
The Multicultural and Multiethnic Characteristics of Migration from Mexico to the United States

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Abstract

Although migration of Indigenous people from Mexico to the United States is a longstanding phenomenon, it was not until the mid-1980 and 1990s that it gained greater visibility. The creation of bi-national ethnic organizations and the massification and diversification of immigration flows have contributed to that effect. Indigenous migration is largely undocumented but by 2005, it is believed that six million Mexican workers, from which a great number of Indigenous people, were in the United States. Some structural changes affecting Mexican crops in the late 1980 along with the North American Free Trade Agreement that followed a few years later have force many indigenous families to see migrating to North America as their only economic alternative. More recently, indigenous groups that had previously been absent from processes of international immigration were identified in the United States. This recent diversification is linked to the integration of new Mexican regions to the migration processes as well as political and religious conflicts.

Keywords

Indigenous; Mexico; United States; migration; NAFTA

Résumé

Même si l'immigration des Autochtones mexicains vers les États-Unis n'est pas un phénomène récent, ce n'est qu'à partir du milieu des années 1980 qu'il a acquis une certaine visibilité. La création d'organisations ethniques nationales ainsi que la densification et la diversification des vagues d'immigration ont contribué à cet effet. Il existe peu de documentation sur l'immigration autochtone, mais en 2005 on pouvait estimer à six millions le nombre de travailleurs mexicains aux États-Unis, dont un très grand nombre d'Autochtones. Vers la fin des années 1980, certains changements structurels dans l'agriculture au Mexique suivis, quelques années plus tard, de l'Accord de libre-échange nord-américain ont forcé plusieurs familles autochtones à considérer l'immigration vers les États-Unis comme leur seule alternative économique. Récemment, de nouveaux groupes autochtones, jusque-là absents des processus d'immigration internationaux, étaient identifiés aux États-Unis. Cette diversification récente est en partie attribuée à l'intégration de nouvelles régions mexicaines dans les procédés d'immigration ainsi qu'à des conflits politiques et religieux.

Mots-clés

Immigration; autochtone; Mexique; États-Unis; ALÉNA

Resumen

Aunque la inmigración de los indígenas mexicanos a los Estados Unidos no es un fenómeno reciente, es solo hasta mediados de los años 80 que este ha ganado alguna visibilidad. La creación de organizaciones étnicas nacionales y la intensificación y diversificación de las olas de inmigración han contribuido a esta situación. Hay poca literatura sobre la inmigración indígena, pero en 2005 se estimó en seis millones el número de trabajadores mexicanos en los Estados Unidos, de los cuales muchos están indígenas. A finales de 1980, algunos cambios estructurales en la cultura en México tras el acuerdo de libre comercio forzaron a muchas familias indígenas a ver la migración a los Estados Unidos como su única alternativa económica. Recientemente, nuevos grupos de indígenas fueron identificados en los Estados Unidos. Esta diversificación reciente se atribuye en parte a la incorporación de nuevas regiones en los procedimientos de la inmigración mexicana, así como a los conflictos políticos y religiosos.

Palabras claves

Inmigración, Indígenous, Estados Unidos; México; TLCAN

INTRODUCTION

The migration of Indigenous people from Mexico to the United States is a phenomenon that has only recently attracted the interest of analysts on both sides of the Mexico-US border. It was not until 2004 that Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado published a book on this particular type of migration. The book is a collection of studies analyzing the growing presence of Indigenous people in several US states, which shows an undeniable fact: the migration from Mexico to the United States is both multicultural and multiethnic.

Although attention has only very recently been given to the Indigenous migration process from Mexico to the United States, several reports from the late 19th and early 20th centuries had already mentioned this phenomenon. The presence of Indigenous people from Mexico in American mines and crop fields constitutes a fact of profound historical significance. Reports have been found that mention Yaqui, Mayo and Opata Indigenous people working in mines and urban areas in Arizona. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that by the mid-19th century, the US-Mexican border had moved southwards to occupy a large part of the Mexican territory. The territory of the above ethnic groups, as well as that of the Kumiai and Kikapu, was divided by the border that today separates Mexico from the United States. The appearance of an Indigenous workforce from northern Mexico in the United States could be explained by the fact that this region had traditionally been part of their ethnic territories.

However, Indigenous people from the north were not the only ones who made up the migratory contingents of workers arriving in the US. The presence of Mexican Indigenous workers from other regions had been noted since the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Manuel Gamio (1971), for example, indicated that the areas in Mexico with the highest migration rates reported large percentages of Indigenous people, and that these people were in fact a large component of the Mexican migrant group.

Devra Weber (2008) notes the Purépecha migration to the United States in order to work in Arizona mines, on cattle ranches and in sugar beet fields in the Rocky Mountains. This migration was characterized by the participation of Purépecha, Yaqui, Opata and Mayo people in the labour movements and union struggles that gave birth to the Industrial Workers of the World union (Weber 2008).

In the first decades of the 20th century, there was a massive migration movement from the western central area of Mexico to the United States. Several years later, this region became the place of origin of the contingents that would participate in the Bracero Program, which ran from 1942 to 1964. This region — which includes the states of Jalisco, Michoacán and Guanajuato, as well as other neighbouring northern states with mining traditions and arid landscapes such as Zacatecas, Aguascalientes, Durango and San Luis Potosí — became a “traditional” region for migration from Mexico to the United States (Durand 2004). Railroad transportation, a large number of landless people, agrarian conflicts and the Cristero War were some of the main factors that made it easy for American contractors to recruit Mexican labourers.

It can be assumed that Indigenous people were massively integrated into the Bracero Program (1942-1964), in which nearly five million Mexicans — mostly male workers — participated. According to official records, thousands of Purépecha workers took part in the program. They were joined by Mixtecs and Zapotecs from Oaxaca, as well as Nahua and Huastecs from San Luis Potosí and Hidalgo. This brought the small communities of traditional “Native refugee areas” together with people in the United States, thus modifying the cultural geography of both countries.

Although the presence of Indigenous people in international migrations is a longstanding phenomenon, it was not until the mid-1980s and 1990s that it gained greater visibility. The creation of bi-national ethnic organizations,

which demanded recognition and respect for the cultural rights of people on both sides of the border, was a decisive factor in this visibility (Barabás 2008). Around that time, the National Indigenous Institute (INI in its Spanish acronym) started a program to support Indigenous migrant workers. With the support of Rural Legal Assistance in Texas, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund and other non-profit associations in Texas and California, workshops were organized to discuss human and labour rights in the United States. The INI was also present, due to the demands of Indigenous organizations that by 1989-1990 had become visible and active. These organizations had radio programs broadcasting news and other shows in their own Native languages. This way, distant Mixtec communities, as well as those in Oaxaca's central valleys, were able to communicate with the large Californian agricultural areas (Oehmichen and Hernández 1994).

The creation of bi-national organizations has been part of the struggle for the rights of Indigenous peoples in Mexico and other Latin American countries. These organizations fight for the fulfillment of ethnic demands such as the recognition of and respect for Indigenous cultures, traditions and forms of social organization. Through migration, these organizations set up a transnational movement for the vindication of historical demands.

The second factor that contributed to the visibility of Indigenous immigration to the United States was the massification and diversification of immigration flows. This phenomenon is related to the US immigration reform legislation that resulted in the legalization of almost two million undocumented workers, as well as the family reunifications that followed, and led to the implementation, in 1986, of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) and the Special Agricultural Workers Program (SAW), and a number of amnesty and naturalization provisions in 1987.

Those who were able to legalize their immigration status could move to other states and working areas in the United States and

could look for better salaries and labour conditions outside agricultural areas. Those able to regularize their status in the country found jobs in industrial and urban areas, as well as in private services. These changes necessitated the integration of new workers who could fill the vacancies in the agricultural areas created by the workers who had legalized their status. A new and very cheap workforce was then integrated in this way, while other areas in Mexico became new sources for international migration.

1. THE MAGNITUDE OF INDIGENOUS MIGRATION

It is very difficult to provide precise figures showing the magnitude of Indigenous migration to the United States, as this migration is largely undocumented. By March 2005, there were approximately 11 million undocumented workers in the United States. Almost six million people (54.5%) were Mexicans, and most of them had not been living in the US for very long. This leads us to the conclusion that many of those people were, and are, Indigenous. As we will see later on, new regions and municipalities that had historically been absent from the international migration have recently become a part of this migration.

The need for a cheap labour force to work in the agricultural areas of California, Oregon, North and South Carolina and Florida, among other areas, corresponded with the structural changes affecting Mexican crops in the late 1980s. The structural changes made by the Mexican federal government include the disincorporation of the Mexican Coffee Institute in 1989, exactly when the international price of coffee was falling. This affected more than 250 thousand producers, 70% of which were Indigenous people. Also, many Conasupo¹ subsidiaries disappeared or were sold to private owners, together with a group of government-

¹ National Company for Popular Supply: a government organization in charge of ensuring a low price for agricultural products and controlling storage, distribution and sales, thus avoiding intermediaries.

owned companies such as Cordemex, Fertilizantes Nacionales [National Fertilizers], forestry companies, and many other organizations in charge of agricultural development in Mexico. Mexico's bank privatization process in 1982 modified the criteria for granting agricultural credits, while government subsidies to support agricultural production were cancelled. In 1991, an amendment to Article 27 of the Constitution was passed, which put an end to the land distribution process and established the legal conditions for selling cooperative land owned by farmers.

A few years later, Mexico became part of one of the world's most important economic and commercial regions by entering, together with the United States and Canada, into the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which came into force as of January 1, 1994. This agreement favoured the country's export corporations and foreign investment, while hindering national development. Thus, as most cities witnessed the bankruptcy of almost all small and medium-sized businesses, agricultural areas also went bankrupt when they were no longer able to compete with imported goods. Since then, migrating to North America became the main if not the only economic alternative for thousands of Indigenous families working as peasants in agricultural areas, as well as for workers living in urban areas who had recently lost their jobs.

In the 1990s, the immigration rate increased and was diversified throughout Mexico. New areas that had never before been part of the migration processes were now integrated (Ariza and Portes 2007). By 2000, the international migration phenomenon was occurring throughout Mexico. According to the National Population Council, only 93 out of a total of 2,435 municipalities had not participated in the migration process. The migration process was so sizeable that the 2000 census showed that 10% of the country's population lived in the United States, where 15% to 20% of the Mexican labour force worked.

Soon, remittances sent by immigrants in the US became the main source of income for thousands of families that began to depend on them to survive.

2. DIVERSIFICATION

Even though Mixtec and Zapotec Indigenous people had been part of the *braceros* since 1940 (Barabás 2008), by the 1990s, the number of Indigenous immigrants from the rural areas of central and southern Mexico, particularly from Oaxaca, Puebla, Guerrero and Hidalgo, was rapidly increasing.

Mixtec people became the largest Indigenous community in the United States, larger than any other Native American community. They were joined by the Triqui immigrants, who started to come to the United States in the 1990s (París Pombo 2008). Stephen (2008) notes that there is a strong ethnic component among the 100,000 agricultural workers in Oregon, especially due to the presence of Mixtec, Zapotec, Maya of Yucatán, Chinanteco and Mixe people. The same phenomenon makes California the state with the largest Indigenous population, even larger than Oklahoma, the US state with the highest concentration of Native Americans (Velasco Oriz 2008).

In California, besides Purépecha, Mixtec, Triqui, Nahua and Zapotec people, there are immigrants from other states that have only recently become part of the international immigration, such as the Maya of Yucatán, Tzotzil and others. They have all moved to commercial agricultural areas, in both Mexico and the United States, in accordance with the demands of the labour market (Durand, Massey and Zenteno 2001).

The latter phenomenon is due to the fact that other Mexican regions have been integrated into the migration processes. For example, the area of southeastern Mexico became simultaneously a pole for the attraction, transit and expulsion of immigrants. As poles of attraction, the tourism industry and *maquila* companies attracted immigrants from rural towns in Yucatán, Tabasco, Chiapas, Oaxaca

and Campeche. White-collar workers, investors and executives were also attracted from other parts of the country and from other countries as well. Within this context, it is important not to ignore the porosity of Mexico's southern border, which, due to war, poverty and political conflicts in Central America, has become a pole of attraction and of transit for hundreds of immigrants who cross the border with the hope of also crossing to the United States. Southeastern Mexico has at the same time become a place for the expulsion of international immigrants.

Today's sources of immigration include nearly 90% of the Mexican territory, due to the integration of regions that were traditionally absent from immigration processes for more than a century. This change matches the ever-growing presence of Indigenous immigrants to the United States, which has increased from 6.1% to 10.9% in the last 15 years (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004).

In 2000, Stefano Varese (2000) identified Indigenous groups in the United States that had previously been absent from processes of international immigration. Among them were the Chinantecs, Mayans from Yucatán, and speakers of Tzeltal, Tzotzil and Mam from the highlands of Chiapas. These immigrants were located as agricultural workers in packing industries and in urban services in the United States. They lived mainly in California, Oregon, Washington, Arizona, Texas, Florida, New York, Illinois, Colorado, North and South Carolina, Georgia and Alaska.

They were joined by Indigenous people who took part in the H2A and H2B seasonal programs, which allowed legal but temporary migration to the United States for working purposes. These contracts depend on the arrangements made between the US government and commercial and agricultural companies in the US. The companies subcontract middlemen who recruit the workers in rural areas in Mexico to perform temporary agricultural or industrial work in the US. These kinds of contracts have also had an impact in

both Veracruz and Yucatán (Smith-Nonini 2002).

Other records show migrations of other recently-integrated Indigenous peoples such as the Chocho, Mixe, Pame, Popoloca and Kanjobal groups (INI 2000). Based on several interviews, Rus and Guzmán (1996) point out that there are dozens of Chamula and Zinacanteco people who have come on their own to Texas, California and Oregon. It is worth mentioning that a large part of this migration has been caused by political and religious conflicts (CDHFBC 2001).

CONCLUSION

The visibility of Indigenous immigration is associated with both massification and the fact that Indigenous immigrants are tending more and more to vindicate their right to develop their own culture, language, traditions and forms of social organization in Mexico. Community traditions, the closeness of social networks and, possibly, the distinctive cultural rules of many Indigenous communities tend to be expressed in the immigrants' destinations. This allows us to predict that, depending on the strength of the community's social network and traditional paradigms, the existence of transnational communities will be identified in some cases, while in others it will not.

Indigenous immigrant communities from Oaxaca have often been strong and energetic in their social organization, due to their capacity to build new social networks that mirror their source communities, creating "child" or satellite communities in the new destinations. These groups tend to develop strategies oriented to the community's social welfare and development, both for immigrants and for those who stay in the source community (Kearney 1996; Lestage 1998; Besserer 2004; Gil 2006; Stephen 2008; París Pombo 2008).

The forms of organization of Native people from Oaxaca cannot be compared with other groups' social forms of organization, since the cultural diversity expressed in Mexico apparently tends to be reproduced internationally. For example,

Purépecha people do not tend to use their ethnic roots as a source of cohesion; that is, they do not use their ethnic symbols as focal points around which to articulate their collective activities. In turn, Mixtec, Zapotec and Triqui groups have become visible in both countries in their demands for certain cultural rights, but this has not happened with other groups.

Lastly, I would like to point out certain premises that may orient future research. Michael Kearney (1996) has noted that the immigration process seems to make the Mexican-Mestizo classification disappear, since it goes beyond the framework of the nation-state that has treated them as a minority. It is also possible, however, to observe processes that reproduce the same system of social classification in the United States, especially when we note that, according to Paris (2008), Indigenous immigrants tend to occupy the lowest positions in labour immigration. Ethnographic data seem to indicate that the presence of Indigenous immigrants in agricultural commercial areas in California and Oregon is closely related to the lowering of workforce costs and ethnic replacement in agricultural labour. Should this hold true, we may witness the creation of a state order where race, phenotype, ethnic group, culture and national origin are associated with different jobs. The interethnic structures that have placed Indigenous people in Mexico in conditions of poverty and marginalization are thus likely to repeat themselves globally.

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