

Social production of the Chiapas-Guatemala border: the current state of affairs

La producción social de la frontera Chiapas-Guatemala: estado del arte

Enriqueta Lerma^{a*}  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3422-3547>
Perla Mónica Castro Cruz^b  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3082-2227>

^a Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Centro de Investigaciones Multidisciplinarias sobre Chiapas y la Frontera Sur, Mexico, e-mail: elermaro@unam.mx

^b Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, Mexico, e-mail: pmonicastro@gmail.com

Abstract

The objective of the article is to offer a systematized review of the studies carried out on the social production of the southern border. In particular, it is emphasized in the inquiries on the Chiapas-Guatemala section, published since the 1990s. The bibliography presented has in common the inclusion of aspects that allow us to understand the social dynamics in the border territories, beyond the perspective of migratory flows. The need to deepen studies that allow understanding the life of the permanent inhabitants of the southern border is concluded.

Keywords: southern border, Chiapas-Guatemala border, territorial organization, national security, National Guard.

Resumen

El objetivo del artículo es ofrecer una revisión sistematizada de los estudios realizados sobre la producción social de la frontera sur. En especial se enfatiza en las indagaciones sobre el tramo Chiapas-Guatemala, publicadas desde la década de 1990. La bibliografía que se presenta tiene en común el incluir aspectos que permiten comprender la dinámica social en los territorios fronterizos, más allá de la mirada de los flujos migratorios. Se concluye la necesidad de profundizar en estudios que permitan comprender la vida de los habitantes permanentes de la frontera sur.

Palabras clave: frontera sur, frontera Chiapas-Guatemala, ordenamiento territorial, seguridad nacional, Guardia Nacional.

Received on February 16, 2021.

Accepted on October 22, 2021.

Published on November 1, 2021.

* Corresponding author: Enriqueta Lerma. E-mail: elermaro@unam.mx

ORIGINAL ARTICLE LANGUAGE:
SPANISH.



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CITATION: Lerma, E. & Castro Cruz, P. M. (2021). La producción social de la frontera Chiapas-Guatemala: estado del arte [Social production of the Chiapas-Guatemala border: the current state of affairs]. *Estudios Fronterizos*, 22, e080. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2117080>

Introduction

In a study published in 2007, the result of a participatory methodology for the creation of mental maps about Mexico, Alfredo Guerrero (2007) observed that the participants (Mexican students) drew the northern border with the United States as a closed space, defined and loaded with adverse meanings, while the border with Guatemala and Belize appeared nebulous, rural, and open. There was no clarity about its length, shape, or origin in history. There was even less mention of anything related to the International Boundary and Water Commission between Mexico and Guatemala. It could not be otherwise: the border wall was to the north and not to the south in the Mexican mentality. However, this notion of a wall to the north and a southern extension no longer holds. It has been transformed from 2000 to 2020. The idea of a southern border “to be controlled” is more present in people’s minds. News about new mechanisms that seek to curb Central American migration is constant and attracts the gaze of public opinion, especially that of many researchers and students. Therefore, if we were to repeat Alfredo Guerrero’s exercise today, the outline of the southern border would be different and no longer look so friendly.

Some events have been significant in reinforcing borders on a global scale. Among them, the most significant was the attack on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, which led to the implementation of new international security processes. After this event, Mexico was under pressure to end the 20th century and begin the 21st century by intensifying territorial security, on the one hand, to reduce its emigration to the United States and, on the other, to control Central American flows in transit through its territory. However, it was not until the second decade of the 21st century that the objective became evident along the Chiapas-Guatemala border. The discovery was possible thanks to two widely publicized processes. The detection of numerous migrant children traveling alone from the Northern Triangle of Central America to the United States,¹ recorded from 2010 to 2016, and denounced by human rights organizations; and, of recent date, the emerging and unexpected organization of migrant caravans, which entered Mexico through Soconusco, starting in 2018. Both situations have increased interest in the southern border and attracted dozens of researchers and students to this region to strengthen research, especially in migration.

Although migration and border are related topics, in the case of the Chiapas-Guatemala border, research has focused on the former and less on how the border has been produced as a territory with its own characteristics. Thus, the implementation of border control mechanisms in border territory has been little addressed. The research group *La producción de la frontera Chiapas-Guatemala: una aproximación al ordenamiento territorial y a su resignificación*, of a socio-anthropological nature, has focused on the second point, questioning how the territorial organization has been produced on the southern border from 2000 to 2021, based on the security policy and obtaining the opinion of the inhabitants of the region, beyond the point of view of migrants in transit.

¹ The Northern Triangle of Central America is the collective name given to three countries: Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

As part of the research, it was necessary to review specialized bibliographies, federal government plans and programs, international agreements, and reports from non-governmental organizations and civil associations to delve into the current social context of the border and interpret the perception of the local population regarding land use planning and its impact on daily life. Many policies have been proposed, but many plans have also been aborted for various reasons. Aware of this, the interest is to trace which plans and programs impacted the production of a controlled border, especially those that have caused transformations detected by the inhabitants in their daily lives.

Concerning this interest and with the desire to contribute to the understanding of the process, the present account of the current state of affairs, derived from the project, aims to offer clues that will ease the way for sociologists and anthropologists interested in beginning research on the production of the current southern border in the Chiapas-Guatemala section. The text has two parts: the first presents a review of the studies carried out on border issues since the 1990s; the second reviews the research results on the territorial organization and the logic of national security. It mentions the main results published by specialists in the region and refers to certain agreements, plans, and programs that warrant review to deepen the analysis of the implementation of the southern border.

Specialized studies

In the study of the configuration of the southern border, there is a long series of historical studies that cover the pre-Hispanic era, continue to the colonial era, and are discussed in the interstices of border delimitation in the post-independence era. This article does not aim to refer to the complexity of this lengthy process but to restrict itself to specific results, which offer clues to understand recent events that gave rise to the current border configuration.

In order to understand the configuration of the southern Mexican border at the regional level, it is advisable to examine the book edited by Phillippe Bovin (1997), *Las fronteras del Istmo. Fronteras y sociedades entre el sur de México y América Central*, a work that, through the pens of various specialists, helps situate the delimitation of Mexican territory in the Central American and Caribbean context. In this fundamentally geopolitical work, historical data can be found that help understand the formation process of the national borders in the region, the local political aspirations of territorial integration, and the influence of the international political forces in the current configuration. Furthermore, it addresses different demographic, migratory, commercial, cultural, and extractive aspects, which help understand the interconnected complexity of the borders in Central America, of which Chiapas is a part.

Two essential contributions, to be found in the book *Chiapas. Los rumbos de otra historia* (Viqueira & Ruz, 2004), are worth reading to complement a regional overview. The first is an article by Juan Pedro Viqueira, "Chiapas y sus regiones", in which the author, unintentionally, succeeds in characterizing the border regions by proposing a new state division based on social and cultural criteria. Based on linguistic, historical, and cultural data, he identifies, among others, six differentiated regions on the Mexico-Guatemala border: Soconusco; Motozintla (or Mariscal) Region; Grijalva Valley; Plains

of Comitán and Las Margaritas; La Selva Lacandona; and Marqués de Comillas, which is useful for delimiting border areas of study. The second contribution is a set of articles, grouped in the last section of the book, entitled: “La Selva Lacandona”, which presents cultural data and sociological interpretations of how the jungle region, close to the border, developed prior to the uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN) in 1994. Two chapters stand out in this set: “De la sierra a la selva: identidades étnicas y religiosas en la frontera sur” (Hernández Castillo, 2004).

Another essential work of a historical nature is that of Jan de Vos, who, through archival sources, ethnographic research, testimonies, and life stories, demonstrated the complexity of the border. The author situates the regional, national, and international dispute when delimiting it, but always grounded in particular subjects. Although his work is vast, four books and two articles stand out for this article. In thematic order, the first is *Las fronteras de la frontera sur. Reseña de los proyectos de expansión que figuraron la frontera entre México y Centroamérica* (De Vos, 1993). In this book, four historical projects proposed to delimit and implement the border can be succinctly traced: the pre-Hispanic, the English, the Mexican, and the Guatemalan. It presents the intervention of different intentions that led to the current delimitation of the southern border. The configuration of the territorial limits becomes clearer on examining the book *Oro verde. La conquista de la Selva Lacandona por los madereros tabasqueños* (De Vos, 1996), which deals with the disputes between logging companies in Tabasco, Chiapas, and Guatemala, whose struggle influenced how territorial limits were resolved on the ground at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. As a side note concerning this period, it is worth reviewing two texts associated with the delimitation process of the Mexico-Central America border. One is by César Sepúlveda (1958): “Historia y problema de los límites de México: II la frontera sur”, and the second, “La Comisión Mexicana de Límites y la definición de la frontera sur del país”, by Luz M. O. Tamayo (2015). In the latter, the author clarifies the challenges and decisions that the commission had to make to delimit the Mexican territory.

Other recommended works by Jan de Vos are: *Una tierra para sembrar sueños. Historia reciente de la Selva Lacandona 1950-2000* (De Vos, 2002b) and *Viajes al desierto de la soledad. Un retrato hablado de la Selva Lacandona* (De Vos, 2003), which specialize in analyzing excerpts from travelers who knew the Lacandon Jungle and testimonies of actors who inhabited it in the second half of the 19th century and who relate the details of the social dynamics in the region and its relationship with Guatemala. One final text to recommend is, “Las fronteras de la frontera sur. Una visión histórica” (De Vos, 2002a), a classic for understanding the political dimension of this border.

Another outstanding researcher is anthropologist Andrés Fábregas, who, in the early 1980s, led a project on the southern border, attached to the Center for Research and Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology (Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, CIESAS), a pioneer of its kind. Fábregas gave an account of its results in numerous writings; however, the best synthesis is found in “La elaboración del concepto de frontera sur y la fundación del CIESAS-Sureste. 1983-1985”, included in the book *Marcos institucionales de la antropología en Chiapas a finales del segundo milenio* (Fábregas, 2015, pp. 23-60). In this text, he describes studies generated in the context of the project. This information is completed with reviews of previous studies, from which his inquiries were nourished. Among them, he mentions the research by Juan Pohlenz on coffee plantations in Soconusco and their role in the

development of the market economy, which gave rise to migratory circuits among the populations of Los Altos de Chiapas, Soconusco, and Guatemala. Fábregas notes that this point would later be further explored in the context of a project by Mariano Baez and Patricia Ponce in Soconusco.

It is necessary to make a new side note in this same block of studies focused on ethnographic demonstrations of how the coffee economy impacted the formation of the border in Soconusco, for which the study by Andrés Medina (1973), “Notas etnográficas sobre los mames de Chiapas”, is recommended. The author presents the close relationship between coffee production and the formation of Mame border towns, which opens a new vein of anthropological exploration, previously seen only in a glimpse: that of the complex ethnic diversity on the Chiapas-Guatemala border.

Another essential book for understanding the history of the migration regulation system arising from day labor on coffee plantations is that by Germán Martínez Velasco (1994), who offers a detailed investigation of its transformations. His work is entitled *Plantaciones, trabajo guatemalteco y política migratoria en la frontera sur de México*. The argument of this book can be completed with the one edited by Mercedes De Vega (2011), *Historia de las relaciones internacionales de México 1821-2010*, which is necessary to understand the regulations on mobility and migration on the southern border.

Fábregas (2015) indicates that there were three variables identified by his team in 1983, and which brought the southern border to the attention of the rest of the country: 1) migration caused by the recent wars in Central America; 2) the discovery of oil deposits, and the possibility of expanding exploration in the area to encourage the search for hydrocarbons; and 3) the implementation of tourism projects. It is curious, however, that the sustained attention that CIESAS gave to the studies on the border was not based on these findings on forced migration, extractive exploration, or tourism, but on another aspect, which seems not to be so pressing: the study of religious diversity in southern Mexico, thanks to which one can learn, through case studies, the role of the different faiths along the border. Therefore, CIESAS crystallized the first effort to understand the social dynamics by publishing four books on religious change—a collection coordinated by anthropologist Leonel Durán Solís.

From this interest of CIESAS in the southern border, first directed by Andrés Fábregas and later by Durán Solís, stands out the work of the then young researcher, Rosalva Aida Hernández Castillo (1988), who wrote her undergraduate thesis on the Kanjobal refugee population in Mexico, due to the war in Guatemala, *Mecanismos de reproducción social y cultural de los indígenas kanjobales refugiados en Chiapas*. This opened the field for her to dedicate decades to unraveling the complex relationships between ethnicity, identity, national state, religious change, and community organization in the daily dynamics between Chiapas and Guatemala. As a result of her observations, she published several works now essential in the study of the southern border, such as: “Los refugiados guatemaltecos y la dinámica fronteriza en Chiapas” (Hernández Castillo, 1992); *La experiencia del refugio en Chiapas. Nuevas relaciones en la frontera sur mexicana* (Hernández Castillo et al., 1993); “Identidades colectivas en los márgenes de la nación: etnicidad y cambio religioso entre los mames de Chiapas” (Hernández Castillo, 1994); *La otra frontera. Identidades múltiples de los mames de Chiapas* (Hernández Castillo, 2001); and *Sur profundo. Identidades Indígenas en la frontera Chiapas-Guatemala* (Hernández Castillo, 2012).

The influx of Guatemalan refugees, caused by forced displacement as a consequence of the repression of the armed movement in Guatemala, was an event of great consequence in making the southern border visible at the end of the 20th century, and an extensive bibliography illustrates the impact it had on the re-marking of the border limit and its re-signification. In this context, for Mexicans, dissociating themselves from the Guatemalans was a survival mechanism among the regional population to emphasize their Mexican nationality and avoid attacks by the Guatemalan army. Among the works that analyze this process, it is recommended to consult: *Los refugiados guatemaltecos en Campeche y Quintana Roo. Condiciones sociales y culturales* by Sergio Aguayo et al. (1989); *Una década de refugio en México*, edited by Graciela Freyermuth and Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo (1992); *Ser mexicano en Chiapas. Identidad y ciudadanización entre los refugiados guatemaltecos en La Trinitaria, Chiapas* (Ruíz Lagier, 2013); and “Los refugiados guatemaltecos y la frontera-frente de discriminación, explotación y desigualdad”, by Verónica Ruíz Lagier (2018). Edith Kauffer has also written prolifically on the subject: *Les réfugiés guatémallèques au Chiapas. Le retour du peuple du maïs. Un projet politique* (2000a); “Refugiados guatemaltecos en México: del refugio a la repatriación del retorno a la integración” (2000b); “De la frontera política a las fronteras étnicas: refugiados guatemaltecos en México” (2005), “Refugiados guatemaltecos y conformación de la frontera sur de Chiapas en los años ochenta” (1997), among others. The same author went on to research regulations and disputes over shared international watersheds in this region (2011a; 2011b; 2013).

The work of Ricardo Falla is significant in helping understand the problematic dynamics of the border with Guatemala in the 1980s; he addresses the complex situation of the communities that continue to resist on the Guatemalan side, around the Northern Transversal Strip. Given his abundant production, it would be worth reviewing the introductory notes by Enriqueta Lerma and Gerardo Monterrosa (2020). Reading them helps identify topics and select an appropriate bibliography to understand various aspects of the border.

Another topic, already analyzed but not exhausted, is the role of ethnic groups in shaping the border. A review of this magnitude goes beyond the scope of this work, but cannot be left out. In dealing with the subject, the researcher will note two types of groups that reproduce their culture around the border: those with deep historical roots in the region (Choles, Trojolabales, Jacaltecos, Chicomultecos, Mames, and Kanjobales), and those of recent settlement, either because they migrated in search of land after the 1960s (Tsotsiles and Tseltales), because they expanded with the influx of Guatemalan refugees during the 1980s (such as Chujes, Kanjobales, and Acatecos), or because they recovered land with the EZLN uprising in the last decade of the 20th century. Contributing to understanding the diversity of the state of Chiapas is the book edited by José del Val et al. (2019): *Estado del desarrollo económico y social de los pueblos indígenas de Chiapas*, where they statistically and quantitatively analyze the socio-cultural and economic processes of the state. This essential reference book includes material on the socio-demographic dynamics of the peoples of Chiapas, including those of the border region, their cosmovisions, and diversity of identities.

From a historical perspective, there is the text by Jan de Vos (1994), *Vivir en frontera. La experiencia de los pueblos de Chiapas*, which does not deal specifically with what is now understood as a *border limit* (containment system) but rather with the concept of a *border-frontline* (outpost or expansion). This work shows how the colonial border was expanded and its production process up to the Mexican Revolution. It emphasizes

the indigenous peoples, both local and related, and describes their encounters and disputes in the process of political configuration of the region. Other important works on this subject are those of Ruth Piedrasanta Herrera (2009): *Los chuj. Unidad y rupturas en su espacio; Historia chuj a contrapelo. Huellas de un pueblo con memoria*, by Fernando Limón (2009); and *Voces de la historia. Nuevo San Juan Chamula, Nuevo Huixtán, Nuevo Mazatán*, by Ana María Garza et al. (1994). Delving into the Mam case, another Mayan people divided by the border, it is recommended to read: “Los mam de México y Guatemala: un pueblo binacional entre la autonomía y la heteronomía” by Miguel Ángel Toledo-Pineda and Enrique Coraza de los Santos (2019).

In order to understand the strategies used at the end of the 20th century to reorder the border with Guatemala, it is important to review the context that preceded these decisions. One must not lose sight of the fact that this is a space of ethnic-peasant marginality. Therefore, it is recommended to review the book with contributions by several authors, edited by David Moctezuma Navarro: *Chiapas. Los problemas de fondo* (1994); and the book by Xóchitl Leyva and Gabriel Ascencio (2002): *Lacandonia al filo de agua*. Although these texts focus on exploring the causes of the EZLN uprising, the border constantly appears in their analyses. These texts are completed with a review of the re-municipalization process that Chiapas went through after the insurrection of the Zapatista guerrillas and how this configured a new territorial order and a new way of administering the southern border. The work of Sonia Toledo, Luis Rodríguez, Neil Harvey, María del Carmen Solís, and Jesús Solís, grouped in a work edited by Xóchitl Leyva and Araceli Burguete (2007), and enriched with their own contributions, stands out: *Remunicipalization in Chiapas. Politics and the political in times of counter-insurgency*. Similarly, there are *Estudios monográficos. Nuevos municipios en Chiapas*—in two volumes—, edited by the same authors (Leyva & Burguete, 2004) and *Maravilla Tenejapa. Monografía municipal*, by Luis Rodríguez (2017).

Numerous research results on the subject have been published so far in the 21st century. Many of them have already been mentioned above. Going through the existing bibliography would be excessive, so the search is limited to studies on how the border is configured by those who reproduce their daily lives within it. Thus, the consultation firstly refers to books of individual authorship. Three works stand out: *Frontera Sur Chiapaneca. El muro de la violencia. Análisis de la normalización de la violencia hacia los migrantes indocumentados en tránsito*, by Soledad Álvarez (2016), a fascinating book, which ethnographically explores the daily lives of those who live on the southern border, near Ciudad Hidalgo, and their continuity in Tapachula. Based on specific descriptions, the author describes the experiences in this space of truck drivers, nightclub workers, migrant center personnel, the members of the National Migration Institute, domestic workers, street vendors, and children who work in parks, among other social subjects, who have made the border their form of subsistence. From the perspective of daily life and its link with the state, there is a noteworthy article “Configuración regional del Estado: orden mercantil y comunidad interpretativa en la frontera México-Guatemala” by Hugo Rojas Pérez and Héctor Fletes Ocón (2017), which describes the dynamics around the cross-border sale of vegetables, on the Suchiate River, an activity contrary to state regulations, creating a space of border permissiveness.

Another recommended book is by Carmen Fernández (2017), *La vida en una orilla del sur. Inmigración hondureña en dos ciudades de la frontera Chiapas-Guatemala*. The work delves into the forms of appropriation of space in Soconusco by Honduran immigrants

and their social networks, formed to face the challenges imposed on this population because of their status as neighbors and their desire to move further to the north of the continent. Texts that may well complete this topic, from a gender perspective, are that of Dulce K. Ramírez López (2018), *Mujeres migrantes en la frontera sur de México: aproximaciones desde la interseccionalidad*, and that of Rojas Wiesner and Ángeles Cruz (2012), “La situación de las mujeres migrantes en la frontera de México con Guatemala”. With these publications it is possible to begin to understand the social dynamics of Central American immigrants settled in the region of interest.

Finally, to complete the recent study of social dynamics on the border, this article concludes with two books, the first by Enriqueta Lerma (2019b): *Los otros creyentes. Territorio y tepraxis de la Iglesia liberadora en la región fronteriza de Chiapas*, in which the author addresses the problems experienced at what she calls “the intermediate Chiapas-Guatemala Border”. She analyzes the efforts of parishioners of the liberating church (liberation theology) to intervene in the organization of the territory on the southern border, in the municipalities of Frontera Comalapa and Chicomuselo, where believers wish to decriminalize Central American migration and stop the extractivist mining that threatens their territory. The second book is by Mario Valdez (2006), *Desencuentro y encuentro de fronteras: el Petén guatemalteco y el sureste mexicano 1985-1949*, which addresses, from the perspective of regional history, how the border territory was appropriated in the integration of the jungle into the global production system. In order to explain the construction of cross-border regional space, the author analyzes the economic investments, extractive projects, and disputes between different companies that shaped the development of the current border.

On the other hand, there is a series of collective books that address different social, historical, gender, labor, health, and migratory aspects, such as: *Identidades, migraciones y género en la frontera sur de México*, edited by Edith Kauffer (2002); *Actores y realidades en la frontera sur de México*, edited by Hugo Ángeles Cruz et al. (2005); and *Trabajo y vida cotidiana de centroamericanos en la frontera suroccidental de México*, edited by Carolina Rivera (2014), which analyses the working conditions of Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran migrants who decided to stay in the Soconusco region. Among these collective works there are two texts, one written from a macro perspective, edited by Daniel Villafuerte Solís (2004): *La frontera sur de México. Del TLC México-Centroamérica al Plan Puebla-Panamá*; and the other with a narrower perspective, which emphasizes the people and objects that cross the border: *Regímenes de movilidad en la frontera México-Guatemala: gobernanza transfronteriza para el Desarrollo*, by María del Rocío Barajas Escamilla et al. (2021).

The collective book, *Vidas transfronterizadas: dinámicas y actores en el límite Guatemala/México, siglo XIX-XXI*, edited by Justus Fenner et al. (2020), a product of the binational research group Mexico-Guatemala, deserves special attention. The text addresses the historic production process of this border, with an ingredient that did not exist in the works reviewed so far, this being the participation of researchers from both sides of the border; therefore, the text considers both views in a broad historical period and in various aspects.

There are research results in articles and book chapters on how this border is perceived. Some recommendations are, “Guatemalteco-mexicano-estadounidenses’ en Chiapas: familias con estatus ciudadano diferenciado y su multiterritorialidad” (Lerma, 2016), where the author illustrates how the territory is perceived diversely, according to the mobility possibilities of a group of Guatemalan origin settled in a

border municipality. The article, “La línea ‘...está ahí, es algo que se ve, pero que también se siente’: imaginarios de frontera de las juventudes ‘al sur’” by Amalia Campos Delgado (2010), explores how the border is perceived by young people who have taken on the challenge of crossing two borders, Mexico-Guatemala and Mexico-United States. It is also worth reviewing the study by Diego Noel Ramos Rojas (2020), “La triple frontera: propuesta conceptual para explicar las dinámicas de la región fronteriza entre México y Guatemala”, which presents the different perceptions of the space held by different migrant actors, depending on their nationality.

The following section groups a different category with a more geopolitical focus.

On land-use planning and the logic of national security: texts and documents

As mentioned above, Andrés Fábregas (2015) identified the inauguration of a migration control process on the southern border in the 1980s. This was consolidated with the intervention of national and international organizations dedicated to identifying, assisting, and regulating the passage of Central Americans to Mexico, especially Guatemalans, who arrived in Mexico as a result of armed conflicts in the region. A decade later, the intention to reorganize the border territory would result from agreements reached during the signing of the Free Trade Agreement.

María del Carmen García identifies the strengthening of border control mechanisms as part of international agreements:

the subordination of Mexico to the security agenda of the U.S. government reached its maximum expression in the administrations of Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón. It can be exemplified by the treatment given to the phenomenon of irregular transit migration. (García, 2015, p. 60)

This section mentions the bibliographical and documentary clues to follow based on the discourse of reordering the southeastern territory—focused on regional development—and the aim of “guaranteeing national border security”.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the southern border underwent strategies to produce a controlled space. This task was dominated by a set of economic measures aimed at productively reordering the territory and the conclusion of agreements, conventions, and plans to make it “secure”. There are some specialized publications on these points, which facilitate research. In the last decade of the 20th century, Rodolfo Casillas identified certain key points, made known in the text “Migraciones centroamericanas en México. Semplanza de un proceso social emergente” (Casillas, 1991). There, he suggested paying attention to the diversity of the migratory flows crossing the southern border and the diverse ways those related remained legally or illegally in the area, whether as temporary workers, refugees, displaced persons, or transmigrants. Casillas finds in the attempt to register, control, and diminish these diverse migratory flows a reinforcement of a policy of coupling with U.S. immigration policies.

Along the same lines, another recommendation is the results of César E. Ordoñez (1994) in *Modernización y Desarrollo regional en Chiapas. Un caso: la zona libre de Tapachula* and “Tendencias de la integración económica fronteriza en Chiapas y Guatemala”

(Ordoñez, 2001), studies in which he demonstrates how the development of southern Mexico and Central America has been planned as part of an economic integration strategy, which includes making the southern Mexican border “productive”. It is also worth reviewing: “Las fronteras de la Frontera sur” by Daniel Villafuerte and María del Carmen García (2005); “La migración irregular de tránsito desde el derecho y la política en el tiempo global. El caso de México” by María del Carmen García (2015); and the essay by Úrsula Roldán, “La frontera estratégica y extendida, México-Centroamérica. Sus impactos: ‘Seguridad nacional versus derechos humanos de la población migrante’” (2017). These studies help understand, in a timely and chronological manner, the political-economic provisions applied to this border, by considering the impact of the global economy on the local.

On the other hand, two articles offer a sociological look at the process of imaginary production of contemporary international borders, with emphasis on the political configuration of the Chiapas-Guatemala border: “Esta orilla que es nuestro centro. Producción imaginaria de la frontera: Una mirada desde el borde Chiapas-Guatemala”, by Enriqueta Lerma (2019a), and “La producción de una franja fronteriza controlada. El ordenamiento territorial en el sureste mexicano”, by Fenner et al. (2020).

This bibliography makes it possible to introduce and follow up on the complex political relationships at the different global, national, and regional scales and on the different mechanisms developed and applied to Mexico-Guatemala border control. Similarly, other sources include the minutes and annual reports by the Southern Border Affairs Commission of the Senate of the Republic published on its website (Comisión de Asuntos Fronterizos Sur LXIII legislatura, 2016; Comisión de Asuntos Fronterizos Sur LXII-LXIII legislaturas, 2018). This website records, in two decades, at least eight initiatives aimed at boosting economic development in the region. These are mentioned here to provide a list that may be of interest: the Puebla Panama Plan in 2000; the Trust for the Regional Development of the South Southeast in 2001; the Commission for the Comprehensive Development of the South-Southeast Region in 2004; and the Meso-America Integration and Development Project in 2008. In 2014, the commission recorded the promotion of two funds: the Border Fund and the South-Southeast Fund, both to conduct studies and projects. For 2016, the commission mentions the readjustment of two initiatives: the Border Competitiveness Fund and the launch of the South-Southeast Regional Development Program, aimed at promoting productive programs.

It is also worth consulting the update of the labor and short-stay migration regulations conducted during the government of Felipe Calderón. There is also the 2008 Plan for the Reorganization of the Southern Border, which regulated the issuance of permits to Guatemalans and Belizeans. From that same year, there is also the first Letter of Agreement on the Merida Initiative, signed between Mexico and the United States, which implied cooperation and recognition of shared responsibilities to counteract the violence caused by drug trafficking on both sides of the border. It is worth highlighting the four main points agreed upon in the Merida Initiative: 1. To affect the operation capacity of organized crime; 2. To institutionalize the capacity to maintain the rule of law; 3. To create the border structure of the 21st century; and 4. To build strong and resilient communities (Embajada y Consulados de Estados Unidos en México, n. d.). These points implement a border with increased immigration control.

The Merida Initiative represented a decisive step in advancing the U.S. external border into Mexican territory. It helped encourage the criminalization of border areas in 2008. This meant the transition from a policy based on economic development to a policy adjusted to national security. This logic became particularly important in the current border territorial planning design, where the Southern Border Program occupies a significant place.

In the same vein, it is of utmost importance to pay attention to the implementation of the program mentioned above, the beginning of a set of measures related to national security, representing the continuity of the National Security Program 2014-2018 (DOF, 2014b). This second program transformed the concept of security used in the diagnosis of the southern border. It proposed a new multidimensional approach that included the surveillance of the health, nutritional, ecological, and labor systems, among others, to maintain the security of national sovereignty. As of this modification, “prevention” was prioritized, so the document devotes a significant part to explaining the need to detect *possible* threats that *may* “hinder security”, and delegates to the Executive power the decision making in this matter, with the capacity to “avail of the entire permanent armed force, that is, the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force, to guarantee the international security and external defense of the federation” (DOF, 2014b), including, especially, the southern border.

The prominence of the Southern Border Program, promoted by President Enrique Peña Nieto in 2014, lies in the fact that it was justified as part of a plan to develop the region economically. In reality, it had other objectives, having taken charge of safeguarding border security. Of note is the interest in concluding the construction of Comprehensive Attention Centers for Border Transit (Centros de Atención Integral al Tránsito Fronterizo, CAITF), whose initial programmed objective was to monitor foreign trade and improve road transit,² as published in the *Diario Oficial de la Federación* (DOF, 2014a). However, in the field, the CAITF focus on detaining migrants, deporting them, and acting as barriers to regional mobility and markers of border territory.

In addition to paying attention to this program, it is suggested that further attention be paid to increasing militarization in the area. For example, it is worth mentioning the inauguration of the barracks of the 101st Infantry Battalion with 600 personnel in Chicomuselo. As stated at the time, Manuel Velasco, governor of Chiapas, was to strengthen security actions and protocols in the region and on the southern border (Coutiño, 2018, p. 23). The barracks joins other previously established military stations: three of the Unmarked Infantry Company (Compañía de Infantería No Encuadrada, CINE) in Maravilla Tenejapa, Boca Lacantum, and Camp Lacantum; two military bases in Puerto Chiapas and Motozintla, and the 4th Motorized Regiment in Tapachula, in addition to two military bases in Chiapas, one in Comitán, and the other in Tuxtla Gutiérrez. The latter received the Early Warning and Detection Squadron, in 1987, to guard the southern border (Comisión de Defensa Nacional LXII legislatura Cámara de Diputados & Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional, 2014). These data help to think about the role of the army in border protection, which should not be left out of inquiries.

² The agencies that comprise the Border Transit Assistance Center are the Secretariat of the Interior (Secretaría de Gobernación); the Secretariat of National Defense (Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional); the Secretariat of the Navy (Secretaría de la Marina); the Secretariat of Finance and Public Credit (Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público); the Secretariat of Agriculture, Livestock, Rural Development, Fisheries, and Food (Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación); and the Secretariat of Health (Secretaría de Salud).

The article, “La producción de una franja fronteriza controlada. El ordenamiento territorial en el sureste mexicano. El ordenamiento territorial en el sureste mexicano” by Enriqueta Lerma (2020) helps go more in-depth into territorial planning, illustrating the attempt to economically develop the region with the intention of containing Central American migration by strengthening productive areas and the development of communication routes, to consolidate a migratory circuit.

In conclusion

With all the works mentioned above, one cannot argue that this is an undiscovered border or one for which little data are available. On the contrary, the analysis of the southern border—Chiapas-Guatemala—already has a considerable body of research results, to which new titles are constantly being added. The bibliographic review helped illustrate the diversity of topics and approaches and the problems that have been analyzed to make this space more comprehensible. However, it also helped find common aspects, research in the making, and emerging or unexplored topics. Among other issues, it is noteworthy that, unlike work done prior to the 21st century, the texts currently avoid developing exhaustive explanations on the history of the international delimitation of the border and try not to dwell on specific descriptions of geography or demography. On the contrary, as part of the research advances, the objectives of the study are addressed from the first pages, and reference is made to the current state of affairs to contextualize the central discussion.

There are other cross-cutting aspects present in most of the studies. There is still interest in making visible the ethnic diversity of the border, comprised of the original Mayan population (Chuj, Mame, Kanjobal, Acateca, Tojolabal, Tsotsil, and Tzeltal), to highlight their specific characteristics and historical continuity. This approach helps situate the continuities and rethink and make the analyses more complex in the face of the recent social heterogeneity resulting from new migratory flows (Central American, African, and from the Caribbean).

Similarly, the approach to studying the frontier remains and considers it not as a homogeneous territory but as an area comprised of diverse eco-systemic regions, historically complexified by different development plans, diverse production activities, and successive waves of colonization. This approach is complemented by analyzing recent local, regional, and global economic and political processes and their impact on different border sections. Although these are not innovative analyses, they take on new meanings when dealing with the border configuration based on national and international political agreements on border security and when analyzing the differentiated consequences along the international boundary.

On the other hand, there has been an increase in migration studies on this border, which initially shifted from analyzing regional mobility in pendular circuits, Mexican-Guatemalan day laborers, and seasonal workers, to a broader spectrum of the phenomenon, with an emphasis on Central American migration. This has led to no longer seeing this border only as a binational (Mexico-Guatemala) or tri-national (Mexico-Guatemala-Belize) boundary but as a space where other border processes are connected.

As predicted by Andrés Fábregas (2015, p. 32) in the 1980s, interest in three issues took on greater importance: first, migration, to which reference has already been made; second, the exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbon and mineral deposits on the southern border, and the social conflicts derived from these activities; and third, the development of tourism in protected natural areas, as regulated spaces that prevent the proliferation of human settlements.

Other topics have been less studied, including the perception that border inhabitants have of the social dynamics that affect them and how their livelihoods have been transformed by securitization policies and migration to other parts of Mexico and the United States. There has also been little production of studies with a gender perspective. On the contrary, there has been an increase in research on securitization policies and violence, human rights, and exploratory studies on the increase in child migration and the massive caravans of Central American migrants.

Undoubtedly, the bibliography that will be reviewed shortly will touch on other topics currently under development. Among these are the social impact of the National Guard in the different border sections, the social and political effect of Haitian migration in Soconusco, which increased between 2020 and 2021, and in the last year, the social consequences of the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the time being, the hope is that what has been presented in this document will be of interest to know the current state of affairs and help identify gaps to be worked on in detail. These studies presented here do not exhaust what has been written so far. Even so, hopefully, this document will provide direction to those interested in analyzing the processes taking place along the southern border, especially in the Chiapas-Guatemala stretch.

Acknowledgments

This contribution is part of the Support Program for Research and Technological Innovation Projects, PAPIIT IN300620, class of 2020, of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

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Enriqueta Lerma

Mexican. Doctor of Anthropology from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, member of the Sistema Nacional de Investigadores, level 1. Researcher at the Centro de Investigaciones Multidisciplinarias sobre Chiapas y la Frontera Sur of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Research interests: cultural conceptualization of territory; community development and autonomy; religion in border spaces. Recent publication: Fenner, J., Lerma Rodríguez, E., Piedrasanta Herrera, R. & Torras Conangla, R. (Eds.). (2020). *Vidas transfronterizadas: dinámicas y actores en el límite Guatemala/México, siglos XIX-XXI*. Cimsur-UNAM.

Perla Mónica Castro Cruz

Mexican. Student of Anthropology at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Research interests: anthropology of the borders and gender. Contributor to the independent digital journal *Voces de Quimeras* and member of the project PAPIIT IN300620 “La producción de la frontera Chiapas-Guatemala: una aproximación al ordenamiento territorial y a su resignificación”.