Interviewing a female worker in the strawberry agribusiness in Zamora in 1978. This photo is from the author's photo collection

Chapter 2
The World is Becoming a More Dangerous Place: Culture and Identity Among Mexican Migrants in the US

Yes, I'd like to think of myself as an indigenous person,
they're very precious to me, but right now I feel normal–not indigenous,
not Spanish, not a gringa–, I feel Mexican.
Rocío Montalvo, young migrant woman from Tlacotepec, Mexico.

2.1 Introduction

The second half of the twentieth century has been called 'the age of migration', given the unprecedented number of people who have moved to another country (Toro-Morn/Alicea 2004).[1] More than two hundred million persons—including undocumented workers—have crossed borders in their search for jobs or a new life. This is bringing about momentous changes in the hierarchies and creative mix of cultures, in governance structures and in human relationships.

Such flows are motivated mainly by disparities in revenues. Recent data in this report show that the gap in income between developed and developing countries tripled from 1960–1961 to 2000–2002: only 16 developing countries saw a growth of more than 3 % between 1985 and 2000, while another 55 % reported an annual growth of less than 2 %; of these, 23 reported negative growth (Halonen 2004).[2] Other factors are the disparities in population between countries and regions and, I would also emphasize, cultural influence of the mass media and audiovisuals.

The United Nations points out that the migration 'stock', which is the permanent nucleus of these transfers, rose from 0.8 % of the world population between 1960 and 1965, reached a surprising peak of 6.7 % in 1985–1990, and fell back to

[1] This text was originally published in *Development*, Vol. 50, Num. 4 (December 2007): 6–12. Permission granted by Ms. Laura Russell of Plagraves Macmillan on 2 July 2013.

[2] See also Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM) at: http://www.gcim.org (13 June 2013).

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1.5 % in 2005–2007 (UN 2006).[3] The presence of women in these movements continues to grow, from 46.8 % in 1960 to 49.6 % in 2005 (UN 2006). These are no longer women traveling to join their families, they are independent workers; the same shift that has been identified in national migratory flows (for Mexico see Trigueros 2004; Goldring 2001).

Given globalization, geopolitical and demographic trends, recent estimates suggest that such flows will continue unabated. The illegal nature of much of international migration has also given rise to problems of crime and security that go beyond the border regions, which require new measures to combat trafficking in human beings, including the sexual commerce of women and children as well as organized crime and terrorism.

2.2 Cross-Border Migrations and Culture

The cultural aspects[4] of migration have rapidly become a salient issue in national and international agendas in relation to problems of migrants cultural integration or ascendancy, pluralism in governance and homegrown terrorism among migrants. Concerns about culture are currently being played out heatedly in three arenas.

First, in international relations where the old, discredited discourse of civilizations has been used, for example, example, by Samuel Huntington in the 'clash of civilizations', as a euphemism for religions, in what could be considered an attempt to simplify world politics so as to leave out the plurality of real actors presently emerging on the world scene.

Secondly, in the mass media and now in the Internet, in the concern over the dominance of the English language and of US audiovisuals in all realms of telecommunications and informatics.

How ironic it seems, then, that Huntington's 2005 book *Who are We? The Challenges to America's National identity*[5] calls for the defense of the 'American Creed' against Hispanic migrants in the US. He singles out Mexicans as the principal threat, arguing that they may end up dividing the United States into two

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[3] Note that figures on international migration are based primarily on the number of foreign persons registered in national censuses and other official sources. Therefore, they do not include undocumented migrants, or trafficking, or those involved in the drug trade or other criminal activities.

[4] Culture being a polysemic term, the working definition of culture in this article is a self-referential group which usually belongs to broader categories, in which individuals decide whether to keep, discard or radically change the symbolic discourses and practices that are characteristic of the group. Cultures are not autonomous, autarchic units but are always linked by dimensional flows with other cultural clusters.

[5] A first article by Huntington (2004) presenting his argument was entitled 'The Hispanic Challenge' which Hispanics in the US quickly dubbed 'His Panic Challenge'.

nations. In fact, his data are wrong, since all studies show that by the third generation, descendants of migrations are fully integrated into the American way of life.[6]

Indeed, this is the third arena where culture has been true to its 'contentious' nature[7]: the integration or lack of integration of migrants in recipient societies. It is a policy area in which governments of countries receiving migrants are urgently looking for new policies, given the problems fostered by multiculturalist policies as in UK and Netherlands. While the problems of integration of migrants in developed countries are constantly referred to in international fora, much less attention is given in development policy discussions to the 'failed societies' that migrants are leaving behind them in their countries of origin.

In this context, Mexico occupies a particular place, because it is the only developing nation that shares a border with an industrialized country, a border that is also long (3,200 km long of which the Wall to be built would cover 700),[8] porous and politically sensitive. Demonstrations that brought out hundreds of thousands of undocumented workers of all nationalities and their allies in the United States in March and May 2006 drew attention to the need for political and cultural agreements in which the risks and benefits are shared more equitably between the sending and receiving societies.

2.3 Hispanic Immigrants in the US

According to the 2000 US Census, 22.3 million Mexicans are now living in that country, a number which doubled in 1980–1990 and again in 1990–2000 (Rumbaut 2006: 33) with an estimate that 4 million migrated between 2000 and 2006. In the census, that figure is equivalent to 63.3 % of the total Hispanic population of 35.2 million (Rumbaut 2006: 33).

How do different groups of immigrants identify themselves culturally, or, in the US Census terms 'racially'? According to Rumbaut (2006: 33), and I agree, Hispanics or Latinos are to being forced into racial categories that do not correspond to their historic experiences or cultural perceptions. Only 49.9 % of Hispanics considered themselves to be white, black or Asian; the rest identified themselves as 'multi-racial' or 'other'.

Mexicans classified themselves as follows: 46.8 % as 'white'; 0.7 % as 'black'; 0.2 % as 'Asian'; 1.2 % as 'American Indian'; 44.8 % as 'other', and the last 5.2 %

[6] In a recent article, data was presented from a survey showing the cultural impact of Mexican migrants as well as other Latino migrants, that has enlivened painting, literature, food and 'fiestas' in the US, and of course, i.e. popular music. See Arizpe (2004).

[7] The classic view of culture as a homogeneous, consensual, discrete unit has given way, since the rise of 'cultural studies' to perceiving it as a 'site of contestation'. This seems, indeed, a more apt definition of it for today's turbulent cultural interactions.

[8] At the Berlin Wall, 1,008 people died trying to cross. At the Mexican border, the count is at present in 2007 4,000. Migrants interviewed say the 'Wall of Shame' will not stop them because they have 'a passport from God'.

as 'two or more races' (Rumbaut 2006: 39). "Of those who chose 'other' as their race, 41 percent indicated Hispanic or Latino, and another 20 percent cited their nationality (e.g., Mexican)" (Portes/Rumbaut 2001: Table 7.7 cited in Tienda/Mitchell 2006: 44).

According to the excellent study carried out by the National Academies of Science on 'Hispanics' in the United States; figures and other social and cultural traits reveal the tremendous diversity among them (Tienda/Mitchell 2006). They explain that the term 'Hispanics', created by administrative decision as a new category for the 1980 census has, over various decades, become a new ethnic and racial category. Although it initially referred primarily to social and labor aspects, with the new movements that culminated in the massive demonstrations of May 2006, the category has taken on a strong political connotation.

The study also demonstrates that, although Hispanic immigrants in the United States are going through the same phases of immigration as immigrants of other nationalities—gradually losing their language and social isolation with each successive generation, attaining progressively higher levels of education and better-paying jobs, reaching professional and management positions in their companies and marrying with people of other ethnic groups, white or otherwise. They caution that unless more investment is devoted to the education and integration of Latinos, this category risks changing from an ethnic definition to a sort of permanent 'underclass', exacerbating the labour, educational, and health problems of this group (Tienda/Mitchell 2006: 57–58):

> The key question for the future is whether Latinos, the popular term for them, will evolve a symbolic identity for some or all people of Latin American descent as they join the American mainstream, or whether it will become an enduring marker of disadvantaged minority group status (Tienda/Mitchell 2006: 4).

On the other side of the border, our study shows how Mexican migrants themselves perceive their situation and the cultural interactions they are involved with in this continuous movement across the border.

2.4 How Do Mexican Migrants Identify Themselves?

In our fieldwork research[9] we interviewed migrants from four communities in the northeast state of Morelos and those of one community in the suburb of Norcross in Atlanta, Georgia. Migration in that region began only recently, with adult men migrating as temporary workers, although in the next generation, for today's

[9] Interviews and a survey of 201 individuals, based on a random sample with equal number of men and women, migrants and non-migrants, were carried out in the state of Morelos in Mexico and in one of the migrant communities in Norcross, a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia. They were conducted by Lourdes Arizpe, coordinator of the project, anthropology students Cristina Amescua and Edith Pérez, and Carlos Guadalupe Ocampo, a member of one of the communities. Work was funded by the National Autonomous University of Mexico and the Rockefeller Foundation.

young men and now young women between the ages of 15–30, migration is becoming a permanent option.[10]

Of the people interviewed, among the men, 64 % gave mainly economic motives for their migration, i.e.: “the farmland doesn’t give enough”, “there is no work”, “they don’t pay well here”; interestingly, another 15 % answered “to get to know the United States”—these being mostly young people—and 7 % gave as a motive that a relative had sent for them or had invited them to visit.[11] The answers by women were only slightly different: 52 % for economic reasons, 15 % to get to know the country and, as could be expected, 12.5 % at the invitation of relatives.

When asked with what country or region they most identified, respondents answered as follows: 76.1 % Mexico; 15.4 % the world; 7.0 % Latin America, and one respondent (0.5 %) mentioned the United States.

In terms of gender, it is significant that the number of women who identify first with Mexico is low (36.6 %) as compared to the number of men (61.4 %). In the in-depth interviews, women, in fact, voiced sharp criticism of Mexican institutions: of the government, because they blame it directly (as do their husbands) for forcing their husbands to emigrate, and for placing them in conditions of unemployment with no possibility of earning a decent income; of the courts and justice system, which has never offered them any protection against domestic or public violence—something homecoming migrants tell them is offered in the United States—indeed, with more than 400 violent deaths of women in Ciudad Juárez, among many other cases in other states of Mexico, unexplained by the Vicente Fox’s government (2000–2006), together with the exponential growth in drug trafficking during that same period, these women are only describing reality; and, of social programs like ‘*Oportunidades*’—the World Bank sponsored social policy of the Mexican government—in which only a few women of the community are chosen to get a grant to keep their one eldest child in school. As one of the women left out of this scheme rightly said, “…they choose whoever they want to give the money to for whatever reason–what, so those of us who don’t even get the dust, aren’t we Mexican?”

One interesting aspect shown in the survey is that respondents who identify themselves as indigenous feel more closely identified with Latin America. Northeast Morelos still has a few people, mostly old women and men who speak ‘Mexicano’ as it is called locally, that is Náhuatl, the ancient language of the Toltecs and Mexica, representing no more than 5 % of the local population.[12] This being the case, it is highly significant that 56.7 % of those surveyed said that they did consider themselves indigenous! This points to how inclusive Mexican nationality is and that the term ‘Mexicanidad’ being used more and frequently by Mexican migrants and their descendants in the United States is, in fact, building a new social representation of them, broader than that of Mexican nationality, in the US.

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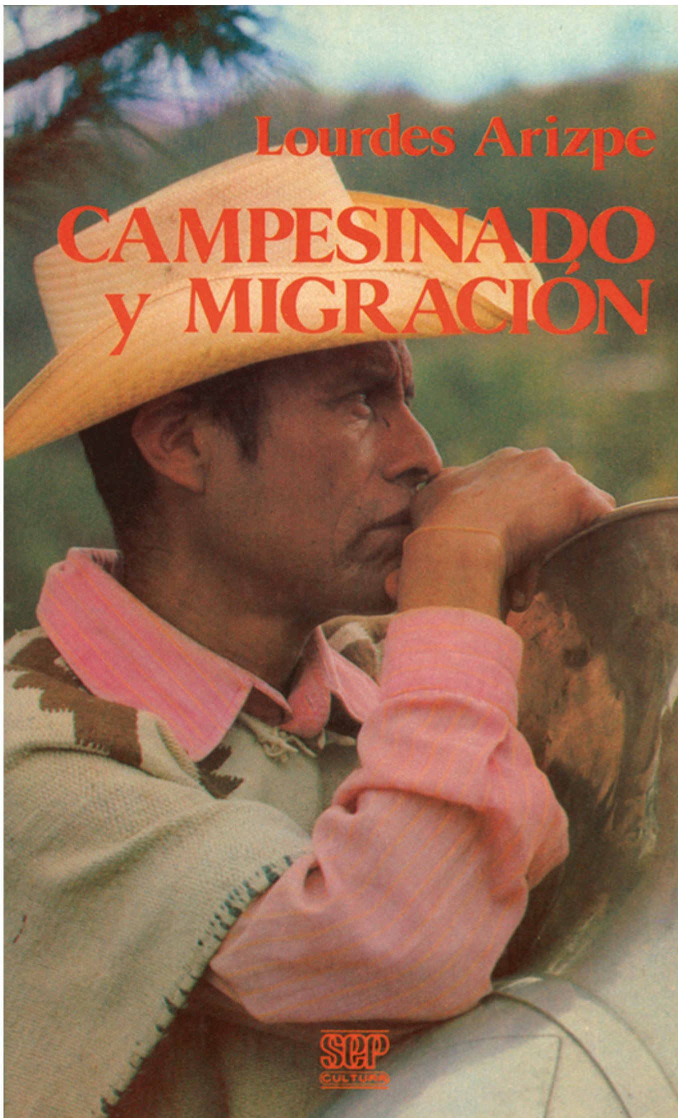
[10] Fieldwork was conducted in northern region of the state of Morelos, in four communities in the municipalities of Temoac and Zacualpan, on the southern slope of the volcano Popocatépetl.

[11] The sample was random, but with a balance as to migratory condition (temporary, circulating or permanent), gender, age, and religion.

[12] Survey conducted in 2007 in four communities in the state of Morelos—Zacualpan, Tlacotepec, Amilcingo and Temoac—with a random sample of migrants and non-migrants cross-referenced for age, gender, locality and migrant status.

2.5 The World is Becoming More Dangerous

The most worrying trend indicated by the survey was the answers to the question in the survey: "what is the world's biggest danger today?" They describe an emerging world in which violence is predominating over all other risks, a fear expressed by 43.2 % of the respondents, with reference to crime, drug addiction,



Book cover of Lourdes Arizpe: *Peasants and Migration* (Mexico: Education Ministry 1985)

war, and terrorism. Other responses mentioned the environment (10.4 %), unemployment and poverty (7.0 %), illness (7.0 %), natural disasters (6.0 %) and other less frequent responses like migration, politics, human beings, and loose morals. Significantly, *twice as many women as men mentioned crime, and the response was the highest among young women between 19 and 35 years of age*. These migrants were especially emphatic in their remarks about crime and drugs, which reflect their experiences in crossing the border, and many of them living in high-crime, drug-plagued neighborhoods in the United States. They mention one specific aspect which, if corroborated, is highly troubling: "There are loads of people who have just given up, and don't come (back to Mexico)—they're into drugs". There are also increasing concerns about drugs expressed by a number of anxious mothers from Tlacotepec, in Morelos itself. A young boy from that town confirms the interpretation we made earlier on the deep insecurity that women feel living in Mexico. Even the two transsexuals who came up the sample of those interviewed in the US also identified crime as the biggest risk.[13]

Among the men interviewed—even the younger ones—there was also a predominant concern over crime and drugs. This was corroborated in interviews in which they said that, until recently, drugs were not being sold locally but are now circulating widely, even in the high schools of the region.

Explained to us, "the family gets lost when (the parents) go away, I guess because a lot of times the marriages don't last, they go away and they find someone else over there, and (the children here) are raised without an image, and they do whatever they want and do awful things because they don't have a strong father figure in their lives." This perception of an increase in drug consumption among children is correct: specialists at a seminar held by the Ministry of Health in May confirm that this type of consumption in Mexico rose at a rate of 20 % in the previous year.

Another prevalent response was about illness, also linked to the vulnerability they say they feel as immigrants. As a driver from Zacualpan said, "what's happening is there's a lot of infection from illnesses, deaths from the gases they inhale and they catch from each other … one of those was my brother, he got hit by a car over there … I'm more worried about the ones that went over, because they bring things back with them, over there they would give us talks about AIDS, and the doctor was a Mexican and said that he had a lot of cases of AIDS, and a lot of Mexicans go there, and how awful it felt to tell (his) countrymen that they had it … I can't forget that, because sometimes you just get yourself up and go, you can't get it from just one time, but think of their poor wives, because they come back here and infect their wives and your children, and now it's a pandemic". The problem is worsened by the lack of doctors or clinics that treat this sort of illness in their villages.

[13] Ethnographic fieldwork indicated that homosexuality may also be a factor in inducing migration, since the life of homosexuals in Mexican rural villages, both men and women, is wrought with discrimination and humiliation.

2.6 "I'm Thankful for Having Been Born in Mexico …"

In the survey, cultural loyalties were laid out in interesting patterns. In response to the question of whether they preferred Mexican or US culture, 90.1 % of immigrants—most of them male—said Mexican. Only one chose American culture, and the rest did not answer or said they didn't know. We also asked why they preferred it, and we received an outburst of exuberant responses. Among them were the following: "I was in a (Mexican) dance group, and your blood swells up and you feel like you want to say 'Thank you for having been born in Mexico'" (Juan Martínez); or "Even though we're disrespectful and corrupt, looking at the warmth we create, I'm happy with that" (Rocío Montalvo).

There is however, bitter criticism against the Mexican border authorities, and some resentment against those who made it in the US. It is common that migrants complain that "…the same Mexican acts like a motherless jerk, they get some temporary job and get all full of themselves, and then when you get there they don't help you with anything, they discriminate against you" (Francisco Ornelas).

Another important finding was that most migrants like Americans, especially white Americans, many of them emphasizing how fair they are in treating them on the job. Migrants reiterate that "here (in Mexico) they give you a miserable wage that doesn't get you anything, sometimes it doesn't let you prosper; and (in the US) no, there if some employer sees you and you throw yourself into the job, they pick you up and then they even send for you".

Once again, though, women were more vocal in their criticism of Mexican culture: 97.1 % of the men said they preferred it, compared to 77.5 % of the women. The remainder (22.5 %) did not come out in favor of American culture; they merely did not answer or said they did not know. In the in-depth interviews, there were many instances in which the perceptions were expressed in criticism: against machismo, expressed in domestic violence and alcoholism, against the political disorder and against the irresponsibility of parents toward their children. Because of migration and the mass media, women now know that conditions are different for women in the United States.

It is interesting that 61.3 % of the migrants responded that they felt equally Mexican in Mexico as in the '*Norte*', but that 32.4 % said they felt more Mexican while in the US. Feeling 'more Mexican' fits in with a common attitude among migrants of different nationalities who find themselves in a any country having another lifestyle. However, Mexican identity is based on a multi-layered history of strife and nation-building as well as of notable cultural creativity going back two millennia. In fact, we found that all of these are present today in eastern Morelos: culture is permeated by the Mesoamerican Nahua heritage; some people still hold the agrarian ideology of the Mexican Revolution, even tinged with anarchist leanings, keeping up the flame of Emiliano Zapata's Zapatismo; new generations that have taken up the neo-Zapatismo of Subcomandante Marcos. At the same time, while several dioceses kept the fundamentalist Catholicism predating the Vatican Council II, in our survey, 21.2 % of respondents said they profess no religion.

This plural vision of the world the migrants' sites of origin in our study encounters a different plurality in the US: more contacts with other Latin American and Caribbean people, as well as the astonishing variety of Americans. Eleazar Martínez puts it this way: "it seems as if Mexicans are hot-blooded, party-goers, if you're just hanging out with someone you feel (good), but over there (in the United States) they don't have much culture".

2.7 Biculturality Without Problems

Ultimately, what matters is the future. What do migrants and non-migrants think of what will happen in the future? Let's take the example of the survey's question about whether Spanish will be spoken alongside English in Mexico in the future. A surprising 70 % said yes. A very sharp contrast is evident between young people having less than 35 years of age, among whom the answer was as high as 80 % while among those older than 36 years this figure sinks to around 50 %. There is also a marked difference between Catholics (58.55 %) and Protestants (88.9 %).

Although they may view this change as inevitable, attitudes toward this varied significantly: 48.9 % of respondents think it would be a good thing, 17.8 % a bad thing, and 12.2 % are indifferent to the prospect. The age difference is not so pronounced as in the previous question, but it does reflect a particular bias among teenagers (13–18 years old), 64.3 % of whom think it would be a good thing. These are precisely the age groups more eager to migrate to the United States—concrete evidence of this can be seen in the fact that 80 % of the male graduates of one high school class in Tlacotepec have gone to '*el Norte*'.

Religion is another interesting factor in this response—61.1 % of Protestants approve of bilingualism, compared to 47.2 % of Catholics (15 % of which did not feel it was either good or bad) and 42.1 % of those who professed no religion.

2.8 Conclusion

Our fieldwork and survey data gave a vision of the plurality and contestation of cultural interactions through migration to the United States in the region that was studied. It also pointed at what may be considered to be a general characteristic of Mexican culture: its cultural generosity, which receives and accepts the co-existence of different cultures, ideologies and religions. It also nurtures cultural creativity and crystallizes in the richness of a constantly recreated humus of intangible cultural heritage. For many of the migrants who are crossing the border, however, this situation becomes very different in the United States.

Over there, they say that they feel that there are no sets of practices, rituals or festivities that would allow them to reconstruct the plurality and density of social, family, ritual kinship and community relations that they enjoy in Mexico. It is cause

for great concern that, if undocumented or illegal Mexican migrants tend to get sucked into marginal or even dark criminal undergrounds—even more so at present with the threats of deportation as shadows of a recession loom—and as they become represented in some US media in a dumbed-down version of Mexicans, they face a cultural loss of plurality and possibilities to display their heritage of cultural creativity. So they may turn even more militantly to their identity and heritage.

This turns Samuel Huntington's hypothesis upside-down: if he sees a threat of Mexican dividing the US, it will become more exacerbated the more Mexicans are pushed into a lowly status as a permanent underclass, together with other Latinos.

Cross-border migrations the world over are overwhelming all previous policies and cultural fences meant to melt them, mix them or keep them apart from their host societies. We urgently need new formulas in development thinking to recast cultural representations, multilayered loyalties, in a world in which nations are far from melting down.

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