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Mexicans in the United States

An Incipient Diaspora

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Approximately 18 million people of Mexican origin were living in the United States in 1996 according to the U.S.-Mexico Binational Study on Migration. Of these, 7 to 7.3 million were first-generation immigrants, born in Mexico, while more than 11 million were U.S. citizens of Mexican descent. The 7 million Mexican emigrants make up 3 percent of the U.S. population and are the equivalent of 8 percent of Mexico's population and 40 percent of all people of Mexican descent in the United States.¹

As a population that has migrated from its home to live in a foreign land, "which maintains sentimental or material links with its land of origin,"² people of Mexican origin who permanently reside in the United States can be thought of as part of a modern diaspora.

At least since the 1960s, the Mexican government has tried to expand and cultivate long-term relations with the Mex-

ican diaspora in the United States. Mexico wants to contribute to improving the living standards of Mexican families in the U.S. for reasons of immediate national interest: solidarity with Mexicans abroad is a moral government obligation toward our compatriots who feel no less a part of our nation for living abroad and continue to support Mexican development with their investments and the cash remittances they send home. Also, by contributing to the well-being of Mexicans in the U.S., the country invests in a group of people many of whom return home or who suffer from binational problems which know no frontiers, for example, problems related to public education or health, like the AIDS epidemic. Finally, through international cooperation projects, Mexico strengthens its ties with Mexican American organizations and leaders in the United States who have increasing influence in the U.S. decision-making process, both regarding domestic policies that affect Mexico (like, for example, the debate on migration), and actual U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis Mexico.

In 1990, the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad, an office of the

Foreign Affairs Ministry, was created by presidential decree. Its aim: to coordinate the efforts of different government bodies regarding Mexicans abroad. Its fundamental mandate was to create awareness among Mexicans the world over that "the Mexican nation extends beyond the territory within its borders," as the 1995-2000 National Development Plan puts it, and to implement Mexico's international cooperation to the benefit of Mexicans living abroad, mainly in the United States.

A DIASPORA WITHOUT CONSCIOUSNESS

When compared with the life experience of others, like the Jewish, Armenian or Greek diasporas, in the case of the Mexicans in the United States, political mobilization has not ensued from its self identification as members of a diaspora. The vast majority of U.S. citizens of Mexican origin feel no founding uprootedness; they were not expelled from the promised land, nor did the feeling of being a "dispersed people" precede in any way the formation of the nation-

* Director of the Foreign Relations Ministry Program for Mexican Communities Abroad. Photo reprinted from the book *500 years of Chicano History in Pictures* (Albuquerque, New Mexico: Southwest Organizing Project [SWOP], 1991), p. 177.

state we today know as Mexico. As a result, practically no one has done consciousness raising about diaspora identity inside the community.

The nature of the U.S. political system has done much more to politically activate Mexican Americans than any feeling of being part of a diaspora. The main precedent was the civil rights struggle of Afro Americans which netted the mid-1960s civil rights legislation and gave them the status of a protected minority, a status later extended to other minorities.

To the extent that ethnicity is something attributable, situational and strategic when politically and socially defined categories exist that emphasize a particular affiliation (for example, "Hispanic," which is a pan-ethnic category), and when the members of the group identified as such perceive economic or political rewards (affirmative action programs, for example) associated with adopting that particular affiliation (instead of categories referring to national origin like "Mexican" or "Chicano"), then it is highly probable that there will be mobilization on the basis of that designated identity.³

On the other hand, until very recently Mexico did not cultivate a consciousness of a "dispersed people" among its emigrants. After the 1847 Mexican-American War, Mexican national feeling, based to a great extent on the trauma of losing half the country's territory, was defensive and anti-American. This meant that, despite the massiveness of the exodus to the United States, Mexico's national culture was not very sensitive to the situation of emigrants. Instead of promoting the image of the emigrant

who goes abroad to make good for his family and homeland, our national character developed collective guilt feelings whereby assimilation or multiculturalism was synonymous with disloyalty and treason.

The term "pocho" symbolizes the disdain felt for emigrants. According to the Larrouse dictionary, the Spanish word "pocho" means something that is "too ripe, spoiled," and says that in Mexico it is used to describe Hispanics "who imitate Americans." In Mexico, from the 1930s until at least the 1960s, the word "pocho" was synonymous with Mexican American, despite being a disparaging term that attributes to people of Mexican origin a desire to forget their roots in order to assimilate into U.S. society and a superior attitude with regard to their homeland. In the immigrant communities themselves in the United States, "pocho" is a noun used to "designate those Mexican Americans who, when becoming Americans, forget their society of origin."⁴

STRATEGIC —NOT EMOTIONAL— CONSIDERATIONS

For all the reasons mentioned, it is difficult to pinpoint in the political activity of Mexican American leaders any consciousness of a diaspora, at least if this is specifically understood as a function of the level of priority that Mexican American leaders give the interests of Mexico in their efforts to influence the U.S. decision-making process.

Undoubtedly there are common interests between homeland and diaspora, such as the repudiation of Mexico-

bashing by U.S. conservative politicians, or a rejection of extreme migratory controls that directly or indirectly propitiate xenophobic or discriminatory attitudes against the general population of Mexican origin, regardless of their nationality or migratory status. However, in contrast with Cuban Americans' attitude regarding the Castro government in Cuba, or with Jewish Americans' feelings about Israel's security in the Middle East, Mexican Americans' emotional attitudes regarding their homeland play a secondary role in their efforts to influence U.S. policy toward Mexico, and come after rational calculations or the interests of different organized groups in the community.

Using opinion polls as a parameter, Mexican Americans are ambivalent with regard to a broader trade opening toward Mexico and decidedly oppose more undocumented migration to the United States.⁵ If we analyze, for example, Mexican American lobbying efforts during the negotiations leading up to the North American Free Trade Agreement, it is clear that class loyalties and strategic considerations were given much more weight than inter-ethnic solidarity by the main Mexican American organizations and Hispanic congressmen in deciding their positions. Some of them made the satisfaction of a series of domestic demands, more related to furthering group privileges and/or rights than to trade policy toward Mexico, a condition for their support for the treaty.⁶

Given the nature of U.S.-Mexican relations, marked by geographical proximity and an agenda in which it is difficult to distinguish the dividing line

between internal and external items (on questions like immigration, trade, employment, environmental protection, etc.), it is hard to expect relations between Mexico and its diaspora to develop in any other way.

A LONG TERM CHALLENGE

Today, the government of Mexico is making an effort to remedy the disdainful tone with which it has traditionally visualized the sense of identity of emigrants and their descendants regarding their nation of origin. In late 1996, the Mexican Congress approved a constitutional amendment whereby the voluntary acquisition of another nationality would no longer mean Mexicans would lose their Mexican nationality.

With this amendment, legislators sought to explicitly establish the right of people of Mexican origin to participate in the national project that Mexico represents, with the understanding that feeling part of the Mexican nation is not counterposed to the genuine desire most of them have to contribute to the prosperity of the country where they live. In that sense, while the lawmakers sought on the one hand to strengthen the ties that link emigrants with their homeland, at the same time they acted with an eye to facilitating the integration of Mexican migrants into the societies that take them in, in an attempt to contribute to eliminating discriminatory practices against them and their families.

However, the change in attitudes on the part of the populace will necessarily have to be gradual and very long term. An indicator of just how deeply rooted

in the national make-up the lack of sensitivity to emigrants' situation is can be found in a September 1997 survey of Mexico City metropolitan area residents. To the question, "What is your opinion of Mexicans who go to work in the United States?" 47 percent of those polled replied "negative or very negative."⁷

To encourage the sense of belonging to the Mexican nation among emigrants and their descendants, we must ask ourselves the kind of belonging they are being offered. The aforementioned constitutional amendment is practically the starting point for a debate which in Mexico is only just beginning. Broadening out and consolidating government programs like the Paisano Program—created in 1989 to combat extortion, the abuse of authority and deficient procedures for official paperwork which Mexicans residing abroad are often victims of when they temporarily return home—is fundamental for giving concrete content to the feeling of belonging the Mexican government is promoting abroad. Other support programs which are only very recently being regularly discussed in Mexico will also be fundamental: how should the situation of Mexican Americans be included in school textbooks? What kind of preferential treatment can be given to foreign investors of Mexican origin? How and to what extent can they be formally included in Mexican elections?

For Mexico, the ultimate goal in approaching the Mexican community abroad must not be that of stopping the process of aculturalization of Mexican Americans, nor of aspiring to creating a situation whereby, like in other countries, emotional attachment to the

homeland takes precedence over strategic rational calculations and the self-interest of the different sectors of the diaspora. In the long run, the ultimate goal must be solely creating a legitimate space that situates relations between Mexico and its diaspora on a different plane, a plane on which the efforts of the Mexican state to better living standards of the communities abroad, or to generate support in its diaspora for development of the homeland, can be seen as a logical result of native born Mexicans or people of Mexican descent feeling they belong to the Mexican nation. ■■■

NOTES

- ¹ Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (Mexico) and Commission on Immigration Reform (U.S.), *Estudio Binacional México-Estados Unidos sobre Migración* (Mexico City: SRE, 1997). A review of this study by Remedios Gómez Arnau was published in *Voices of Mexico* 42, p. 55. [Editor's Note.]
- ² Milton Esman, "Diasporas and International Relations," *Modern Diasporas in International Politics* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 333.
- ³ Joane Nagel, "The Political Construction of Ethnicity," Norman R. Yetman, ed., *Majority and Minority: the Dynamics of Race and Ethnicity in American Life* (Needham Heights, Massachusetts: Allyn & Bacon, c1986, 1991), p. 78.
- ⁴ Richard Rodríguez, *Hunger of Memory: the Education of Richard Rodríguez* (New York: Bantam Books, c1982, 1988), p. 29.
- ⁵ Rodolfo de la Garza and Louis DeSipio, "Interests, Not Passions: Mexican American Attitudes Toward Mexico and Issues Shaping U.S.-Mexico Relations" (paper, 1997), pp. 7-12.
- ⁶ Patricia Hamm, "Mexican American Interests in U.S.-Mexico Relations: The Case of NAFTA" (working paper # 4, University of California, Irvine, Center for Research on Latinos in a Global Society, 1997), pp. 27-28.
- ⁷ "Visión de hoy, 1847: la guerra con Estados Unidos," *Enfoque* no. 192, suplement of *Reforma* (Mexico City) (Sept. 14, 1997), p. 14.