

The Mexican Brain Drain Today

Camelia Tigau*



Daniel Aguilar/REUTERS

Brain drain is not a root problem, but an effect of the critical puzzle of poverty, an inefficient economy, low educational levels, and insecurity. Because it concentrates such painful issues, it sells well. It is therefore highly appreciated in the media and associated with various recurrent themes.

First, there is the need to quantify it to offer an overview of the problem. From this perspective, people become numbers that do not necessarily respond to our questions due to the impossibility of pinpointing an exact figure. Who do we count? The old men and women who left after World War II? The ones who ran away from the Dirty War in the 1970s? The ones who studied abroad and stayed there in the 1980s, 1990s, or the first decade of the twenty-first century? The ones who have run away from violence in recent years? The National Science and Technology Council's sinners who did not pay back their scholarships? Do we also take into account the ones

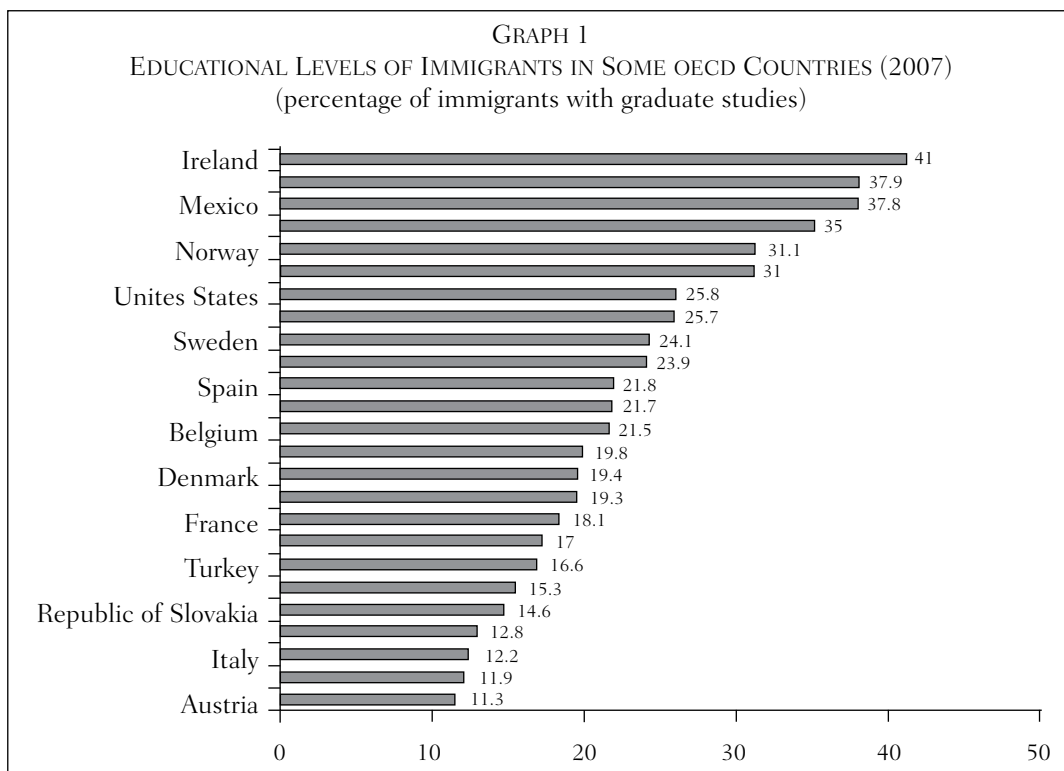
who left without a university degree but got one later? The ones who married abroad but still miss Mexico?

Second, there is a fixation on naming and labeling: from this perspective, people become "brains," "talented," "the smartest," "the brightest," or "the most highly qualified." Calling people "brains" may work from an economic perspective but does not necessarily imply a compliment to the individual and may even be considered an insult. The ones who accept being called "brains" do it because of the tough significance of the concept, which attracts the attention of the public and politicians, exerting pressure for a better way of life and working conditions in Mexico. This reminds us that sometimes migration can be a release mechanism for political dissidents, and therefore may benefit the government.

RECENT MOVEMENTS

Talking to Mexican professionals abroad does not solve the problem but definitely cools passions about the brain drain

*Researcher at CISAN, ctigau@unam.mx.



Source: Catherine Wihtol de Wenden, “Vers un droit à la mobilité,” Christophe Jaffrelot and Christian Lequesne. *L’Enjeu mondial. Les migrations* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po-L’Express, 2009), p. 25.

complaint. We rediscover that “brains” are real people, some wondering how they have become celebrities living abroad. One confessed he was interviewed four times in his year abroad, while in Mexico he had gone completely unnoticed.

Someone else wondered who we have to consider a “talent” since schooling levels are insufficient for an objective definition. He mentioned that Bill Gates was not particularly outstanding academically and apparently did not graduate university.

New opinions from Mexican professionals give us both good and bad news.¹ The good news is about their organiza-

tional efforts. The bad news stems from migration: the question about why they left and why they stay may lead to painful answers.

GOOD NEWS: DIASPORA ASSOCIATIONS

Some Mexican professionals have joined with government institutions to organize themselves in associations like the Network of Mexican Talents Abroad, based on the infrastructure provided by Mexican embassies and consulates.² The network’s current projects are a combination of citizens’ good will, consular facilitation, educational cooperation, and commercial activity. They involve citizen responsibility as well as an interest in Mexico, whether for patriotic or personal reasons.

These projects need risk capital and eventually, tax breaks to start operations. Even though they will not solve the problem of science and technology, they are a good complement for current policies. In the same way that an economy cannot run exclusively on foreign aid, the Diaspora might not

Talking to Mexican professionals abroad does not solve the problem but definitely cools passions about the brain drain complaint. We rediscover that “brains” are real people, some wondering how they have become celebrities living abroad.

be able to solve all the problems of innovation, science, and technology in Mexico.

Other associations such as ExATec Students or 100 Mexican Women are also meant to reestablish contact with their homeland, stimulate foreign direct investment, improve Mexico's image, or help integration in the destination country.

Diaspora associations are a big effort considering they involve groups of individuals highly critical of governmental infrastructure, who disdain the idea of a possible return to Mexico. To many, cooperation with Mexico implies a "pact with the Devil" from whom they ran away. This may explain the insufficient communication among what seems to be a variety of Mexican associations abroad that cannot find a common denominator that would let them help each other. Thus, they seem to export Mexico's social differences; that is, there is little if any communication among Mexican associations abroad, for instance between Mexican Talents and ExATec.

THE FEMALE BRAIN DRAIN

In a recent poll with Mexicans abroad, we found that most of Mexican "talents" seems to be men: 88 out of 137, or 64.2 percent. Men are also more interested than women in communication and networking with other members of the Diaspora. Often, families are organized according to a pattern where men have the main job and women "adjust." This means that in general, women do housekeeping or accept jobs with lower skill requirements than the ones they had in Mexico. I found a sociologist working as a cashier, an economist working as a cook's helper; and an architect studying to

Often, families are organized in a pattern in which men have the main job and women "adjust." This means that, in general, women do housekeeping or accept jobs with lower skill requirements than the ones they had in Mexico.

be a nutritionist's assistant. Women accept interviews above all if they are held in their own homes. It is for these reasons that we can talk about a "double female brain drain": first, when they leave Mexico; and second, they do not use their studies abroad. They are also more socially excluded in cultures where all family members tend to work.

Beyond gender interpretations, this is due to the fact that women seem to prefer medicine, humanities, or the social sciences, professions which need further certification in destination countries and therefore further studies. By comparison, men seem to have more flexible jobs in engineering or financing; consequently they get hired more easily and need lower levels of foreign language proficiency, besides mastering the professional codes.

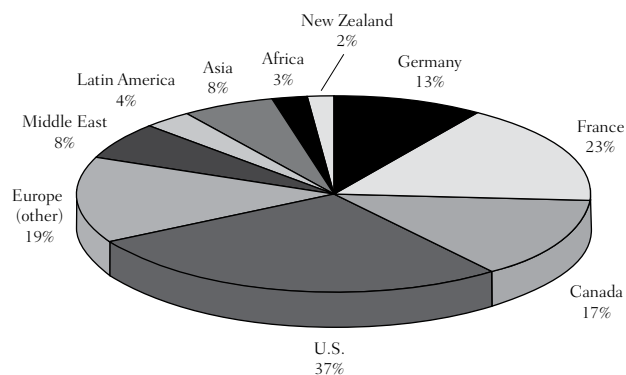
THE REASONS WHY: MAIN PROBLEMS IN MEXICO

The reasons Mexican professionals choose to live abroad depend on age and year of migration. Migrants from the last five years have systemically planned their migration, many of them due to insecurity and violence. Most have done it to protect their families and children. Insecurity is not necessarily to be interpreted as a real event but as the internal perception of the people's lives, of the stress caused by the daily need for protection, and job uncertainty.

On the other hand, migrants who left Mexico longer ago have done so due to personal circumstances such as studies abroad, disappointment due to corruption, or poor professional prospects. The reasons they left are not necessarily the same as the reasons they stay, with violence and insecurity again being one of the causes for them to stay abroad. Their viewpoints are also to be interpreted with caution: people who left will always complain.

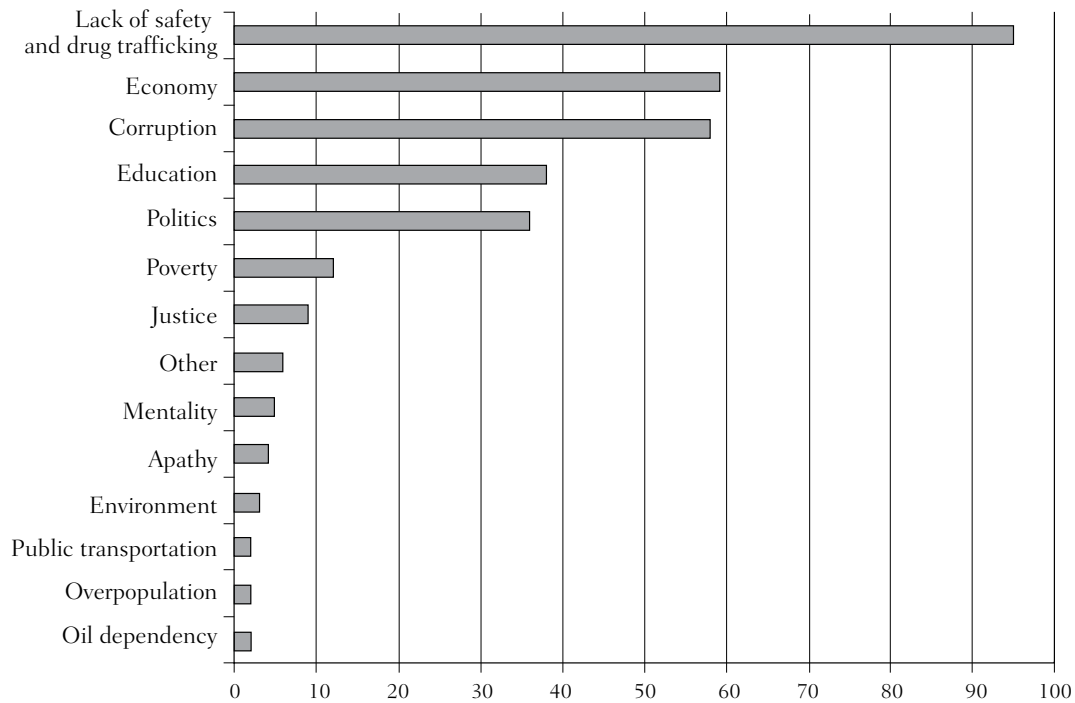
According to Mexican professionals abroad, the three main problems in their country seem to be a) insecurity and violence; b) economic problems (call it poverty, lack of fiscal

GRAPH 2
DESTINATION COUNTRIES OF MEXICAN PROFESSIONALS



Source: Developed by the author based on her survey "Highly Qualified Mexicans Abroad," www.surveymonkey.com/s/ctigau.

GRAPH 3
MAIN PROBLEMS IN MEXICO ACCORDING TO THE DIASPORA



Source: Developed by the author based on her survey “Highly Qualified Mexicans Abroad,” www.surveymonkey.com/s/ctigau.

policies and research funding; lack of a good social security system; poor innovation etc.); and c) corruption (see Graph 3). Needless to say, all these problems are interconnected. Some of the interviewees repeat the same problem three times in order to emphasize (“corruption, corruption, corruption”) Others complain about what they call slavery in Mexico: too many working hours that make it impossible for people to have a life for themselves and spend time with their families.

A FINAL THOUGHT

The country misses its “brains,” but they do not always return the sentiment. Many do not feel guilty and justify that with very rational arguments, such as

Mexico has an overwhelming supply of highly qualified people. When I left, another person just as qualified or even better qualified than me took my job. So I came here to fulfill a private need in a country where there are not enough workers, and left my job back in Mexico to somebody who needed it. If you look at temporary workers who pick oranges in the U.S., I am

exactly the same, just with a bit more education. I do not know myself if I am a loss for my country, as in Mexico I was not working for a Mexican company, but for a multinational. (IT engineer, 32, who has lived three years in Canada)

Such opinions complicate the perspective of the overall economic effects of brain drain. Furthermore, they make us wonder about the generalized demand for more funding for research and academic positions in Mexico, which focus attention on intellectual elites rather on the huge number of the poor, illiterate population. ■■

NOTES

¹ Camelia Tigau, survey “Highly Qualified Mexicans Abroad,” <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/ctigau> and <http://www.redtalentos.gob.mx/images/stories/encuesta.pdf>, July-November 2010.

² There are at least 11 of these associations (two in Europe: Great Britain and Germany); five in the U.S. (Los Angeles, Orange County, Houston, Detroit, and Silicon Valley; three in Canada (Ottawa, Montreal, and Toronto); and one in Japan (in the process of being formalized). The most successful chapters have been the ones in the U.S., due to reasons like the tradition of Mexican migrants in the U.S., being close to Mexico, and direct help from the Mexico-United States Foundation for Science (FUMEC).