

A world without borders?

Mexican immigration, internal borders and transnationalism in the United States

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Introduction

A walk through certain areas in any large Western city, such as the Raval in Barcelona, East LA in Los Angeles or Brixton in London, is bound to give the unwary visitor an odd feeling: most of the people he or she comes across will belong to ethnicities from elsewhere in the world, speak unintelligible tongues and in some cases even wear picturesque costume without a trace of self-consciousness, because after all this is “their” neighbourhood and it is the visitor who looks out of place. This feeling is not just produced by the manners and aspect of the residents: the whole morphology of the place, from the appearance of the shops and the products they sell to the very smells and colours, does not correspond to what is normally considered indigenous to the country. The most striking thing about all this is that these areas are not curiosities for tourists craving exotic images for their holiday photographs (although there is some of that) or a kind of theme park showing in the flesh what everyday life is like in other parts of the planet. Although visitors may have the feeling that they have been inadvertently transported to another continent, what they are actually looking at is a typical neighbourhood in the globalized West, as authentic as any other but of a kind unknown outside the First World.

Actually, this experience is not peculiar to today’s world. The numerous “Chinatowns” and “Little Italies” scattered all over the planet, many of which are among the longest-established and most traditional neighbourhoods of the cities concerned, show that international migration is not a phenomenon of recent date. Although people may often choose to forget the fact, its history is as old as human existence on the earth itself. Or rather, to be more precise with our terms, it dates back to the appearance of the first

international borders.¹ In fact, with the sole exception of the so-called countries of settlement (chiefly the United States, Canada, Argentina, Australia and New Zealand), all Western countries plus Japan experienced large population outflows until well into the twentieth century, accounting until that time for the bulk of international emigration. Even what are now highly developed countries such as Italy, Spain and Ireland were sources of large-scale emigration until as recently as 30 or so years ago, a fact that is often forgotten.² If there is one thing that distinguishes the current situation from what happened in earlier periods, it is that international migration has not only intensified, but *extensified*, so that while Western countries have reduced their contribution to emigration flows in the last few decades, the starting points, destinations and characteristics of these flows have diversified as a result of the combination of processes we term globalization.³

In turn, migratory dynamics are reinforcing and rendering irreversible the interdependence between countries that characterizes globalization, so that each of the migratory routes forming a regular link between a country of origin and a country of destination is progressively consolidated. By virtue of what D. Massey has termed the mechanism of *cumulative causality*,⁴ each migratory movement establishes the conditions for new migrations by people to whom the migrant is related. This is why, once a route is established, the growth of migration ceases to be linear and becomes exponential, thus creating ever closer ties between the two countries in a process that is continually feeding back upon itself. A brief review of migration figures from 1973 to date⁵ confirms the

¹ To challenge the received wisdom about the supposed explosive increase in migrations over recent years, Tapinos and Delaunay (2000) highlight the continuities in international emigration over time, arguing in their interesting article that the current situation does not differ substantially from that of earlier periods. In their latest book, Durand and Massey (2003) deal with the case of Mexico, analysing the continuities of Mexican emigration to the United States over the last 100 years.

² We cannot resist the film buff's temptation to cite the Italian film *Lamerica* (1994) by Gianni Amelio, set in Albania in the early 1990s at a time when thousands of Albanians were embarking for the south of Italy, only to be rounded up in Bari stadium and then deported. An Italian deserter who lost his senses during the Second World War and has languished since then in an Albanian prison regains his freedom in the confusion and, believing that he is in his native Sicily in the 1940s and that people are emigrating to the United States, boards the ship as well. The message being conveyed to Italians by the director, who has not forgotten his origins, is clear: these ragged Albanians with their hopes of starting a new life, whom so many Italians unsympathetically reject, are a kind of mirror reflecting what they themselves were 50 years before.

³ Without entering into the controversy about how globalization should be interpreted, a controversy which extends even to the term itself, we have adopted the appellation that is most widely used and accepted in academic circles to refer to a set of processes which are intensifying social relations and interdependence on a planetary scale. An overview of the relationship between globalization and international migration can be found in Castles and Miller (2003) and in Sassen (1998), particularly section I.

⁴ A term adapted from the work of Gunnar Myrdal (1958), who applied the term *cumulative circular causation* to the set of processes that perpetuate underdevelopment.

⁵ While attempts to date the moment at which one stage of a historical process ends and the next begins tend to be somewhat arbitrary, experts agree that the current stage of migration as a historical phenomenon, characterized by the predominance of newly industrializing and Third World countries as a source, increasing diversity and informality, and the tendency of migrants to find work in the activities and occupations most affected by economic deregulation, along with certain unskilled personal and community services that have

existence of population flows of this kind between the Caribbean Basin (Mexico, Central America and the West Indies) and the United States, between the Maghreb and some Mediterranean countries in Europe (France, Italy and Spain), between Hindustan and the United Kingdom, between South-East Asia and Australia, and between Guangdong Province and the rest of China (although this is not really an international flow), to cite just a few of the best-known examples showing the extent to which this phenomenon has spread around the globe.

Experience shows that, in all these cases, the first population movements are the trigger for an expansion in contacts of all kinds between the two countries: immigrants return to their countries of origin for vacations and are visited by friends and relatives, they send home goods purchased in the host country but also consume goods produced in their country of origin which have to be imported, they transfer remittances to their country and send news of employment opportunities for new migrants, receiving in exchange information about events affecting their families and taking decisions about them; and so we could go on citing examples of a web of contacts of ever increasing density. To cope with this increase in contacts, meanwhile, an entire communication and transport infrastructure is developed (establishment and extension of scheduled flights, improvements to telecommunications systems, creation of money transfer mechanisms), and this in turn facilitates new migratory movements, leading to the appearance of what we might call *migration circuits* between the two countries. Consequently, one of the characteristics of migration today is that it is no longer confined to the flow of persons, but increasingly drives a no less copious flow of material and symbolic goods, information, capital and cultural values between the territories linked by these migratory circuits. An important consequence of this is that the links may become so deep and extensive that the origin and destination countries come to form twin poles of what in practice is an integrated system. Despite being a factor of external origin, immigration acquires a growing influence on the development of key elements in the structure of host countries, such as their demographic pyramid or the characteristics of their labour supply.

The case of the pairing formed by Mexico and the United States may be considered the supreme example of this phenomenon in its advanced phase: in terms of the percentage of each country's total population represented by the migrants concerned, Mexican emigration to the United States has acquired a critical mass such that the interdependence between the two extends into the sensitive core of their socio-economic structures,⁶ to the

experienced enormous growth in recent years (care of dependent persons, eating and drinking establishments, maintenance work), began with the 1973 energy crisis and the consequent restructuring of the production model which turned the Western countries into post-industrial societies. The fact that most people migrating to other countries do so for work reasons fully justifies this association between the different stages in the development of the world capitalist system and the historical phases of international migration. This subject will be returned to later.

⁶ Although the strategic importance of emigration to the United States for the socio-economic stability of the country is widely recognized in Mexico, initiatives like Clause 187 in California, which restricted undocumented migrants' access to social health and education services and obliged employees of these

extent that the administrative boundaries separating the two countries have in a sense been blurred by a reality that inexorably overflows them. On a smaller scale, the conurbation formed by Ciudad Juárez (Chihuahua, Mexico) and El Paso (Texas, United States), separated from each other only by the Rio Bravo but cut off by desert from the rest of their respective countries, constitutes a kind of laboratory experiment in extending this integration to all aspects of economic and social life. This is a truly binational city in which each half fulfils a function indispensable to the survival of the whole. In fact, the existence of an international border does not necessarily mean a sharp separation but rather, by creating differences between the two sides, lays the basis for increased integration thanks to the complementarity that these differences make possible.

Although in most instances the degree of integration is less than that now developing between Mexico and the United States, it is possible to describe some of the characteristics of this phenomenon in a general way, while bearing in mind that its progress and outcome will be different in each country depending on its existing models of social, economic, political and cultural cohesion and, of course, on the political decisions taken in response to the issues raised by international immigration. One example of the influence of each country's peculiarities on the integration of immigrants is the importance of the informal sector in the economy generally: depending on its size, a larger or smaller proportion of immigrants will be undocumented, and the way they integrate into the host society will accordingly be different as well, i.e., involving more or less friction. It might be worth noting that in many Western countries there is also a demand for informal labour that often has to be met by undocumented immigrants, and this is one of the main causes of this type of migration.

In this paper, we are setting out from the experience of Mexican emigration to the United States to examine the implications of international migration for the survival of borders between countries in the era of globalization. We shall now show that this process has a dual nature: although frontiers are becoming blurred in practice, at the same time border and immigration controls are stiffening, and the living conditions of immigrants are worsening as a result. We shall then analyse how this situation, combined with the labour market segmentation that has been driven by restructuring of the production model and by social differentiation processes (what we call "internal borders"), has been turning

services to report them to the migration authorities, show that on the other side of the border public opinion does not regard the benefits of migration as reciprocal. The academic debate in the United States about the impact of Mexican immigration on the country's economy is moving towards a consensus that its net effects are positive, but this view has not yet penetrated the political debate and public opinion, where the contrary belief has so far prevailed. Without looking further afield, an initiative similar to the Californian one was approved by referendum in the state of Arizona in November of last year, although the news was overshadowed by the presidential elections that were being held at the same time. To continue with the cinematographic references, the fiction documentary *A Day Without a Mexican* (2004) by Sergio Arau, a Mexican director based in Los Angeles, while of course not scientific evidence, might carry some conviction. It predicts the disastrous effects that would ensue for California were its inhabitants of Mexican origin suddenly to disappear.

immigrants into a population group characterized by social vulnerability and overexploitation in the workplace. Nonetheless, we regard this not as a process of social exclusion but as the way inclusion is taking place for immigrants in the current context. Lastly, we analyse the appearance of transnational communities and the role of transnationalism as a mechanism that is shaping the profile of migrants as social actors situated in this context of structural differentiation.

International migration and the erosion of traditional frontiers

Going by the experience of Mexican migration to the United States, the emergence of pairings between countries of emigration (newly industrializing countries such as Mexico, and Third World countries) and countries of immigration (the West) is having two principal effects on the status of frontiers between these two types of country: increasing diversity in the host countries, showing that their borders do not isolate them from other parts of the world, and increasing integration between origin and destination countries.

1. The most striking effect of this process is that it increases the ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity of the host countries, which eventually absorb some of the characteristics of the emigrants' home countries. The eastern part of Los Angeles to which we referred earlier has the highest concentration of inhabitants of Mexican origin in the United States. In fact, its population is almost exclusively Mexican and Spanish is practically the only language heard. But this part of the city is not just a piece of Mexico grafted on to the United States; it is also a type of neighbourhood that can be found, with the same composition and characteristics, in many other cities in the country. In other words, East Los Angeles is not just a Mexican neighbourhood, but is now a typical United States neighbourhood. In the era of globalization, in fact, areas of this type, defined by their migratory origin, are not just ethnic enclaves but are an intrinsic characteristic of global cities.

It could be argued that what was occurring in these cases was a phenomenon of juxtaposition without any great consequences, i.e., that immigrant communities were creating autonomous subcultures in epidermic contact with the rest of society, a situation that will gradually disappear as the group fully assimilates or that will harden and lead to the appearance of ghettos isolated from the rest of society. Indeed, the immigrant tradition of the United States, with its constant assimilation of successive waves of immigrants after two or three generations, would appear to support this diagnosis.⁷ Nonetheless, one example will serve to illustrate the importance that the critical mass of immigrants of like origin referred to earlier can have as a factor for change in the host society.

⁷ See Portes and Rumbaut (1997) for a discussion of the immigration history of the United States.

After several decades of increasing immigration from Latin America, the United States has become one of the countries with the most Spanish speakers in the world.⁸ While it is true that most United States citizens do not know the language at present, in the near future bilingualism is likely to be an almost indispensable requirement for any elected office in many states; and in the United States, it should be remembered, elections are held for many local posts that in other Western countries are filled by unelected officials, such as state judges, local police chiefs and others. It is not too rash to predict, then, that before long this tacit obligation will progressively spread to any position of an executive or technical character, so that Spanish comes to join English as one of the United States' own languages, even if this status is not made official. As can be appreciated, this implies an alteration in the traditional logic of assimilation, with immigrants integrating into the host society but at the same time profoundly transforming its social structure.

Indeed, the adverse reaction in large sections of United States society to the growing presence and influence of Hispanics, which was given intellectual expression most recently by Samuel Huntington's essay *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (2004), demonstrate the plausibility of this scenario and the perception of it as an imminent threat. Although the subtitle of Huntington's work is rather unfortunate (after all, Hispanics are American as well), it shows that what is at stake and what its defenders seek to preserve is a particular conception of national identity, defined by certain shared values embodied in a nation occupying a territory which is its exclusive possession. But even if this type of community ever did actually exist, the conception is becoming more and more debatable as the diversity of Western societies increases. In any event, this reaction should not be regarded as simply populist in nature, since it is also the outlook of the elite that Huntington represents, with many supporters among decision makers. These adverse reactions should be regarded as another of the effects of international migration and as a factor that will influence the way the process develops.

2. Another consequence of this phenomenon is that, through migration, the social dynamics of the countries of origin become major factors in the development of the social dynamics of the destination countries so that, in practice, they become endogenous factors in these dynamics. All this means that the socio-economic and sociodemographic structures of the countries receiving migrants become more open to the outside, not just because the migratory flow contributes to their evolution but also because, through emigration, the social dynamics of the countries of origin have a direct impact on the internal dynamic of the recipient countries. By this we are referring not just to emergency situations like the devastation produced by Hurricane Mitch in Central America in 1998, the civil wars of the 1980s in that same region or

⁸ The 2000 census found that a little over 28 million people aged over 5 spoke it at home (United States Census Bureau, Population Division, Education and Social Stratification Branch), a number that is rising so that the United States will soon have more Spanish speakers than any other country except Mexico.

the collapse of the Mexican economy in 1982 and 1994, all of which produced large rises in emigration to the United States at the time, but also and mainly to processes that are structural in nature.

One of the processes that reveal this structural interdependence is the historical population dynamic of the countries receiving migration. Here we see that, when demographic developments are analysed, immigration proves to be not just a supplement to organic growth but, for many of these countries, an intrinsic part of the population reproduction system. This contribution is not confined to the population increase that immigration generates directly; there is also the subsequent contribution of immigrants and their descendants to the natural growth of the population. This is evident in the so-called countries of settlement, but it is also true of countries, such as France, that have historically been characterized by low fertility. In these cases, population growth is largely due to the continuing arrival of immigrants and the twofold contribution they make: when they themselves immigrate, and when they and their descendants reproduce.⁹ We thus encounter a demographic complementarity between countries of emigration and destination that is structural in nature, even if the actors have changed over time. Developing countries are now in the position formerly occupied by certain Mediterranean and Slavic countries in Europe, among others. Another feature of the present situation is that population ageing in Western countries is certainly going to accentuate this complementarity yet further.

Regarding the other half of this pairing, emigration also plays a vital role as a population regulation mechanism because it mitigates the effects which situations of stagnation and social change alike cause for countries with a peripheral position in the world economic system. It is obvious that a situation of stagnation and backwardness can lead to emigration, but change can have this effect as well.¹⁰ An example is provided by developing countries whose productive apparatus is modernized and integrated into the international economy. It used to be thought that, by promoting development and welfare in countries of actual or potential emigration, processes of this kind would act as a check on population outflows. Consequently, development assistance, foreign direct investment and free trade were proposed as possible instruments to halt these flows. One indication of how widely accepted this idea has become is the fact that, in line with this approach, the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act not only created stricter controls on immigration into the

⁹ Demographer Anna Cabré (1999) has developed this thesis for the case of Catalonia, which received immigrants from the rest of Spain for a century and now receives them from other parts of the world. She shows that, of women born between 1856 and 1960, only those born between 1936 and 1950 achieved a net reproduction rate in excess of 1. She concludes from her calculations that, without immigration, the population of Catalonia would now have been 2.4 million instead of the actual figure of just over 6 million. Gabriel Estrella, Alejandro I. Canales and María Eugenia Zavala (1999) put forward a similar argument for Mexico's northern frontier.

¹⁰ Paul Singer (1975) developed this thesis in depth, although he was dealing with migration from the countryside to cities within a given country.

United States but supplemented these by providing for the creation of a Commission for the Study of International Migration and Cooperative Economic Development in Congress, with a mandate to recommend economic cooperation and development assistance measures to offset the adverse effects that increased border controls would have on the countries from which immigrants came, and thus to reduce these flows. What has been found in practice (and this was one of the Commission conclusions) is that this approach is too simplistic. Bringing these countries into the international economy has led to the breakdown of traditional local communities and reduced the means of subsistence of large sections of the population, thus often triggering an increase in migration flows to other countries.¹¹ The industrialization of the European countries and Japan likewise led to massive emigration from countryside to city, and also overseas.

A third effect of international migration on borders that we wish to highlight, namely the appearance of transnational communities, is more local in its manifestations, although it is having a very substantial impact as it spreads. For this reason, we analyse the phenomenon more fully in the last section. In any event, the two processes that we have just described mark an irreversible trend towards growing integration between countries. Although integration is making it impossible for the borders between States to separate the different countries effectively, however, traditional frontiers have not disappeared. Rather, as we shall now see, interregional integration is coinciding with the strengthening of traditional borders between States and the imposition of greater obstacles to immigration.

Frontiers old and new

Although the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the ensuing war against terrorism have resulted in stricter controls on border crossings and immigration in all Western countries, thus introducing a new element that we have not included in our discussion, the results of the international migration that we have just alluded to are part of a long-term trend and everything seems to indicate that the effects are going to intensify in future. In any case, raising obstacles to migration may moderate it and probably bring more friction into the process, but it will certainly not halt it. All this could lead us to think that the progressive disappearance of frontiers as constraints on social processes was irreversible or, at the least, that frontiers would gradually become so porous that they amounted in practice to no more than lines drawn on the map, with little impact on reality.

¹¹ The thesis that capital mobility generates international migration is developed in Sassen (1988). An example of this process can be found close to hand in the foreign direct investment that has gone into the El Salto industrial corridor (Jalisco, Mexico). This industrial zone was one of the main sources of employment for the Guadalajara metropolitan area and helped keep emigration to the United States at low levels. When *maquila* export industries were introduced, the preference for female labour resulted in a lack of job opportunities for men and a substantial rise in emigration to the United States.

And yet the whole process that we have just described has coincided with a progressive stiffening of immigration laws and growing restrictions on new immigration, a process that started, let it be remembered, before the 11 September attacks. The border between Mexico and the United States at Tijuana-San Diego is a clear example of this ambivalent situation. On the one hand, this is the world's busiest border post, something that reflects the growing interconnection between California and Mexico. In some ways, indeed, San Diego and Tijuana constitute a transnational metropolis, with many Mexicans crossing the border daily to work or shop in the San Diego area, just as Tijuana is a habitual place of recreation for residents of San Diego. At the same time, the proximity of San Diego and its well-developed business services infrastructure is an important comparative advantage for Tijuana when it comes to attracting international investment in its *maquila* industry.¹² On the other hand, the border is an imposing wall that runs out to sea and into the desert, and those who try to cross it clandestinely are pursued implacably by the border patrol. The two facts coexist and represent a dual reality: the frontier does not exist in practice for some, but for others it does. In other words, the border has never been so permeable, but at the same time it has never been so closely watched as it is now.¹³

Although the disappearance of frontiers has not been total but selective, however, and despite the growing obstacles to immigration, we have observed how migration is expanding and how it is contributing to globalization. The new obstacles to immigration are not halting it but only making things harder for immigrants, whose response has been to adopt new methods to overcome these obstacles, even if this means greater risk and effort. When it becomes impossible for undocumented migrants to cross at frontier towns, they make the attempt through the desert or over mountains, and when surveillance is stepped up along sections of coast where immigrants have traditionally landed, they try to reach other, more distant parts of the coast that are not yet watched. But even when they succeed in crossing the border in a less dramatic way (and this is usually the case), many immigrants are condemned to a legal limbo of indefinite duration that limits their life prospects and exposes them to the worst forms of exploitation. We thus see that traditional international borders and the restrictions created by migration laws remain for many, if not an insurmountable barrier, then at least an obstacle to be overcome. In fact, the perception that borders are disappearing is a Eurocentric one, since they are still there, and are a greater challenge than ever, for most of humanity.

In any case, these traditional borders are just the first barrier that migrants encounter in their new lives, since in practice international migration causes the border to be displaced into the interior of the recipient country. Migrants carry it with them like an aura, so that the

¹² See Alegria (1992) and Herzog (1990) for an analysis of integration in these border regions.

¹³ To avoid qualifying the sentence we have been obliged to traduce history. In fact, until the Great Depression the border between the United States and Mexico could be crossed with complete ease by Mexican seasonal labourers going to work in the United States. Likewise, the numerous westerns in which Indians and outlaws flee across the border into Mexico show that this type of unofficial crossing took place in both directions.

border becomes diffuse and multiple, but always shadows and restricts their movements. In this creation of internal borders we can identify two closely related key factors that account for their existence. Firstly, employment has become increasingly segmented and polarized in the new deregulated labour market that has resulted from economic restructuring in the Western countries. Secondly, there is the ethnic and cultural segregation of Mexican migrants in the United States, which has prevented this community from following the traditional assimilation pattern of previous waves of migrants.

Migration and employment in post-industrial society

In considering the relationship between immigration and the employment structure, attention needs to be paid to the changes that globalization has wrought in the organization of work and to the leading role played by immigrant labour in these changes. Without denying the importance of cultural factors when interpreting the integration of immigrants into the host society, we believe that because work is at the core of the social structure, the function it discharges in this process will determine how immigrants fit into the new society. We shall not go into the details of the new organization of work, however, but will concentrate only on those aspects that are most relevant to our theme.¹⁴

One of the characteristics of the new occupational structure is its growing polarization, owing to the deregulation of labour relations. On the one hand, there has been an expansion of executive, professional and technical posts whose common characteristic is that they are based on information processing, and which are becoming the core and apex of the new occupational structure. At the same time, though, there has been an increase in lower-level and less skilled service occupations, essentially in the field of what are called "personal services". Although we cannot expand on the point here, this increase in the number of low-level occupations whose function is to improve other people's quality of life is the necessary counterpart of the growth in occupations at the apex of the occupational structure, since this expansion of the number of people with a high level of purchasing power has created a greater demand for personal services work, both skilled (interior designers, psychoanalysts, pet veterinarians, etc.) and unskilled (cleaning and maintenance services, jobs in eating and drinking outlets, care of dependent persons, etc.).¹⁵

Besides this growing demand for unskilled labour in service industries, it is also immigrants who are mainly affected by another phenomenon, namely the new conditions of employment that have arisen as a result of contractual and labour deregulation, not only in

¹⁴ The theoretical background to our discussion can be found in Castells (2000), Sassen (1991 and 1998), Piore (1979) and Beck (2000).

¹⁵ One need only think of the difficulty President Bill Clinton had in finding a candidate for the post of Attorney General who had never hired an undocumented immigrant as a cleaner.

many branches of industry and in construction, but in almost all leading-edge sectors as well. Because so many companies are outsourcing services and production processes, the kind of unskilled, repetitive jobs that offer no prospect of training are providing increasingly little in the way of stability or benefits either. In the case of industries where Fordist methods of work organization still apply, we are also seeing an expansion of more temporary and informal (if not downright illegal) forms of hiring.¹⁶ This is a strategy used by businesses to respond to the challenges of global competition without having to confront the costs of technological innovation or delocalization. The downgrading of working conditions (“casualization”, in Sassen and Smith’s term) drives local labour out of these jobs, which are then filled by immigrant labour hired on worse terms. By contrast with personal services, what we are seeing here is not net new job creation, since industrial employment is diminishing in relative terms (and often in absolute terms as well) in Western countries, but a growing demand for immigrants to fill these jobs, owing to the downgrading of contractual conditions.

Earlier waves of immigrants were similarly subjected to poor working conditions and exploitation,¹⁷ but what characterizes the current situation is that the employment flexibility and adaptability seen among immigrants are not just a survival strategy for families impoverished by economic restructuring but also, and primarily, the result of patterns of change in the production apparatus of the United States economy. In the past, low-level occupations of this kind provided earlier immigrants with modest employment, but because they were stable and society deemed them honest they enabled complete assimilation to take place over the course of a generation or two. The situation has now changed radically, for while there is upward mobility in the employment structure over time (the share of occupations requiring greater training and higher education is still growing more quickly than the share of lower-level occupations), what is happening is that workers are

¹⁶ Some examples in the United States where local workers have thus been replaced by immigrants employed on worse terms are documented in Colón-Warren (1994), Ziolniski (1994), Fernández Kelly and García (1987) and Sassen and Smith (1992).

¹⁷ De Tocqueville, writing as long ago as the early nineteenth century, made a telling observation about the employment prospects of European immigrants in the United States: “An erroneous notion is generally entertained that the deserts of America are peopled by European emigrants, who annually disembark upon the coasts of the New World, whilst the American population increases and multiplies upon the soil which its forefathers tilled. The European settler, however, usually arrives in the United States without friends, and sometimes without resources; in order to subsist he is obliged to work for hire, and he rarely proceeds beyond that great belt of industry which adjoins the ocean. The desert cannot be explored without capital or credit; and the body must be accustomed to the rigours of a new climate before it can be exposed to the chances of forest life. It is the Americans themselves who daily quit the spots which gave them birth to acquire extensive domains in a remote country. Thus the European leaves his cottage for the trans-Atlantic shores; and the American, who is born on that very coast, plunges in his turn into the wilds of central America. This double emigration is incessant; it begins in the remotest parts of Europe, it crosses the Atlantic Ocean, and it advances over the solitudes of the New World. Millions of men are marching at once towards the same horizon; their language, their religion, their manners differ, their object is the same. The gifts of fortune are promised in the West, and to the West they bend their course.” (*De la Démocratie en Amérique*, 1835).

automatically allocated to particular occupations and production sectors in accordance with their sociodemographic characteristics, particularly their gender, ethnicity and migration status. In other words, although it is obvious that the occupational structure has always produced some kind of inequality, there are factors of a cultural nature that are limiting the mobility of certain workers and confining them to particular places within that structure. This is why there has been a large increase in immigrants working in jobs such as building maintenance and cleaning, gardening, dish washing, restaurant work, house cleaning, domestic service and other low-skilled occupations of a similar kind. Furthermore, the automatic allocation of immigrants to jobs of this type for cultural reasons leads to a demand monopoly which makes their working conditions even less satisfactory.

The result of all this is an asymmetrical labour market. The extreme vulnerability of immigrant workers puts them at the mercy of their employers, so that they have to accept the wages and conditions offered by these without any opportunity for negotiation. Let us recall that this vulnerability is the result not of economic factors but of extra-economic ones, such as migration status. This reveals the inadequacy of traditional approaches to migration that have interpreted it with reference to local imbalances in the employment market that are resolved by a transfer of factors, in this case labour. While this is part of the explanation, it must be stressed that the operation of this employment market for immigrants is governed by asymmetrical power relationships (more asymmetrical, that is, than those applying in the case of local workers) that have their origin in extra-economic factors. Drawing on Max Weber's formulation, Jorge Bustamante analysed the characteristics of this *imperfect market* for labour, where the vulnerability forced upon migrants deprives them of the negotiating power which should by rights derive from the indispensable role they play in the normal functioning of the United States economy.¹⁸

This segmentation in the labour market provides the basis for a wider segmentation of the population into differentiated economic, social and cultural categories. Although the stratification of the different occupational groups follows the economic logic of the labour deregulation process, the composition of each of them is not determined by a strictly economic logic but by extra-economic social differentiation processes, the main factors of differentiation being culture, ethnicity, demography, gender and migration status. These social differentiation factors are the basis for the new internal borders that have arisen with globalization and that are contributing to the segmentation of the social structure in the information society.

As a result of these social differentiation factors and differing roles in the labour market, vulnerability levels also differ between population groups, a situation that has been worsened by a context where the political and social negotiating mechanisms that arose in industrial society and were enshrined in the welfare State have ceased to operate for the most vulnerable groups. This is the mechanism that creates social and cultural minorities like immigrants (but also female household heads, for instance), whose socially

¹⁸ This thesis is developed fully in Bustamante (1997), particularly pages 238-256.

constructed vulnerability is transferred to the labour market in the form of a devaluation of their work, and thus of their conditions of existence and reproduction as well. As we can see, the poverty and insecurity of these workers are not the result of exclusion from the labour market but, on the contrary, of the way they participate in it. The fact is that in the current context of economic and labour deregulation, modernization generates and reproduces its own forms of poverty, since the social vulnerability of individuals (due to their membership of a social, demographic or cultural minority) ceases to be a factor that exposes them to possible economic exclusion and becomes instead the necessary condition for their inclusion. Consequently, it is doubtful whether the current modernization process will overcome poverty and social inequality, since these, far from being hangovers from pre-modern societies, are an intrinsic part of globalization itself. In this context, the transnational communities developed by immigrants take on a particular importance.

Migration, transnationalism and internal borders

While the phenomena described above are affecting the whole social structure of Western countries, we are also seeing another result of international migration that has its origin in factors of a microsocial nature and is manifested on a local scale: the appearance of *transnational communities*. Although the deepest causes of population movements are structural, they are of course the outcome of an aggregation of individual migrations by people who make decisions on the basis of what is happening in their immediate environment. Most of these individual migrations are determined in practice by the existence of family and community networks, which shape a specific itinerary and geographical (and often occupational) destination for emigration. Although it has always been found that members of a given community tend to emigrate to and settle in the same place, thus tending to constitute a microcommunity in the destination country that reproduces their community of origin, this phenomenon now evinces a greater complexity.

Traditional approaches distinguished between temporary and permanent migration. In the latter case it was considered that, although immigrants might maintain close contacts with their countries of origin, their intention was to establish themselves and integrate in their *adoptive country*, so that these contacts would weaken over time until the group was fully assimilated ("Americanized"). This assimilation need not mean that the link with the country of origin disappears or that immigrants give up all their customs, and immigration consequently has effects on the characteristics of the host society. It should be recalled that while the United States was originally a refuge for various Protestant sects that were persecuted in Britain¹⁹ and this has shaped the country's collective image of itself, it now has a large Catholic population as a result of immigration from Ireland, Italy, Poland and other Catholic majority countries. Another example is United States policy towards the

¹⁹ Interestingly enough the state of Maryland was founded by Catholic refugees, who were also persecuted in Britain at that time.

conflict in Ulster, visibly influenced by its large population of Irish origin. Nonetheless, maintenance of these links does not call integration or the “American dream” into question. Rather, they often go to swell the cultural heritage of the United States (Saint Patrick’s day parades, pizza, artists of Jewish origin, etc.).

By contrast, Mexican migration was traditionally seen as a typical example of temporary migration. Although many Mexican migrants settled in the United States during the twentieth century, most of them did not intend to integrate. Indeed, it might be said that migrants lived in the migratory circuits to which we referred earlier, rather than in a specific location, while still maintaining their Mexican national identity. Since the 1980s, though, a significant change has taken place: many of these migratory circuits have turned into transnational communities because the *density* of movements and social ties has extended the community of origin to all the places where its migrants are to be found.

The result is that the reproduction of communities of origin in Mexico is directly and inseparably linked to its migrants’ different settlements in urban and rural areas of the United States. In other words, it is a single community dispersed around different locations. This new social and spatial form of the communities created by migration makes it necessary to reformulate traditional ideas about migration and migrants. To start with, in these cases migration no longer entails a radical change in socio-economic context; rather, migrants go and live in a different section of their own community, but with the same forms of social reproduction. Irrespective of the fact that the two settlements may be separated by thousands of miles and an international border, they continue to form a single community and this enables their residents to maintain not only their original national identity, but their local one as well. Thus, it often happens that an immigrant neighbourhood maintains a closer relationship with its community of origin than with those around it.²⁰

The consequences of all this for the communities of origin are quite substantial, although there is debate as to whether the effects are positive or negative. Up until the 1980s the negative aspects were emphasized, the argument being that emigration reduced the amount of labour available, heightened social inequalities and caused dependency or a “migration syndrome” as Reichert (1981) famously termed it, restricting the potential for endogenous local development. Since then, however, there has been a tendency to stress the positive impacts, particularly the potential offered by remittances sent home by migrants when used for productive investment. This point of view is shared by international development organizations, which are trying to encourage the development of emigration countries by this route.²¹

²⁰ For an overview of transnational communities, see the collective works of Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton (1992), Mummert (1999) and Smith and Guarnido (1997). Another two works on transnational communities from an anthropological perspective are Kearney and Nagengast (1989) and Smith (1995). A summary of these studies can be found in Canales and Zolniski (2001).

²¹ Excellent critical reviews of the literature on this subject are provided by Durand and Massey (1992), who offer a positive overview of the role of emigration in the development of communities of origin, and by Binford

In any event, what we wish to emphasize is that in the context of the new productive and occupational structure of the Western countries described earlier, transnational communities are taking on a special significance. The social networks of reciprocity, trust and solidarity on which they are based also act as a mechanism for coping with the social vulnerability that derives from their members' position as immigrants. Immigrant workers, marginalized in a context of inequality and insecurity produced by globalization, develop forms of response (although not of "exit") to this process by turning back to their own communities. Thus, the links they maintain through transnational communities provide them with defence mechanisms for coping with situations of vulnerability such as relocation risks, settlement costs, job seeking, participation in destination communities or the day-to-day reproduction of the family in the communities of origin. All these needs can be met thanks to the resources provided by the system of social networks and relationships that make up transnational communities.

Transnationalization, then, is a result of the behaviour adopted by migrant workers to cope with their subordinate role in the labour globalization process, marked by a strengthening of the traditional borders between States and, above all, by the existence of internal borders that limit their work and life prospects. Although the function of this mechanism is to cope with internal borders, however, it also has the effect of blurring the borders between States. Where the social identity of migrants is concerned, transnational communities are based on a feeling of "belonging" that is very different from citizenship. It is about configuring an identity that precedes but also transcends citizenship, a transnationalization of the sense of community that is not confined by national borders. In this way, Mexican migrants living in the United States maintain and increase their links with their communities of origin even once they have taken up legal, stable and permanent residence. For them, possible integration into the destination country does not mean renouncing their communities of origin, since their attachment to these is deeper and more vital than politically constructed attachments. In many cases, indeed, people integrate only the better to defend and maintain these community ties.

To sum up, transnational communities and social networks, which constitute the *social capital* of migrants, have two sides. On the debit side, as strategies of response but not of "exit", they serve to reproduce the conditions of social subordination generated by globalization. In other words, they make possible the social reproduction of immigrants in a hostile environment, but by failing to challenge the system of social stratification that is at the root of migrants' vulnerability they allow this system to perpetuate itself. Furthermore, in ensuring social reproduction, this mechanism also serves the interests of a system that is based on the overexploitation of migrants.

(2002), who takes a somewhat more sceptical approach. See Canales and Montiel (2004) for a discussion of the economic role of remittances in the case of Mexico.

As regards the credit side, by providing an alternative field of belonging and action transnational communities may also act as a social base from which migrants (who usually occupy a subordinate position in both the origin and the destination country) can escape from the narrow frameworks of negotiation imposed by globalization and by the persistence of borders. One example of this are the so-called “home town associations”, popularly known as “migrants’ clubs”. These associations originally arose as a way for the natives of a particular country to hold festivities and maintain some traditions from their communities of origin, and as mutual aid and solidarity mechanisms. However, they soon extended their activities to their communities of origin, chiefly by channelling financial and material resources to these and improving the living conditions of their compatriots. These activities have elevated such immigrants to the status of political actors influential enough to negotiate with the Mexican authorities, especially at the state and local levels. Again, some of these associations have adopted a political profile in the destination country as well, actively standing up for the economic, occupational, human and political rights of their compatriots in the United States. This is often done by creating coalitions with community organizations, unions, non-governmental organizations and other civil associations that defend the rights of the United States population in general, and it is also an active way of participating in the destination country.

These are, broadly speaking, the characteristics of transnational communities and the framework in which they function. However, the relations that are established between these communities and the host society are not predetermined. They will rather depend, to an extent, on the decisions taken by the different actors and on the integration models that develop in each particular case. Accordingly, we can imagine different integration scenarios, all with their quota of strain and conflict.

For example, transnational communities could dissolve like ice in a bucket of water, so that the amount of water increases but there is no change in its composition. Or we could imagine them behaving somewhat like sugar, i.e., ultimately dissolving in the host society, but contributing a new “flavour” to its culture and identity (“sweetening” United States society in this case). In other words, an integration model where the host society absorbs not just the immigrants but also their culture, itself changing in the process. Another possibility is that they may behave rather like a rock in that same bucket of water, so that there is a strict long-term separation between the two. While the effects of erosion would mean pieces of the transnational community gradually becoming detached, they would never be absorbed or assimilated by the host society. A much more improbable scenario, in our view, is the one apparently envisaged by Huntington, where integration resembles a sponge and the transnational community ends up by absorbing and supplanting the community that was there originally.

Conclusions

For all our efforts to systematize it, reality will always be a step ahead. In the case of international migration, the growing integration between countries caused by globalization has rendered obsolete many of the theories and concepts used to approach the phenomenon, since migrations have been taking on new forms that do not fit well into the traditional moulds. By contrast with previous episodes, they are not the result of temporary or cyclical imbalances in the labour market of the Western countries or of a need to colonize, and nor are immigrants assimilating by adopting the national identity of the destination society. The new conditions of production in Western societies now mean that the demand for migrant labour to take up low-skilled, unstable employment is permanent in character. The development of migration circuits means that this need for labour can be met uninterruptedly, but inevitably the increase in flows, and the vulnerability of the migrants, has given rise to the appearance of transnational communities, and this in turn is changing the way migrants integrate.

In this context, transnationalism is not just an emerging social phenomenon, but is proving to be a paradigm that enables us to interpret the peculiarities of international migration in the globalization era. For this reason, one of the first tasks of the social sciences is to develop this new paradigm if they wish to address the phenomenon of international migration. With the knowledge we have now, however, it is possible to draw some conclusions of a political nature which could help to ensure that the intensification of international migration and the appearance of transnational communities, as irreversible historical phenomena, develop as untraumatically as possible.

1. As we have noted, two parallel phenomena are occurring in the contemporary world: the virtual disappearance of borders as obstacles to mobility for some and their entrenchment for others. While the former development is a necessary adaptation to globalization, the latter is no more than a futile attempt to halt an irreversible process. We need to be aware of the irreversible nature of integration and of the advantages it can generate. It would be advisable, therefore, to analyse the benefits deriving from increased labour mobility more thoroughly as an educational exercise for the benefit of public opinion in Western countries, to lay the political and social groundwork for a less traumatic integration of immigrants. The ageing of Western countries (especially Japan and Europe), for example, shows that increased labour mobility is not just inevitable but necessary.
2. Despite the attempts to check immigration, it has emerged as one of the main drivers of globalization. The globalization process certainly has its good and bad sides, but proper management of it could ensure a better quality of life for all at the lowest possible cost. Consequently, it is wholly unfair that immigrants should bear such a disproportionate share of the cost of globalization, in the form of obstacles to movement and overexploitation in the workplace. In many countries of emigration, for example, the remittances sent by international migrants to their households of origin

exceed the volume of foreign direct investment (to say nothing of development aid). Consequently, it is migrants who are making the greatest contribution to the development and welfare of their countries of origin. Facilitating the sending of remittances and reducing the commission on these operations should be considered not just an act of decency, but also an effective way of fostering development.

3. The configuration of the production system, and in particular the automatic allocation of migrants to particular sectors and occupations, has the effect of creating internal borders. These borders are not a necessity of the production system but the outcome of certain ideological prejudices that also yield an abusive advantage from the overexploitation of migrant labour. For this reason power relations in the labour market, which tend to be weighted in favour of employers at the best of times, are particularly skewed against migrant workers. This is especially true of undocumented migrants, who cannot take advantage of the protections enjoyed by other workers. Considering that the need for migrant labour is an intrinsic characteristic of labour markets in Western countries, the continuation of this state of affairs suggests a desire to keep immigrants in a position that makes it easier to overexploit their labour. While this problem is a complex one to resolve, measures to bring the underground economy to the surface would substantially improve the living conditions of many migrant workers.
4. In particular, we consider that the current character of migration as a process which generates transnational fields of belonging and action renders useless the efforts of States to restrict people's mobility. This is so, firstly, because the ways actors participate in and experience migration are becoming more and more extensive and diverse, making strict control of immigration impossible, particularly when the aim is to reduce this. And secondly, because these transnational fields are not confined to the mobility of persons but, crucially, include a system of networks through which material and symbolic goods are moved and exchanged. Given this situation on the ground and the need to defuse the possible strains and conflicts of the process, integration policies should concentrate on two things: a revised conception of citizenship that reflects the new multicultural reality of Western countries, and vigorous efforts to combat the forms of exclusion suffered by immigrants, although to be really effective these would undoubtedly require profound changes in the production model. Accordingly, and in view of the leading role that the new forms of public policy implementation give to civil society, it would be desirable to recognize the institutions and actors forming part of transnational communities as social interlocutors in the decision-making process.

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