

IDENTITY AND MOBILITY

Toward a Definition of Remigration

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The relationship between *class culture* and *class consciousness* is a focal point not only for the Chicano movement, but also for U.S. government policy with regard to ethnic minorities.

Mexican migrants in the United States share common interrelated

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cultural norms which permit them to be differentiated from other groups. This is why “Mexicans from the other side [of the border]” constitute a particular ethnic unit, with all the complexity involved in defining an ethnic group.

This phenomenon can be looked at from two points of view: a) one ethnic group can be differentiated from others by its cultural traits and/or by the relative accu-

mulation of norms: social status, political power, etc. Therefore, it can be defined by language, religion or national origin,¹ without forgetting that the competition for resources produces a stratification

¹ See Axel Ramírez, *Conciencia política y autoconciencia: los chicanos en una sociedad cambiante*. Doctoral Dissertation, Mexico, School of Philosophy and Letters, UNAM, 1994, p.106.



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Mexico has lost a great many of its citizens to migration, both legal and illegal.

of the group within the society; b) self-identification and forced identification vis-a-vis other groups is the other method, which has contributed to a heightened interest in ethnicity or a sort of “shared feeling.”²

A particular characteristic of Mexican immigrants in the United

“no man’s land,” which is not his country of origin, much less the one which offers him work and residency. For this reason he is subject to work structures which are sufficiently paternalistic to confirm his situation.⁴ His way of life becomes a duality: his family and fellow countrymen are placed in a

two autonomous linguistic tools: his native tongue, useful fundamentally in his private life with family and friends, and a specialized administrative language of the country which offers him work, a language for him lacking in affection and which essentially plays a passive and public role. The consequence of this institutionalized separation of the *language of power* and the *language of affection* is a tendency to impose on the foreign worker a divide in his daily life between two unconnected universes: the universe of work and that of the cultural ghetto.⁵

At this point we must ask whether this “no man’s land” is reproduced in the country of origin of the immigrant: that is, when he migrates, does he lose his socio-cultural space? This leads us inexorably to the problem of reverse migration or remigration.

It was a Mexican writer, Agustín Yáñez, who in the chapter “Los norteros” (The Northerners) of his novel *Al filo del agua* (On the Edge of the Water) (1947) made abundantly clear the contempt with which immigrants are received when they go back where they came from:

...and where did you leave your way of speaking? It seems like you’ve forgotten the language your parents taught you.

⁵ *Idem.*



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Mexicans being deported from the U.S.

States is what Cicourel sees as life in two cultures,³ with the tension resulting from a contradiction stemming from problems of identity, social ambivalence, alienation and rejection, etc.

The immigrant worker can be put into what Swetland calls

cultural context which reproduces the norms of his country of origin, and his work and public life exist in a culture unfamiliar to him.

This dichotomy or cultural diversity becomes most explicit in the immigrant’s gradual adoption of

² *Idem.*

³ See Aarón Cicourel, “Vivir entre dos culturas: el universo cotidiano de los trabajadores migrantes,” in *Vivir entre dos culturas*, Paris, UNESCO, 1983, pp. 32-92.

⁴ See Carolyn Swetland, “El ghetto del alma: factores socioculturales de los programas de formación lingüística para trabajadores migrantes en Noruega,” in *Vivir entre dos culturas*, *op. cit.*, pp. 93-151.

The long and short of it is that they're a bunch of traitors; I don't know if on purpose or because they're just plain stupid. Whichever it is, they're point men for the gringos, who want to steal what's left of our land, what they couldn't steal the last time.⁶

What Yáñez actually gives us in his novel is a complete inventory of the open rejection expressed in their own country for those who have gone to work in the United States. That is why he says, "In their miserable condition, it is not clear which is worse: absence or return."⁷ This puts us on the track of a structural process in which the idea of "decasting" continues to be valid.

Since the last century, Mexico has lost, and continues to lose, a great many of its citizens through migration—legal and illegal. This is mainly due to the play of supply and demand in the receiving country(ies), basically the United States, which becomes a genuine dilemma.

There are hundreds of thousands of Mexicans abroad whom it is very difficult to draw back to the country. The government—much less the private sector—has not carried an open campaign to relocate all those immigrants who want to return; one reason for this, among others, is that Mex-

ican emigration continues to be the well-known "escape valve" for the country. Therefore it would be illogical from any point of view that such a campaign be carried out.

Asking a Mexican who resides abroad to come back to show his "love and patriotism" would be an anachronistic, worn-out discourse.

Acceptance or rejection of returning emigrants—despite what Yáñez has shown—depends on the social class they belong to. Those who leave with sufficient capital and a high social status rarely lose their space. In contrast, lower class people who attempt make a vertical move only achieve horizontal mobility which at the same time marginalizes them within their

Returning to the country of origin becomes another adventure, not at all easy to undertake, in large part because it is not simple to make a hurried decision and because the new life which awaits people in the place they left is full of uncertainties.

In this sense, remigration can be defined as *the process of mobilization, displacement, etc., of an individual or group of persons to a particular region or country who return to their place of origin through migration and are rejected and/or accepted according to their social class.*

Whether in the United States, France, Germany, England or Japan, there is not the slightest doubt that cultural alienation, isolation and ambivalence permeate the

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microcosmos, which is expanded to include an emerging middle class.

When an attempt was made to persuade Jamaicans to return to their homeland from the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom after the difficult Manley years, it was a failure. People had jobs and homes; their children were enrolled in schools; they had built a new life and what was more, they were not sure how they would be received in Jamaica.

migrant's daily life in his adopted country and his life led between two cultures and two social universes which are uneven and conflictive. This leads us to ask whether this "no man's land" of cultural hybridism induces the migrant to secularize his relations more and therefore depend less on others and assimilate more easily the local social structures, which would lead him irrevocably toward a process of assimilation, or to reproduce his

⁶ Agustín Yáñez, *Al filo del agua*, Mexico, Porrúa, 1995, p. 151.

⁷ *Idem.*

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cultural norms in the hope of returning to his country and be received with the same acceptance as when he left.

Migrants sell their labor abroad to support themselves, and they “are a ‘reserve and regulatory army of labor for industry’ thanks to domestic and international effects of monopoly capitalism and the international division of labor.”⁸ But, has anyone thought about the cost of reproducing the workforce in the capitalist system? As Ronald Parris points out:

For Cicourel, an important related question is the cost of reproducing the workforce in the capitalist system: the different costs that are borne by the countries of origin of temporary migrants compared to those borne by those workers in the countries where they work. For Swetland, the migrant worker has “zero exchange value” as a person even if capital values him for the surplus value that his work creates.⁹

Mexican workers imbedded themselves as part of the U.S. work-

⁸ See Ronald G. Parris, Preface to *Vivir entre dos culturas*, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-13.

⁹ *Idem.*

ing class; the first organizing efforts derived from the ideological changes taking place in Mexico and the United States, political ideas having crossed the border with middle class Mexican immigrants.

Ethnicity, for some authors, is part of the U.S.’s manifest colonial oppression because the increase in the *race* and *class* dichotomy is motivated mainly by the historical exploitation of non-whites by whites in the United States.¹⁰ For Randall Collins, however, ethnic consciousness is created basically by the historic operation of three conditions: 1) the exclusion of the members of an ethnic group from the economic mainstream; 2) the control of political and economic institutions by the dominant majority; and 3) visible differences in skin color.¹¹

Researchers Tamotsu Shibutani and Kian Kwan approach the problem of ethnic consciousness in terms of the psychodynamics of the groups themselves, leaving

¹⁰ Axel Ramírez, *op. cit.*

¹¹ See Randall Collins, *Conflict Sociology: Towards an Explanatory Science*, New York, Academic Press, 1975, pp. 84-86. Also Richard Griswold del Castillo, *The Los Angeles Barrio, 1850-1890: A Social History*, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1979.

to one side completely the influence of economic and political surroundings.

According to Shibutani and Kwan, the emergence of ethnicity is due to three factors: 1) the degree to which the group maintains its own channels of communication (language, press, associations, etc.); 2) the degree of shared understanding (consensus) among the members of the group; and, 3) the extent to which the group is able to develop social structures related to its changing conditions of life.¹²

Many Mexicans who emigrated to the United States felt no great need to become culturally assimilated because they were practically in their own country. Proximity, then, accentuated ties and spurred immigration, which made for incomplete assimilation since the different waves of immigrants refused to be “purified,” perhaps under the impression that Mexicans’ success was due precisely to not being integrated into the culture and assimilated.

The United States actually receives more immigrants than any other country: in the fiscal year of 1991, the U.S. government authorized legal residency for 1,827,167 immigrants. In California, 69 percent were from

¹² See Tamotsu Shibutani and Kian W. Kwan, *Ethnic Stratification: A Comparative Approach*, New York, McMillan, 1952, pp. 572-578. Also Richard Griswold del Castillo, *op. cit.*

Mexico, 4 percent from the Philippines, 3 percent from El Salvador, 3 percent from Vietnam, 2 percent from China and 19 percent from other countries. In Arizona, 86 percent were from Mexico, 2 percent from Vietnam and 12 percent from other countries.¹³

Texas, which shares a 1,200-mile border with Mexico and where

the Philippines, 4 percent from the ex-Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and 24 percent from other countries.

In Florida, 30 percent were from Mexico, 21 percent from Haiti, 6 percent from Cuba, 4 percent from Jamaica, 4 percent from Colombia and 35 percent from other countries.¹⁵

from Colombia, 5 percent from Mexico, 5 percent from Peru and 68 percent from other places.¹⁷

Migration and identity continue to be the great dilemma of the United States. Immigration is now the source of one third of the population growth of the United States, and projections for the future indicate that we



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Border surveillance has increased in recent years.

380,000 undocumented immigrants were apprehended in the last year, receives 80 percent of its legal immigrants from Mexico, 4 percent from El Salvador, 2 percent from Vietnam and 14 percent from other countries.¹⁴

In Illinois, 54 percent were from Mexico, 9 percent from Poland, 5 percent from India, 4 percent from

New York, despite the fact that it closed its port of entry in 1952, receives 12 percent from the Dominican Republic, 10 percent from the ex-Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, 6 percent from Jamaica, 5 percent from China, 5 percent from India and 62 percent from other countries.¹⁶

In New Jersey, 9 percent come from India, 7 percent from the Dominican Republic, 6 percent

will reach a population of 383 million in the year 2050 and 436 million in the year 2090.

Despite the fact that 60 percent of U.S. citizens are against immigration, the country faces a dilemma: Will it continue to be a melting pot, or will definitive reforms be made? We are inclined to think that the United States government will opt for the former. ❧

¹³ See Bill Turque, Spencer Reis, Melinda Lou and Adam Wolberg, "America: Still a Melting Pot?" in *Newsweek*, August 9, 1993, pp. 16-25.

¹⁴ *Idem.*

¹⁵ *Idem.*

¹⁶ *Idem.*

¹⁷ *Idem.*