

THE DISCOVERY Of Great Manhattitan¹

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Mexican migration to the New York metropolitan area is a phenomenon which has recently occupied the attention of scholars, experts and politicians alike. Traces of families who went to New York from the Mixteca area of the state of Puebla can be found as far back as the 1930s, but it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that thousands of Mexicans from the Mixteca region—which covers parts of the states of Puebla, Oaxaca, Guerrero and Morelos—emigrated to the great metropolis.

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This flow of immigrants has changed the nature of the attraction that New York enjoys for Mexicans. In the 1970s, New York was not even mentioned in population censuses as a destination for Mexicans. In 1990, however, it was the state with the highest growth rate (eight percent), higher even than California and Florida.

This change has created an economic, political, cultural and social interdependence between the inhabitants of the Mixteca region and the group of immigrants living in New York. Because of the acceleration of this flow of migrants and the part of the labor market that they have occupied, this relationship has transcended the limits of the Mexican milieu and plays



New York City has become one of the main destinations for Mexican immigrants.

a role of circular dependence between the supply of jobs for New York employers and the demand exerted by Mixteca employees.

The way opened by the 1970s immigrants was key in establishing a permanent migratory pattern. For 25 years, Mexicans have known how to make themselves indispensable in the New York labor market. Quality, tenacity, efficiency and loyalty on the job are characteristics that drive up the cost of Mexican labor. As a result, there is a high demand for Mexicans in restaurants, dry cleaners, fruit and vegetable stores, organizations of itinerant salespeople, etc., parts of the labor market disregarded by other workers.

These efforts bring in important sums of money that the immigrants send to their hometowns, with positive results: brick has substituted adobe in housing; local parks have playground equipment; the churches have been restored and decorated. A substantial part of the resources go into basic infrastructure: schools, paved streets, drainage, etc. Also, when the immigrants return for good, some bring home with them a great variety of technology and know-how. This is the case, for example, of the municipality of Tulcingo del Valle, in the state of Puebla, where three pizzerias have been opened by people who worked for more than 15 years in the business in New York. Others return to their original activities, particularly the peasants.

As a result of this relationship, an information and communications network was born among the Mexico and New York communities which contributed to an increase in migration, creating what we have called in this article "Great Manhattitlan," a city which



The Mexican-Korean connection: a Mexican working in a Korean-owned store.

for thousands of Mexicans has become their land of hopes and dreams. A reflection of this is Tehuixtla, a ghost town in the Mixteca region, known among local inhabitants as "Little New York" because its entire population went to live in New York. The *Hegira* began in 1972. Only a few old people were left to take care of the houses. The schools closed; the restaurant shut its doors; and the amusement parks emptied. On the streets, only dust and *huizaches*.² And the church's entire year is spent preparing for the arrival of the inhabitants of "Little New York" who come home in December to their traditional festivities.

This scenario demonstrates the economic and social success enjoyed by some undocumented immigrants who are now some of the New York's most highly respected businessmen. Some of them have invested their profits in Mexico, stimulating local production by setting up canneries, can factories, chili-packing plants and other businesses that employ their compatriots and slow the migration to the north.

Not just anyone can easily emigrate to New York.

Some prerequisites must be fulfilled: among them, a minimum educational level, direct con-

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² A thorny plant native to arid regions of Mexico. [Translator's Note.]

tact with migrants already residing in New York and the ability to take on the challenge of a more than 5,000 kilometer trip, which implies a stay of at least a year.

Mixteca migrants are descendants of peasants. Some of them were in New York in the 1970s working in restaurants or factories and returned to their hometowns to work the land. The younger immigrants, their children, in contrast, have been exposed to an important degree of social mobility, particularly because of their access to better education. This makes them ideal candidates for migrating to New York.

Migrants from Mexico City, on the other hand, have different backgrounds. They are the sons and daughters of office and retail employees as well as skilled workers. However, they have the same educational level as the migrants from the Mixteca region. In both groups, 95 percent has a primary school education; 80 percent has a junior high school education; and some are even primary school teachers or have higher education.

Clearly, while Mexico's investment in the education of these young people has evened up opportunities, it has also resulted in decapitalization of human resources since they emigrate to the United States in search of better lives.

The majority of immigrants are between 19 and 25 years of age, mainly single. Eighty percent are men and

twenty percent women. They usually plan to stay in New York from one to five years and they all initially plan to come back to Mexico to live permanently.

Most of them crossed the border in Tijuana, paying between U.S. \$500 and U.S. \$800 (today the fee is between U.S. \$900 and U.S. \$1,000), which includes getting across the border and transportation to New York's La Guardia Airport. There, they are met by friends or relatives who give them temporary lodging and information about job possibilities. Almost 30 percent have a job waiting for them when they arrive.

Migrants from the Mixteca region worked in Mexico mainly in the primary sector: 34 percent in agricultural jobs, commerce and services which require no previous training, even when they had the necessary education to be able to do more skilled work.

In New York they work in everything from itinerant sales to clerical jobs. Since 1985 there has been a noticeable increase in the number of Mexicans working in small fruit and vegetable stores owned by Korean merchants. This Mexican-Korean connection is common all over "Manhattlan." Mexicans sell the products while the Koreans work the cash register and manage the store.

Restaurants are one of the most attractive sources of employment for Mexican workers because of the expectations they arouse. Stories abound of youths who began as dishwashers and ended up as partners.



Most Mexicans in New York are of Mixteco origin, particularly from the states of Puebla, Oaxaca and Guerrero.

Migration brings along with it many cultural traditions and customs that begin to take root in the great metropolis. This is the case of *fondas* where tortillas, *cecina*,³ goat's cheese, Jalapeño chili peppers and crisply fried pork rinds are served; Mexican music is played; Mexican soft drinks —imported by a company called “La Nostalgia”— are sold; and domino is the favorite table game. Today more than 80 Mexican establishments in Manhattan cover everything



Cultural traditions are a unifying factor for immigrants.

from restaurants of differing quality to bakeries.

Besides these enclaves, Mexican food products have won a place in the market served by large stores, which sell wheat and corn tortillas, different kinds of chili peppers, hot sauces, fruits like *jícama* and all kinds of spices like coriander and *epazote*.

Flower selling on street corners is another job for thousands of immigrants from March to October. For seasonal reasons, this is when the flow of migrants is the greatest. Flower sellers, mostly women, live in the cellars of Harlem and eat in nearby Mexican restaurants in order to subsist and save. This migration is definitely rotational since they go back home periodically to prepare for their next sales season.

Forty-two percent of the immigrants work in semi-skilled service jobs: as dishwashers, barmen, busboys and waiters, cooks' apprentices and cooks.

Only 10 percent have higher education. These work as skilled workers in auto shops, carpenter shops and similar places. The construction industry and

semi-skilled jobs like painter, electrician and door and window installers provide employment for 7.8 percent. And 4.6 percent do work that requires agricultural skills, like cultivating delicate vegetables and fruits, caring for greenhouses and gardening in country clubs, jobs practically cornered by Mexicans from Michoacán and Jalisco. Only three percent are clerical workers, technicians or professionals. They work from 40 to 80 and more hours

a week. Thirty percent of the immigrants who work in the service sector work more than 55 hours a week and earn under minimum wage. These figures indicate the over-exploitation of Mexican labor, particularly in low-skilled jobs. They work many hours of overtime to be able to earn a little more and send some of their savings home. Sharing rent and leisure and other costs are common strategies to increase savings. They always have the hope of getting ahead and attaining “The American Dream,” which has been reached by very few.

The option of living in New York and not somewhere closer to Mexico is based on a series of conditions. The first consideration is that they have relatives and friends there, as well as the certainty of finding a job that will allow them to save. Another factor is the mirage of economic success attained by some.

Solving the job problem is indispensable to beginning a new life. Therefore, recent arrivals place great stock in the feeling of protection they get from the powerful network of relatives and friends from the same area. Lastly, the knowledge that immigration author-

³ A salted beef steak. [Translator's Note.]

ities are more flexible in New York than on the West Coast is another factor.

Mexicans live in New York's five boroughs: Manhattan, Brooklyn, Bronx, Staten Island and Queens. An important number lives in the state of New Jersey, in Patterson, Passaic and Westchester Counties, as well as in the town of New Rochelle.

Mexicans' sense of community in a foreign land is admirable. To counter the cultural nostalgia caused by being far from home, they have developed mechanisms for cohesion which give them solidity and a feeling of belonging.

One of the most important cohesive factors is sports, which have brought together a sizeable number of Mexicans. Since 1976, five soccer leagues have been created, with 126 teams and 2,700 players; two baseball leagues, with 50 teams and 980 players; one basketball league, with 10 teams and 100 players; and the Mexican Athletic Club, which has 150 members.

The sports' enthusiasts need to meet to plan strategies for their games has forced families to participate, making the meetings real Mexican fiestas, in which complicity, ties and affection are fostered among those who leave and those who stay in Mexico. The stays in Great Manhattitan, therefore, tend to get longer, particularly if the first year's stay has been economically successful and allowed for the acquisition

of comforts that only with great difficulty would have been attainable if the immigrants had stayed home.

Things have changed greatly in these 20 years of Mixteca-New York migration. Many immigrants have become U.S. residents or citizens in order to work, expand and help new immigrants. The 1970s offered important advantages and facilities to recent arrivals because of the enormous demand for Mexican workers, who guaranteed loyalty to the employer, good personal relations and long working hours. The 1980s witnessed the discovery of "Great Manhattitan": the great migration from the Mixteca of Puebla, Oaxaca and Guerrero.

In the 1990s, the migratory flow is still important. However, even though in 1995 migration was still high, in 1996, as a result of the high price of the dollar and its impact on transportation costs, migration has tended to decline. The cases of repatriated immigrants who could not gather the funds needed to reembark on the adventure and decided to stay home are frequent today.

In the last two years, migration has created new social problems, particularly due to the increase in very young undocumented immigrants who have organized gangs for stealing and mugging, antisocial behavior that did not exist among the original migrants. The Mexican community with more than 20 years in

New York is concerned about this new wave of migration. This has led them to organize support groups to provide orientation and slow destructive impulses that have only begun to cloud the healthy relationship that has always existed between Mexico and this part of the United States.

Because of the changes over the last few years, immigrants who have lived more than 20 years in New York advise the youths from their communities to stay in Mexico. End-of-the-century conditions offer neither the advantages nor the safety that immigrants in the 1970s and 1980s enjoyed. **W**



They hang on to the hope of the American dream.