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## Guest editorial

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### **Postborder cities, postborder world: the rise of Bajalta California**

In the first half of 2004, Mexican emigrants worldwide sent \$7.9 billion back to their homeland. These remittances represent the second most important source of income in Mexico, after oil and ahead of tourism. A large proportion of these Mexican workers reside in California; many are undocumented. The USA–Mexico economy can be characterized as a vast flow of people northward, matched by a flow of dollars back to the south. Integration at the borderlands is proceeding so quickly that many observers characterize it as a peaceful *reconquista*—a reappropriation of those lands lost by Mexico to the USA after the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The USA–Mexico borderlands are today among the fastest-growing regions in both countries, exhibiting radical change in economic, sociocultural, political, and demographic life. In the words of Carlos Monsiváis, *la frontera portátil* is everywhere (Monsiváis, 2003): from Mexico City to Los Angeles; from São Paulo to New York City. The portable border is becoming a fundamental feature of urban life across the globe.

### **New ways of building cities**

The majority of the world's population is now urbanized, a trend that is likely to intensify for the foreseeable future. There is little doubt that the global order of the 21st century will be determined principally by a relatively small number of megacities. It is therefore important to understand the principal dynamics generating the production of cities worldwide. Five tendencies are especially important:

- *World city*: the emergence of a relatively few centers of command and control in a globalizing economy, referred to as 'city-regions', which are functionally integrated with national as well as international urban hierarchies.
- *Cybercity*: the challenges of the information age and the rise of a 'network society', especially the emergence of geographically well-defined 'technopoles' of growth that contradict the much-touted capacity of connectivity to supplant the constraints of place.
- *Dual city*: an increasing social polarization between the rich and poor, between nations, between the powerful and the powerless, between different ethnic, racial, and religious groupings, between genders, and between those who are digitally connected and those who are not.
- *Hybrid city*: the fragmentation and reconstitution of material and cognitive life inspired by global and regional migrations, including the collapse of conventional identities and communities, the emergence of new concepts of citizenship, and the rise of cultural hybridities and spaces.
- *Sustainable city*: the emergence of a worldwide consciousness about the need to protect and conserve natural resources, and to manage urban growth in order to ensure the future viability of the global habitat by minimizing the ecological impact of human activities and settlements.

These five tendencies—globalization, network society, polarization, hybridization, and sustainability—are not always synchronized and their synergies can be deeply contradictory. Perhaps most importantly, there is a clear dichotomy between an economy that is globalizing and a politics that is becoming increasingly localized—witness the rise of powerful claims for local autonomy in the forms of liberation movements, revitalized local nationalisms, and secession struggles. As economic globalization

proceeds apace, the structures and institutions of nation-states and international law are increasingly ill-equipped to deal with the challenge of globalism. This may be especially important because politics and war in the 21st century are supposedly less about the military and economic might of nations, and more focused on the so-called clash of civilizations.

### **New ways of seeing cities**

As the new world order emerges, politicians and intellectuals, business people and ordinary citizens, struggle to understand what exactly is happening in our lives. The 'information revolution' has set in motion forces that are likely to have consequences as far-reaching as the industrial and agricultural revolutions of centuries past: transnational companies can relocate production facilities and destroy local or national economies almost overnight; terrorism and 'preemptive' wars undermine national security for all peoples, including the perpetrators; the global AIDS pandemic somehow fails to interest those with the means to address it; and the world stumbles towards environmental catastrophe.

These trends are so new and so complex that people have difficulty understanding them. We invent terms such as 'postindustrial' to suggest the emergence of economies based on service industries rather than on manufacturing industries. Another favored 'post' word is 'postcolonial', used to describe cities and societies across the world that are now freeing themselves of the control of earlier colonial masters. The popularity of 'post' terms demonstrates that, although we may be convinced that we have left behind previous eras, we have as yet only slight knowledge of where we are heading. One of our contributions to the search for understanding is the concept of the 'postborder' society (Dear and Leclerc, 2003). If there is any reason to be optimistic about our collective urban futures, the notion of the postborder may be it.

### **Bajalta California: rise of a postborder city**

At the southwest corner of the United States of America, where the peninsula of Mexico's Baja California attaches to the continental mainland, there lies a megacity of over 22 million people. The international boundary between the USA and Mexico is scarcely visible, as it is smothered by the cities of Tijuana and San Diego, which themselves merge imperceptibly with Tecate and Rosarito, plus the sprawling metropolis of Los Angeles. Occasionally, lofty mountain ranges interrupt the carpet of urban development, but the vast megacity has vaulted over these ranges into nearby deserts. In places, irrigation has miraculously converted these arid plains into fertile agricultural land, which sometimes succeeds in slowing the inexorable outward spread of the megacity.

This enormous agglomeration of people and activities has no name. It is usually referred to simply by its constituent pieces: Tijuana, Rosarito, Tecate, Ensenada; San Diego, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, the Inland Empire, Palm Springs, and so on. But we call this agglomeration 'Bajalta California', because it is a single, integrated city-region that just happens to straddle an international boundary. In 1848 these contested territories on the shores of the Pacific Ocean were sparsely settled. But today these same landscapes are host to an emergent world city of international and global significance. How did so much change in such a short time?

There is no historical precedent for what has happened to Bajalta California. It took many centuries of continuous urban growth to produce New York, Paris, and London, but it required less than 100 years in Bajalta to create a megacity of equivalent dimensions. Cultural production in present-day Bajalta California is a consequence of the tensions between Mexico and the USA. According to Néstor García Canclini (1996), these tensions produce a 'hybridization' that encompasses both dislocation

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(associated with migration) and deterritorialization (linked with globalization). As a consequence, the emblematic condition of border environments is the production of *culturas híbridas* (hybrid cultures). Canclini describes Tijuana as a major laboratory of postmodernity. Homi Bhaba (1994) used the term ‘third space’ to define the liminal (in-between) places between cultures. Guillermo Gomez-Peña (quoted in Rouse, 1996, page 248) refers to the Tijuana–San Diego frontier as the gap between two worlds—a metaphor for many things, including a literal crossing, a spiritual passage, a place of struggle and transgression. Debra Castillo (1995) captures the essence of a border consciousness, in which the potential for crossing, or not crossing, to the other side is a constant presence in border dwellers’ lives.

In an attempt to explain what is happening in this world of hybridity, we have begun to consider Baja California as a *postborder city*. In formal terms, a postborder city may be defined as a collection of two or more urban areas that exist in relatively close geographical proximity and are bisected by an international boundary, yet they function as a single, integrated urban agglomeration. Such urban complexes may exist at a variety of scales, including the metropolitan and local; they may also be highly asymmetric in terms of settlement size on either side of the border. A *postborder ecology* is a physical or mental manifestation of the merging of cultural, economic, social, and political traditions, frequently manifest as activities or behaviors of striking originality, including the import of consumption practices, the formation of cultural hybridities, and linguistic adaptations. Taken together, the combination of mental perceptions and material practices define what may be termed a *postborder condition*, a consciousness that is characteristic of places where elements of different worlds coexist and mutate. Such a condition is presently transforming lives in neighborhoods on both sides of the border, creating a blurred macrofrontier that extends way beyond the boundary line itself. This can be seen in many forthright and nuanced instances:

- As the number of Latinos in the USA has grown (there are currently more than 35 million), *quinceañera* (coming-of-age) celebrations have become more commercial and more mainstream. Wal-Mart now stocks quinceañera gowns in 200 stores in 30 states. The gatherings are spreading outside the Catholic Latino community, and guests increasingly consist of multiethnic lineups.
- In California, where one third of the population identified as Hispanic in the 2002 census, Hispanics increasingly define what it means to be Californian. In July 2001, for the first time since the 1850s, a majority of newborns were Hispanic, and more than two thirds of those babies were being born in Southern California. (In 1975 Hispanic births accounted for only one quarter of the state’s total.) Hispanic population growth is now being driven by natural increase, not by immigration. A new ‘California identity’ is foreseen by many.
- Perhaps one of the most important examples of hybridity is the case of the rise of ‘Spanglish’, a mongrel language somewhere between Spanish and English. From Texas to California it is possible to find radio and TV stations that fluidly mix both languages—what linguists call a ‘code switching’, in which words and phrases from one language are dropped into sentences in the other language. Part of the reason for Spanglish is the need to communicate—forms of Spanglish have certainly been present since English speakers arrived in California—but present-day Spanglish is also practiced for fun, for the sheer pleasure of playing with language. It is moving out of Latino neighborhoods, and used as a marketing device for consumer products.
- In 2001, approximately 286 million people, and more than 97 million vehicles, crossed the border between Mexico and the USA legally. The busiest crossing points were San Ysidro–Tijuana, Calexico–Mexicali, El Paso–Ciudad Juárez,

Laredo–Nuevo Laredo, and Hidalgo (McAllen)–Reynosa. That same year, the US Customs Service collected about \$22 billion in duties and fees. No one knows how many illegal immigrants are coming to the United States to stay permanently. Official estimates put the figure around 350 000 people per year, but anywhere between 400 000 and 500 000 seems more probable.

- The border has always been a wild place, and outlaw activities persist as part of everyday life along the borderlands. The murder of hundreds of young women in Ciudad Juárez is now a cause of international concern. Journalists investigating drug cartels are murdered on the streets of Tijuana. A federal investigation is currently examining the links between the Chihuahua police force and Juárez drug smugglers. And, in the USA, the nation's two most dangerous national parks are Organ Pipe Cactus National Movement (AZ) and Big Bend National Park (TX). Both are plagued by drug smuggling and illegal immigration. And women and girls who are forced into prostitution in the USA have often been abducted in Eastern Europe, transported to Mexico, and then smuggled into the USA as sex slaves. In Phoenix, homicide rates are at the highest they have ever been, and police say that almost two thirds of the city's crime is related to smuggling and kidnapping.
- After NAFTA, California's trade with Mexico and Canada boomed, jumping from a \$12 billion value in 1993 to \$26 billion by 2002. In 1999 Mexico overtook Japan as the state's leading export market, accounting for more than 17% of the state's exports. The growing integration of the two economies is best revealed in the data on remittances sent back to Mexico by migrant workers. In the first six months of 2004, Mexican emigrants (many in California) sent a record \$7.9 billion to Mexico, a rate 26% higher than in the previous year. The average transaction is about \$400, and is destined for household budgets across Mexico for spending on personal consumption items. Remittances represent a new kind of integration among nations. Financial analysts estimate that 175 million people worldwide send more than \$150 billion annually back to their home countries. One fifth of Mexican adults are receiving remittances from relatives in the USA. In this sense, migrant workers are players in the era of globalization, part of transnational networks operating beyond traditional borders, markets, and committees.
- In McAllen (TX) as many as 80% of new businesses are owned by Mexicans, a reversal of the proportions from five years earlier. McAllen now draws a greater share of Mexican spending than any other US city, affecting everything from retail sales to home purchases and vacations. Most of the influx of dollars into McAllen comes from the booming city of Monterey, only two hours away by high-speed toll road. So common is this trip that a new Spanish verb has been created—'mcallenear', literally 'to do McAllen'.
- In 1996 Mexico amended its constitution to allow citizens to cast ballots from outside their voting precincts; four years later, President Vicente Fox promised to extend the franchise to Mexican nationals in the USA, a potential 11 million new voters. Although Fox regards these migrants as 'national heroes' because of the remittances they send to Mexico, there is still no absentee vote system in place in Mexico. In 2003, under pressure from migrants who sent \$2 million per day to Zacatecas, State Governor Ricardo Monreal signed a constitutional reform ending residency requirements for elected offices to Mexicans in the USA born of Zacatecas parents. In addition, two seats in the legislature were set aside for migrants only.

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**Urban futures: the frontera portátil and culturas híbridas**

In Baja California we may glimpse a future where borders may no longer be consequential, where hybridities are erasing cultural differences of all kinds. This is a large claim, perhaps impossible to prove, at least for the present. And yet, after two years of intensive travel along the USA – Mexico borderlands, we believe that the claim is defensible. To see this, imagine what would happen if you moved the boundary line ten or twenty miles to the north of its present location. Very few people's lives would be altered. Indeed, for many, *la línea* already has been erased. In the daily border crossings of hundreds of thousands of people who live, work, and play in the transnational milieu, we may already be glimpsing a postborder world that represents the principal hope for our collective urban future.

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