CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Culture, Politics, and Informal Economies at the U.S.–Mexico Border

The U.S.–Mexico border, once considered the periphery of both countries, is now at the center of global economic change in the late capitalist period. Mexico's Border Industrialization Program of 1965 helped initiate this shift, and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) consolidated it. Despite these ostensibly promising formal policy changes, the heart of life at the borderlands involves people in transition: migrant people who, seeking a better life, move toward and across borderlines, as well as people who live within a transition zone.

The Meaning of Borders

We who live at the border have long been inspired by the work of border scholars in core disciplines like history and sociology and in interdisciplinary fields such as environmental studies.[1] Those who founded the Association of Borderlands Scholars (ABS) and the *Journal of Borderlands Studies* have valiantly mined not only the rich U.S.–Mexico border locale, but binational borders elsewhere in the world. Yet their work has not been as visible as it should be: to national heartlands; to the global political economy; and to critics of modern paradigms in anthropology, geography, literature and other

This book could not have been written without research assistance from the following borderlanders and border-crossers: anthropologist Alejandro Lugo, sociologist/demographer Cheryl Howard, political scientist Gregory Rocha, and the social science students named in the Preface, who, thanks to the National Science Foundation, were supported with stipends to conduct interviews and to code the data. They labored outdoors in 100-degree temperatures, usually dry heat, except when rain made mobility virtually impossible over the unpaved neighborhood streets. About half of these Spanish-speaking students resided or studied on both sides of the border for significant parts of their lives.

fields. While borders might be viewed as special and unique, borderland experiences have lots to say to the mainstream and heartlands.

Borders are not just elegant literary metaphors; nor are they merely the territorial lines that separate countries. In this book I conceive of borderlands in ways that speak to a much wider audience. This audience sees borders as new spaces of transformation and reflection, not lines that separate or mark difference. It sees borders in many places, even inside a country's heartland. This audience wonders about ambitious state-driven modernization projects, plans sometimes undone by poverty, by people's resistance, by skewed political participation, or by the planners' own inadequate vision. This audience understands the importance of the everyday lives of people making work and homes for themselves. This audience, further, listens for people's voices through methodical and transparent samples, rather than through official numbers and high-level abstractions about global capital and industrial forces. The highly contentious concept around which this understanding has evolved is *informality*, a concept born in economics but gradually rescued therefrom by a highly eclectic literature.[2] Yet this audience appreciates that informal work and self-help housing occur in context, including contexts of public policies and politics that steer reality in more or less significant ways.

Renato Rosaldo challenges classic definitions of culture and makes central the "zones of difference within and between cultures," at borderlands of all kinds: "sites of creative cultural production that require investigation."[3] Why, he asks, are those with full citizenship deemed uninteresting in cultural terms? What better place to examine criss-crossing borderlands than at an international border, where the lines drawn by nation, gender, ethnicity, formal employment, immigration, citizenship, neighborhood, community, and by public regulations for each nation and for border crossing itself are enforced by multilevel hierarchical bureaucracies?

The pages that follow present the U.S.–Mexico borderlands as counterhegemonic sites. Beneath the veneer of formal rules, political machinery, immigration laws, and gender constructions, people move, work, shelter themselves, and otherwise engage in creative cultural production. But it is a counterhegemony with little *political* recourse—though it has more recourse in Mexico than in the United States. Civil society is much more than that which the state authorizes, but the terms of people's engagement with government

set boundaries around policy agendas. Modern government in the United States, along with the aspirant modernism of northern Mexico's opposition party, now in government, uses policy rhetoric that strips informality of its public legitimacy. Organizing around informality is difficult, given people's extensive noncompliance with petty regulations. However, just beneath the surface of state-authorized political engagement and regulation is a complex and rich mosaic. It has the potential, if people operate with openness and trust, to transform political communities.

Research in a Border Economy

This book begins with the working hypothesis that people generate income and develop their housing informally on *both* sides of the U.S.–Mexico border, in sizable, perhaps comparable, numbers. It also assumes that differences of gender, spatial location, and income exist, both across and within social, political, and geographic borderlines. Certainly, we would not be surprised to find sizable amounts of informality for Mexico; its presence has been documented in a rich academic and official literature. But comparable informality would be surprising for the United States. Literature on informality in the United States is narrow and sparse, based on the assumption that informality is either minimal, criminal, or segregated within immigrant and poverty enclaves. I challenge these assumptions.

To measure and document these expectations, I look at three matched neighborhoods in Ciudad Juárez and in El Paso, a combined metropolitan area of two million people. This area is the largest urban area joining the so-called first and third worlds, north and south, or rich and poor countries. As later chapters show, the El Paso–Juárez region has undergone massive economic restructuring. It is also an area of rapid growth, a result of migration from Mexico's interior to its frontier, from the U.S. heartland to its sunbelt, and from Mexico to the United States. It is, finally, an area that shares a Mexican heritage, for 70 percent of El Paso residents are census-defined Hispanics but self-defined largely as Mexican Americans and Mexicanos.

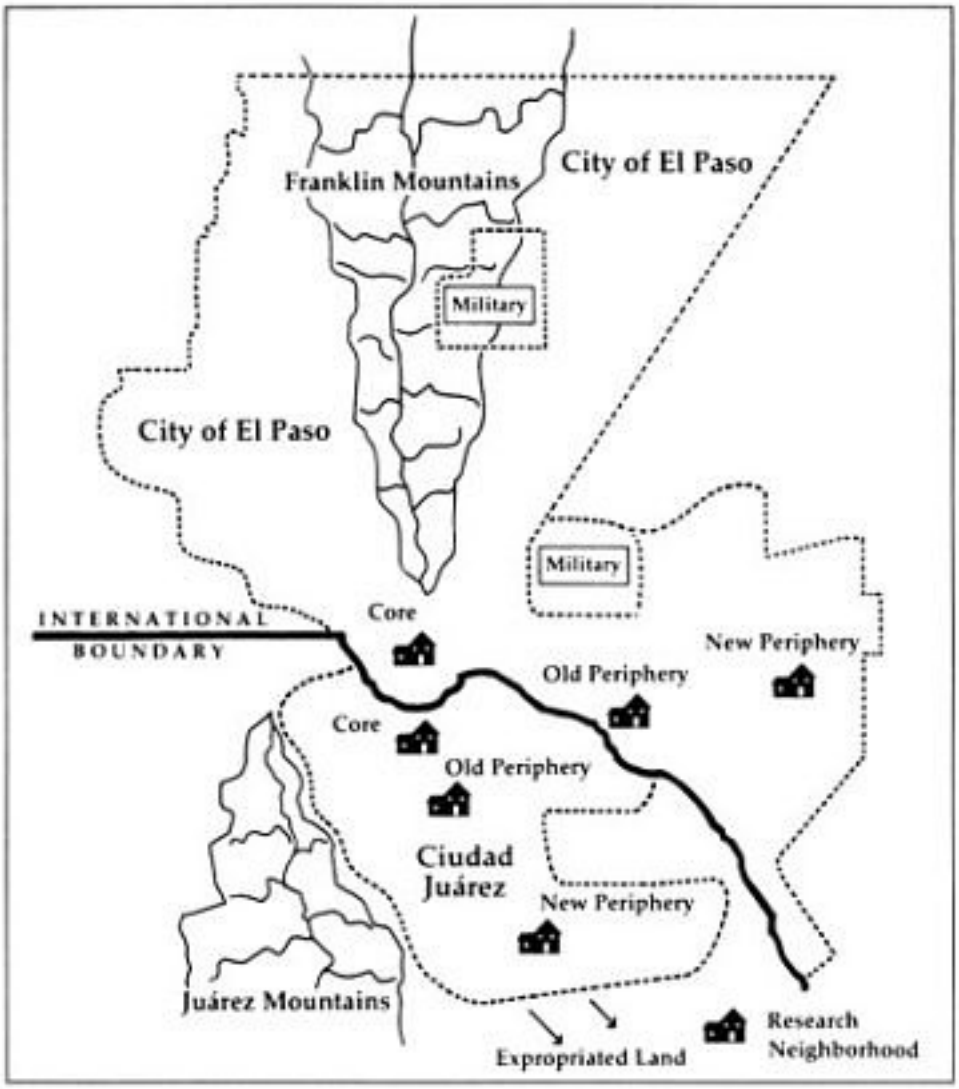
Of the neighborhoods I examine, two are in the core (near the downtown); two are in the old periphery; and two in the new periphery. The neighborhoods also vary in terms of their economic prosperity, with the old peripheries exhibiting middle-income char-

acteristics based on loosely comparable data from the 1990 censuses of both countries. The neighborhood units allow comparisons on the basis of poverty, space, and organization. Map 1 shows the rough location of these neighborhoods in Juárez–El Paso, in the river valley between two mountain ranges that once was called the Paso del Norte ("Pass of the North"), a region examined in Chapter 3.

Where does the information in the following chapters come from? A random sample of 100 households in each neighborhood was chosen, for a total of 600 households. Using a sixteen-page questionnaire (and a four-page supplement for self-employment), interviewers spent approximately an hour and a half talking face to face with members of each household. With a response rate of 77 percent, we in the NSF team collected information on 2,031 individuals in 465 households with 131 informal businesses. I refer to these results as the "householders" or the "household sample."

To comprehend informality more fully, we talked to more than sixty government officials and political leaders; in the text and notes, I refer to them by position. Second, I analyzed census data from both countries, although it should be noted that this "formal" source describes only a veneer of reality. Third, I reviewed newspapers from both cities (*Diario de Juárez, Norte de Ciudad Juárez* [Juárez], El Paso *Times*) every day from 1991 through 1995. Fourth, we collected information from particular informal workers, or "informals," such as street vendors and cross-border traders, in smaller, nonrandom samples numbering a hundred or fewer each. These samples are referred to specifically in the text and notes. Finally, I drew on participant observation, from unobtrusive immersion in city council and planning meetings and on streets to active years of service in Seeds Across the Border, a nongovernment cross-border organization that put some of the research findings to use.

This design allowed me to use comparative analysis to explain the extensiveness of informality, the spaces in which it flourishes, its viability, and its connection to various aspects of people's lives. I was particularly interested in the comparative political laboratories: Mexico and the United States, the states of Texas and Chihuahua, and local governments in El Paso City/County and in the Juárez Municipality. The comparative lens provoked several questions. What different macro- and micro-level policies are pursued? How are policies put into practice? How do enforcement strategies touch people in their everyday lives? Can ideologies and policy rhetoric



Map 1 El Paso–Juárez (the New Paso del Norte)

legitimize informality and its collective political voice—and, if so, where and for whom? And what consequences does this legitimacy have for informals' work and housing?

Culture is also of interest in this comparative analysis. To borrow Rosaldo's fine metaphors, though, neither Mexican nor U.S. culture is a well-preserved museum; rather, both are more like garage sales.[4] And garage sales are more than an apt metaphor, for some informals make a business out of buying and reselling used goods, even going to *al otro lado* ("the other side," i.e., crossing an international border) to do so. Although Mexican heritage transcends the border, residents on either side exhibit a mixture of cultural characteristics as-

sociated with short- versus long-time border residency and with assimilating, resisting, and/or negotiating with the regional and institutional cues that come to be associated with "American" or "Mexican." Subsequent chapters focus more extensively on the recent crossers, particularly those born outside the United States. How much cultural "baggage" is associated with informal labor, self-help housing, negotiated policy enforcement, and collective political voices? Is the real motor for informality the lack of housing and of (formal) jobs paying a realistic wage?

Invariably, people are anxious about the methods used in studies of informality. We collected information from multiple sources through purposive and random samples. In purposefully sampling informals, we talked to people who do not fully comply with regulations, and thus appear on no lists from which to draw random samples. We cast wider, more representative nets with random samples of households, including many households with no obvious informal practices.

But even complementary methods like these do not allow us to generalize about everyone, as the censuses in both countries pretend to do. This book focuses on neighborhoods as units of analysis in both cities, rather than the cities themselves. The neighborhoods represent low- and middle-income residents, rather than wealthy ones; thus the study neither generalizes patterns to whole cities nor includes their minorities of privileged residents.[5]

Concerns about studies like this include the extent to which people will respond honestly to queries if they perceive risk. We in the research team gave considerable attention to questionnaire wording and translation, and tried to get at the different ways people conceive of "informality." There were no questions about drugs, sex, gambling, or other illegal goods and services. Besides the respected guarantees of anonymity, including the decision to keep neighborhood locations anonymous, Spanish-speaking student interviewers—wearing visible identification—distanced this research from the surveillance various government agents sporadically exercise over people at the border (and elsewhere). Our face-to-face interviews probably increased validity, compared with the use of mail-in questionnaires or phone queries.

Interviewers encountered surprising frankness, particularly about documents and income-generation. Invariably, they heard and recorded "don't know" and "hard to say" responses. Prior to the large-