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A GATE THAT OPENS AND CLOSES: GLOBALIZATION AT THE US-MEXICO BORDER

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A great deal of the rhetoric around globalization has extolled the collapse of national borders. This rhetoric has also proclaimed the emergence of a human society no longer rooted in national categories. Many proponents of this version of globalization, noting the rapid movement of capital, information and cultural meanings across the globe, have suggested that national borders and nation-states have become increasingly irrelevant in our globalizing times.

As an anthropologist who has worked for over ten years at the U.S.-Mexico border, I have always taken a somewhat quizzical approach to these claims. Through my research in this particular region, I have come to the realization that any sweeping claims regarding globalization and the future of national boundaries are highly problematic. This is indeed a region that has always experienced a considerable amount of cross-border flows: of people, commodities and cultures. But it is also a region which has seen tremendous effort and resources go into preventing certain kinds of flows, namely of migrants, undocumented laborers, and drugs.

In recent years, globalization, in the form of bilateral trade agreements, new immigration and border control programs, and an intensification of drug smuggling have significantly changed the nature of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. In the mid 1990s, for example, after NAFTA was ratified, crossborder commodity trucking increased dramatically in many U.S. ports of entry. At the same time, however, the U.S. Congress, following a legislative initiative in 1994 (the year NAFTA was implemented), endorsed a new border enforcement strategy. Under this initiative, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was legislated to hire 'no less than' 1000 new border patrol agents each year. The INS also decided to redirect 6,300 border patrol agents to just nine 'high traffic' sectors along the southern border and concentrate on interdictions at these crossing points. The result of this initiative and border strategy for many border town has been higher fortified fencing and more border patrol agents. Tragically, the new fences and increased surveillance in the border cities has forced migrants to seek illegal entry out in remote parts of the desert where many die owing to exposure and dehydration. These stories are heart wrenching and horrible, and include the deaths of several children and an infant who was found next to the corpse of his mother. (The INS reported that the death count

climbed from 231 in 1999 to 369 in 2000, although other border groups suggest that the real numbers are significantly higher.)

So although globalization has facilitated certain kinds of flows across national borders, it has also gone hand in hand with the deliberate restricting of other kinds of flows. And there is, of course, a set of power relations which structure these flows across the U.S.-Mexico border: as anthropologist Robert Alvarez has commented, "No other border in the world exhibits the inequality of power, economics, and the human condition as does this one." Economic migrants seeking a better life in the United States, for example, often attempt to cross the border after abandoning low-paying jobs in foreign-owned maquiladora factories. Yet, even though the commodities that Mexican workers have produced now cross the border with greater ease, their bodies as laborers face ever greater and more dangerous restrictions.

The fact that this opening and closing of the global gate has occurred in a context of tremendous economic disparity between two countries has made the U.S.-Mexico borderlands a unique place for political and spiritual reflection. Globalization, border flows, economic inequality and a theologically-informed politics is the focus of a social movement located in Southern Arizona. Called Borderlinks, this is an organization which is dedicated to exploring the contradictions, complexities and injustices of national borders in global times.

I first met members of Borderlinks in 1990 as a graduate student conducting research on the US Sanctuary Movement in southern Arizona. The Sanctuary movement was initiated in 1982 when a Presbyterian church in Tucson, Arizona, declared sanctuary for the thousands of Central American fugitives who were being massively deported during the 1980s. A significant component of the movement was the development of an underground railroad and the movement of refugees up through Mexico, across the U.S.-Mexico border and safely into the United States. For much of its early period, this underground was staffed by local church volunteers who spent many of their evenings and weekends conducting 'runs'— a rather complex and ingenious set of practices for evading Central American security personnel, Mexican police, and U.S. border enforcement officials. After a federal court case in 1986, however, which resulted in the conviction of eight "Sanctuary" workers, the staffing of the underground changed. While local church members continued to be involved, the underground saw the influx of what were called 'mission volunteers,' young men and women from churches located in other parts of the United States who had come to Tucson explicitly to show support for "Sanctuary." These mission volunteers eventually became the backbone of the underground after 1988, and became the staff members of the affiliated organization Borderlinks.

Borderlinks grew out of a 'partnership' between a series of churches in Philadelphia, Wilmington, Pennsylvania, and Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson. The East Coast churches were sympathetic to the Sanctuary cause but felt somewhat 'disconnected' because of their distance from the borderlands. As a result, in 1987, both communities began a series of programs at the border to educate church members about the plight of Central American refugees. Thus, in its early days, Borderlinks mainly worked through church networks and typically hosted small groups (usually of English-speaking 'anglos') who would spend a week together in one of its programs. During the late 1980s, however, it became evident to Sanctuary

activists and the Borderlinks network that the 'refugee issue' was embedded within a much larger context of economic disparities between the United States and Latin America, and consequently the programs began to expand their political agenda, as well as to host groups outside of the church network (such as high school groups and university professors and students).

From the beginning, Borderlinks built its program on immersion pedagogy or experiential learning. Instead of simply being given information from academic or other experts, participants were exposed to different kinds of people and organizations at the U.S.-Mexico border and encouraged to reflect on these experiences within the context of a group. Typically, Borderlinks participants would come to Tucson, be given a reading packet and then taken to meet a variety of people and 'talk' to them about what they did, what it was like to live in the borderlands, etc. These people included refugee lawyers, Mexican migrants, social workers, INS and border patrol officials, and refugees themselves. The central questions the Borderlinks trips raised for its participants were: 1) what does the U.S.-Mexico border represent as a divide between people? and 2) who is responsible for maintaining this divide?

In 1994, after the US Sanctuary Movement ceased operating, Borderlinks decided to continue and expand its programs. Focusing more intensely on the border and the effects of globalization on the people living in the borderlands; Borderlinks has continued to run its educational immersion programs. At the moment, Borderlinks hopes to educate North Americans about the complexity of life on the border and to challenge dominant meanings of globalization—particularly those interpretations which obscure how globalization, while producing capital and commodity flows, has also produced economic disparity. The immersion programs themselves continue to challenge participants to reexamine their own assumptions and beliefs about globalization and to think about globalization as a process which locates individuals and groups in different economic niches.

In 1998, Borderlinks realized a long-term goal of becoming a bi-national program and now has a bi-national staff and board of directors. Now, in addition to offering short-term and semester long immersion programs for North Americans, Borderlinks has also developed popular education seminars for border residents and hopes to foster leaders who will work for community improvement.

One of the most powerful and important challenges that Borderlinks presents to us is to rethink what we mean by the term globalization, and to critically reflect upon how globalization is experienced by specific communities in specific global places. Although borders have tended to be minimized in much globalization rhetoric, borders such as the U.S.-Mexico divide remain a testament to the tremendous economic disparities which continue to plague our globe—despite claims to the contrary.

As Borderlinks suggests, it is perhaps at borders, themselves, where we are deeply challenged to reflect upon our relationship to and responsibilities in a global society which continues to both open and close its gates.



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