

The Humanities, a Door for “Temporary” Agricultural Migrants to Canada¹

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Men and women, like all living beings, do not have a single territorial base; their “seeds” move; they “travel” to different places. We can summarize

why by saying they are looking for more favorable conditions for their lives and development. So, at the core of men and women’s territorial movements, whether as nomads or migrants, is the search for survival and/or better living conditions than the ones they currently enjoy. The corollary of this statement would be that the basis of migratory movements—if not the need—is dissatisfaction with current conditions

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and at least a hope of improving. This is why Mexico's high emigration rates speak to a country lacking in conditions for satisfying its inhabitants' basic necessities or expectations. Undoubtedly, this is a matter for concern.

But moving from one place to another does not imply radically abandoning the place of origin. For different reasons, mainly cultural ones, we men and women develop an attachment to our place of origin. One way or another, physically or mentally, we stay in contact with our roots. What often happens is that the searches, struggles, and encounters of better material living conditions are accompanied by loneliness, absences, lack of understanding, and estrangement. That is why living inside each migrant is often a dissatisfied person who leads him/her to feel far away and excluded from the social and political world. His/her actions are often limited to responding to his/her most urgent needs and those of his/her family. These migrants almost never reflect about what society owes them or what they can do for society. The problem, then, is what society do these migrants belong to?

The feeling of belonging is a demand for sociability. When that feeling is questioned, given their condition as migrants, undoubtedly living like that brings with it problems for integrating into the society in which they live as well as the society they are from. In fact, migrants who travel year after year to Canada as part of the Seasonal Agricultural worker Program (SAWP) frequently suffer from psycho-social problems because migration tenses their feelings of identity with regard to that of their belonging.² This tension makes it difficult for them to move from "I" to "we," which is necessary for the actions they take to go beyond the immediate and the sphere limited to their individual circumstances and be situated in the sphere of society and the public.

Cornelius Castoriadis wrote, "There cannot be a society that doesn't mean anything to itself, that does not represent itself as something. . . . This implies that every individual must be the bearer, sufficiently regarding his/her need/use of society's representation of itself. . . . The individual's "I am this" . . . has no meaning except by reference to the imaginary meanings and constitution of the natural and social world created by his/her society."³

With regard to the social representation of "what is Mexican," today, many Mexican citizens *need* to emigrate. In the 1980s, when this country was going through the economic crisis that gave rise to structural changes accompanied by the abandonment of the ideals of the Mexican Revolution, as well as a change in the identity of the state as a wel-

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fare state, the hegemonic representation of the country both to Mexicans and foreigners was directly linked to poverty. "Being Mexican" became synonymous with living in precarious circumstances, conditions of want, with no hope of things getting better. In this context, many Mexicans' "I am this" statements turn into "I am poor . . . and I'll continue to be poor unless I do something." Many associate that "something" with the option to emigrate, but the truth is that, generally, wherever they go, they are often accompanied by the representations of poverty and need. This situation of uncertainty, hopelessness, and frustration is put forward clearly by Ramón:

In Mexico, nothing is fair. If we had the same opportunities, perhaps we would have developed like you [Canadians], but we were already born like this because of corruption. Perhaps my future is already determined; they see me as a worker who goes there. Sometimes the future is in our hands, but dreams have a limit; you can't develop more than that. If you stay in a town like this one, you're not going to have a great future. Education is for being a worker, not for developing yourself more. You have a big dream of having things or money; maybe you can sort of achieve it, but sometimes, seeing reality as it is, I don't know if it's possible to achieve it.⁴

Ramón reflects very clearly the loss of the revolutionary ideal of education of a free man; just as he sees it, education seeks to sustain the economic and social regime that only favors those in power; and the last thing they want is developed, reflexive, autonomous beings. Today, in the midst of globalization, the construction of human beings is not permeated by a humanist education, but by training that seeks to incorporate individuals as soon as possible into the work force, so they can do their jobs better and increase production and product quality. Education has become an instrument that no longer humanizes, but de-humanizes, that no longer constructs persons, but *homo economicus*.⁵

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Thus, carrying with them the burden of their self-representations and the social meanings of poverty, many Mexicans “hook up” with the SAWP to go to Canada seeking to minimally satisfy their needs in an *honorable* way, building and projecting their being from the identity of a worker. This way, their human identity is subsumed and they become the bearers of the representation of the *worker in need*, or, what amounts to the same thing, workers without social rights. In this context, the relationship established between capital and labor is backed up by a memorandum of understanding; but in the day-to-day, working conditions offered to migrants are precarious and for all of this, they often feel grateful.

The truth is that often, the conditions of exploitation that Mexican SAWP participants experience are seen as legitimate, even if risk and vulnerability scenarios are configured that become fields conducive to corruption and human rights violations. Thus, the importance of their contributions to the Canadian economy—not to mention Canadian culture—are not often recognized or valued. That is why they even come to be seen as a threat and the “Latino invasion,” as Samuel Huntington presents them in his theory.⁶

Under these circumstances, the Freirian category of “the oppressed” can be used to refer to “temporary” agricultural workers in Canada: the oppressed are those who fear freedom and are seeking “life security,” inserting themselves into “security circles.” The only thing this does is to maintain the *status quo*. By conceiving themselves this way, clearly the problem resides in the fact that emigration brings *dehumanization* with it, which translates into feelings of impotence in the face of adversity, the acceptance that things cannot be any other way, and the adoption of the oppressors’ values and points of view. With this, the poverty and need of “what is Mexican” are consolidated, and, therefore, migrants’ destiny is submission to the rich.

To deal with this situation and change conditions to relations that are more just, it is necessary to transform the representations of poverty that Mexican day-workers carry with

them and that make them see themselves as just workers in need. For this to happen, education is necessary, but that education must go beyond mere training or education understood as a means of socialization, that is, what Durkheim refers to when he writes, “Education is the action exercised by adult generations on those who are not yet mature enough for life in society. Its aim is to provoke and develop in the child a certain number of physical, intellectual, and moral states that political society as a whole and the specific milieu to which he/she is destined demand of him/her.”⁷

The education I am referring to is the kind based on *paideia*, understood as synonymous with comprehensive education and defined as Plato did: “Certain professors of education must be wrong when they say that they can put a knowledge into the soul which was not there before, like sight into blind eyes. . . . The faculty of sight . . . exists already, but has been turned in the wrong direction, and is looking away from the truth.”⁸

At first, the idea of taking the humanities to those who consider themselves “poor” might seem absurd. In fact, those who have already proposed this—this idea is not new—are thought of as idealists and unpractical since, it is said, the poor have urgent needs to resolve and they do not want to—nor can they—study philosophy, literature, art, or history for example. However, concrete experiences exist, like the Clemente course, that show that the humanities have transformed the context of poverty in which men and women had remained for years.⁹

I am convinced that opening up educational opportunities in the humanities for the men and women who migrate to Canada using the SAWP program would contribute to solving problems of poverty and, above all, frustration, lack of expectations, and the lack of participation in the construction of the future. I am convinced that migrants are fundamental historic actors who must be supported in order to increase their capabilities for intervening and combatting the inequalities and injustices that define capitalism.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Sowing education and reaping humanity is by no means simple. It is a painful process in which its participants must struggle against innumerable elements buried in the feelings, thinking, and actions of the oppressed. One of the most difficult elements to deal with is self-esteem, since these migrants

are constantly constructing themselves and are constructed not as people but as workers, as beings who do not know the world and know only how to work. They do not dialogue with this construction; they do not say a word; they do not free themselves; they repress stating their existence as humans. They are afraid of expelling the shadow of the oppressor, of not knowing what to fill that vacuum with, afraid of reflection, of questioning, of the question itself; they are afraid of recognizing their own wisdom. ■■

NOTES

- ¹ This article is the result of the research done for the master's program in social work titled "Propuesta educativa en humanidades para los hombres y mujeres que migran a Canadá como parte del Programa de Trabajadores Agrícolas Temporales" (Mexico City: UNAM, 2008).
- ² The SAWP is an agreement between Canada and several countries that send men and women to work in Canadian fields from two to eight months a year. The program currently functions in nine provinces; Ontario, British Columbia, and Quebec are the ones with the greatest demand for foreign labor. Mexico has been participating since 1974, and in 2012, it sent 17 626 people there under this program; most of these came from the State of Mexico, Tlaxcala, Puebla, Guanajuato, Morelos, and Hidalgo. Source: Interview by the author of personnel from the Dirección de Movilidad Laboral de la Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social (STyPS) (Office of Labor Mobility, Ministry of Labor and Social Services).
- ³ Cornelius Castoriadis, *El avance de la insignificancia* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires [EUDEBA], 1997), pp. 28-29.

- ⁴ Interview by the author with Ramón (fictitious name), a 20-year-old seasonal worker from the state of Puebla.
- ⁵ "This expression [*homo economicus*] describes a conceptual abstraction or, better said, a model and a prediction that the science of economics makes about the perfectly rational model of human behavior, which is defined by three basic characteristics: the individual is presented as a 'maximizer' of options, rational in his/her decisions, and selfish in his/her behavior. The rationality of economic theory rests on the existence and the calculating 'virtues' of that individual, who acts in a hyper-rational way at the moment of choosing among diverse possibilities." See "*Homo economicus* o idiota moral," www.alcoberro.info/V1/liberalisme5.htm.
- ⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *¿Quiénes somos?: los desafíos a la identidad nacional estadounidense* (Mexico City: Paidós, 2004).
- ⁷ Émile Durkheim, *Educación y sociología* (Mexico City: Leega, 1990), p. 76.
- ⁸ Felipe Martínez Marzoa, *Historia de la filosofía* (Madrid: Ediciones Istmo, 1973), p. 141, Fundamentos 21 Collection, quoting Plato (English translation by Benjamin Jowett, *The Republic*, Chapter VII, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.8.vii.html>).
- ⁹ In 1993, Earl Shorris created the humanities-based Clemente Course. Its main characteristic is to offer high quality education to those who had not had the opportunity to study. Since its beginnings, it has targeted vulnerable individuals who live in a circle of poverty. The aim is to fight poverty and social exclusion, and create reflexive, critical beings capable of strengthening democracy. The seeds of the course, seeds of freedom, are taken from Greek culture. In ancient Athens, which for many was the site of the first space in which freedom found its clearest expression, it was impossible to separate the humanities from public life; the humanities and the polis needed each other to exist. The course usually lasts eight months and is given in two-hour sessions twice a week. The teaching method uses maieutics, the Socratic Method whereby knowledge is achieved through dialogue between teacher and student. It reviews texts by Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, and, of course, the most outstanding literati linked to the culture to which the participants belong. It has been given in various countries, languages, and cultures. Earl Shorris, *Riches for the Poor. The Clemente Course in the Humanities* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2000).