

Our Integration beyond Walls

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A group of Dreamers visiting the UNAM.

Contemporary migration is a reflection of the globalized world we live in today. The exchange of information through new technologies and the geographical dissemination of production processes have demonstrated that borders as physical or figurative obstacles are at the very least a porous construct, and that in certain instances of the modern world their once ominous symbolic relevance seems to have vanished altogether. A growing rate of mobility and exchange in terms of data, goods, and services—indeed, neo-liberalism’s hard currency—entails a proportional rate of mobility for people. In the midst of this, a consequent surge in protectionist and nationalist ideology stirs the global political climate, bringing to the fore a marked reluctance from governments to accept the reality of migration.

Mexico has become one of the main actors in this debate. Donald Trump’s presidency in the United States came with the promise of building a wall along Mexico’s northern border, scuttling NAFTA, and enforcing the deportation of almost

six million Mexican nationals. With all the outrage they may have sparked, these measures forced our government to re-examine its social, political, and economic strategy within the North American region. The fundamental conflict in understanding migration as a problem is that it confines our assessment of an extremely complex phenomenon to the logic of causality. There is no “solution” to migration; rather, there is an opportunity for cultural enrichment, an invaluable source of human resources, and an instrument for social development, all enveloped in this defining phenomenon of contemporary reality

Mexico is one of the few countries where migration is lived through in all its forms. As a key point of departure, transit, and return, it is the home of more than one million international citizens.¹ It has also become a kind of mandatory stop-over for more than 300 000 migrants, mostly Central Americans, who courageously set out on the grueling journey from their homelands to the United States every year.² The border, about 3 100 kilometers long and crossed by more than 13 million people yearly,³ is the world’s busiest.⁴ Moreover, Mexico

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is the country with the second-highest migration outflux, and the United States the one with the highest influx.⁵

The extent of the migratory relationship between our two countries is deeply rooted in Mexico's open economy and a regional initiative in favor of open markets between these neighboring nations that is some 30 years in the making. In 1980, before the expansion of free trade, the Mexican state had substantial centralized control over the economy, which relied heavily on local production. At the time, 8.8 million people of Mexican origin lived in the United States.⁶ Today, 23 years after NAFTA came into effect, the United States is home to more than 37 million people of Mexican origin, 12 million of whom are first-generation immigrants.⁷

The *de facto* integration of immigrants throughout recent years, especially in border states, is palpable in all aspects of social and cultural life all along the neighboring territory. Both north and south, around 83 million people live in all 10 border states.⁸ The United States has its largest Mexican populations in California and Texas.⁹ As a result, Los Angeles is the second city with most Mexicans in the world, and Houston, where the Latino population grew 33.2 percent while the white population dropped 37.2 percent between 1970 and 2010,¹⁰ is arguably the most diverse place in the country. In perspective, 98 percent of Mexican migrants go to the United States.¹¹

Beyond the macro-demographic panorama, the specific profiles of migrants are a key factor for understanding the phenomenon. Their age, schooling, and the kind of work they perform, among other things, give us a more detailed picture of the challenge facing our two countries. Over 42 percent of Mexican migrants in the United States are between the ages of 18 and 39.¹² This means they are fit to work, but it is worth remarking that many are sound candidates for higher education precisely because of their age. Despite this, a significant portion of them, around 44 percent, have 10 years of schooling or less.¹³ Most of them are employed in low-paying jobs and, as undocumented aliens, receive no benefits.

The migrant population in the United States is approximately 47.15 percent women and 52.85 percent men.¹⁴ Half of all female Mexican migrants work in the hospitality, leisure, health, or education sectors; the men work mainly in construction and manufacturing. Although their working conditions are often precarious and they get paid significantly less than U.S. citizens, remittances constitute an outstanding source of income for Mexico, which is among the four countries that receive the most earnings from migrants abroad.¹⁵

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However, as much as the profile of migrants in substandard working conditions, with low levels of schooling and income, might represent a large demographic, it is not the only one. Twenty percent of immigrants living in the United States are qualified with high-level technical or professional education.¹⁶ To put this figure into perspective, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) notes that, in 2015, only 16 percent of adults in Mexico had received higher education.¹⁷ In comparison, 37.3 percent of migrants had received between 10 and 12 years of schooling, the equivalent of a high school diploma in the United States. If we look at our domestic figures, the average Mexican has only finished middle school.

This implies that immigrants in the United States, particularly young ones, are a sector of the population that could easily perform better-paying jobs and benefit greatly from access to quality higher education. Although migration is often motivated by poverty, a large number of well qualified migrants in the United States represent enormous human resource potential and could become an even greater asset to society if they had access to better academic and professional opportunities or simply to a better quality of life.

In addition to that, their eclectic educational backgrounds also make up a valuable resource: having grown up with a bi-national, bilingual, and bicultural perspective, first- and second-generation young migrants have tools that are fundamental for today's world. Their intimate familiarity with both countries gives them a unique dual perspective of inclusion, plurality, and multiculturalism. Undeniably, these are all characteristics that could work in favor of economic, social, and cultural bonds that tie both countries together.

Among the first-generation young immigrants who embody this profile are those who have lately been referred to as "Dreamers." The term was coined in 2010, when Senate Bill 1291, the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act (Dream Act) was halted in Congress by a margin of only five votes. This bipartisan bill would have meant that undocumented students could pay the same university tuition as resident students, instead of the tuition international stu-

dents typically pay, which can be up to three times higher. The bill would also have allowed immigrants to get a temporary residence visa, valid throughout the duration of their degree programs, and opt for permanent legal residence after graduating. The Dream Act would have allowed about 65 000 undocumented students graduating from middle school to adjust their status to legal residency for a minimum of six years.

Given the Dream Act's unsuccessful outcome and the subsequent failure of the immigration reform, President Barack Obama announced an executive action that would temporarily act as a placeholder for the act. The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) protects undocumented young immigrants from deportation for a certain period of time, offering them benefits such as work permits. From 2012 to 2016, DACA received 861 000 requests for review (not including renewals), of which almost 76.6 percent came from young people of Mexican origin.¹⁸ Today, estimates put the number of Dreamers who could potentially benefit from DACA at two million. However, the current U.S. administration hostility toward what DACA represents puts it in imminent danger of being revoked if not altogether quashed.

What prevailed throughout the political and legal upheaval arising from the Dream Act and later DACA—note that this is what should ultimately be stressed—is the active role played by groups of young migrants who fought relentlessly for rights they considered basic. In light of this, we must begin by paying heed to the day-to-day struggle of those who have fought hard and long to access higher education: young migrants who have completed university degrees and who have all too often done so despite highly adverse circumstances. The hardships they face can be traced back to the socio-economic context they grew up in and ran away from; but often these hardships are aggravated by the many ways in which they face discrimination in their families and communities on a regular basis.

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precisely in this moment, as this happens, that education must become a pivot for change: governments and higher education institutions in both Mexico and the United States must realize and activate the potential this has to strengthen the ties that bind us. Dreamers represent a small portion among millions of people seeking to reinforce their academic profiles and become ever more qualified. Their efforts must stand as an example of the values that societies need to foster if they are to thrive in the contemporary world.

From this point of view, the phenomenon of Mexican immigration in the United States is first and foremost an opportunity for growth, not a problem to be solved. These immigrants live and breathe the intercultural, dynamic setting from which they emerged and which has shaped who they are. They are living proof that Mexico's future as a country and North America's fate as a region cannot be limited by the constraints of physical borders. Cataloguing migrants or migration as a problem presupposes the need to overcome, vanquish, or eradicate it. Incorporating this vision into any political stance impedes a natural process of integration, which, despite some immediate practical shortcomings, will certainly yield a more plural, wholesome, tolerant future for our societies. The sensibility required to let this happen, however, is something newly instated powers-that-be have proved devoid of.

Migrants themselves understand better than anyone the challenges and complexities of this increasingly intertwined world: they experience them every day. It is they who are truly aware of the tools needed to deal with contemporary globalization; and with the passing years, they have honed their comprehension of the dual dynamic they embody. Beyond any kind of crimp that might seek to put the brakes on the engines of migration, it is necessary to come up with strategies that support integration. Considering the incredibly wide diversity of Mexican migrants in the United States, it is clear that the best way forward is through education.

As an effort to initiate one such strategy, the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) decided several decades ago to wager on internationalization, with the United States as one of its main points of focus. In 1944, the UNAM opened its first outreach center abroad, at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. Today, the UNAM has another outreach center in Chicago and three Mexican Studies Centers: one at the California State University at Northridge, one at the University of Washington in Seattle, and another one at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Moreover, the UNAM has 91 ongoing agreements with 67 U.S. institutions and organiza-

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tions dedicated to higher learning.¹⁹ This year the UNAM will join forces with the Carlos Slim Foundation and the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) in a project designed to inform, educate, and prepare Latinos who are eligible for U.S. citizenship, beginning by offering ten workshops at UNAM's outposts in the United States.

This should be seen as an invitation for institutions of higher education, international agencies, civil society, the private sector, and governments on a global scale to reflect and act together for education in diversity. This commitment must be rooted in strategies that are in line with the demands of our present world. For this reason, it is crucial to open a dialogue on issues that extend beyond our borders in such a way that we may face them from an international perspective, with a humanist, tolerant, and respectful approach.

Twenty-three years ago, Mexico, Canada, and the United States decided to join forces in the creation of what was to become an area for the economic integration of the comparative advantages each country had, reducing tariffs on imports, benefiting the mobility of factors of production, and lowering costs of goods and services for the North American region. Over the past two decades, NAFTA has had its peaks and troughs. As of September 11, 2001, there has been a heavy reinforcement of U.S. borders, and the 2008 financial crisis required tremendous budget adjustments for each of the countries involved in the agreement. In addition, the massive increase in violence since Mexico began waging the so-called War on Drugs in 2006, along with the consequent illegal influx of weapons into Mexico and the unrelenting demand for narcotics in the United States, have become destabilizing factors in the delicate balance needed to maintain both nations' security and economy.

The current political climate in North America has found considerable resonance in Europe through the rising tension around the issues of migration and refugees. Thus, it should hardly come as a shock that a growing number of European countries are notoriously echoing the chants of protectionist

xenophobia and racial intolerance championed by the rising conservative right-wing factions in the United States. The answer to the problem will not be found in erecting walls or tightening borders. When it comes, it will come from understanding ourselves as part of an ongoing process, a global, fluctuating, ever more interconnected world. **MM**

NOTES

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² Secretaría de Gobernación, "Prontuario sobre movilidad y migración internacional: Dimensiones del fenómeno en México," 2016, https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/192258/Prontuario_movilidad_y_migraci_n_internacional_Parte1.pdf, accessed May 16, 2017, p. 100.

³ International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, "Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016. 3rd Edition," Open Knowledge Repository, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/23743/9781464803192.pdf>, March 1, 2016, accessed May 8, 2017, p. 3.

⁴ Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, "Frontera," September 26, 2016, <https://mex-eua.sre.gob.mx/index.php/frontera>, accessed May 7, 2017.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Pew Research Center, "Hispanics of Mexican Origin in the United States, 2013," Pew Research Center, http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/09/15/hispanics-of-mexican-origin-in-the-united-states-2013/ph_2015-09-15_hispanic-origins-mexico-01/, September 10, 2015, accessed May 8, 2017.

⁷ Segob, Conapo, Fundación BBVA Bancomer, "Anuario de migración y remesas México 2016," Conapo, https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/109457/Anuario_Migracion_y_Remesas_2016.pdf, June 29, 2016, accessed May 8, 2017, p. 43.

⁸ Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, op. cit.

⁹ Segob, Conapo, Fundación BBVA Bancomer, op. cit., p. 48.

¹⁰ Brittny Mejía, "How Houston Has Become the Most Diverse Place in America," *Los Angeles Times*, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-houston-diversity-2017-htmlstory.html>, May 9, 2017, accessed May 9, 2017.

¹¹ Segob, Conapo, Fundación BBVA Bancomer, op. cit., p. 38.

¹² Ibid., p. 43.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 124.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁷ OECD, "Panorama de la educación en 2016: México," OECD, 2016, <http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/EAG2016-Mexico.pdf>, accessed May 9, 2017, p. 2.

¹⁸ Migration Policy Institute (MPI), "Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Data Tools," 2016 <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-daca-profiles>, accessed May 16, 2017.

¹⁹ UNAM, Dirección General de Cooperación e Internacionalización, "Estado que guarda la cooperación académica entre la UNAM e instituciones de educación superior y organismos de Estados Unidos de Norteamérica," UNAM, March 2017.