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Conclusion

Traditional histories of the U.S.–Mexico borderlands have tended to assume that frontier residents had clear national loyalties since inception: Americans were Americans since 1776, and Mexicans were Mexicans since 1821. And the two peoples fought over control of large areas of North America during the first half of the nineteenth century. The scholarship on the Mexican–American War has lent support to such an interpretive shortcut. The war has been portrayed as pitting one fully constituted nation against another, one civilizational project against another, and one people against another (with some indigenous auxiliaries thrown in on each side for good measure). This is hardly surprising. Given that the Mexican–American War became a crucial milepost for both the American and the Mexican national projects, it has been made to conform to clear-cut sides for didactic purposes. In the process, the early histories of places like Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California have been reduced to mere antecedents, small skirmishes of the larger national confrontation.

Here I have followed a different tack. Instead of assuming preexisting or fully formed identities, I posit that nations had to be constructed where they hardly existed, and thus I have focused on the contradictory forces swirling around the peoples of the frontier and how they impinged on their loyalties and sense of collective selves. This approach reveals not only an enormously rich, ambiguous, and changing landscape of identities, but it also points to a few specific conclusions that I hope will contribute to move forward the discussion of the history of the U.S.–Mexico borderlands beyond simplistic, billiard-ball-like clashes between nations and ethnicities.

First, the cases of Texas and New Mexico point to the urgent need – borrowing a phrase from Theda Skocpol et al. – to "bring the Mexican State back in[to]" the history of the U.S.–Mexico borderlands. As noted in Chapter 2, the histories of places like Texas and New Mexico – with some exceptions – tend to downplay the Mexican context, giving short shrift to the Mexican institutional arrangement and glossing over the crucial connections

between frontier provinces and the rest of Mexico. There are many reasons for this state of affairs. The seductive notion of frontier, a liminal space beyond the pale of governmental control, already implies the absence of such institutional control and has naturally influenced the thinking of frontier scholars. The overwhelmingly Anglo-American sources – used to write the history of the U.S.–Mexican borderlands, especially in the past, are naturally less attuned to the Mexican context. Yet another reason is the enormous influence of the Boltonian school, with its emphasis on Spanish colonial institutions like missions and presidios – institutions that had entered a period of rapid decline even before 1821. All of this has contributed to the impression of institutional decay during the Mexican period.

Yet, a close examination of the political histories of Texas and New Mexico under Mexico shows a completely different reality. Although Mexico lacked a fully formed state at this time, the civil administration, the military, and the Church worked actively to fashion vast and parallel patronage networks all attempting to bind the frontier firmly to the rest of the nation and promote a sense of Mexicanness. In Texas, for example, the mechanism for disposing of vacant lands produced an impressive administrative apparatus linking dispersed frontier communities to the state capital in Saltillo and all the way to Mexico City. Similarly, a priestly network tied various New Mexican communities to the ecclesiastical hierarchy leading to Durango and Mexico City. These enormous chains of command that involved local, regional, and national power holders were able to influence the loyalties of frontier peoples by offering tangible economic or political resources. Public speech, rituals, and symbols also played roles in spreading such influence. Much of the evidence offered in this book points to the conclusion that the Mexican era was a period of fruitful political exploration when colonial institutions were adapted to new circumstances and new administrative networks were created from scratch. This is very much in keeping with recent findings in other regions of early Mexico attesting to the vitality of its institutional development and how it anchored the lives of its early citizens. Similar work carried out on frontier communities is beginning to restore the Mexican institutional context to its proper place, making the tales that we tell about frontier peoples more credible and human.[1]

Second, at the same time that we bring more clearly into focus Mexico's political and cultural institutions, it is important to appreciate the protracted center–periphery tensions that existed even before the arrival of foreign-born indigenous groups and Anglo-American colonists. The most contentious aspect of the Mexican government's attempt to build the nation at the frontier was the relationship between the center and the provinces. Texans and New Mexicans, along with the rest of the country, splintered into several factions

[1] For specific citations, refer to the historiographical discussion in the introduction, especially footnotes 7, 12, and 13.

over the issue of the degree to which the national government should be involved in local and state affairs. This tension between municipal and state authorities at one level, and between state and national officials at another, was fought out on several fronts, from elections of officials to the regulation of the economy and the organization of the military.

In its most basic form, the split between centralists and frontier federalists acquired a clear national dimension, as the center worried about territorial disintegration of the country and branded radical federalists operating in peripheral areas as separatists. According to reports filed by Mexican local and regional military authorities, all of Mexico's frontiers were rife with rebellions that merited the label of "secessionist" or "independentist" at this time. A brief rundown of such movements includes the following: in Coahuila and Texas the Fredonia Rebellion of 1826–7, the disturbances of 1830–2, and the Texas Rebellion of 1835–6; in the Texas–Tamaulipas border, the rebellion seeking to establish the Republic of the Rio Grande in 1838–40, and the rebellion supported by New Orleans adventurers seeking to create the Republic of the Sierra Madre in 1848–9; in New Mexico, the Chimayó Rebellion of 1837–8; in Alta California, the separatist movement of 1841–4; in Baja California, the plan to achieve the annexation of that territory to the United States in 1852; in Tabasco, the secessionist movement of 1846; in Yucatán, the de facto separation of 1841, and the petition for annexation to the United States in 1846, and so on.[2]

All of these movements bespeak of bitter and protracted power struggles between a determined center and its wayward peripheries. As we contemplate this rich tableaux of rebellions, we must bear in mind that these movements went far beyond the mere banality or incompetence of Mexico's early political and military leaders (a megalomaniac and histrionic General Santa Anna is a recurrent figure in the borderlands literature). Whatever else

[2] A very impressive list of secessionist movements can be compiled from the AHSDN, files 1289, 1351, 1573, 1625, 1654, 1659, 1885, 2273, 2900, 3007, 3142, microfilm edition at the Bancroft Library. These *expedientes* bear titles such as "Documentación relativa al movimiento separatista de la Alta California, encabezado por José Antonio Carrillo, Juan Bandini, William Hinckley, Pio Pico, Santiago Arguello, José María Echandía y José María Padrés," "Expedición organizada en la isla de Gatos, con aventureros contratados en New Orleans, EUA para invadir el puerto de Tampico, Tamaulipas y proclamar la separación de los estados fronterizos," or "Comunicaciones del Ministerio de Relaciones al de Guerra y Marina, dando cuenta del movimiento rebelde en Matamoros, Tamaulipas, y Broconsoilla para formar la República de la Sierra Madre." It goes without saying that the actual scope and aims of each of these movements need to be assessed carefully. For instance, Josefina Z. Vázquez has argued that the Republic of the Río Grande was in fact a creation of the Texas press rather than a real political movement in northeastern Mexico. Vázquez, "La supuesta República del Río Grande," *Historia Mexicana* 36:1 (Jul–Sep 1986), 49–80. In contrast, Leslie A. Jones Wagner more recently has found sufficient evidence to argue for the existence of the Republic of the Río Grande. Wagner, "Disputed Territory: Río Grande/Río Bravo Borderlands, 1838–1840," M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Arlington, 1998, 1. The point to bear in mind is that, given the precedents of Texas and Yucatán, these frontier movements opposing the Federation could conceivably escalate into full-blown secessionism.

these struggles may have been about, they erupted over real issues of spatial distribution of power and longstanding federal–state rivalries. Indeed, as already noted, sectional disputes were not only endemic to Mexico but also to the United States, as both national projects were headed for destruction in this period. Fully acknowledging and exploring the nature and depth of these core–periphery tensions is especially crucial for the story of how Mexico's Far North became the American Southwest, as such tensions constituted the backdrop for such events as the Texas Revolution, the Chimayó Rebellion, and the Mexican–American War. The arrival of foreign-born indigenous groups and Anglo-American colonists to these Mexican provinces exacerbated and changed the dynamics of an *already existing* sectional dispute. The Texas Revolution of 1835–6, for example, would be unthinkable without an understanding of the bitter conflict between the State of Coahuila and Texas and the supreme government that had been brewing at least since 1834. Similar tensions were obvious in New Mexico in the years leading up to the Chimayó Rebellion. Without reference to these protracted core–periphery confrontations, frontier episodes like those described in this book become implausible stories in which a handful of foreign-born individuals were able to wrest entire provinces from Mexico's control, and Mexican and indigenous actors are depicted as mere spectators as their lands are being taken away.

Third, this book seeks to move beyond simplistic notions of American expansionism and Manifest Destiny, and instead tries to examine how specifically American power – with its many facets – affected frontier peoples. As noted in the introduction and elsewhere in the book, vague notions of expansionism and Manifest Destiny are bandied about in much of the frontier literature to describe everything from the psychology of early Americans, to the policies pursued by the United States government, to the relations between different ethnic groups; such notions are even posited to justify territorial acquisitions at the expense of other nations. No one denies that American expansionism existed, but this amorphous American "mood" or "mindset" needs to be dissected if it is to retain some interpretive power.

Here I argue that in the beginning, American expansionism did not materialize at the Mexican frontier as a force of naked conquest. It did not start as a great conspiracy directed from Washington, D.C., and carried out by a succession of scheming presidents, diplomats, and on down to the lowly colonists, all with a clear vision of how things would turn out in the end.[3]

[3] Having studied the Texas case in great detail, Andreas V. Reichstein reached the same conclusion:

> ... the idea of Manifest Destiny was only one part of the evolution of Texas; on account of its religious-philosophical content, it was applied like a hastily donned veil that developed into a second skin at an explanation for their deeds (Reichstein, *Rise of the Lone Star*, 202).

For a taste of the grand conspiracy approach, see José Fuentes Mares, *Poinsett, historia de una gran intriga* (Mexico City: Ediciones Océano, 1977).

Instead, expansionism worked in far more interesting, devious, and unexpected ways. Initially, the inhabitants of Mexico's Far North came in contact with American expansionism in the guise of a powerful economic and cultural phenomenon that proceeded to alter their livelihoods and loyalties. The economy of Mexico's northern frontier changed dramatically in the aftermath of Mexico's independence from Spain as a result of liberalization policies pursued by the early Mexican governments. As frontier inhabitants began participating in a market economy largely dependent on the United States, they started making personal and collective choices that, while seemingly inconsequential at first, would acquire great significance in the end. In the course of the Mexican period, this process deepened, as Texas and New Mexico fell largely within the orbit of the United States economy, and therefore native elites in these provinces saw their fortunes increasingly tied to the continuation of economic relations with the United States that revolved around commerce and land. Such economic integration provided the medium in which crosscultural alliances were forged and loyalties and national attachments were debated. To be sure, the ultimate fate of Mexico's entire frontier was decided in a war. Direct military intervention sealed the outcome. But the scope of America's territorial acquisition had already been foreshadowed in previous decades, as the rise of a market economy had given rise to influential Anglo-American communities across Mexico's Far North and had realigned the interests of other frontier residents, making them dependent on the United States.

Finally, beyond addressing aspects of the history of the United States–Mexico borderlands, this book seeks to contribute to the fast-growing scholarship on borders and identities. This scholarship departs from the notion that ethnic/national identities do not derive from simple impositions from the center on peripheral areas and groups, but instead that this process is better described as two-way exchanges, as frontier peoples appropriate and bring the nation to the frontier to further their own local interests.[4] Furthermore, this scholarship's literature emphasizes that frontier identities are far from marginal to the overall emergence of national and nationalist projects but constitute an integral element of this process.[5]

The existing corpus of frontier/identity studies has already provided a rough sketch of commonalities as well as variation through space and time. For a thousand years or so, European Christian society has expanded outward in all directions, venturing beyond its original heartland roughly coinciding with the contours of the Carolingian Empire.[6] This millennium of

[4] See Sahlins, *Boundaries*, 267–76.

[5] For recent comparative work on this field, see Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, eds., *Border Identities: Nation and Sate at International Frontiers* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[6] Muldoon, *Identity on the Medieval Irish Frontier*, xii, 13–14.

relentless European expansion (with occasional retrenchments, of course) has given rise to numerous frontiers in the most diverse settings and has brought into contact multifarious peoples. Scholars working on European frontiers during the medieval and early-modern period have stressed the centrality of Christianity, a shared religious culture, as an anchor of European identity and as a key determinant in their relations with peoples beyond the Mediterranean/Christian world. For instance, James Muldoon's work on the medieval Irish frontier makes clear that European Christians classified peoples in their immediate surroundings as "degenerates," "half-breeds," and "middle nations," depending on their level of Christianity and acceptance of European standards of civility that included living in settled agricultural communities, possessing a written language, engaging in commercial activities, and having other cultural traits associated with European/Christian culture.[7]

The consolidation of nation-states beginning in the seventeenth century marked a new plateau in the frontier experience. Modern nations emerged only when centralized states were strong enough to launch a process of institutional and cultural integration that resulted in higher levels of effective control of national frontiers than had been previously possible. Peter Sahlins's insightful study of the Spanish–French frontier along the Pyrenees from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries describes the frontier experience in the modern era, highlighting that although boundaries may have been arbitrary state impositions at first, frontier peoples in certain instances found it convenient to uphold and maintain such demarcations in order to further their own interests.[8] Regardless of specific frontier circumstances, the activism of nation-states in asserting their territorial claims led to the intensification of frontier clashes and negotiation of identities not only in Europe but in frontiers around the world, as independent nations in Latin America, Asia, and Africa sought to uphold, resist, or change old colonial boundaries.

At the same time that nation-states consolidated their power, the market economy has spread since the eighteenth century. Many frontier studies reveal the paramount importance of economic transactions in shaping borders and identities. Paul Nugent's recent work on the Ghana-Togo frontier, for instance, shows the extent to which the exploitation of cocoa has affected the mental geography of Togolanders and how smuggling – and state efforts to stop this practice – has given meaning and concreteness to the border.[9] Similarly, Kim M. Gruenwald has shown the inextricable linkage between the commercial development of the Ohio valley since the late-eighteenth

[7] Ibid., passim.

[8] Sahlins, *Boundaries*, passim.

[9] Nugent, *Smugglers, Secessionists and Loyal Citizens on the Ghana-Togo Frontier*, esp. ch. 2, 3.

century and peoples' understandings of the region and its role in the larger national context.[10]

The U.S.–Mexican borderlands exemplify a particular variation of the frontier experience in the modern era. The consolidation of state power and the intensification of capitalism occurred at different rates in different parts of the world, thus giving rise to encounters in which frontier residents had widely different levels of access to state and market resources. Indeed, some of the most contentious borderlands arise precisely in situations when there are disjunctures between states and markets. In our own hemisphere, the prodigious growth of the economy of the United States in the nineteenth century cast a long shadow over large swaths of the continent precisely at the time of the birth of numerous Latin American nations. Cuba's painful status as a U.S. semiprotectorate because of America's overwhelming economic presence is the best-known example of this phenomenon (at the turn of the century, the New Orleans press openly and unabashedly encouraged planters to invest in Cuba: "... little by little the whole island of Cuba is passing into the hands of U.S. citizens, which is the simplest and safest way to obtain annexation to the United States"[11]). The situation was not much different in other Caribbean and Central American nations. In South America, state and market tensions are obvious in places like the Atacama Desert, where Bolivia's claims were thwarted by Chile's expanding nitrate industry. Even in Europe, so neatly parceled out among nations, we can find areas like Alsace-Lorraine formally administered by one nation (France) but economically integrated into another one (Germany). My point is that disjunctures between states and markets – and the type of frontier that this situation generates – are hardly aberrations but all-too-common historical occurrences.

In the case of Mexico and the United States, this disjuncture has an enduring interest, as the economic asymmetry between the two countries has only widened in the intervening two hundred years. There is no question that today's Mexican nation-state is incomparably more successful than its early-nineteenth-century predecessor. The Mexican state is now firmly entrenched, its frontiers are secure, and its political stability is proverbial. Moreover, the true measure of Mexico's success as a nation does not reside in effective exercise of power alone, but on the acceptance of this authority and identity by an overwhelming majority of citizens. One can find innumerable traces of popular nationalism in school textbooks, civic celebrations, football matches, children's bedtime stories, ceramics, and in virtually every other place. By all measures, Mexican identity is profoundly rooted among the many peoples living between the Rio Suchiate in the south and the Rio Grande in the north, and in many communities in the United States. And yet, in spite of the

[10] Gruenwald, *River of Enterprise*, passim.

[11] *Louisiana Planter*, cited in Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973, 1997), 71.

stunning success of this identity, the pull of the American economy and its impact on immigration patterns, fashions, language, political ideology, and many other realms has never been stronger than today. And this pull affects both the millions of Mexicans who spend part or all of their lives in the United States and those who stay in Mexico. This situation does not necessarily lead to antagonism and open confrontation as in the past. Unlike the early-nineteenth century, when matters of territorial integrity and national survival were at stake, today Mexico's (and the United States') vital national interests appear to be safe, and thus state officials and many citizens – somewhat reminiscent of Japan's Meiji Restoration – can afford to cast themselves as open to the world. I am the first to admit that we humans are capable of living happily with contradictory beliefs, mutually incompatible dreams, and schizophrenic impulses. As Pierre Bordieau has insightfully observed, there's nothing peculiar about flagrant inconsistencies of the mind.[12] American Founding Fathers were known to display an inordinate fondness for British tea sets, Soviet leaders were seduced by tsarist paraphernalia, and patriotic Mexicans have been prone to wearing San Francisco 49ers sweatshirts at Independence Day celebrations. But below the patina of such outward – and often unintended – displays of cosmopolitanism, a certain tug of war persists, and in North America it harks back to the time when Mexicans and Americans first came to terms with one another.

[12] Pierre Bordieau, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), passim.