

Mexican mass labor migration in a not-so changing political economy

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Abstract

This article places Mexican migration in the context of the *longue durée* of Mexican–U.S. political and economic relations. We argue that 21st-century migration not only has its roots in the 19th century, but very much resembles its early predecessor. The latest wave of migration is just the most recent iteration of a process of hegemonic dominance over Mexico, a process that has been for the most part ongoing since the late 1800s. It continues to be rooted in labor migration caused by unequal economic policy between the two countries. The paper builds upon the empire theory of migration literature in lieu of the neutral-seeming “natural” “push–pull” of markets and living conditions or social capital theories, and provides a more power-driven analysis stressing hegemony and domination in which the United States exerts control over Mexico for the purposes of exploiting cheap labor and raw materials.

Keywords

Chicano/Chicana, Latino/Latina, labor, migration, political economy, immigration, Mexico, Mexican American, labor migration, empire theory of migration

Pobre de México, tan lejos de Dios y tan cerca de los Estados Unidos.

—Porfirio Díaz, President/dictator of Mexico, 1880–1911

Academics, politicians, and pundits have widely used this quote from former Mexican President Porfirio Díaz to characterize the unequal U.S.–Mexican

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political economic relations during the late 19th century. The statement is rooted within a historical political economic context in which American capitalist production and exchange have dominated Mexico's economic and political structures. Although stated more than 100 years ago, the quotation still characterizes the current political economic relations between the two countries, relations that have changed little in that time span.

In 2013, Latinos reached 53 million making this group 16.3% of the total U.S. population. When this group is disaggregated by country of origin, those of Mexican origin comprise 64% (34,038,599 million) of U.S. Latinos, while the second largest group is Puerto Rican at 9.4% (4,970,604) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Mexicans and Mexican Americans as a subset of Latinos outnumber all other country of origin groups in 42 of 50 U.S. states. By 2050, the Latino population is projected to nearly triple, from 46.7 million to 132.8 million making Latinos the second largest group in the country at 30.2% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). If growth rates remain constant, the Mexican origin population will number 85 million.¹ As this population has increased and expanded geographically, newfound academic interests have emerged to investigate similar questions that academics and activists probed in the early and mid-20th century. Why are there so many Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States?

In this paper, we argue that the current demographic position of the Mexican and Mexican American population cannot be understood apart from the historical impacts of U.S. actions and its capitalist economy on this population. Our argument builds upon literature supporting the empire theory of migration (ETM) and specifically looks at how labor migration is linked to unequal economic policy between Mexico and the United States.²

Popular immigration theories

Mexicans have continually migrated and settled in the United States since the turn of the 20th century. This population has been at the forefront of various political and academic interests for many decades. A valuable interdisciplinary body of literature has developed through debates on the impulses and impacts of immigration, economic and labor integration, political and civic behavior, and the overall processes of assimilation of immigrants.

Early research and publications on Mexican mass migration to the United States conducted by Galarza (1964, 1970, 1977), Gamio (1931, 1969, 1971), McWilliams (1939, 1942, 1968), and Taylor (1928) are considered foundational in the development of literatures on immigration, adaptation, and industrial labor relations studies. Central to these scholars' findings is that the political economy of production is foundational in establishing the conditions for migration and labor integration within various industries (specifically agriculture, mining and smelting, railroad, and construction). It is within this contextual framework that we analyze the political economy of Mexican migration to the United States.

Since these initial publications, a robust interdisciplinary literature on mass migration has developed. Nonetheless, there continues to be no unified “grand theory” on Mexican migration and instead, scholarly debates on immigration have produced multiple bodies of literature offering valuable insights into various aspects of this phenomenon (Portes, 1997). For the purpose of this paper, we briefly discuss three theoretical constructs of immigration as they relate to Mexican migration: neoclassical economics, social capital, and empire theory.³

Neoclassical economics theory

Contemporary neoclassical economics theory proposes two approaches that explain immigration. The first argues that individuals make decisions based on a “rational” assessment of their relative personal position. In this construct, immigration is the process of individuals’ making rational choices as they weigh the cost of immigrating against the potential material benefit gained upon arrival in the new country. The second approach argues that the decision to migrate is not only rational and based on a calculated formula, but is also influenced by competitive market pressures (Ben-Gad, 2004; Piore, 2002; Scheve and Slaughter, 2001).

Borjas (1989, 1994, 1999, 2005, and 2008), economist and prominent immigration scholar, invoked neoclassical economic methodologies to study Latin American immigration to the United States. Borjas argued that econometric models utilizing immigrant origin and certain individual variables can be used to predict the size and composition of immigration, the skill level of those immigrating and how they will fare in the United States. The assumption is that “individuals make the migration decision by considering the values of the various alternatives, and choosing the option that best suits them given the financial and legal constraints that regulate the international migration process” (Borjas, 1989).

This micro-level approach has been challenged on at least two fundamental points. According to Piore (2002: 292–293), “First, the behavior of the actors, which it assumes, is not consistent with the way in which they actually think about the world in which they live and conceive of their own actions... The second problem with standard economics is the story about the human endeavor, which I find impoverishing and ultimately morally suspect.” In sum, the neoclassical theory of migration identifies individual “rational” choice as the root cause of migration, and is critiqued as ignoring the external forces that shape the structural context of migration. In that sense, the theory is not necessarily wrong so much as narrowly focused and incomplete. People do not make migration decisions in a vacuum. What structural forces create the conditions that affect rational actors’ choices? Nonetheless, this theory has continued to gain academic popularity and is increasingly applied to explain world migration patterns.

Social capital theory

Social capital theory argues that engagement in formal public and private organizations creates a set of norms, values, and trust in people that leads to stability in community networks and/or democratic structures (Coleman, 1993; Putnam, 1995). Extending social capital theory to immigration, Massey et al. (2003) argued that Mexicans migrate to America because of high levels of transnational social capital. Social capital among Mexican networks has reached a level in which immigrant social networks are so well informed and linked to the processes of migration and labor economies that movement perpetuates itself. This phenomenon has been coined the “cumulative causation” of migration, or as Massey and others have argued, “the causation of migration becomes cumulative because each act of migration alters the social context within which subsequent migration decisions are made, thus increasing the likelihood of additional movement” (Massey et al. 2003: 20).

Some scholars have questioned the application of social capital theory to immigration. Their major critiques are that this theory does not fully consider the impact of immigration policy, American neoliberal practices and U.S. trade practices on immigration and the people involved in migration. In our view, social capital theory best describes *how* people come to migrate and how they get to their destinations, but does not speak at all to *why* they leave to begin with.

Both neoclassical economics and social capital theories ultimately fail to account for the structural factors that condition migration and the extremely difficult choices people make when embarking on a migratory journey. Leaving the place you call home and family and friends with no guarantee of seeing them again is a major, life-altering decision and process that is not made lightly, despite social capital networks. Such choices also are not made with a simple cost–benefit calculation, but rather, are made only if absolutely necessary for survival and as a last resort.

ETM: An alternative theory

A polemic of migration has recently resurfaced and is gaining popularity within the academy and popular narratives. With the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, scholars have begun to revisit the impact of U.S.–Mexico economic relations on mass migration and consequently immigration. Like scholars from the early and mid-20th century (Anderson, 1964; Galarza, 1956; McWilliams, 1948), contemporary proponents have argued that mass internal migration in Mexico and immigration to the United States are a consequence of the power the United States has over Mexico’s economic and political structures (Álvarez et al., 2005; González et al., 2004; González and Fernandez, 2003; Krauze, 1997; Lopez, 2007; Pedraza-Bailey, 1985). We refer to this model of mass migration as the ETM.

ETM argues against push-pull theories that have shaped traditional understandings of immigration because they have reduced the causes to sets of conditions within the sending and the receiving countries, conditions that functioned *independently* of each other. In one country a push (supply), or too many people and too few resources, motivated people to consider a significant move; in the other country a pull (demand), usually a shortage of labor, operated to attract the disaffected. In tandem they synergistically led to transnational migration. (González and Fernández, 2003: 25)

ETM argues that there are few independent conditions that cause imbalances between sending and receiving countries. Rather, the conditions are interdependent and manifested by a process of global capital flows in which a dominant country like the United States seeks to exploit a subordinate country's natural resources, including labor.

Lenin (1917: 63) suggested this situation is possible only because "numerous [dependent] countries have been drawn into international capitalist intercourse," a process that leads to the creation of an international division of labor. Similarly, Fernández and Ocampo (1974) argued that these processes are manifestations of imperialist⁴ relations between capitalist countries on one hand and countries that serve a colonial function of supplying raw materials and labor to the capitalist countries on the other. These dependent countries are those "which, officially, are politically independent, but which are, in fact enmeshed in a net of financial and diplomatic dependence" (Lenin, 1917: 85). For a country like Mexico, the result is "uneven development and wretched conditions of the masses [which] are fundamental and inevitable conditions and premises of this mode of production" (Lenin, 1917: 63). These conditions in turn have a direct effect on migration patterns. Lenin (1917: 106) contended that a "special feature of imperialism . . . is the decline in emigration from imperialist countries, and the increase in immigration into these countries from [underdeveloped/dependent] countries where lower wages are paid".

Thus, mass internal and international migration is the direct byproduct of political economic arrangements stemming from a hegemonic conquest of a country's economic and political structures through forced economic arrangements coupled with propaganda to justify these arrangements. Gramsci (1929–1935: 13) argued that hegemony and state domination help to create and maintain the particular division of labor. For Gramsci, hegemony is a type of domination not only exhibited through physical or overt force but also one that is "used to designate a historical phase in which a given group moves beyond a position of corporate existence and defense of its economic position and aspires to a position of leadership in the political and social arena" (1929–1935: xiv). Therefore, hegemony is a dialectical process involving discursive practices that have material impacts. For example, the United States continually has sought not simply a position of international leadership, but *the* dominant position, both through having the world's largest military and through establishing itself as the moral arbiter of the global economic, political, and social systems.

This dominant position has been manifested in very particular ways regarding its neighbor to the south. Since the Mexican–American war, the United States has promoted a very specific image and discourse regarding Mexico that first was used to justify taking half the Mexican territory and then to justify maintaining that country in a subordinate economic position. González (2004: 7) suggested that the current understanding and representations of Mexico as well as its economic relationship with the United States date back to the 1800s when “US capital interests sought to penetrate Mexico.” William S. Rosecrans, a land speculator, promoter of Mexican railroads, and the ambassador to Mexico in 1868, made this historical context clear when he stated:

Pushing American enterprise up to, and within Mexico wherever it can profitably go... will give us advantages which force and money alone would hardly procure. It would give us a peaceful conquest of the country. (González and Fernandez, 2002: 32)

This “peaceful” conquest was reached through promoting a very specific and purposeful hegemonic discourse that consistently painted Mexico as a social problem and its people as inferior to Americans, a discourse that continues to dominate U.S. understanding (Carlos, 2014: 47). The promotion of discourse has become a significant tool in establishing hegemonic power.

Foucault (1980: 120) argued that “discourse serves to make possible a whole series of interventions, tactical and positive interventions of surveillance, circulation, control and so forth...” Discourses generate knowledge and “truth,” giving those who speak this truth social, cultural, and even political power. This power “produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault, 1979: 194). For Foucault (1980: 119), “what makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is... that it traverses and produces... forms knowledge, produces discourse.” In essence, power produces discourse that justifies, legitimates, and increases power. Similarly, speaking in reference to literary discourse, Said (1994: 14) noted that literature is not an autonomous cultural form, but rather is about history and politics and supports, elaborates, and consolidates the practices of empire. Television, newspapers, magazines, journals, books, advertisements, and the Internet all help construct stories, creating cultures of “us” that are differentiated from “them” (Said, 1994: xiii). All these forms elaborate and consolidate the practices of empire in multiple overlapping discourses from which a hegemonic discourse emerges.

Hegemonic discourses are constructed and perpetuated strategically. As Dunn (2003: 6) pointed out, representations have very precise political consequences, and according to Said (1994: 16), either legitimize or delegitimize power, depending on what they are and whom they are about. Said affirmed that a narrative emerges that separates what is non-White, non-Western, and non-Judeo/Christian from the acceptable Western ethos as a justification for imperialism’s policies and practices, and argued that discourse is manipulated in the struggle for dominance (p. 36).

Discourses are advanced to exert power over others; they tell a story that provides a justification for action. According to Said, there is always an intention or will to use power and therefore to perpetuate some discourses at the expense of others, and this intentionality makes such discourses dangerous and powerful. As Doty (1996: 2) suggested, through repetition discourses become “regimes of truth and knowledge.” Although they do not actually constitute truth, they become accepted through discursive practices that circulate representations that are taken as truth (Lynch, 1999).

U.S. discourse on Mexico dates back to the turn of the 20th century: “As Mexico opened her doors to the US inspired modernization, a cohort of writers that included professional travelers, Protestant missionaries, academics, journalists business people, diplomats, engineers, tourists and descended on Mexico...[and] in turn began to publish accounts of their travels” (González, 2004: 8). Mexicans were depicted in popular U.S. journals and newspapers as an “uncivilized species—dirty, unkempt, immoral, diseased, lazy, unambitious and despised for being peons” (González, 2004: 8). Through constant repetition, a racialized identity of the non-American, “unkempt” Mexican was constructed, along with a U.S. identity considered civilized and democratic despite its engagement in oppression, exploitation, and economic domination of Mexico. Consequently, the hegemonic discourse provided a veil for “imperial encounters,” turning them into missions of salvation rather than conquests, or in Mexico’s case, economic control (Doty, 1996; Rodriguez, 2005).

This discourse set the stage for creation of what González (2004: 6) called a “culture of empire,” which the United States has used since the 1800s to justify its concerted effort to dominate Mexico economically and subordinate the country to U.S. corporate interests. This dialectical process of hegemony involving both the dissemination of discourse coupled with strategic economic policy continues to allow the United States to justify its dominant relationship with Mexico, continuing a long history of a not-so-changing political economy between the two countries.

This “peaceful conquest” as Rosecrans (1869) called it, was anything but peaceful, and led to the mass disintegration of the Mexican countryside and the collapse of the social fabric of towns and cities. Many of these places were left completely without working-age men, and often women, resulting in half-populated towns with seniors caring for children as if a plague had swept people away in their prime. One can only imagine the effect of 120 years of social dislocation on communities in Mexico and Mexican enclaves in the United States.

ETM provides a counternarrative to popular theories of migration and offers a conceptually sound theoretical alternative to explain the contemporary political economy of mass internal migration in Mexico and immigration to the United States. In the following section, we use ETM to demonstrate how the political economic arrangements between capital—or its latest iteration known as neoliberalization⁵—and the two countries have created the conditions for labor migration

from Mexico and settlement in the United States. ETM places the processes of capitalist production at the center of any analysis of immigration.

The political economy of Mexican migration to the United States

The ETM is a sound alternative framework to study a generalized pattern of mass internal labor migration in Mexico and immigration to the United States. The theory's unifying argument places the United State's economic, political, and social hegemony over Mexico as the root cause of mass immigration. Below, we identify how that discourse has led to key watershed moments in Mexican–U.S. economic relations to show that this theory based on hegemony can best be used to study the complex nature and nuances of Mexican migration and immigration to the United States.⁶

Mexico's first economic modernization period, 1880–1910, took place against the backdrop of unprecedented territorial⁷ and industrial growth in the United States and political and economic turmoil in Mexico. Under the regime of President Porfirio Díaz, unfettered foreign capital investment was allowed to flow into Mexico. The expectation was that direct private investment could more efficiently modernize major Mexican industries and lead to job creation, economic and democratic stabilization, and Mexico's ability to trade with other industrialized nations, specifically the United States. Under Díaz, foreign finance and development of industrial sectors increased to their highest levels in the country's history. For example, U.S. investment in Mexico surpassed US\$2 billion resulting in ownership of all the country's oil, 96% of agriculture, and 76% of all industries (Acuña, 2011).

However, this investment did little to spur any sort of internal growth in Mexico's own internal economy as most of the profits were siphoned out of Mexico in a process known as "capital flight." Francisco Bulnes (1916)⁸ provided detailed accounts of the impact the unequal economic policy between the countries had on Mexico's sovereignty and highlighted their understanding that Mexico was operating within a context of U.S. imperial dominance over the Western hemisphere. In his estimation, the massive foreign investments that led to industrial modernization benefited only the Mexican elite and foreign investors, not the country or most of its people. The ultimate outcome of modernization during this period was destruction of local industries, extraction of natural resources, implementation of coercive labor systems, and the beginning of mass syphoning of wealth out of Mexico, which eventually led to economic stagnation. This control of the Mexican economic and political structures by private foreign capital and the resulting economic stagnation set the conditions for the Mexican Revolution (1910–1921).

González and Fernandez (2002) detailed the processes of U.S. imperial expansion and their impact on Mexico over the past century. They noted that during the Porfirian regime, peasant communities that historically subsisted on farming and

participated in local economies were uprooted and used as labor in capital's construction of the railroads and modernization of agricultural, mining, and smelting industries. They argued that uprooting communities for the purpose of labor integration became the cornerstone of capital development in Mexico that continues to this day:

By 1910 U.S. corporate capital had largely financed the building of fifteen thousand miles of track, providing a basic infrastructure that would insure the transport of raw materials northward and technology south; which led to massive investment of U.S. capital in mining and smelting; while initiating the onset of the destruction of Mexico's agriculture rooted in local economies, the displacement of large segments of Mexico's peasant population as a consequence of the foreign inspired modernization. (González and Fernandez, 2002: 35)

Step migration of uprooted communities toward cities and production centers occurred during this period. The first step was internal migration toward cities where immigrant labor served the needs of the elite and the city. Next, migrants moved north, where many were integrated into different modernized production sites. As a result, immigration grew from 1000 to approximately 18,000 during this period. When these production sites became saturated, they left many with little work, so migrants continued to move north toward the United States using the railways as guideposts in their search for jobs.

Roots of contemporary mass labor migration

ETM argues that the political economic context for mass labor migration and immigration from Mexico to the United States was institutionalized during the Porfirian regime and 60 years later was reinstitutionalized with the implementation of the Bracero Program (1942–1964). This gendered labor importation, or guest worker program, was implemented under the historically false pretext of labor shortages in the agricultural and railroad industries caused by the Second World War. At the program's height in 1955, approximately 500,000 laborers were imported to the United States annually, and in its entirety, 4.6 million Mexican males were contracted (Calavita, 1992). The Bracero Program was the largest state-managed labor importation system of its kind during the 20th century.

This program is a standard example of ongoing unequal economic relations between the countries. The Bracero Program did not allow for capitalization of this labor force within Mexico's economic structure, but rather led to underdevelopment and the localized and national economy's dependence on bracero and unauthorized labor migrants remittances. To date, in large part due to this program, remittances continue to be Mexico's second largest source of foreign currency totaling US\$27.7 billion in 2012, second only to oil (Banco de Mexico, 2012).

The termination of the Bracero Program did not end labor migration from Mexico. On the contrary, industries across the southwestern United States have become dependent on this predictable and exploitable labor pool and continued to actively recruit workers through state mechanisms. With conditions in Mexico relatively unchanged, large numbers of former braceros (many accompanied by family members), unauthorized labor migrants, and a growing coming-of-age working population began to follow the step-migration patterns of previous labor migrant generations: moving first internally to cities, then north toward the border, and finally into the United States. From 1965 to 1989, approximately 36.5 million unauthorized Mexican migrants crossed the border into the United States. Although 23.3 million eventually returned to Mexico during this period, 4.6 million unauthorized migrants “permanently” settled in shadow communities near jobs throughout the United States (Massey and Singer, 1995: 211).

Anticipating this massive population movement, the United States entered into a new economic arrangement with Mexico’s executive branch of government.⁹ The stated intent was to offset the impact that the end of the Bracero Program would have on an already high unemployment problem in Mexico by instituting free trade zones (FTZ) along the Mexican–U.S. border. This program, known as the Mexico Border Industrialization Program 1965 (BIP), attracted corporate investors who built maquiladora assembly plants within the FTZ that promised limited government oversight or intervention, financial incentives, and a readily available, inexpensive labor pool (Feenstra and Hanson, 1995). This program marked the beginning of a more intensified U.S. capitalist production agenda in Mexico rooted in the “neoliberal orthodoxy of industrialization through foreign direct investment” (Chacón and Bacon, 2006: 115).

The maquiladoras turned Mexico’s northern border into an enclave with few links to the rest of the economy. Into the border area flowed duty-free manufacturing inputs to be assembled into final products using cheap labor for entry into the United States or export to other countries. The northern tier of Mexico became a direct appendage of U.S. manufacturing, replicating the examples of railroads and mining in the Mexican economy during the early 1900s. (González and Fernandez, 2003: 55)

Capital investments in the maquila industry have maintained historically high returns on investment, reaching a profit ratio of almost 2:1. For this reason, the numbers of assembly plants have steadily grown along the border region, and since the Maquila Decree (1980) have begun to spread into the interior of Mexico. In 1976, 448 maquilas employed 74,500 workers; in 1986, 865 maquilas employed 227,900 workers; in 1998, 3051 maquilas employed 1,035,957 workers; and by 2013, 5094 maquilas employed 2.1 million Mexicans (Amendariz, 2012).

The maquilas in the FTZs erode labor, worker and human rights, health care, and safety in these industrial zones. With a priority on employment at any cost, the government has sanctioned company labor unions to disempower maquila workers, which has limited the rights of workers to actively participate in

workplace democracy (Cravey, 1998). With 10- to 12-hour shifts, workers earn roughly US\$10 a day, and the demands they can make on their employers or the state are legally and structurally limited.

[Although] the Mexican *maquiladora* sector has largely accomplished its goals of attracting foreign investment to Mexico and creating jobs for its workers, critics contend that these successes have come at a high price. Particularly in the *maquiladora* sector, labor law violations are perceived to be commonplace. Issues such as substandard working conditions, debilitating health effects, and mandatory pregnancy tests are often a part of the daily life of *maquiladora* workers. (Kagan, 2005: 180)

The BIP also has had negative environmental and health impacts on workers and surrounding communities. Toxic pollutants dumped in Mexico's waterways and communities have led to abnormal cancer clusters within maquila worker communities (Gonzalez, 2011). In addition BIP has done nothing to slow immigration to the United States. On the contrary, unauthorized and authorized immigration has reached unprecedented levels, numbering 454,000 in 1950, 760,00 in 1970, 2.2 million in 1980, 4.5 million in 1990, 9.4 million in 2000, and 11.7 million in 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

The Mexican Miracle

To make the case for neoliberal trade, scholars often point to a period of positive growth and economic stabilization for Mexico known as the Mexican Miracle (1940–1970). However, this period of growth occurred under a context quite opposite of that required by neoliberal trade. Growth was stimulated by a domestic economic development strategy based on import-substituting industrialization (ISI) and industry and trade protectionism. Under this strategy, many of Mexico's financial and industrial sectors experienced unprecedented economic growth. At its height in 1968, during the *sexenio* (one-term, six-year presidency) of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964–1970), the peso was stable and the economy grew by nearly 10% with little inflation. A thriving middle class seemed to take root in many metropolitan areas of the country. In the absence of any hint of neoliberal policies (free and open markets, deregulation, privatization), these developments occurred because the Mexican state made a concerted effort to guide the economy and protect it from outside interference.

But by 1976, the Mexican Miracle began to unravel as the country moved away from ISI. That year, “the peso had fallen from 12.5 to 22 per dollar. The foreign debt had sextupled [to US\$26 billion]. Real salaries [inflation]—the buying power of the average income—was half what it had been during the much maligned ‘Stabilization Development’” (Krauze, 1997: 750). The presidency's policy of modernization was carried out without a clear, coherent strategic economic plan and rested on a single economic indicator—the price of oil in the open market.

By 1981, foreign investors owned 87% of Pemex production, Mexico's nationalized oil industry. In February 1982, the peso fell from 22 to 70 pesos per dollar, eventually reaching 150 pesos per dollar, a direct result of a stagnated economy burdened with external debt and corrupt presidencies. Seven months later, Presidente Jose Lopez Portillo was forced to declare the country unable to service the US\$90 billion in external debt it owed the U.S. government and the International Monetary Fund (IMF): Mexico was all but bankrupt and in the midst of an economic crisis (Bean and Stevens, 2003).

Mexico's international debt crisis crippled its internal economy and forced the country into a series of economic agreements to pay its creditors. The agreements with the U.S. government and the Washington-based IMF used the nationalized petroleum reserves as collateral (petrodollars). Many of the petroleum products and the petrodollars that were generated immediately after the agreement, were used to pay this debt. The IMF also initiated a structural adjustment program (SAP) for Mexico to ensure prompt debt repayment. Consequently, by the end of 1982, this agreement had crippled many public institutions that provided public and social goods such as nutrition, housing, education, and health care. Sectors of the Mexican economy were opened to foreign goods and capital services that previously had been nationalized. These adjustments and the 1994 NAFTA that followed caused displacement of millions of Mexicans.

NAFTA and the neoliberalization of Mexico's economy

In 1986, Mexican officials were all coerced into joining the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), now the World Trade Organization, which institutionalized many of the 1982 SAP measures. Foreign industrial and agricultural goods and financial services were introduced in quantities not seen since the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Meanwhile the GATT measures called for decreases in internal investment on national agricultural and industrial production, and local farmers and business owners could no longer compete with foreign interests. At this same time, the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, a comprehensive measure intended to curb illegal immigration by offering amnesty to current unauthorized migrants and creating sanctions to penalize any employers who hired "illegals" (González, 2011; Quintana, 2004).

In Mexico, Carlos Salinas de Gortari oversaw much of this process of neoliberalization of the Mexican economy. Having done postgraduate work in economics at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, Gortari's involvement began during his days as the Secretary of Programming and Budget (1982–1987) and ramped into high gear during his presidency in 1988–1994. Under Gortari's presidency in 1992, an amendment to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution set the stage for the destruction of the ejido system. The Mexican Constitution had instituted agrarian reform that expropriated lands from individuals and corporations that had amassed millions of acres prior to the Mexican Revolution (1910–1921), and Article 27 mandated farmland to be redistributed to the peasants in the form of

communal properties (*ejidos*). With Gortari's amendment, elites and international interests were allowed to purchase large territorial expanses and some of the most fertile cooperatively owned farmland as before the revolution. Following this action, legislation was passed that eventually retracted subsidies and price supports for many Mexican products, a very conscious effort to dismantle, sector by sector, the Mexican economy for the sake of entering the global market (Quintana, 2004).

Meanwhile in the United States, immigration and trade policies that dealt with Mexico and Mexican labor migration were enacted in 1994. First, Operation Gatekeeper was instituted along the southwestern border of the United States to stem the flow of unauthorized immigration from Mexico. Operation Gatekeeper increased the number of border patrol agents and supplied the Immigration and Nationalization Service, now Immigration Customs and Enforcement, with high-tech military training and equipment. Second, the NAFTA was passed, which allowed free flow of capital between the United States, Mexico, and Canada. Ironically, the first measure sought to restrict movement of people from Mexico, while the latter opened the borders to free flows of capital, giving consumer goods more rights of passage than human beings.

The implementation of NAFTA was the culmination of an imperial process to formally neoliberalize Mexico's political and economic structures. González and Fernandez (2003: 54) described NAFTA as having two purposes: to "guarantee a free hand to US enterprises willing and able to invest in Mexico to take advantage of that country's cheaper wages" and to "deny in various forms and degrees to other economic powers the advantage of operations in and exporting from Mexico." NAFTA continued Mexico's long history as a U.S. economic colony, providing cheap labor, raw materials, and manufactures for consumption in the United States while restricting Mexico's access to the U.S. market. NAFTA called for the privatization of state companies and the "flexibilization" of the labor market through "restrictions on wage increases, curtailment of vacations and sick-leave time, extensions of workweek, and increased management powers" (González and Fernandez, 2003: 55). The trade agreement mainstreamed the construction of "a series of satellites subjected to an overriding economic influence tantamount to colonization" (González, 2004: 14). By 1995, Mexico had suffered an economic crisis that mirrored many of the U.S.–Mexico political economic conditions of the 19th century. Mass migration at first internally into major Mexican cities and then northward toward the border and ultimately into the United States was set in motion. As a result, displaced and unemployed Mexican migrant laborers have become integrated into various economic labor-intensive sectors in Mexico and the United States (González, 2011).

Former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari and his Institutional Revolutionary Party vigorously pursued NAFTA as a mechanism for injecting foreign capital into Mexico's ailing economy (Castañeda, 1993). Among those who have fervently proclaimed NAFTA a resounding success are former Secretary of Trade Jaime Serra and economist J. Enrique Espinoza, formerly on the Mexican President's Council of Economic Advisers, who have cited increased foreign direct investment (FDI) as

evidence (Serra and Espinoza, 2002). However, free trade has led only to the enrichment of a few monopolistic corporations in the United States and the deterioration of the Mexican people's economic situation (Robledo, 2006). As Serra and Espinoza (2002: 60) pointed out, FDI has increased from US\$3.5 billion to about US\$13 billion annually, but this increase does not necessarily translate into growth for the Mexican economy largely because the money invested in Mexico is mainly in the form of loans that must be repaid, often at high interest rates. Such investments aim to extract capital rather than to allow it to circulate within the local economy creating a multiplier effect, considered a major factor for economic growth. So while FDI has increased, the increase is not an accurate measure for NAFTA's impact on the Mexican economy because the investment does not automatically translate into Mexican economic growth. In fact to date, Mexico has the largest trade deficit in Latin America, a mediocre annual growth rate of 1.1% in gross domestic product and an inflation rate of 15% from 1994 to 2003, placing it 16th among the 32 countries in Latin America in annual growth (Arroyo-Picard, 2005). Since the passage of NAFTA, Mexico has averaged a 10% annual inflation rate and a growth rate of 0.76% from 1994 to 2013 (Trading Economics, 2013). As far as opening its markets is concerned, Mexico remains the least diversified exporter in Latin America, and with 89% of its exports going to the United States, the Mexican economy is almost completely dependent on the U.S. market (Arroyo-Picard, 2005). NAFTA has largely led to the deindustrialization of Mexico's 1100 capital goods plants: 396 have closed and 17,000 enterprises of all kinds went bankrupt shortly after Mexico's 1994 monetary crisis (González and Fernandez, 2003: 57). González and Fernandez (2003: 54) argued that "NAFTA is just one of the most recent examples of US domination over Mexico and how it continues to misdevelop and tear apart the socioeconomic integrity of that society."

Impact on agricultural sector

NAFTA's impact has been the greatest on Mexican agriculture because agricultural production was once the foundation of Mexico's national development. State investment in agriculture was reduced by 95.5% and credit available to the rural sector by 64.4% (Quintana, 2004: 251). Disinvestment in Mexican agriculture has meant that agricultural enterprises are unable to compete with subsidized U.S. commodities. The United States maintains domestic subsidies that allow it to export corn at 30% below the cost of production, wheat at 40% below, and cotton at 57% below—a practice known as "asymmetrical trading" or "dumping," which has been deemed illegal in world commerce (Fernandez and Whitesell, 2008). The outcome has been the disappearance of profitability for Mexican national agricultural producers. Five years after NAFTA, corn had lost 64% of its value and beans 46%, while at the same time, prices of staple consumer goods rose 257% (Quintana, 2004: 256). Despite these figures, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (2010) cited the growth by US\$5.6 billion in Mexican agricultural exports to the United States during the past 12 years as proof of NAFTA's success.

Yet, producers continue to abandon agricultural endeavors en masse, vacating 1.6 million previously cultivated hectares (3.95 million acres) in the first eight years of NAFTA (Quintana, 2004: 256). Goodman (2007) related the story of Ruben Rivera:

[He] sat on a bench in a forlorn plaza, rather than working on his seven-acre farm. He used to grow tomatoes and onions, hiring 150 workers to help at harvest. Now he doesn't even bother to plant. He can buy onions in the supermarket more cheaply than he can grow them. A crop of tomatoes yields less than the taxes. He lives off the \$800 sent home monthly by his three sons, who run a yard work business in Macon, Ga.

Stories like this have become all too common. As Quintana (2004: 256) wrote, "One of the historically great agricultural civilizations of the world [now places] its food supplies in foreign hands." Mexico now imports 95% of its edible oils, 40% of its beef, pork, and other meat products, 30% of its corn, and 50% of its rice. NAFTA has resulted in the "complete inability of the Mexican nation to produce the food required to feed its own people" (González and Fernandez, 2003: 57).

Promise unfulfilled

The promise that liberalizing industries in Mexico would lead to opportunity for the common citizen and "lift all boats" as U.S. President Bill Clinton claimed has not been fulfilled. On the contrary, neoliberalism also has had devastating social costs for Mexican society. Poverty in rural areas has risen significantly from 37% in 1992 to 52.4% in 2002, with 86.2% of rural inhabitants living in poverty (Quintana, 2004: 257). NAFTA has left half of Mexico's 106 million people (51% of the population in 2010) living in poverty, causing mass displacement of workers and forced migration (Dickerson, 2006; World Bank, 2013). Since 1994 an average of 600 peasants a day (at least two million people) have migrated from rural areas, many to northern cities along the U.S.–Mexican border and others into the United States (Quintana, 2004: 258). Migration means family disintegration and the destruction of the social fabric of Mexico. Many jobless displaced workers will try their luck at crossing a militarized border into the United States. Interviewing Luz Maria Vazquez, a tomato picker from Jalisco, Goodman (2007) reported that six of Vazquez's brothers and sisters are in the United States, most without papers. More than 11 million Mexicans (a conservative estimate), now live in the United States without documents, 7 million of whom migrated to the United States after NAFTA, between the periods of 1994 to 2005 (Passel, 2006). What other choice do these people have? Even if they had access to land in Mexico, they cannot compete in the agricultural market because they lack their government's support. This situation creates internal migration toward the border where vast numbers of maquilas are in place and ready to exploit desperate laborers (Figure 1).

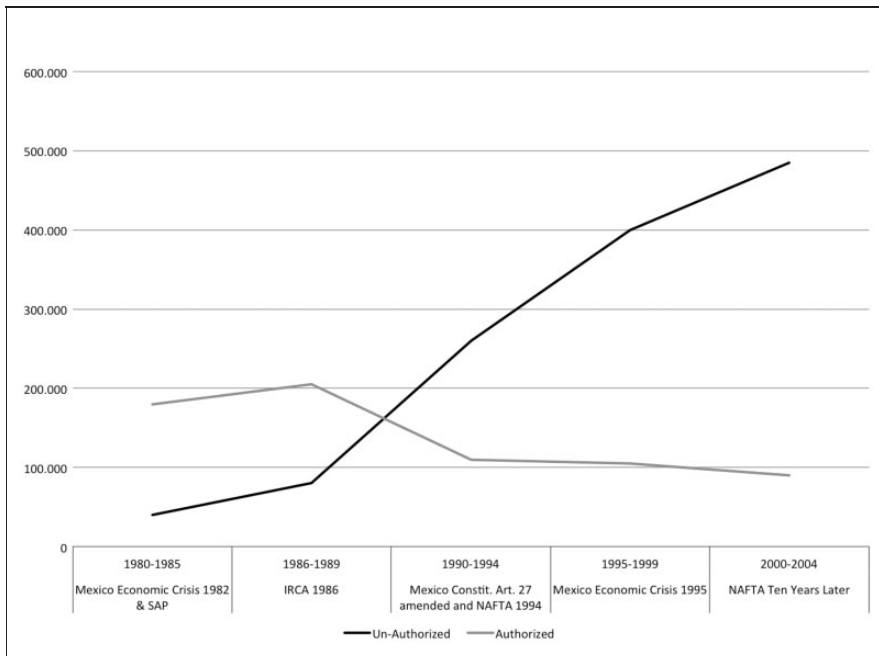


Figure 1. Yearly Mexican immigration to the United States (1980–2004).

The story might have turned out differently had Mexico continued to follow the development path that led to the “Mexican Miracle.” If Mexico had slowly lowered trade barriers—but under its own conditions and rules—it may have continued to prosper. In an issue brief for the Center for Economic Policy Research, Weisbrot et al. (2004) suggested:

[If Mexico’s economy had] grown at the same pace from 1980 to the present as it did in the period from 1960 to [just before] 1980, today it would have the same standard of living as Spain . . . To have 25 years of this rotten economic performance, you’d have to conclude something is wrong . . . It is hard to make the case that Mexico’s aggregate economic performance would have been even worse without NAFTA.

The specter of NAFTA continues to haunt the Mexican working class and much of the Mexican U.S. working community. Since the mid-20th century, the United States has effectively used free markets and trade (under the guise of democracy) to usurp Mexico’s economic and political structures. Today, under the guise of economic and energy reforms, Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution is again under attack by the ruling elite who has amended it once more in an effort to denationalize the energy and petroleum industry (PEMEX). To privatize the largest and last state-owned industry in Mexico completes the reversal of populist victories and sounds the final death knell for the Mexican Revolution.

The “modernization” efforts are all but complete, without any actual modernization in sight.

The people pushback

While these conditions seem bleak, empire and hegemony are never omnipresent or totalizing, they are always contested. And thus, in response to U.S. backed and Mexican Elite supported market-driven policies (such as the Bracero Program, BIP, NAFTA, and the recent “energy reforms” by Peña Nieto) there has been a large public backlash on both sides of the border. In Mexico there have been mass demonstrations against the reforms that have put extreme public scrutiny on the Mexican president. In the United States, an historic immigrants’ rights social movement has organized. This movement is demanding the end of exploitative legal and economic structures targeting immigrant communities in the United States and labor communities in Mexico (Ibarra and Torres, 2013). The goal from both sides is to begin to change the practices of empire and curtail their effects.

This immigrants’ rights social movement had been escalating, fueled by anti-immigration policies such as militarization of the border, surveillance of workplaces and homes, and further criminalization of migrant labor. Intensifying the movement are the effects of NAFTA—the uprooting and displacement of millions who would otherwise not migrate and a U.S. economy that thrives on a seemingly endless supply of foreign workers.

The first large-scale collective pushback from immigrants, workers, and labor and community activists and their supporters in the United States took place in 2006. Not a spontaneous or isolated incident, this campaign was a nationally coordinated effort to stop HR 4437, the Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act. In the single largest protest in U.S. history, millions took to the streets across the country with signs that read: Immigrants built the United States! Legalization Now! Working is not a crime! We are workers not criminals! Undocumented and Unafraid! No human being is illegal! Immigrant rights strengthen all worker rights! End mass detention! Stop deportations! We are ALL Americans!

Although HR 4437 passed the House of Representatives, it failed in the Senate. Many immigrants’ rights leaders, activists, and leftists framed the defeat as a victory. However, the immigrant community continues to wait for comprehensive immigration reform. Even so, recent talks have focused on increased spending on the continued militarization of the border and a new guest worker program that would mirror the gendered Bracero Program that created a tiered, exploitable labor system for migrants. Within this discussion, rarely is there any mention of amnesty or the fundamental human right to remain in one’s home country.

Eight years later, the immigrants’ rights social movement continues to challenge the established anti-immigrant orthodoxy and government authorities through sustained collective and organized public actions. The movement’s

ultimate goal—social change through legislation, specifically a comprehensive immigration reform law with a wide path to citizenship—has had limited success to date. The movement did successfully pressure President Barack Obama to issue on 15 June 2012 the executive order known as the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, which to date has approved 400,000 applicants (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2014). Nonetheless, under the Obama administration, more than two million people have been repatriated (deported), more than any other presidential administration, earning the President the title “Deporter-in-Chief” (Peralta, 2014).¹⁰

Conclusions

In this paper, we introduced the ETM as a way to conceptualize the complex nature of immigration from Mexico to the United States. Mexican immigration to the United States is a process involving mass movement of people as well as individual choices that can be understood only within the context of the power that foreign capital has had on Mexico’s economic, political, and social structures. Applying ETM, we argued that capitalist production, free trade and labor migration are intrinsically linked and condition the context in which migration occurs.

Therefore, migration as a process of mass movement of people can be best understood by these structural forces that make it necessary for people to leave the places they call home. They leave these places without a clear vision of what they will encounter on their journey or without knowledge of what awaits them on the other side. Often lost in the fight for immigration reform is a discussion of the right to stay home. Conversations about human rights often omit the idea that people should have the fundamental human right to stay in their countries of origin, where they grew up, know their neighbors, have their families, and have made their memories. People should be allowed to stay home without the fear of their government selling them out and forcing them to compete with subsidized U.S. agriculture. They should be allowed to live productive lives and make a living within their own communities without needing to travel a long, treacherous, unknown journey to feed their families. Ultimately, people should be allowed to work and live with dignity in the places they call home.

Viewed from this context, neoclassical economic push–pull theories of cost–benefit calculations do not quite capture the complexity of these very human, very personal decisions of survival. Likewise, social capital theories do not capture the structural conditions that force people to decide to travel to a foreign land. Both theoretical strands also make a basic assumption that for migrants, coming to the United States is a positive logical outcome. We question this assumption because the end result is anything but positive; rather, it leads to social dislocation, the disintegration of social fabrics in Mexican communities, and lives filled with indignity and fear in the United States.

ETM places these migration processes within the context of capitalist production, free trade, and the need for labor. Free trade cannot take place without a steadily available, docile, exploitable, and cheap labor force. Such a labor force is

created when masses of people are displaced from the Mexican countryside, and thus, labor migration and free trade are inextricably linked.

Coincidentally, these processes of domination do not happen without resistance. As peasants, workers, city dwellers, and intellectuals rose up in the early 20th century against the foreign-backed Porfirian regime to incite the Mexican Revolution, today the Zapatistas and trade unions in Mexico have found common ground in resisting neoliberalism. In the United States, displaced labor migrants and their allies have established a burgeoning immigrants' rights social movement to demand a stop to capital-backed political and economic exploitation, and the movement is beginning to make inroads that may bring social change.

The contemporary era of mass migration from Mexico to the U.S. harkens back to the 19th-century context as its cause is grounded in unequal economic policy between the two countries. Simply put, mass labor migration is a product of the political economy of capitalist production for the sake of profit and places Mexico's role in the international division of labor squarely in the provision of labor and raw materials to the United States. The latest wave of migration is simply the most recent iteration of a process of U.S. hegemonic dominance over Mexico, which has been ongoing since the late 1800s and will continue until working people on both sides massively challenge the current practices of empire.

Notes

1. This essay implicitly questions the analytical utility of the term "Latino" used by the academy and the state to categorize diverse populations into a homogenized group. We agree with Oboler's (1995) statement that a label such as Latino and Hispanic "obscures rather than clarifies the varied social and political experiences in U.S. society of more than 23 million citizens, residents, refugees, and immigrants."
2. For a full discussion of American empire building with the use of foreign economic policy, refer to Acuña (2011), González and Fernandez (2003), González (2011), Hart (2002), and Krauze (1997).
3. For a more detailed descriptions and positions and critiques of these positions, refer to Bean and Stevens (2003), González and Fernandez (2003), Lopez (2007), Piore (2002), Portes (1978), and Portes and Rumbaut (1990).
4. We use the definition used by the classic writers on imperialism. Imperialism here refers to a period in the development of capitalism characterized by monopolistic corporations. Then, the United States particularly exerts economic capitalist dominance over Mexico.
5. Neoliberalism can be defined as the U.S. political and economic doctrine of free market policies. At the core of the doctrine is the belief that the private sector should play an integral role in external and internal governmental affairs.
6. In no way do we contend that this is a complete history of the political economy of U.S.–Mexico relations, but it offers an insight into a larger body of literature on this subject.
7. Bulnes (1916) noted: "The Monroe Doctrine restricts the sovereignty of all foreign nations; and later it will be seen that it restricts the sovereignty of all American nations, except the United States."

8. Official within the Porfirian regime were known as “científico” and believed in applying the scientific rational method to solve problems of industrialization, finance, and education.
9. Morales et al. (1994) wrote: “Legally, the Maquiladora program is a creature of the Mexican Executive branch of government pursuant to the powers granted to that branch under article 89(1) of the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States.” http://www.dol.gov/ilab/media/reports/nao/maquilad.htm#N_3_
10. As we write this, Central American children by the thousands remain in detention centers under conditions that no child should experience while they await deportation proceedings that would have them return to the war-torn countries they escaped from.

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