

Early years of a border town: a micro-revisionism of Mexicali and his spatial and institutional stability, 1903-1915

Primeros años de un poblado fronterizo: microrrevisionismo de Mexicali y su estabilidad espacial e institucional, 1903-1915

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to review the history of the emergence of Mexicali from evidence not contemplated by conventional explanations. According to this, its first 12 years of existence (between 1903 and 1915) were analyzed to establish a revisionism on a microscopic scale and thus observe how rebellions and continuous criminal attacks never broke the stability of the town, in the sense of maintaining a balance between private property and national sovereignty. Based on theoretical-methodological perspectives of microhistory, new institutionalism and the everyday forms of state formation, were also reviewed the main hydraulic and transport infrastructure works that irreversibly transformed the region are also reviewed, as well as the strengthening of the military authorities in the midst of the Mexican revolution. To conclude, border areas are ideal spaces for observing national processes.

Keywords: border towns, Mexican revolution, local authorities, prostitution, railroads.

Resumen

El artículo tiene por propósito revisar la historia del surgimiento de Mexicali a partir de evidencia no contemplada por explicaciones convencionales. Se analizaron sus primeros 12 años de existencia, entre 1903 y 1915, para establecer un revisionismo en escala microscópica y así observar de qué manera rebeliones y continuos atentados criminales jamás rompieron la estabilidad del poblado, en el sentido de mantenerse un equilibrio entre la propiedad privada y la soberanía nacional. Con base en perspectivas teórico-metodológicas de tipo microhistóricas, neoinstitucionales y de la formación cotidiana del Estado, se revisaron las principales obras de infraestructura hidráulica y de transportes que

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transformaron irreversiblemente la región, así como también se explica el fortalecimiento de las autoridades militares en plena revolución mexicana. En conclusión, las áreas fronterizas constituyen espacios idóneos para observar procesos nacionales.

Palabras clave: poblados fronterizos, revolución mexicana, autoridades locales, prostitución, ferrocarriles.

Introduction

Antonio Padilla and David Piñera, two pioneers of historical research in Baja California, reflected on something significant for this article: “Mexicali emerged as a consequence of an economic impulse initiated before 1903—a date that defined the foundation of the present city—and manifested physically in the successive subdivisions of the land (...)” (Padilla Corona & Piñera Ramírez, 1991, p. 149).¹ By the time Mexicali and its valley began to develop, the imaginary line between Mexico and the United States was a well-established fact. Some of the first entrepreneurs and inhabitants of the hamlet maintained the stability of the dividing line between the two countries despite the gradually established institutions’ porosity and premature nature. Beyond how the border towns took shape, this text shows their jurisdictional framework. For example, based on a request from the political chief of the Northern District of Baja California in the first months of 1912 to precisely identify the area under his command, Colonel Manuel Gordillo Escudero presented a report to the authorities of both countries with the intention that the Mexican territory bordering the Imperial Valley (in California) should be recognized by its own name and nomenclature. It should no longer be called the “Mexican Imperial Valley” (Gordillo, 1912a, pp. 11-12).

The letter sent by Gordillo Escudero in June 1912 to the Secretary of the Interior, Jesús Flores Magón, constitutes a meaning postulated here as another birth certificate of the city and the homonymous agricultural valley, different from 1903. Fundamentally, Gordillo Escudero’s request constituted the recognition of a new type of municipality in the Mexican republic that openly and originally implied foreign influence, in this case from the United States. The hamlet and the valley would bear the name of Mexicali, “for although it is true that [the latter] geographically does not form [a] valley in its entirety”, in a practical and simple way, the denomination could be adjusted to this geographic feature (Gordillo, 1912b, pp. 26-27). In a certain sense, the area in question was so far from the highlands—specifically, the Anahuac valley—that such imprecision was unimportant. What worried Gordillo Escudero was that, in the future, the hamlet would require a land registry. So he called for order, especially with the understanding of the federal authorities in mind. He named the municipal subsection after its head town; the hamlet ended up designating an agricultural valley and a future municipality. In any case, the toponym Mexicali arose from the acronym Mexico + California, that is, from the historical intertwining of both countries (Verdugo, 2014, pp. 34-35).

¹ In the summer of 1968, a symposium was organized to determine the “birth certificate” of Mexicali. It was discussed for months until it was concluded, after the oldest document with the place name was presented, that this date corresponded to March 14, 1903 (see details in Walther, 1991, pp. 122-129).

The theoretical and methodological approach proposed in this article involves a type of observation conditioned by its dimension and scale. The term *micro-revisionism* implies, of course, a regional and a micro-historical type of analysis. Italian historians laid the foundations for this choice of historical method, which, as a scientific instrument for the production of a true discourse about the past, is closer to anthropology. Nonetheless, it does not cease to look for sources that renew familiar objects of study that do not contemplate *a priori* a scale of observation. “The use of micro-analysis must be understood”—Jacques Revel (2015) noted—“as the expression of a taking a distance from the commonly accepted model” of certain historical facts (Revel, 2015, p. 24). The first time the concept of *micro-revisionism* was used was in 2009 by the writer Giampaolo Pansa, who used it to reinterpret communist militancy during Mussolini’s regime in Italy (Tabet, 2015, p. 218).

Regarding the period considered here, it should be mentioned that although the body of the text is limited to observations of the early twentieth century, the review of the context goes beyond a chronological and monothematic exploration to observe how political and economic regulations were able to take place in a peripheral context during the transformation of the nation state. Accordingly, this study adheres to a particular way of interpreting this political problem: from a classic study of Marxist historical sociology, the state is seen as a masked reality since certain actors mask economic interests (Abrams, 1988). For the same reason, and seeing the state entity as a practice rather than as an ideological apparatus, the historical-economic discussion of Douglass C. North, which conceives “formal and informal” functions as the everyday setting of political institutions, has been consulted (1990, p. 4).

This article comprises six sections: the first and last are dedicated to the political bosses Celso Vega (1903-1911) and Esteban Cantú (1915-1920), respectively, as they were the formal authorities of the Northern District, whose military control had some fissures explored in the fifth section on local corruption linked to prostitution. The second, third, and fourth sections, concerning judicial institutions, foreign ranches, and railway works, consist of an exploration linked to selected topics of neoinstitutionalism, thus providing a novel character to this micro perspective.

The six sections are organized according to their own chronology but linked to the regional space studied here, which, following the premises of microhistory, neoinstitutional, and everyday analysis of the state, seek to “constitute the plurality of contexts that are necessary for the understanding of the observed behaviors” (Revel, 2015, p. 32). Specifically, they seek to understand the federal government institutions, consular agencies, and U.S. authorities involved in developing the border town.

Usually, historical research consists of reviewing many files, some of which are better classified than others. Thus, from the date of production of the documents contained therein to their labeling as part of the archives, there will be data contained in the file that may have gone unnoticed (if the labels are not conspicuous). Most of the historical sources for this article come from the photocopies of the Fondo Gobernación of the Archivo General de la Nación available at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California. This documentary repository “is mainly political”, especially regarding “local issues” (Grijalva & Calvillo, 1998, p. 122). Due to the minuscule and insignificant

nature of the events described, the sources used here were ignored by researchers and chroniclers such as Walther (1991), Verdugo (2014), Sánchez Ogás (2015), Samaniego (2008), or Schantz (2011).

The emergence of Mexicali is narrated as a case of micro-revisionism to understand the subsequent attachment of the town and the agricultural valley of the same name to the Mexican state in the sense that its incipient institutions reflected this interplay of border interests. The history contained herein covers a transition between the Porfirio Díaz regime and the Mexican Revolution, which enriches the analysis to describe a certain stability of political institutions.

Celso Vega: order and progress

The deployment of property rights and hydraulic investments in the Colorado delta initially manifested itself with a certain immateriality. In May 1903, the Irrigation and Land Company of Baja California (CITBC, *Compañía de Irrigación y Terrenos de la Baja California*) admitted, although its investors did not reside in Mexico, its responsibility for the radical changes in the border area. First, the CITBC obstructed the dirt road between the agricultural valley and the hamlet of Mexicali (Vizcarra, 1903). The company's canalization and irrigation works wreaked havoc in the small settlements, and although they had presidential authorization, the Justice of the peace, Manuel Vizcarra, felt that the works exclusively benefited the United States. The project carried out on one of the old Colorado riverbeds to convey the waters up the Mexican territory toward the Imperial Valley was a controversial event (Vizcarra, 1903). Although among the individuals directly harmed were indigenous groups, for the authorities in the Northern District of Baja California the problem resided in the multiplicity of adventurers and entrepreneurs on both sides of the border (Castillo-Muñoz, 2017, pp. 24-30).

One individual who personified the policy of order and progress of the Porfiriato was Colonel Celso Vega (1904a, pp. 1-3), whose plan for the hamlet of Mexicali was to acquire a suitable location to construct the first government building, without concern for the presence of the native Indians. He was more interested in the CITBC granting the government of the Northern District some land to materialize the presence of the Mexican authorities in the Colorado delta. From the above context, the only thing that the journalists and historians—who decided in 1968 the date of birth of Mexicali—did not contemplate was the precision with which Celso Vega defined the points from which Mexicali would emerge. Inhabitants and employees of the federal government were to settle their lots 300 meters below the dividing line (Vega, 1904b, p. 4). What did he want that space for? As will be seen below, the 300-meter interstice created by Vega would serve several functions, but mainly to mark the boundaries and materialize two nations whose powers and economic capitals were literally far away.

At that time, Mexicali was not the most populated locality in the Northern District (Samaniego, 2008, pp. 75-81). Vega (1903) reported to the authorities in Mexico City that 550 people inhabited the hamlet. Mining and other economic activities that gravitated around the port of Ensenada concentrated the universe of inhabitants and the

working population. With a district population of just under 2 000 people, news spread quickly: the only thing that slowed it down was the distances between scattered settlements. Naturally, certain topics circulated faster than others; for example, the extradition of a Mexican prisoner from the United States to the Northern District was a topic of the local press and casual conversation (Andrade, 1905). However, the fact that U.S. citizens were bringing firearms into Mexican territory, even for sport hunting, reflected without a doubt the prevailing tensions.² Celso Vega resolved the controversy in favor of the hunters by allowing them to fire their guns only on their property—not near or inside the hamlet. The context did not require anyone to flaunt their political power, as informal arrangements between agencies often sufficed (Mariscal, 1905, pp. 1-3).

The 300-meter space below the border that the political leader Celso Vega implemented responded to a much older and more complex policy. In a letter sent to the Secretaría de Gobernación in August 1907, Vega stated that the request of Secretary Ramón Corral had been carried out. Corral intended to homogenize the width and nomenclature of the streets along the dividing line from Chihuahua to Baja California, passing through the towns of Sonora. By following the boundary markers delineating and defining the contours of the boundary line, established during the last third of the 19th century by the surveyor and astronomer Joaquín Blanco (see Morrissey, 2018, pp. 42-43), Corral and Vega worked to give uniformity to the borders of the homeland. The spatial layout of Nogales was a perfect example of what the federal government intended (Corral, 1907b).

However, Mexicali was not Calexico's twin, as were Laredo-Nuevo Laredo on the Texas-Tamaulipas border or the two Nogales on the Sonora-Arizona border. Initially, the area that mattered was that common space dedicated to agriculture and cattle raising, which, as stated in the introduction, some called the Imperial Valley and others the Mexican Imperial Valley. Commercial activities were almost nonexistent at that first point. Moreover, the land still lacked a pricing system, as only those lands through which the Colorado water flowed in the direction of the United States were valuable. As a reminder of the 1905 and 1906 floods, the flooding of the customs office in April 1910 was an opportunity to point out the culpability of the engineers and employees of the California Development Company (the U.S. firm behind the CITBC), who, on a trial-and-error basis, manipulated the flow of water in canals, intakes, and drains as part of the formation of the Imperial Valley irrigation district. In any case, in the eyes of the Mexicans living on the border with the United States, it was a negligent act (Vega, 1910a, pp. 5-6). A classic study of Mexicali's urban history emphasized the presence of both irrigation companies as the town's origin (Padilla Corona, 1998, pp. 209-256).

The establishment of the Colorado River Land Company (CRLC) meant the arrival of countless capitalists and investors who speculated on the value of land not yet irrigated, all to benefit the Imperial Valley and southern California (Samaniego López, 2015). In a letter sent in March 1907 by the representative of the CRLC, Ismael Pizarro, to Secretary Corral, it was stated that the roads previously used by machinery for

² Although the documentation consulted does not mention it, this introduction of guns involved Harrison Gray Otis, owner of the *Los Angeles Times* and major investor, along with his son-in-law Harry Chandler; both of whom were responsible for changes in land ownership in the Colorado Delta (Kim, 2019, p. 41).

the construction of irrigation works allowed the intrusion of land invaders. The U.S. company's reaction, although it was registered in Mexico, was to fence its properties (Pizarro, 1907, pp. 4-7).

The processes described above had never been seen before in the Colorado Delta, so it was logical that various levels of controversy would be generated in the Northern District government. Corral's response was to demarcate the federal government and refer the matter to local law enforcement. For the same reason, the secretary "did not consider that it is within his authority to review the acts of the authority referred to and therefore abstains from taking cognizance of the matter" (Corral, 1907a, pp. 7-8). In this regard, it seemed that Celso Vega was obsessed with ensuring only the maintenance of the 300-meter strip between the village and the dividing line. What else could an authority with limited powers do?

Beyond the issue of land and water, the other resource that was the subject of attempted government regulation and intervention was the men and women who made the border their living space, especially those from Asia, with or without economic ties to Los Angeles or San Francisco, California (Duncan, 1994, pp. 630-634; Kim, 2019, p. 162). Rather than speaking of the Chinese community—or rather Chinese-American—as the pioneer of Mexicali, its commercial (in urban settings) or agricultural (in the rural areas of the valley) entrepreneurship is highlighted (Sánchez Ogás, 2021). The frontier regions defined specific roles for men and women in the decisive years of their formation: in a very simple sexual distribution of labor, railroads and irrigation for men, and prostitution for women. At the risk of sounding dichotomous, this distribution did not correspond to all economic actors and forces, reflecting the border's porosity and tolerance. However, this article is not a labor history; the remaining sections will simply attempt to demonstrate how ordinary people without any function, public office, or capital to invest in livestock, agriculture, or transportation infrastructure, survived Mexicali's early years.

Despite having a specific identity, local government functions had little administrative clarity. In contrast, the international border was a clear economic and spatial reality. In June 1908, Cristino Fonseca invaded CITBC lands, and as a result of these actions, jurisdictional problems arose between the sub-prefecture and the Court of First Instance. Although the sub-prefect of Mexicali supported Fonseca, the judge did not. Colonel Vega then had to mediate between them (Vega, 1908). A few years later, Fonseca became an important cattle rancher whose problems with the local authorities were something of the past. The question is, how did the court so quickly acquire such a significant position in such a short time? Undoubtedly, economic processes triggered these changes.

The Court of First Instance

For many reasons, Mexicali became the capital of the Northern District of Baja California. Some authors have claimed that the decision to change from Ensenada to Mexicali in 1915 was due to the clairvoyance of Colonel Esteban Cantú. Others explained it as

part of the internal struggles within the municipality of Ensenada, but as will be seen in the following lines, a problematic field of action accelerated the change from the capital of the port of Ensenada to the border town. In May 1908, the *Calexico Chronicle* (“May remove capital to Mexicali”, 1908) published a note about the imminent removal of the capital. The source cited by the newspaper was another of greater circulation and prestige: the *Los Angeles Times*, an editorial body that reported on the interests behind the movement. If any geopolitical interpretation could be attempted, it would be that the CRLC was a combination of Californian capitalist interests that used Mexican institutions to choose the best location to establish the seat of government (Ruiz Muñoz, 2017, p. 71). Beyond the business ties of Harrison Gray Otis and Harry Chandler to the *Los Angeles Times* and the CRLC, several small and medium entrepreneurs settled in the area dominated by Otis and Chandler. These entrepreneurs often mentioned how expensive it was to travel from the Imperial Valley to Ensenada to attend legal proceedings. The *Calexico Chronicle* reported the following:

Many problems could be avoided [...] The Mexican authorities are not inclined to favor the project [of moving the capital to Mexicali]. However, it has been said that because of the additional costs which the move would involve, very soon the Inter-California Railroad Company and the California Mexico Land and Cattle Company will offer the government of Baja California to jointly pay all deficits in court expenses after the [current] fees and fines have been collected, if the Court of First Instance is established in Mexicali. (“May remove capital to Mexicali”, 1908)

Other promoters of the court were Mexican diplomatic and consular agents in California. Therefore, it is not surprising that the proposal to move the capital of the Northern District was in line with national legislation. A letter from the Secretary of Justice to Celso Vega revealed that the proposal was not rejected and that Porfirio Díaz even endorsed the court’s creation. However, by the fall of 1908, it had become obvious that the Northern District government would not exercise any control over the court as the federation took over its operation. Following the official creation of the Magistrate Court, the *Calexico Chronicle* reported the news. It is unknown which was the journalistic source for what happened in Porfirio Díaz’s office, or if it was just an act of imagination, but the newspaper mentioned that the head of state asked where Mexicali was. “The situation was clarified to President Díaz by showing him several maps; he acceded to [Justino Fernández Mondoño’s] request, and action was immediately taken” (“Court of First Instance”, 1908).

The newspaper exaggerated and editorialized the implications of the opening of the court, mentioning that “Mexican citizens on this side of the line and [U.S.] citizens in Mexicali are on equal footing” (“Court of First Instance”, 1908), which was not true. But neither was it true that the new court would serve to defend property rights in the Colorado Delta. Subsequent events would prove the usefulness of this judicial institution in maintaining public order in Mexicali. Although the imaginary line between the two countries was an objective reality, it did not prevent acts of violence. 1911 is the

most convincing example of how the Northern District was also affected by the episodes of war that would soon occur in the rest of the country. In the months following the creation of the Court of First Instance, some incidents occurred that would be confirmed by the armed intervention of 1911: Mexicali was a refuge for fugitives.

On November 3, 1909, a Calexico police officer fired his gun numerous times at René Grivel, a French immigrant residing in Mexicali who was involved in counterfeiting U.S. dollar bills in Calexico. As the chase and shootout occurred, some Mexicali residents watched what happened, including Grivel's hiding place in the hamlet. The national troops who observed the commotion reported it to the political chief Vega in Ensenada and to the sub-prefecture of Mexicali (Vega, 1909). By the 1910s, the issue had reached Los Angeles and Mexico City as individuals began to cross the imaginary line to avoid criminal responsibility in Mexico or the United States. Harrison Gray Otis, the principal investor in CRLC, and Otis B. Tout (1931), editor of the *Calexico Chronicle*, opined very negatively about the Northern District in some articles that were soon read as a possible attempt to annex the peninsula. De la Sierra (1910, pp. 3-6), who played an important role in the pacification of the region after the armed intervention of Magonistas, radical liberals, anarchists and syndicalists in 1911,³ denied that Otis and Tout wanted to annex the peninsula.

Some of the explanations about prostitution in the Northern District (some of which will be reviewed) suggest that the order imposed there by the federal government tolerated more corruption than was commonly believed. It is very curious that after the military intervention of 1911, the number of cases of federal authorities involved in legal matters increased. The Court of First Instance was part of this trend. An example of this is the dismissal of Judge Trinidad Meza y Salinas in February 1914. As his replacement wrote, Trinidad had "been prosecuted in Calexico for the outrageous crime [of procuring]" (Vázquez, 1914b, p. 4). Who was the victim? It remains unknown.

One of the most famous cases of the decade was that of Javier Velasco, an immigration office inspector who took imprisoned prostitutes based on the 1918 legislation. Before going to prison, Velasco used to have free sex with the prostitutes. When questioned about this situation, he mentioned many authority figures involved in sexual exploitation (Ruiz Muñoz, 2017, pp. 129-142).

The outrage against prostitutes was an effect of the institutional strength of frontier life that encouraged representatives of the revolutionary government to obtain additional earnings over and above their public service positions. However, if such a situation was easy to accomplish for people with law degrees and connections in Mexico City, it was truly difficult for Mexican workers to obtain employment. Not all the ranches in the valley employed Mexican laborers because some entrepreneurs previously hired their own salaried workers. The next section will go back again to the

³ Micro-revisionism as a perspective on certain events and regions may relegate some aspects in order to explore others. One of them is the rebellion that altered the life of the Northern District between January and July 1911. The heterogeneity of the forces of Ricardo Flores Magón, the Mexican Liberal Party, and its sympathizers enriches the interpretation of such events in political terms. However, in the author's opinion, all possible explanations and sources have already been exhaustively analyzed by Samaniego, 2008.

time when the Colorado delta became an agricultural valley. The presence of the first railroads in the region can explain these changes. This is one of the factors, together with cotton cultivation, that produced the greatest changes in the United States and that neoinstitutional analysis has identified (North, 1990, p. 25).

Inter-Californias Railroad Company

The construction of the Inter-Californias railroad represented an irreversible geographic alteration of the Colorado Delta. This was the conclusion arrived at after several years of research by two historians writing at the intersection of global studies and regional history, Álvarez de la Torre (2014) and Santiago (2011). At the time the first tie was installed in the area now identified as Mexicali, engineers and workers had a single goal in mind: that the railroad would be “the line that will take us to Yuma”, in the sense that the Mexican territory itself was conceived as a blank space open to all possibilities (Gordillo, 2011, pp. 122-123). In one of his most famous reports, Colonel Manuel Gordillo did not know exactly what the economic arrangements were between the U.S. entrepreneurs to project the Inter-Californias from Mexicali to Los Algodones. He understood that the Southern Pacific Railroad Company was involved in the project in one way or another, but he still suspected that Guillermo Andrade was intimately linked to the new means of transportation (Gordillo, 2011, p. 138). Unlike the CITBC's hydraulic works, the Inter-Californias was a kind of projectile that made the mobility and establishment of capital in the region possible. Understandably, Gordillo was unaware of this, as it was only recently revealed that the California Development Company had purchased some shares in Inter-Californias (Samaniego, 2015, p. 63).

During the first quarter of 1905, the *Calexico Chronicle* spread rumors that the construction of the railroad would result in the annexation of the Northern District to the United States. With these perceptions and ideas circulating among the authorities in Mexico City and Los Angeles, it is only natural that they would interpret the events of 1911 so drastically. However, the work done by contractors Shattuck and Desmond was, in a sense, an example of the stability of national identities: as soon as the company's machinery was brought into Mexico, the Mexican consuls in Mexicali and Calexico made sure that the U.S. citizens crossing were actually employees of the railroad. Had any workers of Asian origin infiltrated, the consular reaction would have been one of alarm, although after a short time some Chinese of U.S. origin and with the resources to invest began to participate in agriculture (Duncan, 1994). What was supposed to be a cause for joy and gratitude due to the modernity represented by the railroads would soon, very soon, become a threat. This is reflected in the January 1905 letter that the vice-consul wrote to the Secretary of Foreign Affairs:

Mexicali has a very small police force and scarce resources to prevent troublesome incidents that frequently occur among workers. I believe it prudent [...] to provide the indispensable means of security to the town and thus be able to protect ourselves from the pretexts that our neighbors seek to exploit. (Montes, 1905, p. 5)

In Mexicali there was no disorder until 1911. Thanks to the reports of Colonel Celso Vega, it is known that the railroad began operating in 1909. With just under 86 kilometers of track running through the valley and employing 18 American operators who ran the machinery and 16 workers, including workers, railroad guards, loaders, and all kinds of laborers of Mexican origin, the company began to offer freight and passenger service. A monthly average of 245 passengers completed their journey from Calexico to various points in what soon became known as the Mexicali Valley. The arrival of the railroad favored the rebellion, which was made up of a group of Yuman Indians, Magonistas, and internationalists who generated a panorama of social and economic activities, and in January 1911, took over the customs offices of Los Algodones and Mexicali in January 1911 (Vega, 1910b; Samaniego López, 2006, p. 71).

The Northern District was an isolated place, but there was a certain political complexity linked to liberal and nationalist traditions. From this point of view, it is correct to say that the Mexicali Valley existed as a land connection between Mexico and the United States and, because the border was a stable reality, people crossed it to get to safety or enter risky environments. Such was the case of Pandurang Khankhoje, a leftist intellectual from India who traveled all the way to the Northern District in search of “revolution” (Kent, 2020, p. 388). With such an idea in mind, the inhabitants of the Imperial Valley and others in the county used to watch the rebellion from points closer to the dividing line.

The pacification of the Northern District was a very brief process, but it never ceased to be a spectacle in itself. The most violent episodes of the Mexican Revolution occurred far from Baja California, but after the 1911 rebellion, between three and four political bosses circulated with the purpose of controlling the region. The latter only occurred when Esteban Cantú assumed regional power from 1915 to 1920. So, in that sense, the legacy of Celso Vega’s government was to establish the pristine infrastructure works of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, in recent years much of the new historiography has established that its function, in reality, was to implement the tourism of vice and “risky pleasures” (Schantz, 2011). Prostitution and especially some cases of white slavery were phenomena that provided a new vision of the early years of Mexicali’s existence. Perhaps it was due to the distance between the border town and Ensenada, but in any case, Vega contributed to the criminal activities by being too far away and visiting it too seldom. His failure to combat such crimes was equivalent, in a sense, to consenting to them.

Two American ranches

In the early 1910s and as an example of its premature nature, Mexicali proved to be a place of some national and international significance. It is not the purpose of this article to reflect on the most controversial event in the history of Baja California, the factional origins, ideological motivations, or the intentions of the so-called Magonista rebellion. Enough words have been written trying to clarify a historical fact tainted by interpretations that force scholars to take a position on an issue of supreme impor-

tance: the Mexican Revolution and the influence of the liberal and anarchist politics of the Flores Magón brothers. By initiating their strategies in the Colorado Delta and moving in the direction of Ensenada and Tijuana in their attempt to modify the situation of the Northern District in terms of capitalist investments, the events of 1911 had political repercussions in the sense that the authorities in Mexico City and Washington were very aware of a possible annexation of the peninsula to the American Union.

In the historiography relating to 1911, some of the central figures orchestrated the different phases of the armed intervention in the Northern District. Two of them, the Sinaloa liberal José María Leyva and the Canadian mining leader Stanley Williams, disputed the movement's leadership due to the aforementioned repercussions and the simultaneous growing importance of Francisco I. Madero.

As already mentioned, this article is not interested in defining the ideological profile or the political agenda of the rebels or the federal army, which would be defeated in less than three years by Álvaro Obregón and the northwestern army. Instead, the microhistorical objective is to explain the emergence of Mexicali and in this respect the testimonies of the ranchers affected by the rebel mobilization are an invaluable historical source that indirectly refers to the process of rural-urban integration in the area. For example, the historiography of the battle of La Mesa—which took place between three and six kilometers outside the hamlet of Mexicali during the first half of April 1911—mentions, without specifying further coordinates or location clues, how the ranches of Leroy Lee Little and L. E. Sinclair were the setting where federal troops under Miguel Mayol opened fire on 86 men accompanying Stanley Williams. The source that confirms the above is the correspondence of Consul Enrique de la Sierra (1910), whose perspective is one of the few historiographic sources about the events of 1911 in the Northern District (De Fabela, 1966, pp. 195-211).

The story of how the ranchers Little and Sinclair arrived in Mexicali helps to explain how the Imperial Valley in California became a pole of attraction represented by the land newly opened to irrigation. Both ranchers were recognized very early in local history as some of the pioneers of the economic success in Calexico, Heber, Brawley, Calipatria, and other Southern California localities.

Hailing from Arizona, Leroy Lee Little arrived in Calexico in December 1902 searching for an irrigation site and ended up finding it when he crossed the border. While in the early 1920s the Little Ranch planted up to 200 acres of cotton, during its early years it experienced flooding and wheat and barley crop failures (Tout, 1931, pp. 79-80). However, on the eve of the Federal pacification of the region, none of this could compare to Little's discomfort after his encounter with Stanley Williams and the rebel troops. He was on his way to Calexico when his neighbor at the Sinclair ranch warned him of the shooting that was taking place on his land. As he watched the clouds of dust and heard the explosions, he thought of nothing but the risk to his family. After rescuing his loved ones, Little lost control of his ranch for three months, during which time the rebels occupied it and set up camp. They even improvised a casino with a gambling table.

Sinclair came to the Imperial Valley in 1908 and in partnership with the farmer Sidney McHarg acquired 297 hectares of CRLC land. Like his neighbor Little, he abandoned his ranch during the revolt and only at its conclusion did he return to farming his land (Tout, 1931, p. 83). Although L. E. Sinclair died in 1928, some of his children continued to work his lands in the Imperial Valley and Mexicali Valley, to the extent

that during Franklin D. Roosevelt's first presidential term (1933-1937) the famous photographer Dorothy Lange recorded the Sinclair family's agricultural plots in Calipatria as part of the New Deal propaganda.

The Northern District was pacified between June and July 1911. A report that consular authorities circulated about both ranchers mentioned that Little's neighbor, "Mr. Sinclair has a property a few miles southwest of Mexicali and that in mid-April he complained of having had to hand over to the [rebels] some domestic animals, a gun, and other objects" (Vega, 1911).

Nine years after the 1911 rebellion, Carlos Osten, a Mexican employee of the Little Ranch, filed a complaint to the authorities of the Northern District intending to bring it to the attention of the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation. A tree trunk fell on Osten's leg while clearing some of the lands in Mexican territory. They were Little's lands. This was not the first time that one of his workers suffered a mishap in the middle of the working day, as in 1908 one of them died after having consumed adulterated alcohol while in the middle of the clearing work ("More sudden deaths here", 1908). Twelve years later, upon being refused compensation, the affected worker explained the wealthy status of Little, the rancher who employed him: "he was the richest man in land in the region, in addition to receiving assistance from the authorities as well as from self-interested lawyers" (Osten, 1920).

In the 1930s and 1940s, the entire area occupied by both ranches underwent a transition in property rights: In January 1937, in a revolutionary action known as the Assault on the Land, agrarian groups invaded entire portions of the Colorado River Land Company's estates, so that President Lázaro Cárdenas had no choice but to go along with them, and assume that from then on he would have to apply the current legislation on expropriations and the creation of collective ejidos. With such events, the Sinclair and Little lands became a part of the Orizaba ejido. President Cárdenas "believed that populating the rural landscape of Baja California with peasants would resolve pressing issues such as foreign ownership", and then agricultural workers like Osten could aspire to the benefits of agrarian reform (Castillo-Muñoz, 2017, p. 74). The establishment of the collective ejidos modified the geography of the Mexicali Valley just as the Inter-Californias had previously done. None of the 1911 rebels imagined that the expropriation of the CRLC would occur almost 30 years later.

Corruption at the border

One of the issues confirming that Mexicali was a place where the imaginary line between two countries was a stable reality is that of deportations. While in other border areas Mexican workers were being deported from the United States, in the Northern District the opposite occurred: Americans were deported to their country of origin. This peculiarity was the result of the maturity of the federal regime when the border town emerged. In the recent historiography on the policy orchestrated by local authorities who made use of sanitary legislation for the deportation of American prostitutes (see in addition to Ruiz Muñoz, 2017, the works of Christensen, 2013 and Schantz, 2012), it can be perceived how the continuity of a relatively strong legal and institutional framework produced some contradictions in the whole border phenomenon.

The *Imperial Valley Press*, another Imperial Valley newspaper, mentioned something useful for understanding Mexicali: the town had “a certain peculiar characteristic”, one that was not linked to the appearance of alcohol dealers and traffickers or bullfighters trying to promote the tourist industry but rather “thieves, drunkards, and renegades from the u.s. territory, mixed with a select group of members of the oldest profession in the world. The only Mexican thing about Mexicali was a few government officials”, especially those who embodied the heritage of Celso Vega (“The quaintness of Mexicali”, 1910).

On December 31, 1913, Pablo Flores and Encarnación Sánchez traveled from Los Angeles to Mexicali. They were looking for Encarnación’s daughter, Amelia Sánchez, who had been kidnapped. So they crossed into Mexico to find her, but they never imagined what would happen to them. Upon hearing of their presence in Mexicali, Subprefect Colonel Agustín Llaguno immediately ordered the execution of both visitors. The Mexican consul in Calexico informed the Secretary of the Interior about the incident. The local militia arrested Pablo and Encarnación and took them six kilometers south of the hamlet to dispose of them. However, they failed in the case of Pablo, who received only a gunshot wound to the chest and managed to escape to Calexico to inform the authorities. During the following months, Mexicali remained in the news (Vázquez, 1914b).

In February 1914, Amelia Sánchez was arrested in Mexicali as a favor to federal officials investigating the murder of Encarnación Sánchez and the wounding of Pablo Flores. Felizardo Simmons, “Amelia’s spouse”, accompanied her at the time of the arrest. She was questioned by u.s. officials and declared that she was unaware of her father’s death. “The young woman also admitted to having shared her income with Simmons”; in other words: he was her pimp (“Sánchez girl and Slaver captured”, 1914). The Justice Department agent was assigned to investigate whether Simmons was involved in the death of Amelia’s father, so he was “a few steps away from untangling the web of guilt”. Meanwhile, the immigration official and the judge of First Instance (brother-in-law of then president Victoriano Huerta) were imprisoned in the Imperial Valley, as they were involved in the homicide. The case entertained the *Calexico Chronicle’s* readership, who speculated about its international implications. The fetishization of stability consists in believing that every event, no matter how minuscule, is an attack on the natural order.

The Department of Justice investigation concluded that the Mexicali authorities were complicit in Encarnación Sánchez’s death because rumors began circulating shortly beforehand that implicated the victims as possible spies “from the revolutionary center in Los Angeles, California, [who] spied on the military operations that were being conducted there” (“Charges on theft against Mexicans drops when u.s. will not prosecute case”, 1914). Due to the presence of Mexican workers in Southern California, Vázquez (2016) explained how Los Angeles was conceived as a “revolutionary center” with enormous influence over areas like Mexicali. When Colonel Esteban Cantú began his campaign in the Northern District as head of military operations, another sign of regional stability became apparent: the prerogative to disseminate (or not) an international scandal that occurred on the u.s.-Mexico border (“Charges on theft against Mexicans drops when u.s. will not prosecute case”, 1914).

The historiography has shown how the case of the Sánchez family, with a dead father and a prostituted orphan, was due to “collusion between political authority

and the prostitution business”. However, this corruption resulted from federal and local legislation concerning prostitution that the political boss Gordillo Escudero established between 1912 and 1913 (Schantz, 2012, p. 108). The prostitution legislation began to be used to proscribe certain types of prostitution but allow others, especially circumstantial prostitution in tolerance zones in both Tijuana and Mexicali. The paradox lay in a body of law that accelerated an epidemic of trafficking of white women, North Americans for that matter, across the border. Amelia was only the tip of the iceberg.

Catherine Christensen has described how in the 1920s the League of Nations reported the trafficking of women taking place in Tijuana or Mexicali. U.S. legislation on white slavery allowed Simmons and Amelia to be captured as fugitives from the Mexican criminal justice system. Both were arrested in Bisbee, Arizona (Christensen, 2013, p. 223). Although Christensen’s work is a reflection on gender politics and discourses about the feminine, she shows how “the international border functioned as a critical site for the regulation of sexual and identity norms”, and one of the most revealing phenomena of the *sui generis* character of the border was that there were prostitutes from the United States who ended up having a deep knowledge of Mexican law. One of them said that “the occupation of Mexicali by the Magonista rebels created an abnormal state that forced everyone to obey the law” (Christensen, 2013, p. 228).

Nevertheless, prostitution did not disappear from the economy of the Northern District. In the following decade, the businesses that profited from prostitution thrived under new legal provisions. Such provisions were the legacy of Gordillo Escudero who, while he defined the name of the Mexicali valley, also facilitated the participation of an extensive business network run by the so-called “Barons of the Border (*Barones de la Frontera*)”, who controlled gambling, prostitution and the production of intoxicating beverages (Gómez Estrada, 2002, p. 71-111). Prior to Abelardo L. Rodríguez’s just under six years of government—between 1923 and 1929—, “Cantú was responsible for making the border attractions [in the Northern District] safe again”, wrote one scholar, “allowing for the subsequent resurgence of middle-class tourism”, although this does not mean that the violence and scandals had ended (Schantz, 2012, p. 112).

“We are the only representation of our homeland”

A historical description of Mexicali’s early years would be incomplete without a micro-review of Esteban Cantú. Although 1915 marks the beginning of a new global era with the start of the First World War and the rise to power of Venustiano Carranza in Mexico, a five-year period of great dynamism began in the Northern District and Mexicali. It is true that the previous four years outlined the historical course, especially after Cantú began to develop his border leadership. His first 48 hours as military chief in the Colorado delta, for example, between June 24 and 26, 1911, showed how the rebellion had shattered much of the dynamics of the hamlet. The local power vacuum encouraged the formation of many military groupings attempting to regain order in response to future attacks. The first half of that year revealed the exceptional vigilance prevailing in the area.

Driven by pressure from the CRLC, Celso Vega and his troops from the district headquarters fought the rebels on February 15, but after being wounded, he returned

to Ensenada. According to the investigation that led to this article, he never returned to Mexicali. One of his last government acts was to allow the U.S. consortium to create its own “police”. During the first days of June 1911, the rebel contingent increased its armed forces, so a federal detachment under the command of Gordillo Escudero arrived in the Northern District from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua (Sánchez Ogás, 2015). Cantú was in that military column: he never imagined the radical change his life would undergo. He was a native of Nuevo Leon trained in a Michoacan military school, and it would only take him a 50-minute ride on horseback through the hamlet to see the defensive tactics against Rodolfo Gallego and his gang, as well as the gunmen in the service of Harrison Gray Otis and the CRLC (Cantú, 1958). A burly man in his 40s, Gallego was from Los Angeles and was credited with having captured 385 rebels. Cantú had 50 soldiers at his disposal, with which he could undertake and negotiate a disarmament campaign with Gallego. Following this, Walker K. Bowker, the military chief of the CRLC, attacked Cantú’s troops, caring little that they were official representatives of the federal government: the attack was evaded by retreating beyond the three hundred meters previously specified by Vega. Subsequently, agrarian agents and organizations in the Mexicali valley gave Bowker the nickname “vampire of Mexicans” (Samaniego, 2008, p. 106).

Shortly after that, in a conversation with a U.S. militia captain, Cantú gave one of his famous speeches. The Mexican federal government simply did not understand how a foreign country allowed “individuals of the vilest criminality to gather on the border, entrench themselves, and hide on the international line to fire their weapons against a neighboring town”. Thus, with the support of the U.S. military, Cantú frustrated Bowker’s attempt and “provoked a punitive expedition to Baja California” (Cantú, 1958, p. 592). Finally, the differences were ironed out inside the CRLC building when Gordillo Escudero and Cantú’s troops met with the Californian entrepreneurs. They had dinner and then smoked tobacco. Subsequently, Cantú left the building to talk with the Imperial Valley and Mexicali Valley residents. Much of the stability of the Northern District during the most violent years of the Mexican Revolution was because the troops under Cantú’s command were satisfied to receive a salary in cash, and this prevented major uprisings (Marcial Campos, 2016). That was why he told the residents and soldiers: “I want you to realize that from now on, we are the only representation of our homeland” (Cantú, 1958, p. 594).

Beginning in the second half of 1911 and during the following three years, Cantú observed the arrival of half a dozen political bosses. As a lover of geography, during this time he traveled extensively in the Northern District, beyond the towns of Mexicali, Tijuana, or Ensenada. As part of his resistance to Victoriano Huerta and the political boss Francisco Vázquez (1914a and 1914b), he had decided to return with his family to Monterrey, Nuevo León. However, the residents of Mexicali detained him. After Carranza and Villa overthrew Huerta, Vázquez had no choice but to return to Mexico City and hand over political leadership to the villista Balthazar Avilés. During the few months that the latter governed, the authorities of the Northern District and the emerging business class cultivated friendly relations to the point of resuming plans to change the capital of the Northern District from Ensenada to Mexicali. Avilés declared to the press that he was going to “promote agricultural development in Baja California and protect all the American ranchers who crossed into Mexico to work the land”, and also reform casinos and dance halls (“Mexicali new capital of Baja California says Governor Balthazar Avilés”, 1914). At the time of these statements, the Amelia and Encarnación Sánchez scandal was very recent.

Cantú was not interested in modifying the plans to remove the capital from the Northern District. His support for such a decision was based on simple political economy: the Mexicali valley was a promising area that would generate large revenues “for the national treasury, as well as for the district government”, which would henceforth have to monitor “the dividing line” more closely (Cantú, 1958, p. 614). At this point, the meaning of stability consisted in the fact that more changes could occur in the political and military factions in conflict (due to the Mexican Revolution), but as long as the economic structure continued to function, the border towns would continue their activities. Dorothy P. Kerig’s classic book about the CRLC is a good example of how the Cantú government’s capitalist promotion focused on foreign landlords and subtenants, including “the use of imported Chinese laborers” (Kerig, 2001, p. 138). The tax revenues generated by the land occupation and cotton production allowed the local government to consolidate itself.

The historiographic and regional consensus on Cantú’s abilities as a public administrator will not be discussed (see Rodríguez, 2006). Beyond political or fiscal matters, he was an individual who knew how to keep out of (or free himself from) controversies and quarrels between political bosses and revolutionary leaders. Despite economic arrangements with entrepreneurs in Southern California, relating to the smuggling of Asian laborers or the legal production and consumption of opium (González Félix, 2000, p. 8), Cantú always strove to legitimize his position: it was too redolent of the 19th century. Regardless of how abusive his tax collection was,⁴ between February 1915 and May 1917 it remained in the eye of the storm because of Harry Chandler, one of the investors behind the CRLC. He was arrested in Los Angeles for violating neutrality laws between Mexico and the United States. As part of the plots, there were echoes of the incompatibility between the political boss Balthazar Avilés and Cantú, who “effectively controlled the region that soon became the economic center of the [Northern District], Avilés being in Ensenada, [still] the district capital, was at a disadvantage”. Furthermore, upon resigning as political boss, he moved to California to receive ammunition and men at his command, apparently with funding from Chandler (Blaisdell, 1966, pp. 386-387). In the end, Chandler was not sent to prison because some of these accusations came from politicians belonging to the labor movement; but after Pancho Villa attacked Columbus, New Mexico, and the actual punitive expedition, the jury dismissed the case.

The local and national press followed the so-called “border intrigue” until it was over, especially the *Los Angeles Times* editorials, of course pleading the innocence of Chandler, Otis, and Bowker. Beyond proving whether they intended to annex the Northern District to the U.S., the underlying message was that the presence of Southern California businesses and entrepreneurs represented an act of pure and simple U.S. imperialism. Both detractors and defenders of the CRLC agreed on this point. Based on recent historiography, there is little doubt that the CRLC’s economic and urban development doctrine exemplifies the imperialistic thinking of the Los Angeles elites. Historian Jessica Kim stated the following after studying Paul Kramer’s work on U.S. intervention in the Philippines: “Imperialism is about the organization and control of space, as well as networks that are not territorial in nature”, and a historical figure as sharp as Cantú knew exactly how to take advantage of this (Kim, 2019, p. 228).

⁴ This was one of the main suspicions of Carranza’s government with respect to Cantú; so, doubting his administrative abilities, they requested an exhaustive study of his government. See Rolland, 1993.

Conclusions

This *micro-revisionist* analysis began by asking how it is possible to discover new clues about the origins of a border town like Mexicali. In a professional historical context of chroniclers and amateurs in which seemingly all the answers have been asked and answered, the conceptual distinction between rural and urban can shed new light on the agricultural valley and the homonymous locality, especially by increasing knowledge of two geographic entities that coexisted within the same coordinates. As an example of everyday history, the microscopic scale review complexifies the roles of ordinary people who witnessed the spatial and institutional transformation. Faced with an imperial giant like Southern California, the study of how Mexicali emerged should not ignore that the Baja California peninsula was never amputated from the national territory. In the twilight of his regime, Porfirio Díaz inquired about the location of Mexicali: this is historical evidence of an unprecedented nature. Similarly, this article demonstrated that, despite his infamy of encouraging procuring, Gordillo Escudero was a staunch defender of the Mexicali Valley: he sought to differentiate it from the Imperial Valley to the end. Both microhistorical findings indicate, in their own way, the Mexican sovereignty that covered the border town.

Micro-revisionism is a type of history “from below” that is less interested in the anecdotal dimension of human experience and more focused on situating itself on a scale of observation that is accessible to the understanding of realities whose explanations have been taken for granted for decades. The French historian Jacques Revel mentioned that the purpose of microanalysis is to make visible “the social strategies developed by the different actors according to their position and their respective individual, family, or group resources” (Revel, 2015, p. 26). On the other hand, by abstracting the subjective dimension, a comparative perspective of Mexicali with another agricultural valley in northwestern Mexico would make it possible to expand and explain the meaning of the border experience.

The history of the Mayo Valley in Sonora⁵ is in some ways similar to that of Mexicali and the Colorado Delta. The material changes allow, more than the discursive ones, a different valuation of the historical condition of border areas, whether or not they are contiguous to an international border with a country prone to territorial expansion. What matters in any case is that there are colonization plans involved in the process of territorial occupation. Ignacio Almada Bay, a specialist in Sonoran history and the family background of the revolutionary elite, wrote the following about the Mayo Valley:

The expansion in the region of the role of the nation state with the objectives of pacifying, populating, communicating, and homogenizing, with the national army and armed neighbors playing a crucial role, the extension of communications—especially the railroad—and the spread of hydraulic technology [due to] the growth of agricultural land irrigated by canals. (Almada Bay, 2018, p. 197)

The above quote is a brilliant exposition of border development due to its neoinstitutionalist character. With the exception that, unlike the Mayo Valley, the Northern

⁵ See a neoinstitutional interpretation of the Mayo Valley for a period contemporary to that of the Mexicali Valley in Ramírez Zavala (2013).

District had a more heterogeneous population, Mexicali could be conceived with the same characteristics described by Almada: railroad and hydraulic technologies transformed both regions and this can be perceived with or without micro-revisionism. However, it must be established how, according to the rules of the economic game—which neoinstitutionalism is so fond of—there were notable differences between the Mayo Valley and Mexicali: in the case of Sonora, the economic transformation was part of the *Porfiriato*. The Northern District changed notably some time later, to be more precise, during the Mexican Revolution. The heterogeneity of forces and institutions meant that the border did not dissolve in Mexicali; on the contrary, it would end up being reinforced.

At this point in the article, it only remains to follow this argument intuitively. The construction of the nation state inherited from the revolution would find border life as an obstacle to the so-called “Mexicanization of Baja California”: the proliferation of bilingualism and the circulation of the u.s. dollar as part of daily economic exchanges led certain politicians and rulers to interpret the region as contrary to Mexican nationalism. Years later, the federal government opted to stop using this kind of discourse to emphasize a different colonization strategy for the Mexicali Valley.

Despite the archipelago of agricultural colonies, farm fields, and cattle ranches that gravitated around Mexicali, u.s. capitalism and the Northern District government opted to join forces. “The war that broke out in Europe in 1914 was a great stimulus for the u.s. economy of which the Mexicali Valley was an extension” due to the exponential growth of the cotton agro-industry (Kerig, 2001, p. 130). Despite armed conflicts and the possession of multiple hectares of land by individuals linked to the u.s. imperialist project, Mexicali never escaped federal control. This is the neoinstitutional and micro-revisionist stability that this article articulated. This is reflected in the fact that during most of the first half of the 20th century there were governments of military origin in Baja California. From Celso Vega to Esteban Cantú, passing through Manuel Gordillo Escudero and other revolutionary representatives loyal (or not) to the central government, sovereignty was never questioned. From the 1920s onwards, the governments of Sonoran extraction (headed by Abelardo L. Rodríguez) initiated a period of collusion between capitalism and revolution.

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