

I arrived at the Mexico-Guatemala borderⁱ in September of 2007 to ethnographically study the consequences of seemingly contradictory, yet related, macro-level policies that simultaneously open the border to commerce, finance, and services through the recent passage of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), yet close it to population flows. Numerous scholars, as well as activists and journalists have referred to a renewed militarization of Mexico's "Southern Border" with Guatemala, mostly in alliance with a US-influenced security agenda (Villafuerte-Solis 2004; Andreas and Biersteker 2003; Benítez-Manaut 2003). The proposed aim of increasing border security is to create an integrated hemispheric security system to stem the northward flows of illegal migrants, arms, and narcotics.

However, when I arrived at "the border," I realized not only how porous the border was, but how attention to "the border" obscured the multiplicity of crossings, negotiations, and alternate modes of legality present in the larger region. Despite the increased presence of various military, police, and bureaucratic authorities in the larger border region, most local residents and officials alike agreed that their presence was more symbolic than actual, echoing many of Andreas' (1998-1999) arguments about the image and placement of security at the US-Mexico border (also see Massey 1999).

Since the 1990s, the busier, "official" crossing points have become increasingly visibly monitored and mechanized including the introduction of cameras and automated stop-lights to regulate vehicle passage, in addition to the influence of US military training and technology. Border surveillance and governance has also become more centralized, with most resources concentrating on the busiest transit point of Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico and Tecún Uman, Guatemala. The effects of this policy have not been increased security or even decreased "illegal" flows, but a diversion of most flows to more clandestine and unmonitored areas. This parallels the arguments of scholars that assert that the US's immigration policies have not led to fewer undocumented flows, but rather, have pushed these flows into increasingly unmonitored and potentially dangerous zones (Massey 1999).

In the case of the Mexico-Guatemala border, not only do most officials and locals deem border security impossible due to lack of resources and difficult terrain and geography, but they also believe that total security is undesirable. Not only are there large profits to be made through illicit flows, but formal enterprises also benefit from clandestine commerce in the border region. In addition, in a region with a faltering economy and widespread migration to the US, locals often find the roots of survival in such clandestine gaps. While concentrating on official border crossings is necessary, we cannot ignore how this therefore renders other crossing points clandestine and illegal (see Heyman 2004; 1998; 1999). These gaps create potential areas for profit, plunder, and violence, but also space for renegotiating the state, the law, the economy, and citizen's rights over the state and its spoils. I argue that is often in these gaps that the economy and the state come into being. Therefore, it is on one of these gaps that I now concentrate.

Since the particular border passageway I discuss in this paper is not recognized by the state and lacks the presence of official institutions, many refer to it as an "illegal border crossing." Yet residents of this passageway have appropriated state formations and discourses of law in order to create an alternate system of legality that legitimizes their activities. This includes instituting community-run toll-booths called "cadenas" that mimic a customs post, creating signed documents that certify the cross-border transport of goods that would otherwise be labeled contraband, and acquiring documents to assert nationality in both Mexico and Guatemala. It seems paradoxical that locals seek documentation of otherwise secret and clandestine activities. Forged or false documents may help individuals assert certain benefits and access, but they also run the risk of state detection or changes in official whims that seek to change the rules and their implementation (see Das 2007). Yet in the case of the toll booth, locals pride themselves on the transparency of their system in order to assert their legitimacy over a corrupt state where officials constantly blur the lines between taxes and bribes. Moreover, the effects of toll-booth money are directly discernable to residents and other locals alike in the form of road improvements, direct handouts, and improvements in infrastructure. This contrasts with the collection of taxes by authorities

that locals asserted “went in their pockets” in a border region long neglected in national and transnational development projects. Since the toll-booth mimics a state function, it might be read as reinforcing the idea of the state (see Flynn 1997; Das 2007). However, what is important is how residents, through appeals to morality, development, and rights, question not the fact of state taxation itself, but *who* the legitimate authority is to charge such border taxes and how they convince others to allow them to do this.

First, I discuss how the toll-booth was established and how it gradually gained visibility and normativity, gradually approaching a local law. I examine how the toll-booth has created a normative system of legality/illegality around itself that at times clashes with official interpretations. I argue that it is this normative system, and not official rules and laws that often determine cross-border flows in the region. Without taking into account these every-day, regional systems of legality, we cannot understand what actually happens at the border. I also discuss the economic impacts of the toll-booth in the communities in order to question conventional assessments of the role between state taxation and community development. Furthermore, I argue that such clandestine spots are important for what they teach us about the everyday functioning of the global economy and the state’s role in transnational commerce and migration. Rather than representing “trouble spots” (Sampson 2003) or the underside of globalization, I assert that such spaces are integral to the functioning of today’s global political economy (see Nordstrom 2007). It is in such spaces that we often witness the clash of ideals and reality, of state power and local grassroots organizing, of international appeals to openness along with the fears surrounding security and terror. This is particularly apparent in a border zones, where these realities conflict on a daily basis- in fact such conflicts are at the nature of a “border zone” in the age of neoliberalism where states, international companies, NGOs, and institutions, in addition to local residents, dispute the borders of nation and state, profit and exploitation, and rights and security.

While often the case, it is not a foregone conclusion that such places will be characterized by violence. For example, Aretxaga (2005: 179) questions the relation between law and violence, examining

how new autonomous representations of law in the Basque country have led to increased violence. However, here, what must be explained is the relative *absence* of violence in this border passageway (especially in relation to the official crossing points), even though most analyses would predict it. We must therefore examine how various actors and their interests intersect in the making of border flows and regimes of legitimacy. Too often are analyses of the border and its flows conducted as if there were no people living there. In fact, some people even told me when I wanted to conduct research at the Mexico-Guatemala border that no one really even lived there! While statistics may help us approximate migration and commercial flows, the fact that *the majority* of flows in this region occur informally or illegally depending on your definition renders an analysis of such places and their people all the more important for understanding the larger political-economic context of the border.

Paradoxes of Security and Profit:

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, both Mexico and Guatemala, but especially Mexico, proclaimed a strong stance toward curtailing illicit border flows and increasing security. Ironically, however, border residents assert that this same period is characterized by a *decline* in official surveillance at the border. Every year official presence has increased, including the recent institution of the Policía Estatal Fronteriza (State Border Police) in Mexico in 2007, whose sole purpose was to control the border. Yet actual vigilance, many assert, has declined. As one Mexican local customs official agent explained, “It’s not that we don’t have the same power as we did before (referring to prior to the late 1990s). We just don’t enforce it.” The most common response to the official rhetoric citing Mexico’s stricter stance on border security is, in fact, laughter, as officials and locals are well aware that “even if Mexico *could* secure the border, it would be undesirable to do so.” The effects, however, have been mixed. While state agents, local business and companies, and even local residents profit, the most vulnerable including small-scale smugglers and Central American migrants are the ones who suffer and are caught in the web of selective vigilance. While enabling creative survival strategies by those who “know how it works,”

lack of this knowledge can be pricey and life-threatening. Depending on who has access to such types of information, and how it is used, has implications for the possible increase in mafiaization and violence in the region. This has clearly been seen at the US-Mexico border, where strict border policies have not curtailed illegal flows, but have rather led to an increasingly organized and violent mafiaization of specialized smugglers who control the resources and knowledge to influence or evade officials and attract vulnerable prey.

This perceived decrease in vigilance by residents was real, as state policies on both sides of the border emphasized decentralization, modernization, democratization, and preparation for free trade agreements with the US. This often meant taking corrupt officials off the street and putting them into modern offices. The late 1990s was when the nearby official border post achieved its current size, as resources were concentrated in a few official border points rather than on every rural pathway. In addition, bureaucratic processes were further streamlined, and the nearby customs post was deemed a subsection of the larger post at Ciudad Hidalgo. According to the law, this post was seen mainly as a tourist crossing, whereas those wishing to carry goods worth more than a few hundred dollars would need to contact a customs agent at Ciudad Hidalgo; about 3 hours south of here. This facilitated specialization and smooth functioning and distribution of border functions. However, for locals who wished to commercialize their goods, this was not practical. Yet it also contributed to the image the state desired, since only tourists passed through this point and goods only through the southern crossing at Ciudad Hidalgo. Many assert that “nothing comes through here,” thus legitimating the present distribution of functions. While the majority of commerce does go through the southern crossing, we cannot fully understand the growth in the past ten years of the regional economy on the Mexican side without the growth in illegal commerce. Due to the collapse of the peso in the mid 1990s, it is beneficial for Guatemalans to buy products from the Mexican side, yet paying taxes renders these profits negligible. Many companies have been able to fill export quotas and contribute to the larger national and state

economy by relying on commercializing their products through informal passageways such as the one discussed here. In a situation where the additional personnel would be more expensive than the tax revenue lost (according to local officials), yet a lax attitude toward the border is internationally and nationally unpopular, centralizing functions at specific modern and visible border crossings while deeming other passages illegal is beneficial to the operation of the state in the neoliberal economy. Yet the establishment of “cadenas”, or tollbooths, in such illegal passageways, and the legitimacy they acquire, challenge attempts to hide such actors.

The Establishment of “Cadenas”

A few miles from the previously mentioned “official,” and therefore, legal, border crossing, lies a three-mile passageway connecting Mexico to Guatemala. Six small rural communities make their home on both sides of the passageway. Since they own the land that they live on (either individually or collectively), they have begun to gradually assert their “rights” over those who attempt to use this border passageway. They also constructed the road that is used to cross the border here. A common dictum is that “We are the ones who live here and built the road, so we have the right to work here.” Many, in fact were landowners before the border was even demarcated. However, various state and military agents on both sides of the border previously set up informal posts to collect taxes and monitor contraband and the flow of migrants. This was difficult in a region in which families straddle both sides of the passageway and Guatemalans rent and work the lands on the Mexican side. As one man lamented, “Before if I tried to cross the border with even a package of cookies, they [the officials] would stop me and take them away.”

However, due to government restructuring policies, social movements, crises of governance in Chiapas, and local organizing efforts in the villages, Mexican officials began to gradually retreat from the passage in the mid 1990s. While the governor of Tuxtla passed an informal accord that prohibited official interference in the passage of corn through this passage (I elaborate on this in another article), locals took advantage of this opportunity to assert their control over the passage. Officials were widely deemed

corrupt and undeserving of the right to collect taxes. “They have no right in here,” say locals. “If they [the officials] can charge and put the money in their pockets, why shouldn’t we charge too?”

It was this realization that led to the implementation of the *cadenas* in the passageway. Locals reasoned, if the officials could charge, so could they since they had “more of a right since we own the land.” Gradually the local law became that officials are only allowed to enter if they respect the “communities” and do their job, which is to provide security and not interfere in the *cadena* or the commerce that sustains it. To assert their authority and presence, each village owning a part of the border road strung a *cadena*, or chain, across the road and began to charge tolls on passing cargo. At first only the local authorities patrolled the *cadena*, but then it became regularized around 1996 with local committees, book-keeping, and rotating 12-hour shifts. Locals raise or lower the chain to permit or prohibit entry and charge tolls on all passing cargo depending on truck size. Each community member takes a turn at the *cadena* collecting tolls, which is seen as a community service.

However, referring to the “*cadenas*” as toll-booths falls short of the full meaning of the term and value system behind them. The *cadenas*, or chains, are literally metal chains that the villages in the passageway use to delineate their territories. While locals use the term “*cadena*” to refer to the actual chains themselves, this term takes on a wider significance since residents use the word “*cadena*” to refer to the entire social, moral, political, and economic system of organization, rights, and taxation it represents. I therefore prefer to retain the term *cadena* (with italics removed) over toll-booth.

The *cadenas* also comprise a local legal system, where “the laws of the community” must be respected in order to garner entry. Prices are determined in community-wide assemblies. Some of the villages in the passage even developed a separate committee with presidents and treasurers to ensure that the *cadena* operates in accordance with the “community laws” established in village-wide assemblies. As one man said, people who seek to enter the passage respect the *cadena*, because they “realize that there is an internal law. There is law here.”

Since border residents use this passageway daily for commercial, family, or social needs, there also has to be some sort of agreement between the cadenas and villages. For instance, not just anyone can put up a cadena. Prices must also be justified, for if one cadena charges too much, all will be affected because smugglers will seek out other routes. The cadena, therefore, is part of a larger moral and political order that ties the rights to a cadena and taxes to the rights to land, most specifically to the road. The moral logic behind the cadena is that all who own a part of the border road here have a right to charge to help maintain it. However, how this moral is enacted in the villages reveals local differences of power, highlighting relations of land tenure, class, gender, ethnicity, and authority. I take up this issue in my larger work. Here, I concentrate on how the cadena not only became accepted locally, but also regionally.

The Cadena as Norm and Moral Authority:

“What happens if officials come in here?” I asked one man in LG. He smiled. “If the officials enter to abuse us, we will run after them. We will trap them in here, call all the people over the microphone, and then everyone will gather with sticks and machetes. We have done this before so now they know better and don’t bother us. We are friends now and they respect us now.”

Appeals to honesty, community benefit, and unity are used to entice service, discourage theft, and bind individuals to the cadena, and thus the community. At each village meeting, the amounts collected are reported to the entire assembly. If there is a problem, village members will send someone to the local town hall to call all residents on the loudspeaker to gather at the cadena and block the road. Therefore, there is also the threat of community force and control over the border. Various instances like this, argue locals, is how officials have now learned “to respect the people and the cadena.” One instance of this use of the cadena as a form of entrapment highlights how the villages have used the threat of force, their large numbers (compared to officials), and state-like discourses of rights and law to assert their rights to the border. Here a border resident recounts one incident that occurred in 1998:

“The *judiciales* (police) came in and detained a pick-up with a little bit of sugar. It was barely anything, just a few bags! They wanted to confiscate it and take them [those carrying the sugar] in [to the police station]. So we called everyone on the loudspeaker and hundreds of people came to the cadena with their sticks and machetes. We trapped the police here until their boss came and

resolved the conflict...After a few times like this, they [officials] knew not to come in here to bother us anymore.”

Residents on both sides of the border tell similar stories from the late 1990s. As one man said, “officials don’t pass in here much anymore. More on the highway...They don’t enter here anymore since now there is rigor here...the communities here are united in this.”

However, no overt violence has ever occurred here against police. In fact, community members use this fact to stress that they are more benevolent guards than officials: “when we held the officials here (until their boss came), we didn’t hurt them. We treated them well. We gave them food and drinks.” However, uprisings in Chiapas, in addition to the murder of corrupt migration officials by residents in a nearby border passage in the 1990s, are constant reminders to officials to “obey the laws.”

While most residents in the passage now assert that officials and other regional actors are “accustomed to the cadena” and have come to take it for granted, this was not always the case. While some asserts that having the cadena is the prerogative of the autonomous decision-making rights of *ejidos* (collective land holdings) embodied in the Mexican Constitution, or the right of owners of private property,ⁱⁱ the cadenas are now considered to represent a type of unquestionable law. As one woman stated, “if the truckers respect the community and pay the toll, they pass *legally*.” Despite the internal and intervillage differences highlighted through the cadena above, residents will appeal to discourses of universal rights and freedom to unite behind the “community right” to a cadena. In this way, notions of “community” are invoked to reinforce, re-bound, and unite members despite internal differences. While sometimes the villages will aid one another if their cadena is threatened, the villages largely use this to differentiate themselves, only uniting when a threat compromises the whole chain. The individual chain is the most important. But, then again, if one chain is broken, the whole thing can fall apart.

Why can’t everyone have a cadena?:

I came to understand why officials respected the cadena, as I spoke with them and saw how they understood how few they were in contrast to the populous, united, and often violent (according to the

officials) rural villages. But two things continued to perplex me: Why do other regional actors, who are often high-profile smugglers, respect a toll set up by rural villagers? And why doesn't every village put up a cadena if they also own their land? The answers to these questions reflect differences of power, access to strategic roads, and the geographic framing of the border.

Access to the best (widest, straightest, and most direct) road over the border enables the villages to keep the cadena in the face of potential opposition. In addition, the villagers here have power over the cadena as long as the nearby official post makes it difficult, bureaucratic, and expensive to import and export products. As community members say, "Legally at the official post they would have to pay a lot more. We built the road here so if you pass here the idea is that you should contribute something." As another said, "people respect the cadena since they realize there are internal laws here." In other words, smugglers respect the cadena because they know that their other option would be to pay a lot more at the official post. While there are other pathways that now compete with this passage, these villagers have also set up cadenas, and compete to make their paths more attractive to smugglers.

The communities also attempt to "be more understanding" and honest tax collectors who collect "cooperation" in contrast to officials that "extort the people" or collect bribes. For instance, the cadenas do not charge those who are carrying products for their own consumption, especially their own harvest. As one man says, "We only charge those who are making money, doing business. If you are making money, then you have to cooperate a little. If it is just someone's harvest, we understand. We appreciate if they give a little, but we don't make them." Regional corn producers have also worked out more friendly relationships with the passage's residents, recognizing their mutual interdependence, stating "we pay the tax so that they maintain the road so we can commercialize our products easily." The passage's villagers also add that they keep the road safe, whereas more robberies and assaults have occurred in other clandestine paths. Thus they portray themselves as a more benevolent and functional state than the state itself whose agents "only put the money in their pockets. Pure bribes (*pura mordida*)."

In addition, although merchants and businessmen come from as far as the U.S.-Mexico border and Guatemala City, they tend to be from the region, or at least travel through the passage regularly, often weekly. Therefore maintaining a friendly relationship with the locals is necessary for the smooth and efficient conduct of business. Mostly the same trucks pass each week and they “know the law here,” say locals. If not, they are not allowed to enter. For instance, if someone speeds by and doesn’t pay, there isn’t much you can do, but “they have to come back somehow” and that is when they can put up the chain or enforce their authority.

So why doesn’t every village put up a cadena? While I was perplexed by this, community members took it for granted, arguing, “of course other nearby villages can’t have a cadena because they are not on the border.” There is a sense that commercializing products out of, or into, the country should require a tax. Also the amount of transit going through here is tougher on their roads than on other villages that do not experience this heavy traffic. In addition, the state owns many roads that pass through villages, whereas the locals here own the land and built the road.

However, when I went to a lakes region in northern Chiapas, I saw two villages that had also established toll booths- one at the entrance to a national reserve that the locals are responsible for protecting, and the other, at the entrance of a path used to visit archaeological ruins. While I was unable to assess if these were independent initiatives or tied to state projects, these cadenas seem to represent a similar situation. The villagers in these cases appropriate a “common sense” idea of where tolls, borders, and taxes should be collected, yet question who has the right and responsibility to perform this function. Rather than questioning the right to charge fees, they question *who* has the right to do this.

Many equate paying the cadena with paying “taxes” and “obeying the law.” They therefore substitute the cadena for the official customs post and take over this “state function” of border control and taxation from a state many view as ineffective, corrupt, and therefore undeserving and incapable of this right and responsibility. This idea of the cadena representing the local law is fluid. Some see it as a

parallel legal system, others see it as an illegal act, and others merge and replace the official law with their own law. The last option is especially common among border residents either unfamiliar with, or critical of, actual legal practice. For instance, when I asked one resident if the smugglers who came through here paid taxes, I was referring to state taxes. However, he merged the two legal regimes together, supplanting his own, “Yes of course they pay taxes, they pay the cadena.” The term used to refer to toll payments is in fact called an *impuesto* (tax), the same word used for official customs fees. Although lost in its Spanish translation, paying the cadena here, or local form of “customs,” is the custom and the law.

Yet what about drug, migrant, and arms smugglers who are often linked to larger criminal organizations and resource networks? Do they laugh at these small posts where the local people gather with sticks to block the path to uncooperative smugglers and officials? The villages resolve this situation in a way that enforces their own moral authority while maintaining a safe and mutual relationship with these smugglers who are considered “more dangerous and illicit.” For instance, when I served my turn at the cadena, my friend Betoⁱⁱⁱ said to me, “if someone offers to give you money and they are carrying drugs or migrants, you put that money in your pocket. We don’t enter those illicit things in the cadena.”

While enabling these flows, cadena practices in relation to more dangerous types of activities also keep locals at a safe physical and moral distance from “illicit activities.” Since they do not charge what they deem illicit, they can assert that the cadena is a “legitimate and clean fund for the community” and not risk encounters with potentially armed smugglers. The smugglers in turn appreciate a quick and safe passage. Locals in the passage invoke a dictum of “we don’t bother them and they don’t bother us.” In fact, as one man said, “No they don’t bother us and I am not afraid.” He laughed, saying that he often liked when these smugglers came through “because they buy me drinks!”

“We live from the cadena”: Development and Regional Trends

While ethnography enables us to see the legal and moral force of the *cadena*, understanding why smugglers might prefer to commercialize their products through this passageway than through the official border post, how much business are we actually talking about? Last year 24,000 tons of corn passed through this passage and one community's *cadena* collected nearly \$US 60,000. Recently one of the communities even *loaned* money to the local government office that had promised to conduct local road repairs. Meanwhile, nearby customs officials say that "nothing passes through here," referring to the official border post. At the same time, most admit that the larger region here has experienced tremendous growth in the last ten years due to commerce with Guatemala. So where is all this commerce going? Where should we be looking to understand these trends?

There are other pathways similar to the one I describe here that also charge taxes, although most believe that this one is the most trafficked. Similarly, below the official post at Ciudad Hidalgo, contraband runs across the river under the gaze of officials positioned above. However, in most cases we would assume businesspeople, officials, and smugglers would be the winners in this situation. Businesses and the local formal economy profit from contraband here, in addition to officials who collect bribes on contraband. However, local communities also benefit from the income provided by the *cadena*. Here it is not only a competing moral-legal code to the state, but also an alternative development model.

Residents recognize that the border region here, on both sides, has been historically neglected in terms of government aid and services and NGO attention. Meanwhile, they are acutely aware of the large profits to be made in border zones. Over time it has become apparent that most projects have come from the *cadena* rather than the government, which has served to further bind the people to the *cadena*. Now defending the *cadena* within the villages is unquestioned; questioning it is to threaten the social and economic base, and identity, of the "communities."^{iv} It also unites people behind local smugglers, obscuring wealth differences in favor of stressing the community-wide benefit.

The fact that community members write down the amounts collected and announce them each month creates a sense of accountability and pride. Most of the communities have also set up bank accounts. While previous years' records were often ignored, residents are now striving to document changes in income over time and throughout the year to better understand their position vis-a-vis the economy. While the communities have archives, most are kept in a locked cabinet, that in one case no one had the key to. Or more often, records are kept by outgoing community presidents in their homes. Archives are often used for short-term documentation, and are shortly thrown out or forgotten. I was lucky therefore to come across one of the Mexican community's cadena records since 1998. The former treasurer of the cadena found them under his bed. Documentation allows continuity, responsibility, and provides a sense of legality to the cadena, however, it can also be dangerous if discovered by the wrong sources.^v Yet most community members are not worried about this, and believe that the local government knows about the cadenas and does not have the interest or the authority to interfere.

Since tolls have remained relatively constant over the tenure of the cadena: large trucks carrying ten tons paying the equivalent of about US\$5, small trucks carrying 3 tons about US\$3, and pick-ups about US\$1.50, it is possible from these records to examine how the flow of contraband through the border has changed over time.^{vi} In 2006, however, prices for Guatemalan trucks, which often can carry more than 10 tons of a product, was raised to \$10 (while Mexican large trucks remained at \$5), and in 2007 prices for pick-ups were raised to \$2.00.^{vii} While each community's cadena prices and policies differ slightly, they are relatively similar in order to remain competitive and fair. However, the prices on the Guatemala side are slightly lower. Therefore, multiplying the figures in **Table A** by the amount of cadenas (5) in the passage gives a rough approximation of the flow through the passage. Currently, a community can make as much as US\$4-8000 per month. However, we might want to decrease a multiplied total number due to Guatemala's slightly lower prices, in addition to the fact that empty trucks are not charged tolls and some trucks may unload before passing all of the passage's cadenas. Yet, even

when cargo changes vehicles within the passage, passing through all of the cadenas is most common since the majority of commerce is destined for locations beyond the passage. Considering that of the 5 communities with cadenas, the largest has about 400 families, whereas the others have 100 or less, the sum is substantial for communities of this size, whether the money is distributed to members, kept by a few, or destined for community projects. Compared to others in the region, the communities here stand out due to money provided by the cadena which has enabled the construction of a park, basketball court with a roof, school repairs and pageants, and multiple, large patron-saint parties throughout the year replete with large bands, rides, and food and game stands. While many state that most of the money goes towards road repairs, these other developmental projects cannot be ignored. They have mainly been completed in the last three years since the committees began documenting and tracking cadena income and expenses more closely.

Since cadena inputs are entered each night and day, and then calculated by month, we can also better understand the timing of the flow and the commercial cycle in the region. For instance, locals that claim that their business is legitimate and not illicit since it passes “during the light of day” are largely correct according to cadena records. Certain businesses and industries are also seasonal or depend on market days, and thus we can approximate how they have changed over time. For instance, rises in Thursday traffic are most likely due to the development of contraband in clothing in the last few years destined for a nearby Friday market day.

Perhaps most importantly in the region, we can understand the evolution of corn and coffee production and sale in the post NAFTA era. Many claim that it is no longer profitable for farmers to grow corn. All of Mexico’s state-run corn depots were closed in 1998. The customs officials at Ciudad Hidalgo have never seen corn pass through there. However, most people still define themselves as corn farmers. Municipal records (see **Table B**) kept by La Democracia, Guatemala of all corn traffic coming through this passage in the period, in addition to cadena incomes, help us understand what is happening with corn

in the region as it is increasingly informally traded to Guatemala. Since the community keeps monthly records and most of the contraband is based on seasonal agricultural products, we can also trace potential seasonal effects on production (tables available upon request). Further analysis into past climatic conditions or price changes may help us better explain how these patterns change over time. For instance, additional cadena data from 2007 may help us assess recent debates over corn shortages, crises, and price increases in 2006-2007. For instance, is the crisis real and how did it affect trade?

While still considered illegal by both state governments and customs authorities, the municipality of La Democracia, Guatemala informally sanctioned the corn trade in this passage in the late 1990s due to wide-scale protests. The municipality charges its own nominal tax in exchange for permits, which is documented in their records. Rising flows of corn in the past few years also point to what locals refer to as an increase in corn traffic from all over Mexico, and even the US, that is destined for Guatemala. Coffee prices and production have also varied substantially over this period. Since coffee and corn are the most common products to pass through the border, subtracting corn may help us understand the influence of coffee booms and busts on the coffee trade. For example, in Mexican pesos, La Democracia collected 162,000 pesos (about US\$15,000) in 2006, whereas the community made 630,000 (about US \$58,000). Given that the tax rate for La Democracia is 70 pesos per truck of 10 tons and the community only charges 50 and assuming equal counting of trucks, we can adjust the rates to assume that the community made about 116,000 pesos (almost US\$11,000) of its 630,000 (about US \$58,000) total cadena income from corn. For each year, we can then therefore deduce the portion of cadena income not from corn and analyze what may be causing shifts in this number over time. Monthly data from La Democracia would help us better approximate these flows better since most commerce is based on products that follow seasonal agricultural cycles. However, none of this data helps us understand the direction of the flow, nor does it account for the growth of other businesses such as sugar, gasoline, and bottled and canned goods.

The limited data does not, however, account for what the product is being traded or which direction it is going. It also does not disaggregate each day by truck. Only the amount of *pesos* or *quetzales* recorded at the end of each 12-hour shift is provided. We also do not know much about the flows of drugs, arms, and migrants, often the main concern of policy-makers and locals alike. Residents do not track these items in order to maintain the legitimacy of their cadenas and taxes while avoiding potential harm. However, here ethnography can help us, since where data is sparse, locals are astute. I once “served” a cadena shift with a teenager who could tell me what was in each passing truck without looking inside; he knew from how “low the truck was riding” which signified how heavy it was and what it was carrying. Locals always know about changing preferences and prices, and will change the direction (towards Mexico or Guatemala) of their businesses, most notably in the case of coffee. They also cite some recent dips in income due to the proliferation of cadenas in other nearby border passages. My informants also almost always know if cars carrying migrants or drugs are passing, “you can tell,” they say. “Sometimes they flash their lights to let you know not to stop them.” Learning from my informants and observing the traffic of everyday life has informed some of my hypotheses of what has changed the flows of goods and people over the years.

Changes can also be understood in terms of larger macro trends such as changes in trade policy or police vigilance. If anything cadena records prove what locals tell me, that since 2000, in contrast to former President Fox’s objectives, “officials became more corrupt and there has been less border vigilance.” It remains to be seen what the larger effects of CAFTA will be in the region, which is something I hypothesize we can begin to understand by looking at such informal records and talking to local residents and officials.

Economies of Gaps:

Although I can only provide one case study, anthropologists in other parts of the world have come up with strikingly similar conclusions- that much of the economy, formal and informal, legal and

illegal, depends on understanding what happens in such gaps or shadows (Nordstrom 2007; Cunningham and Heyman 2004; Wilson and Donnan 1999; Tsing 2005). Flynn's (1997) study of the Niger-Benin border also provides a comparative case of border communities that have set up toll booths and how conditions in the gap and at the center are intertwined, especially as states change border policies and enforcement over time. Analyses on both the left and the right, as well as from macro and micro perspectives, point to the critical role that such gaps play in today's global world. It is in such gaps that bandits meet state agents, NGO volunteers meet transnational executives, farmers meet cartels, and in the process of their interactions blur their roles, identities, and any clear-cut notion of the legal/illegal and moral/criminal (Sampson 2003; Nordstrom 2007). Here I quote Carolyn Nordstrom,

“Legality at first glance appears a straightforward concept. There is a line dividing what is legal and what is illegal; rules define those lines, judicial codes institutionalize these rules, and enforcement agencies guard justice. Yet there is no biological imperative marking crime from legitimacy; borders between the world of the licit and the illicit are conceptual. As concepts change, so too do borders. And as cultural categories, borders are fraught with ethical implications...” (Nordstrom, 2004: 85).

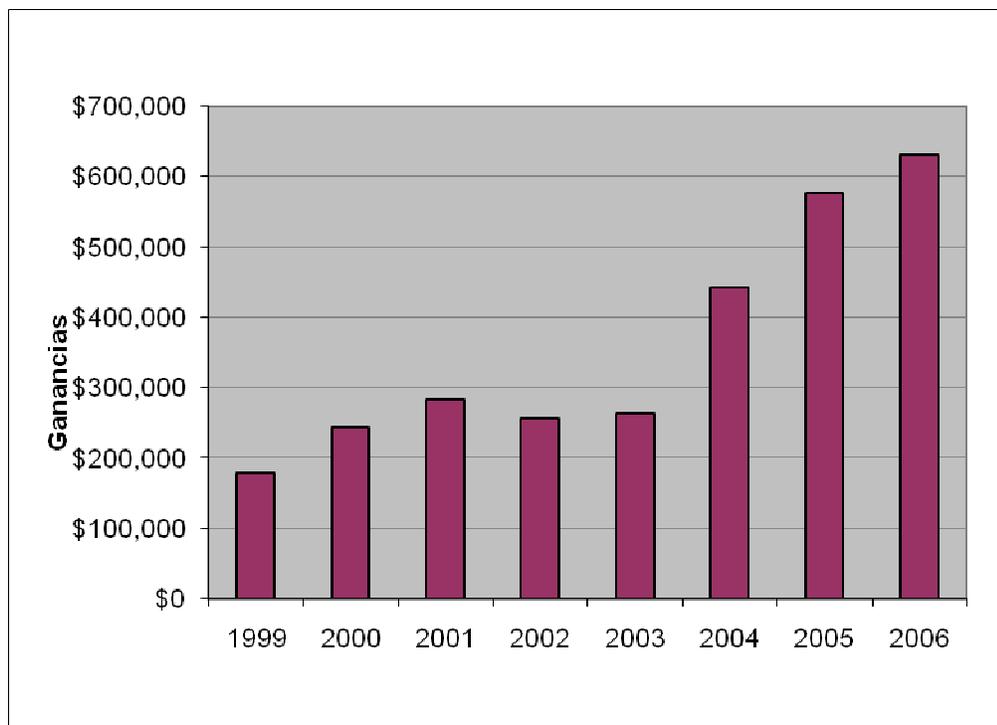
Yet how do we balance the need for numbers with the need for detail and nuance that official statistics hide or render illegal, or even invisible? I encourage the further use of the methods of anthropological demography to study such gaps. A combination of quantitative data, with ethnographic analysis not only provides meaning and context to numbers, but also helps us look at new categories and areas of study. Especially in this case, it may focus our attention to what numbers we should be searching to count. We often rely on political and legal categories of official/nonofficial and legal/illegal to find our data sets more easily or define our object of study (for example choosing to study illegal/legal migration), which obscures larger patterns and actual demographic effects that defy these dichotomies (Hollifield 2000). Instead, we must question how such categories and dichotomies are created, and what the alternatives might be. Following this line of reasoning, I hypothesize that maybe regions like the one I discuss here are not gaps after all, but actually, the key loci in which to examine global transformations in

an era of ever-increasing global connection alongside strong concerns over state sovereignty and border security.

TABLES:

Table A: Chart of Cadena income for one Mexican community in the border passage

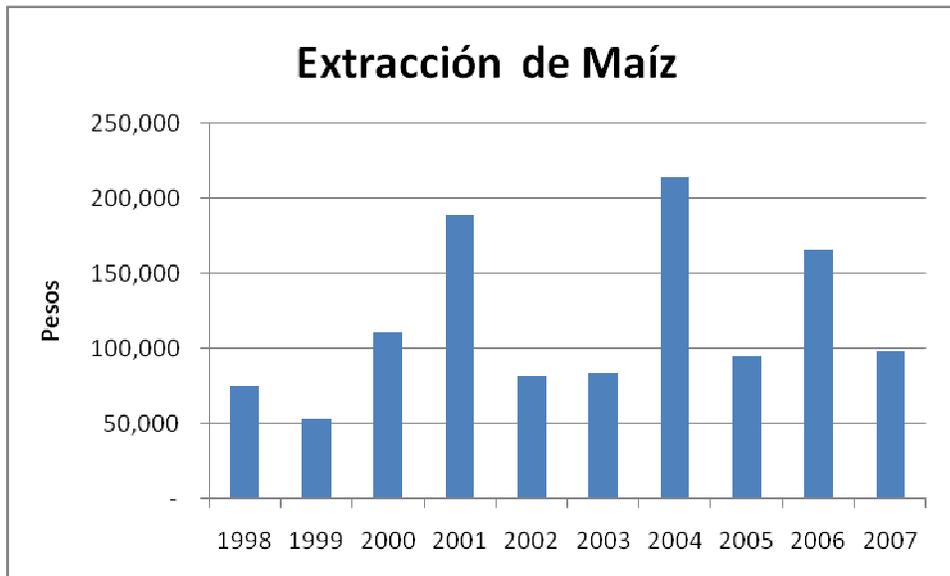
Ganancias= Revenue
Amounts in Mexican pesos. US\$ 1=10.8 Mexican pesos



Source: Community Records, Name kept anonymous to protect identities of informants

TABLE B: Income from corn traffic through the passage to La Democracia, Guatemala. Data have been converted from Guatemalan quetzals to Mexican pesos to facilitate comparison with **Table A. 1**

Guatemalan Quetzal=1.4 Mexican pesos



Source: Municipal Archives, La Democracia, Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Data through mid-year 2007.

ENDNOTES

ⁱⁱ I intentionally do not mention the name of the communities nor the name of the nearby “official border crossing” in order to protect the anonymity of the people who live in this region. While generously permitting me to use their data, I have the ethical obligation to respect their privacy.

ⁱⁱⁱ Village members often have different conceptions of rights based on the type of land tenure in their particular village, which informs their views of the *cadena*.

^{iv} All names are pseudonyms in order to protect individual identities.

^v However, this often obscures local divisions and rising class differences generated by the contraband economy.

^{vi} This is a concern that I currently struggling with, and have therefore resolved to keep the description of the location as general as possible.

^{vii} This extrapolation, as well as the inferences/suggestions that follow, are only to be seen as rough approximations, highlighting the potential of alternative data sources. It does not intend to be sophisticated demographic analysis. Rather, I intend to highlight its demographic potential and future potential to refine data and research questions.

^{viii} This was due to a perceived increase in income being made by smugglers carrying gasoline in pick-up trucks. Seeing increasing amounts go by, this particular community felt that it should have a larger share of the profits.

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