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Contents

- Migrants trafficking and individual strategies: the formation of dynamic channels in international migration **1**
- JOÃO PEIXOTO
- Ethnic Residential Segregation and Assimilation in British Towns and Cities: a Comparison of those claiming Single and Dual Ethnic Identities **11**
- RON JOHNSTON, MICHAEL POULSEN AND JAMES FORREST
- Ethnic conflict, wars and international migration of Turkmen: evidence from Iraq **31**
- IBRAHIM SIRKECI
- Mental Health Workforce Collaboration and Partnership: Towards a response to World Health Assembly Resolution WHA 57.19 **43**
- NICHOLAS G. PROCTER
- International migration between Finland and the Baltic Sea Region **53**
- ELLI HEIKKILÄ
- Haciendo de Tripas el Corazón/Plucking Up Courage: Migration, Family Internal Conflict, and Gender in Veronica's Story **67**
- HILARY PARSONS DICK
- Where do they go? "A day without a Mexican," a perspective from south of the border **77**
- JEFFREY H. COHEN
- Book reviews
- Embracing the Infidel* by Yaghmaian, Behzad **87**

Where do they go? “A day without a Mexican,” a perspective from south of the border

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Abstract

The author uses the film “A day without a Mexican” to explore Mexican-US migration and to examine current US policy on immigration and in particular, US attitudes toward undocumented Mexican migrant workers.

Keywords: Mexican migration, labor, remittances, Oaxaca.

In the film, “a day without a Mexican” the audience watches as Anglo Americans in California deal with the loss of the state’s hidden underclass—the Mexican immigrant worker. Mexicans have disappeared, they are not around to work in fields, care for the elderly, fill service positions, fix leaky drains, or staff restaurants. The film is heavy handed in its politics and clear in its evaluation of the situation. For Californians, the loss of Mexicans means the state can no longer function—Mexicans are truly the underclass, carrying the burden of the state; needed but ignored, depended upon, but with no real representation.

With its Mexicans disappeared, Californians fall into a kind of limbo, caught unawares, awaiting a return of the very people that so many in positions of authority bad mouth. The situation is not hard to understand; we (US citizens) need our Mexicans, but most are in the US illegally,

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“A DAY WITHOUT A MEXICAN”

therefore, Mexicans must be criminals. Fortunately, California’s Mexicans reappear toward the end of the film, and the state begins to once again function—any serious consideration of the issue is left for some other time and the audience watches a happy ending unfold.

What are we, citizens, researchers, and so forth, what are we to do about the migrant problem? Might the US cease to function without the efforts of our largely undocumented immigrant class—Mexican often, but not always? California certainly would seem in dire need of its Mexicans, but the state also needs its Asians and Pacific Islanders. New destinations are growing ever more dependent upon this working, hidden class.

I was recently in Mexico, working in Oaxaca, a state in the south of the country. Oaxaca is a poor state, and the reporter Margarita Vega noted that poverty and social inequality between rich and poor in states like Oaxaca now rivals or outpaces the poverty and inequality found in countries like Namibia. Oaxaca is marked by all of the problems we can imagine, high birth rates, low education rates, high levels of illiteracy, poor health care and a high level of economic and political marginality. Nationally, the Ginni coefficient for Mexico (that is the measure of income distribution nationally) places the country next to Zambia and Guatemala, and ranking below both El Salvador and Nigeria (Vega 2005). Obviously, the push factors are strong in Mexico. Low wages and a lack of opportunity make crossing the border a less difficult choice (see discussion in Marcelli and Cornelius 2001).

Furthermore, the people who are leaving are often the very people that the Mexican state must try to keep home. The Pew Center for Hispanic Studies, notes that most Mexican migrants to the US are leaving jobs, they are not the poorest of the poor looking for jobs that do not exist rather, the majority of migrants are workers looking for opportunities. Often they are leaving jobs with wages that cannot compete with those available in the US. The loss is real and profound (Suro 2005). But is there an alternative? The Mexican state has yet to create opportunities that can rival what is

available in the US; this is particularly true for rural Mexicans and the Oaxacans with whom I work.

With Mexico's inequalities, the lack of opportunity, and the desire of most rural Mexicans to provide for their families, I found myself thinking a lot about "A day without a Mexican." In particular, I found myself thinking about what a day without Mexicans might mean for sending communities and states in Mexico and specifically in Oaxaca. What if Mexicans quite suddenly left the US and found themselves home?

In the remainder of this essay, I ponder these outcomes — my goal isn't to explain all the possibilities that might come from "a day without a Mexican" rather, it is to motivate us to think about what migration means for the average Mexican. Often, migration is portrayed as a problem that is caused by migrants — a problem that we can resolve by building a large wall that physically marks the border and creates a barrier to passage — a plan supported by far too many members of the US congress. But rather than a focus on the migrant as the root of all things wrong, we need to realize that for many Mexicans, in fact, for many of the millions of people who are moving across the globe, migration is a decision made because there are so few local options.

What is Mexican migration?

We know that throughout the 1990s, 300-500,000 Mexicans (out of about 1.1 million migrants on average) entered the US annually. There is the sense that this population is new — something that began only in the 1990s, and only recently became an issue that is untenable for most US policy makers. But this perspective is not valid. While migration from Mexico to the US spiked in the 1990s, Mexican migration dates back for generations; and we can find movers throughout the history of our nations. We also find that the US government regularly develops plans to deal with migration, but generally these plans fail.

Manuel Gamio first documented the Mexican migrant in the US (1931). He found a population that was ambivalent, moving between worlds and working hard on the US side of

“A DAY WITHOUT A MEXICAN”

the border to better lives south of that very border. What is interesting is the fluidity with which Mexicans often moved across the border. In fact, Mexican-US migration along the southern Texas border—particularly on the far eastern edge of that border—was often little more than a bump in the road. Migration between the US and Mexico spiked in the early twentieth century and only slowed as the Great Depression took hold. With alacrity, the US passed laws prohibiting Mexicans free passage into the US and in fact, deported thousands of Mexicans to their natal homes. By the 1930s nearly 1/2 of all Mexicans were returned home.

The situation was quite different when North America became involved in the Second World War and sought workers to fill jobs vacated by soldiers. Working with the support of the Mexican government, the US began the second Bracero program (the first ran from 1917-1923, see Monto 1994). The program allowed Mexicans legal entry to the US and access to jobs in industry, service and agriculture. The Bracero program brought Mexicans to the US on short contracts, and over the 22 year history of the program, more than 4.5 million Mexicans accepted contracts.

Problems with the program arose as contractors and employers abused the system. Abuses included employers who would not pay contracted wages, or sought non-Braceros who worked for less money and without benefits. A second set of abuses arose around contractors and middlemen who demanded bribes to open programs to potential workers. Additionally, while contracts stipulated that a portion of each Bracero's wages was to be withheld for later payment, much of the money disappeared. This was typical among US employers who failed to pay withholdings and contractors who charged Braceros for services they were to receive for free (García y Griego 1998; Ponce de León 2002). Illegal immigration developed in part and in reaction to the abuses of the Bracero program. Some of these workers simply overstayed their contracts—working well beyond the time limits of their original Bracero contracts. Other Mexicans sought to forego contracts and find work independently.

The decline and final collapse of the Bracero program led to a rise in illegal migration into the US; and Meissner notes, institutionalized networks and labor market relationship that spawned the growth in undocumented migration (2004). In response to rising tensions over illegal entry by Mexican migrants to the US, the Reagan administration implemented the IRCA (immigration reform and control) act passed in 1986. The act gave illegal immigrants to the US an opportunity to apply for legal status (green cards) but also prohibited business owners and farmers from employing illegal or undocumented immigrants (González de la Rocha and Latapí 1991).

Migration to the US reached its apex in the years 1999 and 2000 when over 1.5 million migrants entered the country including over 500,000 largely undocumented Mexicans (Passel and Suro 2005). The legal situation did not change for immigrants during this period and overall, legal entries to the US remained flat, and Passel and Suro estimate that the number of legal entries increased only by 3% overall. On the other hand, illegal entries and legal, non-migrants (that is short term, guest workers) increased rather dramatically.

The issue of legal and illegal entry into the US became a political hot button issue following the attacks of 9/11. Currently, the debate over what to do about immigration rages in the US, with many in congress proposing draconian measures, including erecting a fence that will straddle the entire US-Mexico border.

Who are the migrants?

With these broader patterns of Mexican migration to the US defined, we can turn to the migrants and describe where they come from and why they move. In this section, I'll blend information from my work in Oaxaca with more general data on the structure of the Mexican community in the US (Cohen 2004; Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005).

There is the sense that migrants and particularly Mexican migrants to the US are rouge individuals, traveling across the border to enrich themselves at the expense of their sending households. In my analysis of Oaxacan migration, I de-

“A DAY WITHOUT A MEXICAN”

scribe these individuals as “norteños” addicted to migration, and opportunities in the US, but lacking connections to sending communities and families in Mexico. These are men and women without a country – people who exist on the margins between the Mexico and the US social systems without fully engaging either. In reality migrants are not outsiders, rather, they are heads of households, sons and daughters working for the welfare of their families. The typical US bound migrant from Oaxaca, is a young man in his early 20s, recently married and using his time in the US to organize resources to support his household, put together money necessary to build or remodel a home and educate his children – not as typical were older migrants who remitted to support business start ups, or migrated to gain access to health care. I found that nearly all of the migrants (80%) were young men supporting newly established families. They traveled to the US for an average of 8 years, and remitted funds for about half of the time; sending on average \$540 every month. The women who migrated to the US also went as members of families, although more often as daughters supporting parents not mothers/wives supporting families. Also, women tended to remit only about ½ as much as men (for details on Oaxacan migration see Cohen 2004). If this sounds like a lot of money, it is. Oaxacans typically earn about \$5.00 a day or around 50 pesos.

It is also clear that the total number of Mexicans in the US is very high, and it is estimated that just less than 10% of the nation’s population is currently in the US (or about 13 million people). Oaxacans, while a large group in southern California and western Oregon for example are actually a small part of the overall Mexican migrant community living in the US. INEGI estimates they are perhaps 4% of the total Mexican community in the US. Similarly, states like Chiapas, Vera Cruz and Guerrero send far fewer migrants than do the central Mexican states. The states with the largest migrant populations also have rich histories of movement and a far more diverse community of movers and they include states like Zacatecas, Michoacán, and Guanajuato. In these states, it is often more likely that we will encounter women migrat-

ing alone or as household heads. Zacatecas is also home to many migrant associations, or groups of migrants who support local development projects and play an active role in local political life (Orozco 2002).

Regardless of their state of origin, educational background, experience and age, most Mexican migrants seek work in the North American service industry (restaurant and hotel work for example), construction and agriculture (although fewer Mexicans are moving into agriculture than we might think).

What is to be done?

If we can imagine a day without a Mexican, what would we really find? Certainly, many service jobs would go unfilled. In restaurants, dishes would go unwashed. In homes, beds would go unmade, yards would be uncut. We'd likely manage; we might have to do a few chores we hadn't thought about, we would certainly pay a good deal more for services and goods that we've come to expect. US businessmen and women wouldn't have a cheap pool of skilled, semiskilled and unskilled labor at hand, but we'd manage.

In Mexico, the situation would be a bit different. Unemployment rates would sky rocket as millions of workers who are no longer a part of the Mexican labor market come home and need jobs that are not available. For those who can find a job, the prospects are not good. If they are from a poorer southern state, over $\frac{3}{4}$ of the returnees will find that they cannot earn a living wage. Nationally, at least 40% of the total will live under the poverty line and at least $\frac{1}{4}$ will be underemployed. There are few services for these returnees to access. You might think, well, these returnees can go back to the farm. In the past, that may have been an option, but Mexico is actually an urban country and the majority of the population now lives in cities.

It is estimated the Mexicans remitted over 21.5 billion dollars in 2005. Along with oil revenues, remittances are critical not just for households, but also as a source of capital for the country at large. In a national sense then, remittances allow the country's central banks to establish a positive balance of

“A DAY WITHOUT A MEXICAN”

trade. Of course, these national statistics don't mean much for migrants who are trying to fix their home. For these individuals, remittances are critical—wages are very low. In response, in Zacatecas, the *tres por uno* program matches remittances that go to infrastructural improvements, 3 for 1, an important source of capital for large projects, but without migration, these would of end.

Migration is not a new issue, and the rates of entry today are not that different from those of the early 20th century—in fact, as a percentage of the overall population; migration is not as great now as it was then (Passel and Suro 2005). Is this a wave to be feared, or are we simply fearful? US citizens believe that migrants take jobs from legal, native born individuals. Yet, there is little evidence for such a shift. In fact, some authors note that the arrival of Mexicans as well as other immigrants' supports US communities (see the volume edited by Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005).

The issue then, isn't about immigrants, it is about their status, and if I may be so bold, who the migrants are and where they come from. It is also about countries that will not, or cannot rationally deal with the problem. If we were to experience “a day without a Mexican” does anyone expect that the next group of immigrants won't be right behind waiting to fill the empty slots? What will we do then? It is obvious that something needs to change, but rather than building a new migration policy that includes a barrier maybe we should push for programs that begin to answer the real problems that have caused migration. What are these? First, we need governments to address the cause of migration, not the effect, in other words, build toward humane policies, policies based upon basic tenets of human rights—that we all have a right to live well. This isn't simply an issue for the US, but it is also one for Mexico. In more concrete terms, we need to press both countries to invest in job creation (jobs that pay well) and in Mexico the continued expansion of infrastructure to support economic growth. We also need governments to invest in the basics that make life liveable, access to clean water, education, healthcare and leisure. These changes need to come before bureaucrats and

politicians line their pockets. We also need to encourage employers to pay legitimate wages and to be held accountable for misused or misplaced money. Promoting a guest worker program rather than building a wall is one step in this process. And this then is the real lesson of “a day without a Mexican”; we can’t deal with migration outcomes by focusing on migrants. Migrants won’t disappear, and wall won’t keep people out. It is only through a dialogue focused on real issues, beginning with human rights that we can hope for a better future.

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“A DAY WITHOUT A MEXICAN”

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