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From Brain Circulation to Talent Restrictions: A Personal Insight into Skilled Migration Studies

Introduction

Writing on skilled migration discussing the paradigms of brain drain, brain gain, brain circulation, and diaspora networking has flourished over the past 50 years. Even though this issue of *Voices of Mexico* is dedicated to the

celebration of the CISAN's three decades and, implicitly, to the evaluation of the last 30 years in North American scholarship, my contribution to the field began only 12 years ago.

My previous background is in international communication studies and diplomacy. As an international stu-

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dent who ended up a migrant in Mexico and, later, a Mexican citizen, the UNAM offered me the opportunity for self-reflection as part of a brain drain process from my native Romania. When I left the country of my birth in 2002, 21.83 million Romanians were living inside the country. In 16 years, the population dropped by 11 percent, to 19.53 million in 2018, mainly due to intense migration to the European Union.¹ Most of these people are educated, hold bachelor's degrees, or at least have technical studies. Most live in Spain and Italy, countries of similar Latin backgrounds, where cultural integration may be easier. For the first time in its history, Romania became a country of outmigration, due to the European Union's mobility policies.

Similar to the Romanian case, but in a different context, the migration of skilled Mexicans has been rising in recent decades, both in percentage and absolute terms. Both Mexico and Romania are in line with a more extend-

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ed international trend: migration nowadays seems to be young and selective, with increased participation of women. The majority of Mexican professionals who migrate choose to live in the U.S. Skilled migrants made up 7 percent of the total flow of Mexicans to that country in 2017. The percentage is higher for Mexican women in the U.S., among whom 7.7 percent have undergraduate or graduate studies.²

Apart from the serendipity of my presence at the CISAN, there is a reason behind delving into this particular topic at this kind of research center. The United States and Canada are the countries that have received the most skilled migrants in recent global history. This is "the region" to study the dichotomy between brain gain and brain drain. The U.S. is the world's main recipient of skilled migrants, who totaled 10 281 124 foreign professionals in 2000, followed by Canada with 2 705 370 for the same year. More than half (51.3 percent) of the skilled migrants in the world went to Canada and the United States in 2000, a percentage that has increased steadily since the 1970s, almost doubling from 26.6 percent in 1975.³

With this short introduction, I may now recall my own contribution to the study of skilled migration in North America, the field that I have been asked to address at the CISAN. My findings mainly deal with qualitative research that has involved life-history and in-depth interviews with over 200 skilled individuals, most of them living in

Canada and the United States. In particular, I got a very close look at the Mexican diaspora, in some cases through participative observation and creating profound empathy.

First Level: Brain Drain Caused By Violence and Insecurity

I began my research with a project in which I avoided using the term “brain drain” for its possible derogatory meaning to the migrants. In this first phase of my research, I carried out an online survey with Mexican migrants living on five continents. I was looking for the right migration policies, seen from a main country of origin such as Mexico, in order to benefit from the experience of long-term skilled migrants who do not necessarily return after long periods in the U.S. After publishing a scientific booklet on scientific mobility that introduced the overall puzzle of mobility versus migration of skilled human capital,⁴ I arrived at deeper and sometimes more disturbing findings.

My results pointed to the fact that economic and labor conditions were not necessarily the main cause of professional migration; these were accompanied by factors such as violence, insecurity, corruption, and sometimes, even smaller annoyances like traffic or long working hours. I arrived at the conclusion that brain drain is not an isolated problem with a simple solution, but a result of other issues that may be fixed through correct government interventions, such as increasing spending on research and development, improving the hiring conditions in the labor market, and decreasing inequality, all these as indirect ways to tackle insecurity.

As a complement to other outstanding works produced at the same time, my book *Riesgos de la fuga de cerebros en México: Construcción mediática, posturas gubernamentales y expectativas de los migrantes* (Risks of Brain Drain in Mexico: Media Construction, Governmental Positions, and Migrants' Expectations)⁵ showed the incipient efforts of networking with the diaspora, along with the heart-breaking testimonies of entire families of Mexican pro-

fessionals in their 40s or 50s who sold their homes and belongings to seek a better life. It is worthy of note that part of this research was done during a short stay at the University of York in 2010 and throughout the war against drug trafficking that resulted in a high rate of casualties in Mexico. A great part of Mexican skilled migrants in Canada ran away from what they called “bad living conditions,” with working hours that practically meant not seeing their loved ones except on weekends. Their decisions were often made thinking about the future of their children, whom they were afraid to allow to walk by themselves as adolescents, due to kidnappings and muggings. Very often, they did not directly experience this violence, but they were aware of it through their friends, family, and the news.

Once abroad, be it in the U.S., Canada, or elsewhere, the Mexican professionals interviewed enjoyed the 40-hour work week, in which staying late at the office meant they were not efficient in their work. They admired the meritocratic culture in which people are valued for what they produce rather than according to their social relations. They all missed the warmth of the Mexican culture, its cuisine, lifelong friends, and their families, whom they visited once a year.

Second Level: Diaspora Diplomacy

In 2015, I initiated a new project combining my previous experience in skilled migration and diplomacy research, called “Contact zones for skilled diasporas in North America: Public diplomacy for co-development.” My starting point was the idea that skilled diasporas are active agents of public and cultural diplomacy, who act independently from governmental action through professional networks and associations. Similarly to my previous project, I continued with qualitative studies that included interviews, focus groups, and analysis of media discourses around brain drain in North America. This time, I was able to re-experience the migrant condition during a six-month

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stay at the Mexico Center at Houston's Rice University. I looked for new methodologies to complement my previous experience, and therefore included more comparative studies of the Mexican professionals with the ones from Brazil, Colombia, China, India, Iran, Lebanon, Romania, and Sri Lanka. Apart from that, I also took the opportunity to do historical research at the Nattie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin, consulting original documents that give accounts of the integration of the U.S. Mexican-American minority since the beginning of the twentieth century.

As many other previous studies have pointed out, the internationalization of science and longitudinal field research provide original working material, allowing for new findings. As part of this more mature and internationalized perspective, I produced at least two works that may be recalled for the purposes of this short essay.

One, recently published in an India-based journal, gives arguments that contextualize the long-debated "medical brain drain."⁶ The data I collected during my stay in Houston proves that medical doctors from developing countries may be a brain drain to the research systems in their own countries of origin even without migrating, when those countries do not invest in their medical research. On the contrary, their presence abroad may actually help their scientific systems more if they cooperate with colleagues back home, give talks, and implement systems of virtual patient treatment or bilateral/multilateral working teams. From my perspective, medical brain drain may be evaluated considering the size of the country of origin, its need for medical doctors, and the support for medical research, and dealt with under ethical recruitment considerations in countries of origin. In my research, medical doctors interviewed in the U.S. are willing to give something back to their countries of origin, receive post-doctoral scholars, and actively collaborate with their countrymen, as actors in scientific and medical diplomacy through their professional networks.

Third Level: New Trends and Discrimination Patterns in Skilled Migration Studies

One can be wrong when self-evaluating. I'll take the risk to say that I consider my most important contribution to the brain drain literature to be my most recent book on

discrimination patterns in skilled migration (forthcoming), based on the experience of Mexican skilled migrants in Texas compared to a contrast group of professionals from seven other countries. In this book, I study the relationship between skilled and unskilled migrants and between privilege and prejudice against certain migrants. Before migrating, skilled migrants are part of a professional elite and many times, of a respected middle class with access to a good education, social and cultural capital, domestic help, and personal transportation. After they migrate, professionals become foreigners and have to re-integrate into a community comprised of educated and uneducated alike. In this way, Mexican skilled migrants experience the global perception of being "Mexicans in the U.S.," a heterogeneous group dominated by undocumented migrants with low skills; therefore, their hiring positions are lower when compared to native workers or to "model minorities" such as Asians.

Virtually all professionals interviewed agree on the lack of opportunities in Mexico compared to the United States. The testimonies show that no single truth about the migration process exists, but that each experience is unique. Furthermore, the overall statistics on brain drain from one country to another may become irrelevant if one outstanding individual who may significantly improve particular fields in science or economy is working abroad rather than in her/his country of origin.

In my research, I propose a dual model for analyzing the migration of skilled individuals, considering the privileges of life in the United States compared to Mexico and identifying certain common reasons for the migration for all professions. Based on this model, I discover differences in how certain professionals from particular fields behave in the migration process. For example, engineers are the ones who care most about discrimination; doctors highlighted their extensive cooperation networks with Mexican colleagues, while they observe the lack of opportunities for medical research back in Mexico; and

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young students seem to be mostly scared about insecurity in Mexico.

Entrepreneurs and workers in business administration are perhaps the most flexible professionals in terms of the possibility of finding a job or creating a company abroad. In their case, mobility is greater and many have reached their destination by intra-company transfer. Some did not choose Texas, but were sent there by a transnational. Their migration process did not imply choosing a particular destination, but involved opting to leave. In this sense, they are similar to diplomats, who do not generally choose the countries where they will work.

The contrast group of professionals from other countries showed the existence of certain general global trends in contemporary skilled migration. Among these, I will highlight the impact of public policy in fields such as education, science, and technology. While governments of origin seem to care about investing in better university and graduate education, they must also promote human capital as a social value and create adequate development conditions in their countries. The way many migrants see it, small things matter, such as pollution, the perception of overpopulation, and the availability of public transport.

High-context cultures of origin,⁷ such as Mexico's, India's or China's, put high value on family, friendship, and family relations. This may create a conflict when migrants integrate into meritocratic low-context societies in Western countries. I found that migrants in general, and professionals in particular, may feel uncomfortable or not very adapted to the culture of destination, not necessarily because of prejudices, but because of cultural incompatibilities.

While many skilled migrants do not contemplate returning, I discuss the "networking solution." In general, professional networks that occur naturally in various fields of scientific or business cooperation prevail over governmental diaspora networks. This may be due to ideological reasons: that is, migrants' incompatible political

perspectives vis-à-vis the governments in their countries of origin, a finding that should make us question the effectiveness of the programs of networking with the diaspora.

Conclusion: The Recent "Brain Rejection" Paradigm

A decade ago, we were but few researchers dedicated to skilled migration in Mexico. As a starting point, our main goal was to give an account of how many skilled Mexican were living abroad. How big was brain drain? Now we know the numbers, the destination countries, and, apart from that, the conditions of outmigration and attraction that set the path for this type of migration.

One of my first publications on the topic, *¿Fuga de cerebros o nomadismo científico?* (Brain Drain or Scientific Nomadism?),⁸ identified three stages in the studies and policies for skilled migration: a) the nationalist stage, corresponding to critical brain drain theories that lamented losses in the countries of origin; b) the internationalist, in which brain circulation theories determine policies of networking with the diaspora; and finally, c) the transnational, emphasizing the continuous mobility of skilled personnel between various countries of origin and destination. Are we in a different moment now?

Fortunately for my topic, my research in Texas was conducted immediately before and after Donald Trump's election, a period of heightened concern for migrants with temporary migrant status in the U.S. My results point to the emergence of a new political paradigm in skilled migration, in which the benefits of skilled migration are questioned for the first time by traditional destination countries. As such, in a context of populist response against globalization, some politicians in the countries from the "global North" are responding to the historical critique of brain drain from the countries of origin with a "brain rejection" policy in order to protect their cultures, economies, and native workers.⁹

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The study of populism as a communicative act and the state of the art of media discourse on skilled migration before and after Trump's takeover has been central to demonstrating this change of paradigm or, at least, an important change in the political discourse on the brain drain that existed since the postwar period. Indeed, new historical moments create new needs in social science studies.

When it looked like we knew everything—or had the main parts of the puzzle—the recent conditions of populist politics in three of the main historic destination countries for human capital (the U.S., the UK, and Australia) gave us a surprise. The attraction of foreign human capital is now being questioned along with the overall cohorts of migrants. Is skilled migration harmful to native workers? Is it disturbing societies of origin culturally? Is skilled migration bad when it is too much?

The recent discourse of populist leaders like Donald Trump or Teresa May gave the topic a different reading altogether, when questioning brain gain as a strategy of economic and social development. We already knew brain drain understood as a massive exit of professionals and talented people from their countries of origin was harmful; but never before did we see questioning from the winners or brain gain countries. Reading the news is stimulating and, as a researcher, gives me new reasons to keep studying the same topic. But it is never boring. ■■■

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Notes

- 1 Eurostat, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/population-demography-migration-projections/statistics-illustrated>, accessed January 20, 2020.
- 2 Consejo Nacional de Población (Conapo), BBVA Foundation, and BBVA Research, *Yearbook of migration and remittances Mexico*, First edition (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional de Población [Conapo], BBVA Foundation, and BBVA Research, 2019), p.188.
- 3 C. Defoort and G. Rogers, "Long-term trends in international migration: an analysis of the six main receiving countries," *Population* 63, no. 2, pp. 285-317.
- 4 C. N. Tigau, *¿Fuga de cerebros o nomadismo científico?* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Coordinación de Humanidades, and Centro de Investigaciones sobre América del Norte, 2010).
- 5 C. N. Tigau, *Riesgos de la fuga de cerebros en México: Construcción mediática, posturas gubernamentales y expectativas de los migrantes* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Coordinación de Humanidades, and Centro de Investigaciones sobre América del Norte, 2013), reprinted in 2015, available online at <http://ru.micisan.unam.mx:8080/bitstream/handle/123456789/16694/L0097.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.
- 6 C. N. Tigau, "The Scientific Diplomacy of Medical Diasporas: A Case Study of Foreign Medical Doctors in Texas," *Migration and Diasporas: An Interdisciplinary Journal* vol. 1, no. 2, July-December 2018.
- 7 Edward T. Hall proposed a classification of high-context cultures and low-context cultures based on the way they communicate and their history. While the former give more importance to a person's status, body language, and tone of voice, the latter mainly use language and clear communication rules. E. T. Hall, *Beyond Culture*. (New York: Anchor, 1989).
- 8 C. N. Tigau, 2010, op.cit.
- 9 R. D. Wise and D. T. Martin, "The political economy of global labour arbitrage," in K. Vander Peil, *Handbook of the International Political Economy of Production* (Cheltenham, UK, and Northampton, Massachusetts: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015), pp. 59-75.