.* The universal importance that all nation-states attribute to progress implies that there is a shared civilizational horizon between them, and therefore also a vanguard of progress at the international level. Therefore, science and art, and their practical avatars, technology and fashion, can destabilize 'regimes of value' within a nation. A peasant migrant can return to her hometown with a fancier stereo than the one that the local political boss has in his home. She can maybe wear more modern attire than his wife. Etc. And this challenge can be met with an impulse to foreignize the migrant. In the nationalist Mexico of the 1950s and 1960s, for example, migrants to the US were called '*pochos*,' and were constantly taunted for adopting English words, or American dress, or for any acquired habit that might trouble internal class or gender hierarchies. *Pochos* were portrayed as dubious Mexicans, and as lovers of everything foreign.

In conclusion, *the study of border traffic requires coming to terms with the fact that bordering is a way of framing social relations*, and that this is relevant not only in the study of checkpoints, and of the administrative management of border traffic, but also wherever the dynamic of making a thing or a person foreign is socially useful.

In order to get at this problem, it is worth moving beyond geographies where foreigners and nationals mix-- beyond 'contact zones'-- and into the more flexible realm of contact frames, that can be produced by interests groups or individuals in many dissimilar circumstances.