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Schafran, Alex

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## **Urban Fringe**

# **Ahí Vienen los Gringos, Ahí Vienen los Gringos...**

Alex Schafran

### **Resumen**

México esta siendo testigo de una ola sin precedentes de ciudadanos Norteamericanos –muchos de los cuales son jubilados – mudándose al sur de la frontera. En vez de analizar el impacto físico o cultural que esta migración tendrá en México, la mayoría de quienes comentan el tema se han enfocado en describir el fenómeno como una invasión. El autor de ese ensayo no se pretende en desacreditar esta hipérbola, sino argumentar que talvez hay algo que aprender de esta retórica, ya que nos transporta a la historia de las Californias y nos permite cuestionar la utilidad de la frontera en la actualidad.

# **The Gringos are Coming, The Gringos are Coming...**

Alex Schafran

### **Abstract**

Mexico is seeing an unprecedented wave of Americans moving south of the border, many of whom are retirees. Rather than grapple with the either the physical or cultural impact that this migration will have on Mexico, most commentators have resorted to bombastic discourse of invasion. Yet rather than dismiss the hyperbole outright, the author argues that perhaps there is something to be learned from the rhetoric, for it anchors us in the history of Las Californias and allows us to question the utility of the border in the modern age.

*"The ultimate irony, however, is that there really is something that might be called a 'border invasion,' but the Minutemen's billboards are on the wrong side of the freeway... To use a term from a bad but not irrelevant past, Baja is Anglo California's Lebensraum." - Mike Davis<sup>1</sup>*

*"We are about to see a reverse, peaceful invasion of millions of Americans into Mexico. Large numbers of U.S. retirees will raise the Mexican standard of living, and forge new relations between Hispanics and NorteAmericanos ... There isn't much wrong with Mexico that capitalism and cleaner politics can't fix. What Mexico needs is freer markets, less corruption, and the rule of law. What's good for Iraq is also good for Latin America." - James Lewis<sup>2</sup>*

There is undoubtedly a new(ish) twist to the never boring history of Las Californias – the trickle of *norteamericanos*, primarily retirees, moving south has grown into a sizable enough stream to warrant significant press coverage and a smattering of academic research. It is virtually impossible to state accurately how many Americans are buying property, retiring or living in Mexico, or simply cashing in on what some have called "biggest land rush of the 21<sup>st</sup> century."<sup>3</sup> A review of more than three dozen articles in both the mainstream American and Mexican media over the past few years yields estimates ranging from 200,000 to 1,000,000 Americans living in Mexico. The academic literature is equally vague – no less a scholar than Lawrence Herzog cites two fairly different estimates for the American population of the northern Baja coast (25,000 vs. 15,000 -20,000) in a span of three pages in the same article.<sup>4</sup>

Governmental sources offer some sense of proportion, but little exactitude. An estimate from the 2000 Mexican census puts the number of U.S.-born residents of Mexico at 358,614.<sup>5</sup> This compares with a 1999 U.S. State Department estimate that there are 1,036,300 American

<sup>1</sup> Davis, Mike. 2006. Mexico's Immigration Problem. TomPaine.com (excerpted from No One is Illegal), September 25, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, James. 2006. Invading Mexico with Boomer Retirees. *American Thinker*, April 05, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Weiner, Tim. 2003. Americans Stake Claims in a Baja Land Rush. *The New York Times*, October 26, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Herzog, L. 2003. Global Tijuana: The Seven Ecologies of the Border. *Postborder City: Cultural Spaces of Baja California*. Michael Dear and Gustavo LeClerc, eds., Routledge, 119-142.

<sup>5</sup> Migration Policy Institute. 2006. America's Emigrants: US Retirement Migration to Mexico and Panama; Bosque, Raúl Lardiés and Verónica Zenaida Montes de Oca Zavala. 2006. Análisis comparado de la migración internacional de vejez hacia España y México. Paper presented at II Congreso de la Asociación Latinoamericana de Población, Guadalajara, México, 3 - 5 de Septiembre de 2006.

citizens in Mexico.<sup>6</sup> This discrepancy between estimates of the respective governments is likely due to the fact that they are counting different populations. The Mexican authorities are counting all people *born* in the United States, a number likely to include many children of Mexican nationals who may have been born north of the border to Mexican citizens, but like their parents are growing up in Mexico. The U.S. count includes many Mexican-Americans who may have been born in Mexico, lived in the United States long enough to obtain citizenship (or at least social security), and have now repatriated. The Mexican government does not count them as American – they are simply Mexican. Add to the entire discussion the fact that one in the seven Americans is Latino and the situation becomes incredibly messy, a perfect research conundrum for an increasingly hybridized and integrated continent.<sup>7</sup>

Amidst the uncertainty of the current quantity of the migration, perhaps the only number that truly matters is 76 million - the number of Americans expected to reach retirement age over the next 20 years.<sup>8</sup> As the baby boomers age, the migratory patterns of “the world’s wealthiest generation” will have a profound effect on both the places they come from and the new spaces they occupy. It is a shift noted not only by American migration scholars<sup>9</sup>, but by Mexican scholars and elected officials. In a recent speech to the Graduate School of Business at the University of Chicago, Mexican Secretary of Public Finance and Credit Agustín Carstens noted that the Mexican government expects a significant growth of North American retirees over the next five to ten years.<sup>10</sup> This mimics a conclusion reached by Bosque and Montes de Oca Zavala, who anticipate an “unstoppable” migration, even if the current flow diminishes:

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Dear, Michael, and Andrew Burrigde. 2005. Cultural integration and hybridization at the United States-Mexico borderlands. *Cahiers De Géographie Du Québec* 49(138): 301-18.

<sup>8</sup> AARP report as cited in Sunil, T.S., Viviana Rojas, and Don Bradley. 2007. United States’ international retirement migration: the reasons for retiring to the environs of Lake Chapala, Mexico. *Ageing and Society* 27(4): 489-510.

<sup>9</sup> Sunil, Rojas, and Bradley. 2007. *supra* note 8; Coates, Ken S., Robert Healy, and William R. Morrison. 2002. Tracking the snowbirds: seasonal migration from Canada to the USA and Mexico. *American Review of Canadian Studies* 32(3): 433-52; Torres, Rebecca Maria, and Janet D. Momsen. 2005. Gringolandia: The construction of a new tourist space in Mexico. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95(2): 314-35; Truly, David. 2002. International retirement migration and tourism along the Lake Chapala riviera: Developing a matrix of retirement migration behaviour. *Tourism Geographies* 4(3): 261-81; Warnes, Anthony M. 2001. The international dispersal of pensioners from affluent countries. *International Journal of Population Geography* 7(5): 373-88.

<sup>10</sup> Mexican-U.S. Migration Could Flow Both Ways. *Chicago GSB News*, June 14, 2007, Available at: [http://www.chicagogsb.edu/news/2007-06-14\\_carstens.aspx](http://www.chicagogsb.edu/news/2007-06-14_carstens.aspx), last accessed April 15, 2008.

A medida que las generaciones del *baby boom* estadounidense comiencen a jubilarse .... y aún en el caso de que la proporción de mayores que se trasladan a otro país para retirarse disminuyera, se espera un aumento absoluto en el volumen de retirados extranjeros en ... México. [Given the extent of the American baby boom generation beginning to retire... even in the case that the proportion of seniors that move to another country diminishes, one can expect an absolute increase in the volume of retired foreigners in ... Mexico.]<sup>11</sup>

Mass aging is not a phenomenon unique to the United States - Europe and Japan are aging rapidly as well, and scholars have been paying attention to European external retirement migration (including to Florida and Arizona) for some time.<sup>12</sup> Yet what appears to be different in the United States are the economic push factors influencing migration, as opposed to the pull factors common to retirees throughout the colder parts of the global north. A 2005 Gallup Poll cited by a Migration Policy Institute report indicates that 40 percent of U.S. residents are somewhat or very worried about not having enough money during retirement. Steadily increasing health care costs, the lack of retirement savings and the erosion of what little welfare state the United States possessed are critical factors in the decisions of American to move to Mexico.<sup>13</sup> Sunil, Rojas and Bradley (2007) found that more than 50 percent of migrants in the Lake Chapala region agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "My decision to move to Mexico was mainly economic" and "I live here because health-care is affordable." More than 80 percent cited the affordability of housing as a key factor in their decision. Try this number on for size - in 2006, a private room in a nursing home cost on average \$206 *per day* in the United States.<sup>14</sup> Whether for retirees with limited pensions, or families with elderly members incapable of caring for themselves, Mexico's growing number of retirement homes (based in large part on dramatically lower wages) and open national health insurance system (not only does Mexico have a form of nationalized health care but non-immigrant foreigners can enroll) are providing a lifeline to lower- and middle-income Americans.<sup>15</sup> Thomas Kessler, whose mother suffers from manic depression and lives at a retirement home near Lake Chapala, put it bluntly when referring to the Mexican home, "...basically, they've kept our family finances from falling off a cliff."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Bosque and Montes de Oca Zavala 2006, supra note 5, translation by author.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.; Warnes 2001, supra note 9.

<sup>13</sup> Coates, Healy, and Morrison 2002, supra note 9; Young Otero, Lorena Melton. 1997. US retired persons in Mexico, *American Behavioral Scientist* 40, (7): 914; Sunil, Rojas, and Bradley 2007, supra note 8; Truly 2002, supra note 9.

<sup>14</sup> MetLife report as cited in Hawley, Chris, Seniors head to Mexico for cheaper nursing care: Despite quality concerns, prices prove appealing. *The Arizona Republic*, Aug. 16, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Sunil, Rojas, and Bradley 2007, supra note 8.

<sup>16</sup> Hawley 2007, supra note 14.

## Bombast served fresh, daily

*"If the northern Baja corridor of Tijuana-Ensenada-Playas de Rosarito was the Normandy beachhead of the U.S. invasion, then Baja California Sur is the real estate equivalent of the Battle of the Bulge."* - Reed Johnson<sup>17</sup>

There are many ways one could constructively approach this continental demographic shift. Little is known about the impact of American residents, as opposed to pure tourists, on Mexico and Mexican space and place. How will it impact infrastructure and ecosystems? Will it produce significant internal migrations (and subsequent informal settlements) as did the development of Cancun?<sup>18</sup> What role has NAFTA and Mexican development policy played in the phenomenon? Another angle would be more cultural, *à la* Michael Dear, Nestor Garcia Canclini or Guillermo Gomez Pena, examining hybridization and cultural integration, de-territorialization and dislocation, what Dear and Gustavo LeClerc call *el flujo y el fuego* (the flow and the fire). Alas, these do not seem to be the popular lines of discussion. Rather, the discourse about the southward flow is dominated by the talk of invasion, or more accurately, invasions.

The war metaphors begin with what (Alta) California's children learn about as the Mexican-American War. South of the Rio Bravo, it is "the American Invasion," or more poetically, the "mutilation."<sup>19</sup> While the standard curriculum, at least in my day, somehow ignored the temporal "coincidence" between California's legendary gold rush of 1849 and the war, that coincidence is not lost on Mexicans. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed on February 2, 1848, just eight days after Marshall's famous "discovery" of gold at Sutter's Mill, ceded 55 percent of Mexico's territory to the United States.<sup>20</sup> Mexico had no choice – as immortalized for Americans by the catchiness of the Marine Corps hymn, the U.S. Army under Winfield Scott had occupied Mexico City, arriving through an overland route via the Port of Veracruz, much as Hernan Cortez had done in 1519.

President James K. Polk, whose term in Washington coincided with the largest territorial expansion in U.S. history, was clear about his intentions with regard to our southern neighbors. This was not about the violation of U.S. sovereignty along the Texas border, or the death of a few servicemen. It was firmly about manifest destiny. He states in his

<sup>17</sup> Johnson, Reed. 2007. Taking Baja South, *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Torres and Momsen 2005, *supra* note 9.

<sup>19</sup> Weiner, Tim. 2004. Mexico City Journal; Of Gringos and Old Grudges: This Land Is Their Land, *The New York Times*, January 9, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Available at: <http://www.ourdocuments.gov>, last accessed April 15, 2008.

diary that the purpose of the war was “to acquire for the United States – California, New Mexico and perhaps some other of the northern provinces of Mexico.”<sup>21</sup> Following the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in February 1848, he wrote, “There will be added to the United States an immense empire, the value of which 20 years hence it would be difficult to calculate.” The gold in them thar’ hills made that calculation a heck of a lot easier.<sup>22</sup>

While this may have been the first significant invasion of Las Californias, it was certainly not the last. Baja California, especially along the border, was historically a very *norteamericano* space, especially in the years during prohibition before Las Vegas and a change in Tijuana governance altered the gambling market in the American southwest. The advent of *maquiladoras* beginning in the 1960s prompted another “invasion,” this time from mainland Mexico – the “Mexicanization” of the Baja Peninsula.<sup>23</sup> There is even an invasion that was not – in 1915, William Randolph Hearst’s press empire stoked the fevers of “yellow peril” with an account of a planned Japanese invasion of (Alta) California, aided by allies in Mexico hell bent on restoring that which was lost seven decades earlier. Hearst even had a movie made about the ersatz invasion, aptly named *Patria*, which raised the ire of President Woodrow Wilson, who did not appreciate the portrayal of Nippon’s finest. He forced editors to change the invading soldiers from Japanese – to Mexican.<sup>24</sup>

Ultimately, when English-speaking commentators, from James Lewis on the right to Mike Davis on the left and seemingly everyone in the blogosphere, speak of the current “invasion,” they do so with a strong sense of irony – imagine, *gringos* immigrating to Mexico! Some even work illegally! Yet despite the fact that such talk of a border invasion can both obliterate the long history of Latino California (and the first invasion) and foment hatred, there is something to be learned from this bombast and hyperbole. While the flow of Anglos south is steadily growing throughout Central America, there is a component of the story that is fundamentally about the United States and Mexico. For all that this flow takes place in a context of globalization, it is talked about in terms that require an understanding of the deeply linked and highly contentious history of the two nations. The series of “invasions” have made our lives, economies and politics more intertwined and interdependent. Although it is critical

<sup>21</sup> Brenoff, Ann. 2006. Plunging into Baja; Leading the charge south of the border, Southland buyers are snatching up bargain-priced retirement or second homes on the beach, *Los Angeles Times*, October 22, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> For an history of Baja, see Lucero, Hector Manuel. 2003. Peopling Baja California in *Postborder City: Cultural Spaces of Bajalta California*. Michael Dear and Gustavo LeClerc, eds., Routledge.

<sup>24</sup> Daniels, Roger. 1977. *The Politics of Prejudice*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

that we examine in more depth the economic, infrastructure and cultural challenges posed by the *agringamiento* of Mexico, these discourses of invasion force us to reconsider and remember our intertwined pasts. Although the gold in this case is not buried in the ground – it is the ground – remembering invasions real and imagined, and the capital incentives behind them, can help us think beyond the immediate impacts of the phenomenon and towards an alternative future. Hopefully, the unavoidable irony of this most recent invasion will allow a deeper and wider questioning of the continent's outmoded political geography, and to consider whether it is not the border itself, which is anachronistic in the current version of Las Californias.

*Alex Schafran is a doctoral student in the Department of City and Regional Planning. His research focuses on the changing geographies of race and class and the politics of space in North American cities.*

*Alex Schafran es estudiante del doctorado en el Departamento de Planeación Urbana y Regional en la Universidad de California, Berkeley. Su investigación se enfoca en las geografías cambiantes de raza y clase social, y las políticas del espacio en ciudades de Norte América.*