SECURITY AND MIGRATION IN THE TABASCO-EL PETÉN BORDER REGION

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyzes the relationship between the complex issues of migration and security and constituent factors such as national sovereignty versus free human mobility; what is judicially legal versus what is socially legitimate, and the defense of particular notions of security in the presence of real and potential threats (e.g., a pandemic or a terrorist attack). A qualitative description of the flow of undocumented migrants across the region of Tabasco (Mexico) and El Petén (Guatemala), an activity labeled as illicit by the state, provides a first look at the relationship between migration and security on a local level. However, the ultimately global presence of this process requires new ways of conceiving security, ways that can ensure a democratic management of the migration phenomenon.
KEYWORDS: migration, security, Mexico-Guatemala border, illegal activities.

RESUMEN**:** Este artículo aborda la relación entre dos temas complejos: migración y seguridad. Dicho nexo confronta aspectos tales como la soberanía del Estado nacional frente al derecho a la libre movilidad humana; la línea tenue que puede plantear el dilema de lo jurídicamente legal *versus* lo socialmente legítimo; la defensa de una particular forma de concebir la seguridad de cara a reales y potenciales amenazas, por ejemplo una pandemia o una ataque terrorista. La descripción cualitativa de actividades consideradas ilícitas por el Estado, entre ellas el flujo de extranjeros con estatus migratorio irregular que transitan por la colindancia entre Tabasco (México) y El Petén (Guatemala), ofrece una primera radiografía de la conexión migración-seguridad en su dimensión local, pero sin perder de vista su alcance internacional. La proyección global de este intricado vínculo plantea la ineludible necesidad de concebir nuevos esquemas de seguridad orientados a una gestión democrática del fenómeno migratorio.
PALABRAS CLAVE**:** migración, seguridad, frontera México-Guatemala, actividades ilegales, colindancia.

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T his is an initial approach to a complex and varied subject that encompasses issues such as national sovereignty versus free human mobility; what is judicially legal versus what is socially legitimate, and the defense of particular notions of security in the presence of real and potential threats (e.g., a pandemic or a terrorist attack). These dichotomies and tensions are powerfully present in the border between Balancán and Tenosique, two municipalities in the Mexican state of Tabasco, and the San Andrés and La Libertad municipalities of El Petén, Guatemala. The article is divided in three parts. The first deals with the current security paradigm and compares it to an emergent, alternative approach. The second part explores stances on international border security and takes a conceptual approach to ongoing practices in the Tabasco and El Petén border. The final section describes the unregulated activities taking place in this border area. Although these constitute risks as far as state security is concerned, they must be understood in their socio-economic context in order to be properly analyzed. This study posits that said activities transcend the local aspect and have regional –and ultimately worldwide– impact.

I argue that the migration flow transiting through the Mexico-Guatemala border is not a security risk for either nation given its current characteristics, volume, and dynamics. From a multidimensional security perspective, the migrants that transit through Mexican territory are victims of contemporary circumstances. The challenge for state bodies lies in fostering a democratic policy of migration management (Villafuerte and García, 2007) that takes a positive approach to the complicated interrelationships between security, migration, and borders.

FLUCTUATING CONCEPTS OF SECURITY

Border security has been traditionally approached from a state-centered position (Liotta, 2002) tied to the defense of the state's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and other related issues[2] generally assigned to one or several state bodies. The

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[1] This article presents information obtained by the project «Social and economic effects of migration phenomena in the Balancán-Tenosique/Petén border» (Efectos sociales y económicos derivados de fenómenos migratorios en la frontera Balancán-Tenosique/Petén». This project directed by the author and financed by the state of Tabasco and the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT, Fondos Mixtos, Clave TAB-2007-09-75064).

[2] The term «national security» recalls the military and intelligence-based, controlling and vigilant approach that characterized the concept of «security» until recent times. This was, in fact, the *raison d'être* behind many authoritarian, military and/or repressive Latin American regimes and characterized their handling of external and internal threats.

disappearance of a two-sided world after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the advance of globalization, and the September 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers have changed the Cold War approach to security, leading to paradigms that either reinforce traditional schemes or are more alternative in nature. Mexico seems to have chosen the former by agreeing to participate in the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP), implementing travel monitoring practices involving state of the art technology, and incorporating the National Migration Institute (Instituto Nacional de Migración, INM) to Mexico's National Security System (Sistema de Seguridad Nacional de México; Artola, 2006), all of which is part of a renewed national security project. Some authors (Andreas, 2003) think that, from a continental geo-political perspective, Mexico's post-September 2001 security measures provide the United States with a *de facto* buffer zone that allows the application and implementation of U.S. security policy. The neuralgic point, in this case, is the Mexican southern border.

This new global security rationale entails a complex, undivided network that can turn any local, regional, or national threat into an international menace—one that cannot necessarily be coercively controlled, either by the individual or joint actions of powerful nations (Dillon, 2005). The A1H1N virus episode is a recent example. It paralyzed Mexico for several weeks during 2009, quickly spread to the rest of the globe and, at the time that this article was written, it had yet to slow down. These sorts of contingencies will become more and more common, giving way to an increasingly pertinent concept: the «securitization» of real and perceived threats.[3] Even if there used to be a clear distinction (or, at least, a general consensus) regarding internal and external threats, the situation has changed and these two have mingled to produce what Juan Artola calls «intermestic» threats (Artola, 2006: 193). While Artola does not define this concept in a precise manner or delve into its characteristics, I take the term to mean a condition in which threats and risks operate simultaneously on several scales and levels: from larger to smaller, higher to lower, inside to outside, and viceversa.

Intermestic dangers and threats are linked to «human security», an alternative notion to the hegemonic, state-centered vision of security[4] that emphasizes the individual or a group. The term entered Latin American academic discourse during the early 1990s. In 1999, for example, Chilean politologist Jorge Nef was already talking about the need to reduce risks the eventual magnitude of which could have international impact (i.e., a local crisis attaining global dimensions; Nef, 1991). Human security, according to Nef, concerned the whole of the population and not just territories, regimes, elites, or particular nation blocks.[5] In

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[3] For a critical view on the securitization of infectious disease see Davies, 2008.
[4] For the purposes of this paper, I consider so-called «democratic security» a variation of this term, although I am aware that, strictly speaking, it can be understood differently.
[5] This has been addressed in more detail by Nef, 1999.

1994, the Human Development Report (HDR) issued by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) included two chapters involving a critical approach to this new international paradigm that, as the name suggests, is focused on human security. The report acknowledged that security threats are no longer individual, local or national, but international in scope. Drug trafficking, AIDS, terrorism, pollution, nuclear proliferation, and the food crisis are some of these threats (UNDP, 1994: 2).[6] Human security therefore acquires a «holistic, interrelated and multidimensional» content (Nef, 1995: 10). I will later elaborate on arguments favoring this approach as a way of counterbalancing the reigning security stance, especially in regards to transit migration in Mexico's southern border.[7]

The existence of external, internal and intermestic threats suggests that, in certain situations, both human and state-centered security schemes will have to be concurrently implemented; that is, certain events will require a multidimensional approach.[8] Illegal drugs entail internal health and security risks in each country, while their commercialization and traffic carry international connotations. But before we discuss the risks involved in the irregular activities of the El Petén-Tabasco border we must first define and describe the sphere in which these activities take place.

THE INTERNATIONAL BORDER AS A RISK TO STATE-CENTERED SECURITY

I define the border between two or more countries as a geopolitical limit characterized by its nature as both an institution and a process. For Malcolm Anderson, the institutional representation of a border is ruled by territorial principles and based on political considerations (Anderson, 1996: 1). As processes, borders fulfill a number of roles that include the constitution of active state policy instruments and, usually but not always, demarcations of national identity (Castillo, 2002:

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[6] According to Peter Liotta, these are clearly identifiable and present threats that require understandable responses; for example, the use of military force against external aggression (Liotta, 2002: 478, 479). Vulnerabilities are not so plainly identifiable; they are linked to other issues and responsibilities and correct responses cannot be assigned clearly. Migration, epidemic dangers, natural disasters and drug trafficking are all vulnerabilities that could become threats but to which there is no easy or distinct security answer (Ibid, 479). As often happens with emerging paradigms, this new approach to security has its detractors (e.g., Bellamy and MacDonald, 2002; Ewan, 2007). Some have even questioned the existence of an actual connection between theory and practice (Ryerson, 2008).

[7] The existence of several approaches and stances reveals a lack of international consensus on issues of security. In practice, what security means and implies varies from developed to developing nations. For some European nations and the United States, the priority is to fight terrorism. For poorer countries, the capacity to provide basic services like drinking water, housing, health and education is more important (Fraser, 2006: 3). The debate is ongoing, as the literature attests (e.g., Buzan et. al., 1998; Tulchin, 2005; McCormack, 2008).

[8] According to Jorge Rodríguez B. (2006), the term «multidimensional security» precedes that of «human security» and was coined by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM).

30). Vargas (1993) sees borders as transition areas between nation-state territorialities, an idea I also espouse. Following Wilson and Donnan (1998: 9), I consider borders to be composed of three elements: the material line separating two national states, the structures that define said line (institutions and people), and the territorial area alongside and across that line.

What is undoubtedly clear is that a state border is the product of a particular economic context and the interaction of dominant political forces on several levels, all of which are rarely a reflection of the interests on the population inhabiting the area (De Vos, 1993: 14). This is the case of the El Petén and Tabasco border, which was negotiated by the distant capitals of Guatemala and Mexico according to the reigning interests of the time (those of the timber businesses that dominated the local economy at the end of the 19th century).[9] Although the political division between Mexico and Guatemala was formally defined in 1882, its consolidation as a state referent is very recent. By this I mean that the effective and permanent presence of the state is still pending in the case of El Petén and is quite recent in Tabasco's case–less than a century. This facilitates the free transit of people and consumables, opening the door to a number of activities officially catalogued as irregular.[10] The porous nature of this border questions the implications this no and every man's land has on security. There are at least three things to consider in order to understand the limitations of the state-centric approach to threats and risks in this border space, including transmigration.

One is related to international law. The fact that laws differ from one nation to another or are implemented in different ways in each country can greatly favor illicit trans-border activities. A smuggler knows that crossing a border puts him beyond the reach of a given country's law enforcement, at least for a time (Naim, 2005: 274). Similarly, what one country forbids, regulates or controls can differ in another one. In this particular case, the substantial disparity in regards to rules and regulations involving weapon possession by civilians is an important factor. Mexican border inhabitants are surprised and concerned by the fact that Guatemalans can easily carry firearms. Given the level of violence, impunity and lack of governability that characterize Guatemala, the border space becomes a fertile ground for brutality, crime and arbitrary behavior, all of which are often directed toward migrants crossing the area on their way to the United States.

A second issue is social order. Border inhabitants engaged in irregular activities see these an opportunity to «make a living»: activities categorized as illicit have been culturally accepted in the trans-border space long before the nation-states began to pay attention to these areas. Seen as forms of life that ensure survival in adverse and even hostile conditions, these activities acquire social legitimacy through custom and collective approval. Some have been going on for

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[9] For an extended discussion of the southern border as a region see Castillo, 2002: 29-36, and Castillo, Toussaint and Vázquez, 2006:15-23.

[10] Also known as illegal, illicit, underground. See the third section of this paper.

centuries, proof that the international demarcation between the two countries is more symbolic than real. In the recent past, a local inhabitant could combine illegal alligator hunting in Guatemala with tree cutting in Mexico, or illegal logging in Petén and chili growing in Tabasco; nowadays, keeping cattle and feeding and lodging migrants can be carried out on both sides of the border. As Moisés Naím states, illicit activities survive and prosper because they are highly profitable, not because of moral considerations (Naím, 2005: 239). A local informant whom I shall call Paco Roca said as much during a candid conversation about migrants. The elderly Roca lives in a border *ejido* in Balancán and his house is by a road where pickup trucks carrying migrants go by almost daily. He thinks there is nothing wrong with offering transport to these people because it entails providing a service: «a need is met». However, Roca acknowledged that, judicially speaking, this was not correct (personal communication, April 2009).

Even though part of the border population is simultaneously involved in regular and irregular activities, this is not always the case. Someone who engaged in illicit activities in the past might not do so any longer. Roca supported himself by cutting down *palma xate*[11] in Petén some 20 years ago, during a terrible drought in the region. As far as migration is concerned, profitability is determined by the dynamics of the flow and the responses of the central state. When the Guatemalan army or Mexico's INM put up a checkpoint or control post at a clandestine crossing, the migrant route will move north or south of this «line». If business was thriving in Cacaote (fake town) a month ago, the «wetback harvest» could benefit Jolepe one month later.

A third element complicating border security and migration issues is the existence of closely linked localities across the international line. Here I would like to borrow Manuel A. Castillo's approach to the intense contact between points across the Mexico-United States border, specifically contiguous metropolitan areas like Tijuana-San Diego and Brownsville-Matamoros (Castillo, 2005: 54). Even though these large urban spaces do not exist in the Tabasco-El Petén region (population density is lower and there is a low urbanization level; Ibid), I do want to suggest that the high contact points in this area are of another sort and scale: rural, of modest dimensions, not very noticeable, and underground in nature. The informal market in El Ceibo (see below), irregular migrant transit, and drug and occasional arms trafficking lead to forces and processes with very strong bonds across these globalized border interstices. I am using the term interstice on purpose since, from a state-centered position, these amount to cracks in the system that undermine the (symbolic and real) authority of the state apparatus, questioning a particular way of viewing security «from above». Castillo better illustrates this point:

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[11] Ornamental export plant extracted from jungle areas that have not yet been used for agricultural exploitation.

In this sense, there is great tension between so-called «national interests» and local activities, which oftentimes do not agreeably acknowledge or accept the limitations imposed from the centers of power. Border residents find it difficult to perceive and, even more so, accept what the center identifies as a threat to sovereignty and national security (Castillo, 2005: 56).

The actions carried out by law enforcement seeking to stem migrant flow in the name of national security can also lead to a sense of discomfort and insecurity among border inhabitants (Castillo, 2005: 58), a situation exacerbated by corruption and little or no social auditing over the performance of authorities. It is in response to this discomfort that underground activities, including businesses profiting from transit migration, are adopted by certain sectors of the population as counter-hegemonic practices–that is, to contest the state and its control mechanisms.[12] Under the actual conditions of the El Petén-Tabasco border, this premise often finds concrete outlets when the governmental agenda does not agree with that of local players; extra-official international activities weaken the nation-state by restricting its ability to counteract the global networks that undermine the economy, corrupt politicians, and subvert institutions (Naím, 2005: 8). The following section discusses the reach and nature of these border activities to then expand on the reasons why it is important to include a human security perspective when approaching these issues.

Underground activities in the Tabasco-El Petén border area

Situations that lie outside of what is politically normative (Navaro-Yashin, 2003) –that which entails a judicial status defined by its relationship with the state (De Genova, 2002)– are catalogued as illicit.[13] The issue of legitimacy is tied to the legal/illegal dichotomy.[14] When these practices are widely used and socially

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[12] This idea has been posited by Staud (1998) when referring to the situation in certain points of the Mexico-United States border.

[13] There is a growing body of literature on this subject, where illegal practices (Heyman, 1999) are also called extra-legal, no-judicial, informal, or extra-state. See, among others, Heyman and Smart, 1999; Friman and Andreas, 1999; Nordstrom, 2001; Schendel and Abraham, 2005. I am aware that authors like Moisés Naím (2005) no longer consider extra-legal practices to be underground. However, Naím also claims smugglers are hard to identify because they hide in plain sight (Naím, 2005: 65).

[14] Nicholas de Genova characterizes the state-centered distinction between legal and illegal as follows:
It is useful here to consider a distinction between that which simply falls outside of any precise legal prohibition and so is beyond the law's purview, on the one hand, and that which is constituted as «illegal», on the other (cf. Heyman & Smart 1999, p. 1). The law defines the parameters of its own operations, engendering the conditions of possibility for «legal» as well as «illegal» practices. «Illegalities» are constituted and regimented by the law–directly, explicitly, in a manner that presumes to be more or less definitive (albeit not without manifold ambiguities and indeterminacies, always manipulable in practice) and with a considerable degree of calculated deliberation. (424)

accepted, their cultural legitimacy overcomes juridical definitions. According to Josiah Heyman and Alan Smart:

«…legitimacy always rests with the law and never with crime or illegality. Yet black markets, bribery, illegal migration, protection by racketeers, etc. are accorded considerable real legitimacy, sometimes by segments of society and sometimes by society as a whole. (Heyman and Smart, 1999: 19).

Taking this as a departure point, I define underground activities as those that, 1) are seen as such from the point of view of the state and not the local inhabitants; 2) involve Mexicans as well as Guatemalans; 3) usually (though not always) go in both directions across the border, and 4) have an impact beyond the border space. Note that factors 3 and 4 can also be characterized as intermestic. This definition also includes certain context-specific illicit activities on the international border. Traffic in archeological pieces, gum, fauna, cattle, and wood are among the major underground ventures of the past (Schwartz, 1990). Illegal logging of fine woods and cattle smuggling still persist. Wood currently leaves Guatemala on route to Mexico (via Campeche); trans-border cattle crossing happens in the Tabasco-El Petén area and tends to operate in response to the price of meat and the exchange rate between the Mexican peso and the Guatemalan quetzal.[15] Spontaneous trans-border activities have cropped up here and there depending on time-specific circumstances. A recent example is gasoline smuggling into Guatemala because the price of hydrocarbons favored Mexican petrol.[16]

The emergence of threats across several points of the Mexico-Guatemala border is a relatively recent phenomenon that is closely linked to underground activities. The consequences have never been so dire and, as I have previously pointed out, they transcend the local sphere. In fact, it is this close relationship with processes derived from or associated to globalization that gives them their new and urgent character. In order to evidence the nature and dynamics of underground activities in the Tabasco and El Petén border I must first describe illicit drug traffic and unregulated commerce in a specific border point, so as to finally address transit migration to the United States.

THE DRUG ECONOMY

Drug trafficking constitutes one of the most influential illegal international activities in the area and takes place within a multi- and trans-national scheme. If, as Naím posits, commercial globalization also opened the doors on illicit interna-

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[15] NAFTA also had an effect. After 2002, U.S. meat exports to Mexico affected the Mexican meat industry in high production areas like Tabasco. This state used to send cattle the Mexican north, but producers were unable to compete with U.S. prices.

[16] Guatemalan papers often address this issue. See *Prensa Libre*, electronic edition, July 21, 2009: «Gasolina que venden de contrabando es más barata», http://www.prensalibre.com/pl/2009/julio/21/328809.html, accessed November 11, 2009. In July 2008 I watched a Mexican-Guatemalan citizen residing in the Guatemalan border town of La Libertad take several barrels of gasoline on a boat to import them into Guatemala via the San Pedro River.

tional markets (2005: 19),[17] then the development of drug markets in target countries and the growth of worldwide production and distribution chains are the «clandestine side» of globalization (Andreas, 2003). Drug cartels began operating in Guatemalan territory around 1990 as part of the American intercontinental route between production and consumption points (Benítez, 2009: 2). Petén's proximity to Mexico and the porous nature of the binational border turn it into a strategic area for the drug economy. These activities have not escaped the eyes of those acquainted with the region (De Vos, 2005), and fieldwork data indicates that, in recent times, cocaine is smuggled across two or three border points while marihuana is grown in the Petén area.

The growth of human settlements across the Guatemalan side of the border during the past three decades[18] has also directly and indirectly contributed to the trans-border drug trade. Some border Guatemalan communities discretionally serve as enclaves for underground operations. As in the case of other illegal activities and when dealing with outsiders, local inhabitants are quite hermetic about what happens inside their communities, even though the activities and their location are well known to the town members. A lot of research is still needed to confirm or deny the supposed connection between migration and drug trafficking. Even though some authors affirm or at least suggest this link exists (see Benítez, 2009; Martínez, 2009), my observations suggest this is a false and minor risk in the area. The lack of solid proof regarding a direct bond between these two phenomena is a very delicate matter because, as Maggie Ibrahim states (see note 26), it could lead to tendentious discourse on human security.

THE INFORMAL MARKET IN EL CEIBO

Migration, drug trafficking, and smuggling have turned certain points of the Mexico-Guatemala border into small-scale replicas of «black geopolitical holes»,[19] spaces characterized by lack of governability where the norms that regulate standard social order do not exist. These are also fertile ground for illicit activities the impact of which goes beyond the local (Naím, 2005: 265).

El Ceibo (La Libertad, El Petén), neighboring Sueño de Oro (Tenosique, Tabasco) provides at least a partial image of this geopolitical black hole concept. The emergence of a Guatemalan-based irregular market has quickly developed into an expanding entrepreneurial community.[20] El Ceibo's lure as a marketplace

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[17] According to Canadian authorities, marihuana traffic on the Canada-United States border reached 7 billion annual dollars in 2004 (Naím, 2005: 71). A kilo of cocaine cost between $12,000 and $35,000 after crossing the Mexico-United States border (Naím, 2005: 77).

[18] Development in these communities has yet to be studied; needless to say, this would greatly contribute to the knowledge of the issues addressed in this paper.

[19] This concept refers to failed and rogue nations (Naím, 2005: 62).

[20] For the historical development of this community, see Arriola, 2005, chapter 5.

involves mostly Chinese goods for a Mexican clientele in search of cheap products. Rumor has it that weapons can also be acquired here. Ironically, this merchandise has often been smuggled into Guatemala. Mexican buyers come from far away, as the plates in the vehicles that pack the place every weekend attest. Because of its strategic location and recent growth, the locality has become an important stopping point for migrants headed for the United States, even if that flow began at least one decade ago.[21] Mostly beyond the reach of Guatemalan authorities (until mid-2009 the town had no police presence or a customs house), this near geopolitical black hole is also the only official binational point across this whole border area. The concomitant legal and unregulated aspects of El Ceibo turn it into a vital point for transiting migrants. On a wider geopolitical scale, places like El Ceibo play another role, a situation fully acknowledged by Mexican authorities. In the words of a civil servant at the INM's Center of Migration Studies:

> The importance of the southern Mexican border in the current migration dynamic, which involves Central and South American migrants who go through Mexico on their way to the United States, goes beyond binational issues concerning Guatemala and Belize and becomes a strategic regional point in the relationship, cooperation and management of Mexico-United States migration flow. This regional component of migration does not limit or subordinate the national impact of the phenomenon; rather, it places it in a more complex context of local and international interactions (Rodríguez Chávez, 2006: 70).

In short, El Ceibo is a locality were the border, security, and migration unequivocally intersect, as it is a regular and irregular transit point for goods and people. But even if this is the only official, visible crossing point, there are many other «blind» ones across the border. This is the subject of the following section.

TRANSIT MIGRATION

Transit migration is seen as illicit because most of these migrants, mainly from Central America, go through Mexico without the required legal documents.[22]

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[21] There is extensive information on Asian goods, weapons and migrants in Mexican and Guatemalan media. E.g., *Tabasco Hoy*, May 5, 2007, «Decomisan tangas en las calles del Centro», http://www.tabascohoy.com/nota_interior_impresa.php?id_nota=132871, accessed October 11, 2009; *Proceso*, December 25, 2006, «Admite SSP: Tabasco sigue siendo paso de gran cantidad de droga», http://www.proceso.com.mx/noticias_articulo.php?articulo=35994, accessed October 12, 2009; *Prensa Libre*, August 13, 2006, «Peligrosa ruta de migrantes», http://www.prensalibre.com/pl/2006/agosto/13/lectura_dept.html, accessed October 11, 2009.

[22] This does not mean migration is a crime in itself. The Mexican government already derogated and article General Population Law that criminalized and penalized those who stayed in Mexican territory without authorization.

Tabasco is one of the southwestern states were this phenomenon has grown considerably in recent years. It began some three decades ago and has substantially increased during the past 15 years, as numerous interviews with local informants indicate. During this period, practically all of Tabasco's neighboring Guatemalan settlements have been used, at one point or another, as clandestine migrant entryways into Mexico. A border resident told me that the establishment of one of these communities was directly linked to the migrant transit market (Fulgencio Nava, pseudonym, personal communication, July 2009). The main reason behind transit across this area is to find a train going into central Mexico that can be boarded in points like San Pedro, El Águila, El Bari (all in Balancán), or the municipal head of Tenosique, the favored destination by most migrants.

There is no precise data on the amount of migrants that enter Mexico through these areas. Indirect estimates (or, as Rodolfo Casillas puts it, «appreciations»; Casillas 2008: 158) can be gauged from the numbers issued by several institutions; these, however, are nowhere near the actual numbers. Mexico's INM has a registry of all the people detained in the regional delegation that includes the municipalities of Balancán and Tenosique, but these numbers are just a fraction of the total flow; most migrants are able to get past immigration controls.

What can be obtained from several sources,[23] including my interviews with migrants and personal observation, is a general profile of the transit population: most are Guatemalan or Honduran, male, and younger than 25. I have also noticed an increase in the number of teenagers trying to get to the «north». Another noteworthy detail is that in almost every group (I have never seen a solitary migrant) there are one or two members who are taking the journey again, after having been repatriated from either Mexico or the United States.

Their transit profits locals in charge of providing logistic support, something that can only work efficiently because of the numerous levels of complicity and coordination between Mexican and Guatemalan border residents. Guides, messengers, sentinels, carriers, and food and lodging providers exist on both sides of the line. Migrants use their services based on factors as diverse as their previous familiarity with the route; practical traveling knowledge;[24] whether or not they have hired the services of a *coyote* and are traveling with family, friends or independently, and, above all, how much money they have. The degree of security migrants enjoy is linked to the amount of money they can pay to obtain protec-

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[23] See, for example, Casillas, 2008; 159; Comisión de Derechos Humanos de Tabasco, 2005; Instituto Nacional de Migración, Cuadro 3.1.1. «Eventos de extranjeros alojados en estaciones migratorias según país de nacionalidad», January-October 2009, http://www.inm.gob.mx/index.php?page/ Extranjeros_alojados_y_devueltos, accessed November 11, 2009.

[24] The foreign migrant who knows the route and certain cultural aspects (e.g., a fondness for hot foods, knowledge of popular beer names, local slang, an ability to imitate certain local accents) is more likely to cross successfully into Mexico, unlike those who enter the country for the first time and lack this cultural «capital».

tion from potential muggers (organized or not) and abuse on the part of corrupt law enforcement. Migrants who lack economic resources must walk for hundreds of miles to reach their goal and undergo all kinds of penury and humiliations;[25] those with money are transported, protected and fed through national and trans-border networks. It is not surprising, then, that the political measures implemented by state-centered security (patrolling, controls, and restrictions) should be much more fiercely felt by the first group. A new, recent element that impinges directly on security has made transit across Tenosique more complicated: the presence of the Zetas, who now engage in migrant extortion and kidnapping (Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos 2009, Martínez, 2009).

Under these conditions, transit migrants pose little danger to the Mexico's conventional security (i.e., they are not a threat to public security). The rooted presence of delinquent gangs such as the real and fake Zetas operating in the area are a much greater risk to the security of society as a whole. This is why I argue that the approach to the migration phenomenon must combine state-centered and human security strategies –an admittedly complicated combination because it is difficult for the state to mediate and maintain a balanced position when dealing with migration as an issue of security in such a territorial space.

CONCLUSIONS

The forces of clandestine capitalism (Kyle and Koslowsky, 2001b), in all their forms and dimensions, seep through the cracks where the state has little or no presence, or where its power cannot reach. Porous international borders with little control are fertile ground for illicit activities, including illegal migration. This is a thorny situation that poses serious challenges to both human and state security. The underground activities taking place in the Tabasco-Petén border necessitate a proper multilateral response. By this I mean that the response should be designed having taken human security into account. Currently, the flow of Central American and other migrants going through this border space do not constitute any real threat to Mexico. Almost all of them are in the nation temporarily. It is undeniable that some will take temporary jobs, others will settle in the country, and that some of these transit groups involve gang members such as the Mara. But it would be tendentious and irresponsible to say that most of these migrants steal jobs from Mexican residents, arrive with the intention of settling, or actively engage in criminal activities. On the contrary, a very high percentage fall victim to their condition or status and are often at the mercy of unscrupulous civilians and authorities. In addition, the ways in which undocumented

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[25] The many situations experienced in human smuggling (kidnapping, torture, persecution, corruption, discrimination) turn this issue into a highly complex problem involving human security and human resources. See Benedek, 2008; Kyle and Koslowsky, 2001a.

migrants are stigmatized in the popular imaginary often touch on xenophobia; this makes the matter of «securitized»[26] migration even more delicate for society in general.

The state must establish a balance between conventional security strategies and an integral approach, especially in regard to socio-cultural aspects. This way, the state itself can contribute to the transformation of these perceived potential threats and turn them into manageable risks. Right now it might not be feasible to eradicate or completely control illegal activities in the southern border, but it is possible to implement a more flexible agenda in this regard. As far as migration is concerned, the concept of «democratic migration management» suggested by Villafuerte and García (2007: 34) is worth considering. Although the authors do not develop this idea in detail, I suggest it could comprise the following aspects:

1) Approach multidimensional security from a consensual point of view involving governments and border communities, paying particular attention to social, economic, political, and judicial aspects related to migration; this is a policy that will not necessarily meet the interests of the United States. At the same time, this multilateral approach must pay attention to its potential tri-national reach, eventually involving Honduras or Belize.

2) Implement coordinated but differentiated strategies (Castillo, 2005) within Mexico to attend to problems linked to irregular migration, especially in border areas with intensive binational contact. These strategies should be designed in accordance with local specificities (that is, paying attention to the characteristics and context of the socio-economic realities of international delimitations).

3) Undertake more and better actions to prevent the violation of transit migrants' human rights, a very serious problem that currently tarnishes Mexico's humanitarian track record.

This call is particularly urgent for those territories and rural spaces that are caught in globalized migration processes. These localities situated on global thresholds are subjected to internal and external forces and dynamics that transcend them and, at the same time, have both local and global impact. The transit of licit and illicit goods and people across Tabasco and El Petén drives these transformations, and the current security management paradigm is too restricted and dated for the context.

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[26] Maggie Ibrahim maintains that securitization is a power discourse that represents migrants as a threat to the liberal world of Western democracies (Ibrahim, 2005: 163). According to her, the human security approach increases risks to migrants:
The categorizing of migration as a human security threat, alongside other threats such as narcotics trafficking, is unsettling. In terms of migration, the populations that *are* at risk are the migrants who move across borders to escape war, persecution, and hunger. However, due to this new «human-centered» approach it is the migrants themselves who are seen as threatening to the receiving country's population. This is the paradox of the people-centered approach to development. Instead of focusing on how to support migrants who are at risk, the new paradigm increases their vulnerability. (169)

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