

# Development Asymmetries in the Tijuana-San Diego Region: Reflections on a Historical Dependence

## Asimetrías del desarrollo en la región Tijuana-San Diego: reflexiones sobre una dependencia histórica

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### ABSTRACT

The Tijuana-San Diego transborder region intrigues us due to its transversal and asymmetrical relationships. The development in the border region between Mexico and the United States has a turbulent origin since the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which divides spaces that were once part of the same territory. This study aims to identify the origins of asymmetrical development on Mexico's northern border from a critical perspective. It examines this territorial boundary at two pivotal moments for development: the division and constitution of the California's, 1848, and the Volstead Act (Prohibition Law), 1919. This analysis reveals a divergent space that shapes processes of constant dependence and transversal relationships characterized by unequal territorial activities in a transnational core-periphery relation, also known as semi-periphery.

**Key words:** border, core-periphery, dependency, development, San Diego, Tijuana.

### RESUMEN

La región transfronteriza Tijuana-San Diego nos intriga por sus relaciones transversales y asimétricas. El desarrollo en la región fronteriza entre México y Estados Unidos tiene un origen turbulento desde la firma del Tratado de Guadalupe Hidalgo, que dividió espacios que alguna vez formaron parte del mismo territorio. Este estudio tiene como objetivo identificar los orígenes del desarrollo asimétrico en la frontera norte de México desde una perspectiva crítica. Examina esta frontera territorial en dos momentos clave para el desarrollo: la división y constitución de las Californias en 1848, y la Ley Volstead (Ley de Prohibición) de 1919. Este análisis revela un espacio divergente que da forma a procesos de constante dependencia y relaciones transversales, caracterizados por actividades territoriales desiguales en una relación transnacional de núcleo-periferia, también conocida como semiperiferia.

**Palabras clave:** frontera, núcleo-periferia, dependencia, desarrollo, San Diego, Tijuana.

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## INTRODUCTION

Development is a multifactorial concept that takes a specific direction when related to the study of borders as divergent and complex spaces. Identifying the causes of development asymmetries in border regions is a multifaceted task due to their intricate background: spatial inequalities, the process of historical dependence, and uneven development in political, economic, and social scenarios. However, the historical-juncture process allows us to study the background of this complex dependent framework and delve into the configuration of dynamics in the region in question.

The term “region” is polysemic, emerging in capitalist modernity and adopting different meanings depending on its use and the scale at which it is studied (Golubov and Hatch Kuri, 2022). Politically, regions can be administrative units with specific competencies and functions within a nation-state, such as autonomous or decentralized regions. Understanding territory and territorial dynamics is fundamental for social activity. Territory is a crucial element for our spatial and social organization, as well as for politics, economy, and culture (Sánchez Ayala, 2015).

One of the spaces with the greatest divergences is shared between the border cities of San Diego and Tijuana. Mungaray and Ureña (2015) detail the mobilization of workers who commute from Tijuana to San Diego, known as “commuters.” Both cities—and border cities in general—should be considered a historical region with multidirectional flows and diverse administrations that make up a unique territory. This is the result of a long series of interactions evident in cross-border commuting data and road network infrastructure.

The temporal and geographical variables are essential for interpreting a complex reality such as the asymmetric development on the Mexico-United States border, specifically in the Tijuana-San Diego region. The path of historical dependence between both countries, which share a transnational core-periphery region where national and regional actors play a fundamental role, is the perfect scenario to study the elaboration and application of regional development mechanisms that have become a long-standing paradox.

From a systemic standpoint, the configuration of an economically strengthened core acknowledges its peripheral counterpart with economic and specialized asymmetries. The development process is subject to the productive and technological spillover from advanced economies to the less advanced (Gisande Lucero and Pollera, 2023). Flint and Taylor (2018) state that the notion of uneven development is implicit in the core-periphery dynamic due to its wide disparity of productive techniques and practices. In this sense, the relationship between Mexico and the United States can be considered a core-periphery one.

Tomassini (1989) explains that core-periphery interactions reflect systemic subordination. Amin (1981), Frank (1979), and Lana and Marvulle (2012) personalize dependent processes by describing how capital accumulation takes place in urban cores and its scarcity with low wages in the periphery. Peripheral spaces need the technology and capital of the core, while core spaces require the raw materials, including cheap manpower, that the periphery can offer, as argued by Flint and Taylor (2018) and Blinder (2017). From this interaction of dependence emerges a category called semi-periphery. Immanuel Wallerstein's (2005) world-system theory proposes this term to distinguish the divisions and middle points between both concepts, defining the existence of the intermediate category in which the interrelationship between cores and peripheries becomes apparent.

To analyze this complex network of transborder dependence between the core in San Diego and the periphery in Tijuana, regional history provides the methods that allow us to analyze the conditions and links of the most important events of the past that have shaped the current asymmetric territorial development. The importance of the border as a divergent space, with multiple transversal relationships and acting as a territorial division, probes into how these spaces shape processes of dependence that establish asymmetries with transnational core-periphery effects. This forms a territorial ecosystem adjacent to the configuration of the modern State, where public, private, and transborder actors coexist.

This article aims to explore the origins of asymmetric development along Mexico's northern border from a critical perspective, analyzing this territorial boundary as a divergent space that fosters constant dependence and transversal relationships marked by unequal territorial activities. This phenomenon prompts a reexamination of the cyclical causes behind regional inequalities at the border, supporting the hypothesis that these asymmetries have created a system characterized by core-periphery dynamics. The argument centers on the initial signs of this dependent relationship, with the intention of addressing events that may have been previously oversimplified. With that in mind, the roots of these asymmetries can be traced back to two key historical moments: the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848, which reshaped the borders, and the Prohibition era of the 1920s, which significantly altered the trajectory of cities along the northern border due to alcohol prohibition in the United States.

## NOTES ON DEVELOPMENT AND BORDER: THE GENESIS OF ASYMMETRY

The polysemy of the concept of development engenders specific epistemic debates in each region and juncture, allowing for a deeper understanding of the numerous

systemic inequalities that constantly influence territories in a timeless manner and with different effects. The multifactorial nature of development allows for non-exclusive approaches to the economic dimension and transcends conventional discourses. The incorporation of new parameters of justice and ethics enables a comprehensive understanding of the development phenomenon, thus mitigating the systemic inequalities that prevail in diverse regions. The World Development Report 1999-2000, published by the World Bank (2000) titled "Entering the 21st Century" takes a self-critical stance regarding the conception of development, contrasting with the perspective it traditionally held in previous reports, which was usually centered around economic growth, market freedom, and minimal state intervention (Mujica Chirinos and Rincón González, 2010). This has a multiplier effect on countries with constant asymmetries at the borders. Regional development is a recurring theme in the agendas of local governments, which becomes part of their historical process and an essential tool to contribute to the political imaginary.

Territory and processes of territorialization emerge as key frameworks for the study of borders, specifically the one between Mexico and the United States. Jiménez-Corrales (2021) says that territory is a product of a specific space and time, constantly being constructed and deconstructed, and inherently tied to the political, social, economic, and cultural actors that shape it. Consequently, territory is controlled and manipulated through territorialization: ideas, processes, and material manifestations. In this context, the border is a line that separates national territories, precisely located in global geography, determined by the state, and serving as a point of interaction for human populations (Arriaga, 2012). At borders, practices take place between the border spaces of one country and its adjacent foreign counterpart, referred to as transborder processes. Such interactions primarily occur in cities situated at the edges of nation-states, with examples including labor migration (commuting) and subsistence cross-border trade, among others (Alegría, 1989).

The case of Mexico's northern border manifests a territorial paradox in the formation of a transnational core-periphery with semi-peripheral functions. The historical process of the northern border of Mexico is marked by a dependent and intensely complex relationship with its northern neighbor, the United States. This bond has not only witnessed a series of processes of cooperation and conflict over time but also a set of divergent and unique configurations of the region. From the first contacts to contemporary dynamics, this border has been the stage where historical, political, and social factors are deeply embedded in the shaping and evolution of both states, the clash of a country with peripheral logics, and another with a core-based system.

In border regions, development tends to be unequal in all its magnitudes. In the case of Mexico, the nation maintains two well-identified interstices: the northern

border and the southern border. Each one maintains a type of strategy that incorporates the neighboring country; however, the border with the greatest structural inequality corresponds to the part that divides the Global North from the Global South. Ovidio González (1999) distinguishes the shared border between Mexico and the United States as a semi-periphery due to its geopolitical positioning, the demand for industrial capacity, technological capacity, and the distribution of labor and its connection with the United States as a core country. According to Kees Terlouw (2002), a semi-periphery maintains limited economic-political power, insufficient to regulate the world market but it is the most dynamic part of the world-system. This author also delves into the case of Mexico and posits that it is a particular case, maintaining peripheral and other semi-peripheral areas due to its proximity to the North American giant. The semi-periphery maintains diverse economic factors such as tourism and trade, or political aspects are included in subsequent analyses (Farny, 2016; Akçali and Korkut, 2015; Navarro Thiel and Romero, 2015).

Timeline delineates actions specific to territories; agreements generated after the territorial division between Mexico and the United States required a series of adjustment mechanisms between countries that included regional actors for their gradual implementation. However, transborder dynamics born in pivotal moments have marked the stages and processes that define territorial action and territorialization processes. Borders are elementary spatial structures constructed linearly, which function as geopolitical discontinuity and mark a point of location of three registers: the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary (Linares, 2009). Regional development on the northern border maintains the hallmark of constant dependence under two historical junctures that determine development in both countries: the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo and the 1919 Volstead Act.

## THE GUADALUPE-HIDALGO TREATY IN THE TIJUANA-SAN DIEGO REGION AND THE POSITIONING OF BORDER STATUS

On February 2, 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo was signed, officially ending the war between the United States and Mexico (Velázquez and Schiavon, 2021). This event, which highlighted the military and economic superiority of the United States, resulted in Mexico losing over half of its territory. John (2011) describes Mexico's diplomatic efforts to retain key areas such as San Diego and lands near the Nueces River, which were ultimately divided, as depicted in Figure 1.

During this post-war period, the Californias region began to take shape around its two closest and most significant population centers: San Diego de Alcalá and the

ranches of the Tijuana Valley (Griffin and Weeks, 2014; Piñera and Ortiz, 1989). This situation forced both governments to articulate cooperative mechanisms that gradually established themselves, shaping the interdependence that characterized the region. San Diego and Tijuana, as well as other towns along the border, experienced significant impacts from this new configuration (Ganster and Collins, 2021). The division of spaces that were once part of the same territory created the basis for the subsequent development asymmetries.

**Figure 1**  
MAP BY EZRA ZEITLER SHOWING SOME OF THE BORDERS CONSIDERED DURING THE NEGOTIATIONS OF THE TREATY OF GUADALUPE-HIDALGO

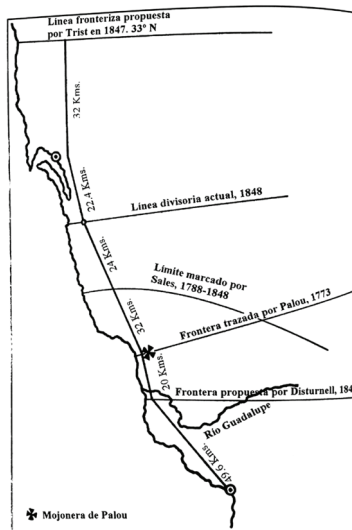


Source: Adapted from "A Line in the Sand" [map], by John (2011).

The historical texts present a wide variety of perspectives on what the border could have been, with the Tijuana-San Diego region standing out due to its unique

situation. Martínez (2003) provides a *sketch*<sup>1</sup> in Figure 2 of the borders proposed during the border division. On the other hand, Magaña (2017) examines in Figure 3 the historical evolution of the region, including socio-spatial variables in southern Alta California and northern Baja California during the pre-war period, the war itself, and the post-war era. Magaña explains that the San Diego area (which now includes San Diego, Tijuana, Tecate, and Rosarito) was mainly inhabited by “californios,” with marked differences between residents of the border (Ensenada and areas towards the Baja California desert) and those to the east (especially Yuma, Mexicali, and Imperial). The views of both authors align in the separation between San Diego and Tijuana as the fragmentation of a space that historically maintained a significant connection, as argued by Terrazas and Gurza (2012) when exploring various factors that link U.S. and Mexican cities.

Figure 2  
 SKETCH OF PROPOSED BORDER LINES



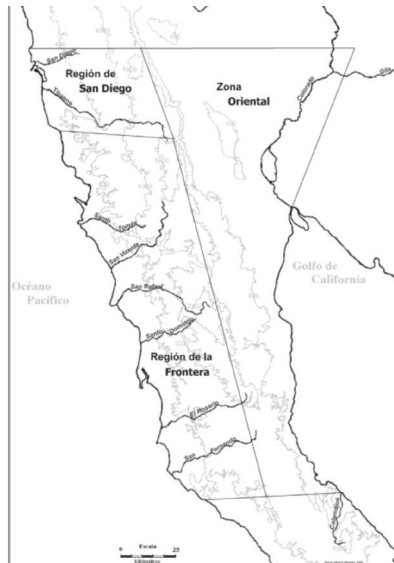
Source: Adapted from Martínez (2003).

Various policies of adaptability, through multiple appropriations of the territory, generated hybrid identities in a cultural environment marked by two countries with a subtle division. Piñera, et al. (1989) describe how uncertainty and insecurity

<sup>1</sup> It is called an outline because the information provided by Martínez was one of the first historical analyses of the region, and may contain inaccuracies.

dominated the landscapes of the Tijuana Valley, the new frontier, attracting gold seekers, filibusters, bandits, and other characters. The region emerged as a territory that needed to be meticulously mapped to facilitate the connection between towns and posts, which began a process to trace the *ruta de las diligencias* (Piñera and Ortiz, 1989). The road from Yuma to San Diego, later used by figures like Capraccio Valencia, messenger during the Magonist movements and the battle of Tijuana, had thirteen posts, highlighting Tecate and José Bandini's house in Rancho Tijuana, as shown in Figure 4 (Sánchez 2021; Piñera and Ortiz, 1989).

**Figure 3**  
HISTORICAL REGIONAL DIVISION IN SOUTHERN ALTA CALIFORNIA  
AND BAJA CALIFORNIA



Source: Adapted from Magaña (2017).

A crucial milestone in Tijuana's development was the installation of railway lines that connected the rest of the United States with San Diego in 1882. According to David Piñera, Jesús Ortiz, and Magdaleno Robles (1989), this new possibility and the intense campaign to colonize the new Californian lands extended to the territories of Baja California. In this context of interdependence, Tijuana was particularly benefited by the speculative boom in land and the sale of urban lots in San Diego, which drove its population growth. The new town of Zaragoza (Figure 5), emerged on the lands of the Tijuana Ranch, sought to capitalize on this growth in San Diego; however, in 1889, the so-called boom came to an abrupt end with the suspension of land sales.



As a result, the growth of Tijuana was gradual. Piñera, Ortiz and Robles describe how a few houses and wooden buildings, with a the characteristic style of the American Old West, were erected on what was then Olvera Avenue (now known as “La Revu”). The discourse of the time reflected a clear dependency on San Diego, as evidenced by postcards from the era showing tourists from San Diego in Tijuana. According to Piñera, et al. (1989), the number of tourists surged in 1898 as San Diego gained momentum following the United States’ war with Spain, during which it became a naval base. Since then, a relationship of dependency has been established between Tijuana and San Diego, in line with the geographical space they share. Although the region was divided by the implementation of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848, the relations between these two areas never ceased, albeit with a clear asymmetry.

### PROHIBITION LAW: TIJUANA AS A RECREATIONAL SPACE FOR SAN DIEGO

Seventy years after the border division, a new juncture was configured, changing the ethos of the cities and generating an unequal process that persists to this day. The Volstead Act, also known as the Prohibition Law of 1920-1933, is part of a multifactorial process that drove Tijuana’s economic growth, primarily linked to American tourist services. Velázquez and Ordóñez (2022) assert that the law prohibited the production, distribution, and consumption of alcoholic beverages in the United States, leading to high demand from the San Diego naval base. The Prohibition Law benefited the northern border, and the modernization of new opportunity niches created entertainment spaces in Mexico. However, it also generated a more notable process of dependence on the U.S. economy. In terms of geopolitics, Mexico’s northern border became a “Lebensraum” of the United States.

Historians Acevedo, Piñera, and Ortiz (1989) recount that the impact of this process was immediate on the population of Tijuana, with the arrival of American entrepreneurs in gambling, alcohol, and entertainment to the Mexican border city. This episode allows for a more detailed examination of a distinctive phenomenon on the Mexican side of the border: tourism, whether legal or illegal, was fundamental to shaping what Tijuana is today.

For a long time, Tijuana was simply considered a gateway to Ensenada or Yuma (on the *ruta de las diligencias*). However, with the enactment of the Prohibition Law, Tijuana transformed into a recreational destination, as mentioned by Gómez (2019), for Americans tired of the morality of their country and who found freedom under the laxity of Mexican authorities.

Within the opportunities generated by this tourism of “moral freedom,” the development of a sector linked to the archetype of the “drunken tourist,” reminiscent of the saloons of the Old West, stands out: the sex work industry. According to Vázquez (2019), the proliferation of brothels began around 1910, and in the twenties, entertainment centers were established offering a variety of activities, with a clear emphasis on sexual services and alcoholic beverages. These establishments not only generated significant profits for their owners but also contributed considerably to the government coffers of the territory, thus driving its economic development.

During this tourist phenomenon, certain specific actors experienced a strengthening that still persists today. Gómez (2019) states that in Tijuana, money was concentrated in casinos, highlighting the Montecarlo, Sunset Inn, Tivoli, Foreign Club, and above all, the Dorado salon belonging to the Agua Caliente group. The location of these places, except for the first racetrack and the Agua Caliente resort, is notable, as they were in the city center, between the first seven streets of the quadrant between A, B, and C. During this time, the famous cantina “La Ballena” was born, with the largest bar in the world, according to its owner (founder of *Cervecería Mexicali*).

Regarding alcohol production and wineries, there was a notable increase, but also considerable benefit for San Diego. As noted by Acevedo, Piñera, and Ortiz (1989), Prohibition in the United States led to an increase in industry, roads, and general development in San Diego; the tourist flow to Tijuana meant that a large part of the income returned to the county, as the business owners were Americans living in the city. Additionally, it was the first place they stayed before crossing the border. As a result of these processes, the National Chamber of Commerce of Tijuana was established. The authors describe that the need for commercial and tourist activities caused by this development in Tijuana led to an organization to defend the general interests of the community, or rather, the business elites of San Diego.

Derived from the dependency generated by tourism during the Volstead Act, the repeal of this prohibition in 1933 dealt a severe blow to Tijuana and marked the end of its golden age. Piñera, et al. (1989) detail that liquor stores, bars, and other consumption establishments represented the main source of income for the city, regardless of the Agua Caliente group and the small portion that was distributed among the residents through Tijuans who found employment in this industry. The closure of businesses and the increase in unemployment created an alarming scenario, according to the authors. Nevertheless, there was still a significant influx of people to Tijuana until 1935 with the publication of the presidential decree by Lázaro Cárdenas that banned gambling in the Mexican Republic. Both governmental provisions marked changes in the tourist activities of the town.

The stage that marked the development of the northern border was defined by the intervention of the federal executive to favor regional economic growth. This policy was implemented for the first time in the mid-19th century as a measure of economic strengthening that would impact the redistribution of wealth in the territories and their competitiveness (Barajas Escamilla et al., 2011). The historical-coyuntural process anchored to a supply-demand dynamic rooted in the city of San Diego, California, became the catalyst for the creation of a market of immediacy.<sup>2</sup>

During this stage, the crisis had a dual connotation. On the one hand, a border market was configured in search of economic products prohibited in the United States, which opened up endless opportunities in commerce focused on tourist activities of all levels. On the other hand, the crisis caused by the Volstead Act in San Diego led the population to turn to Tijuana as a solution, benefiting the latter economically. The dependence generated by this boost led to a process of tertiarization of the local economy, as noted by Mungaray (1989), especially palpable in the commercial and tourist sector. Additionally, this stage shaped an asymmetrical environment focused on the immediate and the unplanned that has permeated the course of development in the city.

## **CONCLUSIONS: THE BORDER REGION AS A MATERIALIZATION OF THE ASYMMETRICAL DEPENDENCE BETWEEN MEXICO AND THE UNITED STATES**

Borders are, essentially, divergent territories with transversal relationships. They act as symbolic and political spaces that divide territories historically used for the delimitation between peoples; however, the complexity of these boundary points of states not only lies in geographical division but also in political and social configurations that entail a notion of territoriality visible through historical processes.

The relationship between Mexico and the United States at the border has not always been peaceful and harmonious. Asymmetries in Mexico's northern border configure a complex process in border history with unilateral actions of power, such as the geopolitical conflict that led to the loss of a part of Mexican territory, the signing of the Guadalupe-Hidalgo Treaty, and the Prohibition Law in the United States (Bustamante, 1989). The historical perspective contributes to understanding the

<sup>2</sup> The market of immediacy is a concept used in this paper to describe the type of supply generated after the Prohibition in the United States. The demand for alcohol from American marines led Tijuana merchants to start offering products quickly requested by this type of buyers; the construction of bars and taverns erected overnight leads to considering businesses grown in the immediate without medium and long-term goals.

asymmetries of development in the northern border and opens a debate about paradoxical interaction, governance at the border, unequal development, and policy implementation in a space characterized by multiple appropriations.

In this area, political interests intertwine with economic interests, shaping a transborder region that oscillates between two state realities: the Californias. The region has experienced significant commercial opportunities and investments, while also incorporating social, cultural, and identity aspects in a process of territorialization that is divergent-transversal. The correlation between Baja California and Alta California are examples that detail these divergences. Both territories share neighboring spaces that, after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848, experienced turbulence. The region of the “californios” (Tijuana, Rosarito, Tecate, and San Diego) showed a clear dependence on mobility routes, the founding of Pueblo Zaragoza (now Tijuana), and the discourse of the time to attract investment, mainly from the Mexican side. Additionally, Tijuana’s economic growth was driven by the implementation of the San Diego-Arizona railroad, speculation for the purchase of land near the growing San Diego County, and migration in the late 19th century.

During the following century, the region became a focal point of attraction with events that stimulated migration, economic growth, and political rise. With the enactment of the Volstead Act, Tijuana emerged as a destination for the demand for alcohol that could not be satisfied in California. San Diego entrepreneurs seized the opportunity to exploit cheap labor and legal loopholes in Tijuana’s tourism sector. This form of labor specialization laid the foundation for one of the city’s most important productive sectors to this day. The downtown area was promoted for the positioning of tertiary economic activities. In this context, Prohibition marked more directly the beginning of Tijuana’s clear dependence on San Diego.

This case study clearly demonstrates the dependent connection between Mexico and the United States. The opportunity for capital investment in areas of opportunity for the northern country was combined with the advantages offered by the Global South in the region. The dependence generated during the historical process, mainly in economic sectors, shaped the construction of a transnational center-periphery under a semi-peripheral logic: San Diego maintains a status as a center, although the case of Tijuana is notably different due to its infrastructure and processes of uneven development. The semi-peripheral argument proposes that Tijuana cannot be considered a center, nor can it be classified completely as a periphery.

The city of Tijuana encompasses peripheral processes, and it is as a result of the Prohibition Era that a possible semi-periphery begins to be perceived. While its peripheral status is undeniable, the confirmation of the postulates of this research opens a debate about its semi-peripheral condition and the need for an in-depth analysis,

along with an evaluation of subsequent events in the asymmetric link between San Diego and Tijuana. However, the events described in this research are sufficient to argue the factors that contributed to population and economic growth during the period 1848-1930: a systemic and asymmetric dependence.

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