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U.S.-Mexico border

# Crisis and the Global Factory at the U.S.-Mexico Border

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**Since its inception, the U.S.-Mexico border has assumed a life outside of itself, taking shape in an assemblage of fictions that inhabit the gringo imaginary. Contemporary references to "the border" evoke a wide spectrum of fantasies. On one end, there are the standard apocalyptic visions; the masculine tales of Western violence, the invading Central American child armies, desert streets running red with the blood of endless cartel wars. Other times, we encounter the more palatable, Beto O'Rourke-type tropes, invoking hard-working, bilingual communities, "Hispanic heritage," and a smiling cast of multicultural characters who eat *elote* together in the sun, and generally feel very safe. Both visions have an entangled genealogy of course, as the sprawl of settler-colonialism and monopoly capital has always rested upon a contradictory set of rationales, juggling the racial subjugation of an unruly borderlands with a promising vision of progressive, and even inclusive, colonial governance. Yet, in their divergent efforts to conjure the U.S.-Mexico border into a comprehensible periphery, standard narratives miss the place of border communities in producing the world we live in.**

The U.S.-Mexico border is not just some imaginary line where the United States vanishes from the map; it is a fundamental node in the reproduction of capitalism on a global scale. Mexican border cities are home to a massive network of maquiladoras, export-manufacturing plants that produce everything from lingerie, toys, and printer cartridges, to car hubs, computer screens, and the electric wiring for F-16 fighter jets. [1] Over three million people are currently employed in these factories, mostly in border cities, making the maquiladora industry the largest portion of Mexico's manufacturing sector. Since the late 1960s, this industry has withered and boomed in tandem with the cyclic crises and demands of transnational corporations. In the days of COVID-19, the industry is once more revealing its precarious position in the arc of global manufacturing.

Just as COVID-19 has endangered the lives of millions of workers deemed "essential" in the United States, the maquiladoras have become the incubators for contagion in the borderlands. The first burst of infections began at Lear Corporation's "Rio Bravo" facility, a plant producing car parts for export in Ciudad Juárez, where workers began experiencing fevers and respiratory symptoms in late March. [2] By the middle of April, thirteen workers at Lear's maquiladora had died of COVID-19, constituting the majority of COVID-19 related deaths in Ciudad Juárez at the time. Some workers believe that the infections began with a visit from German Mercedes-Benz reps to the plant in early March, a theory that seems to line up with the ever-growing realization that the pandemic is traveling on the back of capital's circulation across the planet. [3]

Yet, the contagion was not limited to Lear's plant in Ciudad Juárez. In April, factory workers throughout Mexico's border cities continued to report COVID-19 symptoms. Although the Mexican government ordered the closure of all "non-essential" businesses on March 31st, many maquiladoras have argued that their industries are essential and kept operations running. [4] In response to the industry's resistance to closing the plants, a new wave of wildcat strikes, walk-outs, and work stoppages exploded in cities such as Mexicali, Ciudad Juárez, Matamoros, and Tijuana. Defying their employers and their unions, these workers have called for the closure of plants and full compensation until the end of the pandemic. Some factories have partially conceded to these demands with plant closures and state-mandated partial pay, but as a whole, the industry's lobbyists have colluded at the international level to demand the imminent reopening of their "essential" industries. [5]

For some hopeful observers, these strikes represent the third wave of 21st century insurgency in the maquiladora industry. Current wildcats are preceded by the strike wave of 2015-2016 in Ciudad Juárez, where workers launched a series of work stoppages and factory encampments to protest the dismal working conditions in the maquiladoras, among them a local subsidiary of Foxconn, the Taiwanese electronics company that is notorious for worker-suicides

and protest at its Shenzhen industrial park (for the intrigued, Juárez Foxconn workers have their own [meme page](#)). [6] Then, in early 2019, the "20/32" movement exploded in Matamoros, an unprecedented collective action in which over 35,000 workers led a wildcat strike demanding a 20% wage and an annual bonus of 32,000 pesos. [7] From an optimistic vantage point, it would seem that the crisis of Covid-19 is creating a new opportunity for maquila workers to once more demonstrate their strength, and build on recent experiences of organizing to create a lasting militant presence in border cities.

Yet on closer examination, one finds that the maquiladora industry on the U.S.-Mexico border is no stranger to crisis; instead, its perseverance and growth over six decades has depended upon manipulating crisis and human desperation as a "comparative advantage" in a global market that depends on mythologies of disciplined, "cheap" labor. The logic of the maquiladora cannot be located within a caricature of North-South dynamics, but rather in the vast constellation of competing maquiladoras, Special Economic Zones, and charter cities that constitute the uneven landscape of global manufacturing. Before we begin to theorize the promises of 21st century labor insurgency in the borderlands, we ought to evaluate the history of the maquiladora in the region and its historic position within this vast web of competing "global factories."

## From Magonistas to Maquiladoras

Ciudad Juárez in many ways epitomizes the U.S.-Mexico border's shifting role in capitalist production. Whereas today many associate Ciudad Juárez with femicides and cartel violence, it had actually entered the 20th century as one of the intellectual cradles for the Mexican Revolution. Alongside its neighbor, El Paso, Texas, Ciudad Juárez offered mystics, anarchists, and peasant leaders a binational terrain to elude authorities and organize diverse revolutionary movements against Porfirio Díaz's subdivision of the country amongst a menagerie of transnational firms and landed estates. [8] In 1910, those plots came to fruition, and Ciudad Juárez became the staging ground for the first major military victory of the Mexican Revolution, which eventually spiraled into a decade of agrarian struggle, civil war, and widespread betrayal of the laboring classes.

In the ensuing decades of post-revolutionary disenchantment, cities like Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez shifted from centers of radical politics to hubs of vice tourism. In the lyricism of U.S. artists like Bob Dylan, Jack Kerouac, Tom Russel, and Johnny Cash, Juárez is remembered as a city of drugs, melancholy romance, and neon-lit cantinas. Although tinged with heavy exoticism, this characterization was not totally devoid of truth, and the thrills of Juárez nightlife enchanted as many locals as they did gringos; a double-sided history that César Graciano has recently recounted. [9] Nevertheless, by the 1950s, local politicians and business leaders collaborated with the federal government to rebrand their border cities, leading to the establishment of the National Border Program, also known as PRONAF (Programa Nacional Fronterizo).

The National Border Program began in 1960 and sought to encourage alternative forms of tourism, finance public works, and even stimulate the local manufacture of goods along the border. Yet, as early as 1961, the project's leaders, among them the Juárez businessman Antonio J. Bermúdez, sought outside help to develop a comprehensive plan for the industrialization of Mexican border cities. He contacted Richard Bolin of Arthur D. Little, Inc., an industrial consulting firm that advised the colonial administrations of Puerto Rico in developing "Operation Bootstrap," a plan that promised rapid industrialization of the island by offering U.S. mainland manufacturers packaged tax concessions and access to the island's lower wages. In 1964, Richard Bolin presented PRONAF leaders with a similar plan entitled Industrial Opportunities for Ciudad Juárez, which proposed that Mexico ought to mimic Puerto Rico's industrial model, and establish an industrial sector driven by foreign investment and the manufacture of semi-finished products to U.S. markets. The early report also centered on Mexican border cities' most attractive characteristic: surplus labor.

For the rest of his life, Richard Bolin would claim authorship of the *maquiladora*, an accomplishment that led Bolin to co-found the World Export Processing Zones Association in 1978 as an international lobbying group for export-manufacturing. [10] Yet, ultimately the deciding factor happened at the federal level. Facing the cancellation of the Bracero guest worker program in 1964, a threatened cotton economy in the Rio Grande valley, and a populace increasingly displeased by the failures of agrarian reform, Mexico's ruling party feared an impending economic crisis at the border. In the 1960s, perhaps in consideration of Bolin's policy recommendations, Mexico's Secretary of Industry and Commerce, Octavio Campos Salas, embarked on a tour of export-manufacturing sites in Hong Kong and Singapore. [11] According to Richard Bolin, Campos Salas returned from his trip "totally convinced" that Mexico ought to implement a similar model in the border region. [12] Shortly thereafter, Campos Salas traveled to Ciudad Juárez in 1965 to announce a new federal program (later christened as the *Programa de Industrialización Fronteriza*) that would invite U.S. manufacturers to relocate sections of their manufacturing processes in border cities, beginning with Ciudad Juárez. [13] The *maquiladora* had been born.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, U.S., European, and Japanese manufacturers trickled into Ciudad Juárez and surrounding border cities to take advantage of the new terms offered by the federal government. Yet, in their pursuit of flexible labor conditions, these manufacturers also sought a deeper level of control over labor. To secure this, they sought early contract negotiations with Mexico's official trade unions, referred to locally as charro unions, which quickly acquired a reputation for siding with management over workers. Likewise, although the maquiladoras promised to employ many former Braceros, transnational firms arrived seeking a specific demographic: young, "docile" girls. Chasing a loose mythology of feminine docility one that sweatshops and SEZs would mimic throughout the world maquiladoras ensured that women constituted the majority of their labor force, a tendency that only shifted at the end of the century.

Despite these "controls," the maquiladora industry proved itself to be incredibly volatile and subject to its neighbor's economic fluctuations. In the early 1970s, the sector was still politically weak, its labor conditions were abhorrent, and despite promises from Charro unions, labor upheavals emerged periodically. Then in 1974, the effects of the U.S. economic recession sent shockwaves to border cities, and maquiladoras began laying off thousands of workers and shuttering their doors. Some even imagined that the industry was coming to an end. Yet soon enough the U.S. economy stabilized, and in 1976, Mexico's economy crashed, followed by a significant devaluation of the peso. Then beginning in 1982, Mexico saw its largest devaluation yet, followed by a wave of IMF-imposed austerity measures, and the beginning of what historians have come to call Mexico's "lost decade," which ironically inaugurated the maquiladora's golden age.

In the 1980s, the maquiladora entered a continuous period of exponential growth, radically restructuring the physical landscape of border cities. New maquiladoras sprung up throughout the region, preying on an increasingly desperate workforce and doling out wages that were now "competitively" lower than export processing zones in East Asia. Colonias, or poorly integrated shanty towns, grew alongside these factories, as economic migrants to Mexico's border cities built impromptu living quarters on urban outskirts, many seeking employment in the maquilas. By the time the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was implemented in 1994, offering U.S. and Canadian firms unprecedented access to Mexico's labor markets, the maquiladora had already established a foothold as the central economic motor of Mexico's border cities.

The days that followed NAFTA were not kind to border cities, especially not to Ciudad Juárez. In the 1990s, Ciudad Juárez emerged as a major epicenter for the global traffic of cocaine, and with it, protracted armed conflicts to control the trade. Within this patchwork of armed skirmishes and turf wars, Ciudad Juárez saw a new form of extreme violence: the gendered killing of women, otherwise known as femicides. Although many scholars in the 1990s and 2000s had assumed most of these victims had been maquiladora workers, new scholarship has shown that this violence was and remains much more generalized, taking the lives of Mexican women from every sector, and in some cases potentially targeting local activists. With the rising wave of femicides and the Mexican government's decision to wage "war" on Mexico's cartels (using border cities as battlefields), Ciudad Juárez increasingly became

associated with spectacular, senseless violence.

Although the maquiladoras certainly lost contracts during the high point of the drug war, the industry never significantly subsided. In fact, Foxconn actually began to heavily invest in Ciudad Juárez at the height of the drug war. Building off economic precarity, local crises, and concurrent devaluations, global manufacturers like Foxconn continue to flock to border cities in search of desperate, and hopefully obedient, workers. In fact, it is safe to say that the industry now sees itself as especially "competitive" compared to other export zones around the world.

## Maquiladoras in Times of a Pandemic

Considering its proximity to the United States, a devalued currency, weekly factory wages at around \$50 USD, and a pandemic that has fractured supply lines throughout the world, the maquiladora industry is twisting a crisis into a moment of "competitiveness." Indeed, voice boxes for the industry like Francisco Santini Ramos are urging workers to cease their protests and come together with their employers to defend the maquiladora, particularly since some manufacturers are currently finding it cheaper to produce goods in Mexico than in China. [14] Yet even more sinister warnings have emerged from the U.S. State Department. On April 22nd, Christopher Landau, the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico [tweeted threats](#) claiming that Mexico shouldn't overemphasize the health of its workers, since it "won't have workers if all of the companies close and go somewhere else."

The defenders of the maquiladora ultimately reveal the strengths and obstacles that working class struggles along the U.S.-Mexico border are about to confront. On one hand, the current crisis reveals the value of maquiladora workers' labor, which although recompensed with atrociously low wages, currently maintains supply chains that stretch across the planet. Yet at the same time, Christopher Landau's threats allude to the very real possibility of capital flight to one of the hundreds of export zones scattered across the world. Since the 1970s, the export-manufacturing industry has silently pitted workers of the Global South against one another in this manner, threatening to abandon their factories at the first sign of insubordination or rising wages.

For many years, it has become a standard practice in North American writing on the maquiladora to call for worker solidarity in Canada and the United States with workers in Mexico's border plants. While this sort of North-South solidarity is certainly important, it is even more pressing that networks of solidarity begin between workers of disparate export zones around the world. Just as export-manufacturing has flourished in a multi-directional constellation, so must worker solidarity in the 21st century acquire unprecedented levels of international solidarity. The ruling classes have mapped a landscape of "flexibility," but faced with a different sort of global solidarity, one that pierces every corner of the world, labor can set the terms of the struggle to come.

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Source [Spectre Journal](#).

PS:

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- [1] *Defense One*, 20 April 2020 ["Pentagon Urges Mexico to Reopen COVID-Closed Factories That Supply US Weapon Makers"](#).
- [2] *El Paso Matters*, 23 April 2020 ["How visitors from Germany may have triggered a deadly COVID-19 outbreak at a Juárez maquiladora"](#).
- [3] *Spectre*, 24 April 2020 ["The Global Supply Chain"](#).
- [4] *Adelante Valle*, 7 April 2020 ["Exigen cierre de maquiladoras en Mexicali"](#).
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- [10] WEPZA Gallery of Honour [Richard Bolin](#).
- [11] Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 133.
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