

# The Two Faces of Migration: Mexicans in Texas

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## INTRODUCTION

Many studies have outlined the growing importance of Latinos in the U.S. in terms of numbers, but also of economic innovation. A recent study by Caraballo, McLaughlin, and McLaughlin show that Latinos represent approximately 17 percent of the total U.S. population, about 50 million people, the majority of whom are of Mexican origin; they wield US\$1.3 trillion in buying power and are geographically very easy to reach, since they are concentrated primarily in four U.S. States: California, Texas, New York, and Florida.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most outstanding contributions of this study is to show that Latinos in general, Mexicans included, have contributed significantly to the United States' competitiveness. According to the authors, Latinos have created businesses and jobs and had consumer buying power estimated at over US\$1.5 billion as of 2014, a figure larger than the gross domestic product GDP of most Latin American economies.

"Influence on corporate America is also growing, with more Latinos occupying senior management and board positions. Combined, all these elements indicate that Latinos are in a position to become the face of [U.S.] American competitiveness and innovation in the twenty-first century," they write.<sup>2</sup>

Using evidence gathered in the field in Texas, in this article, I analyze the contradictions between these contributions and the difficulties of integration and acceptance that Mexican professionals in the U.S. may still face. Paraphrasing from a novel on Chinese migrants to the "Promised Land," we may ask: How common is it to mistakenly identify all Mexicans in the U.S. as "those people who try to take live chickens buses and don't own real suitcases?"<sup>3</sup>

## MEXICANS IN TEXAS: A COMPROMISE BETWEEN BEING HOME AND ABROAD

Thirty-eight percent of all Texas residents are of Hispanic origin.<sup>4</sup> Of these, 87 percent are Mexicans;<sup>5</sup> that is, 9 million people of Mexican origin live in Texas. One-third of them

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(34 percent) are highly-skilled professionals, including first- and second-generation migrants (born in the U.S. or abroad).<sup>6</sup>

These statistics show us the numerical relevance of Mexicans among the Latinos. Of course, the presence of so many Mexicans is due to the historical bilateral relations and cultural and geographic proximity. Many migrants interviewed for this study said that being in Texas is a compromise between being abroad and also being close to family. Says one university professor of Mexican nationality interviewed for this article,

Mexican families lived here before Texas was part of the U.S. Texans like to eat guacamole; they break piñatas for children's birthdays; this is cultural heritage from Mexico. . . . We were in Norway and I mentioned to my wife the possibility of applying for a job in Texas. She said, "Send it, right away!" [Laughs.] She obviously wanted to be closer to Mexico or return to Mexico. We actually tried returning to Mexico twice, but it didn't work. And Texas is very similar to Yucatán, where we come from. They got their independence the same year. Yucatán has been segregated from Mexico for a long time. In Texas, like in Yucatán, people greet you in the elevator; they ask you about your family; they open the door for you. (Civil engineer, PhD, university professor in College Station, Texas, 47-year-old man)

#### MEXICANS AS A "MONOLITHIC" GROUP

Despite this proximity and a shared history of the region, many of the professionals interviewed still perceive the local population's resistance to accepting them. In particular, they are worried about Mexicans being stereotyped as people with no education and bad language abilities:

From one migrant with over 20 years in Houston, we hear that here in the U.S., they have a preconceived idea that if you are Mexican, you have no education, you have no culture. In general, skilled Mexicans are not very welcome. That is to say, we

are not treated well. I took a lot of math and physics for my doctorate, but I still have to face the question of how I can understand a problem so well if I'm not from India or China. People have a hard time understanding that we have the same skills; that's why I like to work at multinational companies, where they realize that it's not in their interest to have those types of prejudices. (Geologist, PhD, working at a petroleum company in Houston, 46-year-old man)

This type of preconception has previously been identified as a difference between *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination. That is, even when the law forbids discrimination, and it is not politically correct to be racist, native-born people may still have unsympathetic attitudes toward migrants. Accepting diversity is more a discourse than an actual fact, as a study by Matthew Gritter has previously proven.<sup>7</sup> Gritter believes Mexicans in the U.S. have been a group "*included* rather than *excluded* from the [U.S.] American polity." He writes,

People of Mexican origin are a focus of immigration debates that characterize them as an "other," while antidiscrimination policy explicitly includes them. . . . However, they are often racialized and perceived as a monolithic group of outsiders. *De facto* rather than *de jure* segregation and ostensibly color-blind legislation and policy have been the prime state source of discrimination.<sup>8</sup>

Gritter points to the fact that Mexicans are all considered similar and part of the same group, despite the lack of homogenous origin, of different physical appearance, and cultural background, or the variety of native languages and citizenship statuses.

#### TWO KINDS OF MEXICANS

This perception of Mexicans as a monolithic group negatively affects Mexican professionals in the U.S. and interferes with their social mobility and integration into their destination country. The aforementioned university professor from the city of College Station says,

We see the difference between those who are here legally or illegally when we look at their social mobility. It's also a matter of principle. For me working as a professor was difficult, just like it is difficult for [Anglo] people to differentiate between both groups. This dual ideology of many conservative politicians

in the state of Texas, who don't recognize immigrants, who separate "legals" from the "illegals," produces conflict. We've got students who graduate as engineers from Texas A&M but don't have legal immigration status, so they can't work at the very university they graduated from. (Civil Engineer, PhD, university professor from College Station, Texas, 47-year-old man)

This statement reminds me of the theoretical position of psychologist Farhad Dalal, who shows that "our societies are still driven by very real problems of marginalization of people perceived to be of a different kind. . . . Some 'kinds' of people continue to do less well than other 'kinds' in all arenas of life."<sup>9</sup> Dalal compares this type of *judgementalism* to a more objective judgment and believes that racism in general is due to power relations, rather than a product of ignorance. This is also difficult to change as it is reproduced by institutions that resist structural change—not necessarily consciously—and find ways of apparently complying with the egalitarian agenda without actually doing so. He identifies a double discourse toward migrants in general, which I believe may apply for Mexicans in particular. Dalal writes,

The equality enterprise becomes converted into a paper exercise, the intention of which is to be seen doing good; the way that they have managed this is by stripping ethics out of the conversation and replacing it with bureaucratic procedure. Further, the diversity agenda has been hijacked by some corporations who purport to subscribe to the emancipatory project for justice but, in fact, exploit the notion of diversity to further enhance their profit margins. These, I contend, are the main obstacles to real change.<sup>10</sup>

This social demand for tolerance and political correctness may explain a shared opinion of many Mexican professionals who work for multinational companies and who believe that discrimination is counterproductive in such work environments. Being egalitarian is a matter of survival in such multicultural environments; therefore, many migrants choose them as places to work. This may also explain why certain Mexican professionals may declare they are not at all discriminated against since they are "educated" and they are integrated into multicultural organizations such as transnational companies, hospitals, or universities. However, almost all of them tend to acknowledge discrimination exists outside these environments, where the difference in education influences their integration into or exclusion from U.S. society.

Many of the professionals interviewed perceive the local resistance to accepting them. Particularly, they are worried about Mexicans being stereotyped as people with no education and bad language abilities.

The fact that the Mexican community in Texas is multifaceted also has implications in terms of its organization. It refers to certain tensions and conflicts among educated and non-educated Mexicans, between those with visas and the undocumented. It actually influences the way that the community organizes itself. One of the professionals interviewed told us,

The Mexican community here is very divided. Many Mexican professionals who come here become successful; they shop at The Galleria and then become very conservative. They want to remove the undocumented. There is great division, very little solidarity, little help from the privileged Mexican sector that arrives here on work visas. This has its roots in the super-elitist Mexican society back in Mexico, where we split between those who studied at the Ibero and the "nacos" [a pejorative term for peasants], the ones who take the subway. It's the same here in the U.S. (Journalist, working as an independent interpreter/translator in Houston, 45-year-old woman)

#### INTOLERANCE AND FEAR, HISTORICALLY ROOTED FEELINGS

A study by Feagin and Cobas refers to the racialization of Latinos, to their definition as a "non-white racial group" by Anglo whites, based on alleged physical and cultural characteristics, including phenotype, language, and family characteristics. According to their research, these have been excuses for justifying Latinos' low position on the social ladder, their oppression, and racialization.<sup>11</sup> Feagin and Cobas go on to state that the historical racialization of and discrimination against Latinos has interfered with their socioeconomic opportunities and has prevented them from acquiring various types of social capital.<sup>12</sup>

Other authors such as Maria Chavez share the same viewpoint: "As a Latino or Native American or any kind of minority, you're just another wetback or you're just another migrant

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farm worker or whatever.”<sup>13</sup> Chavez appreciates that this recurring and stereotyping framing of people as “typical Mexicans” signals how powerful such ingrained racial stereotyping and other racial framing are.<sup>14</sup>

While the situation may have changed in some U.S. states and certain professional fields, many of the Mexican migrants interviewed in Texas for this article still prove that reasons exist for migrants to be afraid. One woman with dual U.S.-Mexican citizenship and married to a U.S. citizen says,

Even though I love Houston and consider it my hometown, certain parts of Texas scare me; not in terms of my physical safety, but because of how conservative this state can be when you get out of the urban areas. My husband and I used to travel a lot by car around Texas, and in some areas there are signs on the houses that speak to tremendous religious intolerance and political points of view that we don't share. (Journalist, working as an independent interpreter/translator in Houston, 45-year-old woman)

She goes on to explain that in more remote areas of Texas, people may be more scared of immigrants even if they have not necessarily had a bad experience with them. They may even be more prone to believe the stereotypes of migrants as “rapists and murderers” and, accordingly, end up rejecting them.

#### PUTTING AN END TO STEREOTYPES: MEXICANS AS WORKING PEOPLE

If discrimination is a matter of education, it does not depend only on the educational level of those discriminated against, but also on the individuals who may actually produce the racist discourse. As such, people exposed to more cultures and higher levels of schooling tend to become more aware of the existence of stereotypes and to try to avoid them, rather than reproduce them.

Are Mexicans lazy, big-mouthed, and unreliable? Not necessarily, recognizes one professor from Sri Lanka, getting her

doctorate in Houston. She takes Mexicans to be people who have found a balance between a right amount of work and a good time in their lives and who can perform long periods of work when needed:

My Mexican colleagues in the chemistry department are boisterous, talkative, very friendly, and outgoing people. I know these two Mexican sisters in the chemistry department. They are living in the same apartment. The older one is in a lab and she works so late at night that they almost don't get to see each other. (PhD student from Sri Lanka, Houston, 28-year-old woman)

Changing stereotypes may be a great challenge for the Mexican community and a matter of survival at times of political turmoil and discrimination against migrants, such as those after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In this way, the image of migrants is not just a matter of having prestige, but a deciding factor in whether people do better or worse in life. Diaspora diplomacy has nowadays become a safety concern, vital for improving public opinion about migrants and for further influencing policy decisions. ■■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Vinny Caraballo, Greg McLaughlin, and Heidi McLaughlin. *Leading Latino Talent to Champion Innovation* (New York: Business Expert Press, 2014), p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Gish Jen, *Mona in the Promised Land* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *Population Estimates Program (PEP)*, 2016, <http://www.census.gov/popest/>.

<sup>5</sup> Gustavo Lopez and Renee Stepler, “Latinos in the 2016 Election: Texas,” Pew Research Center, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/fact-sheets/2016-state-election-fact-sheets/latinos-in-the-2016-election-texas/>.

<sup>6</sup> Randy Capps, Michael Fix, and Chiamaka Nwosu, “A Profile of Immigrants in Houston, the Nation's Most Diverse Metropolitan Area,” Migration Policy Institute, 2015, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/profile-immigrants-houston-nations-most-diverse-metropolitan-area>.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Gritter, *Mexican Inclusion: The Origins of Anti-discrimination Policy in Texas and the Southwest* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2012), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Farhad Dalal. *Thought Paralysis: The Virtues of Discrimination* (London: Karnac Books, 2011), p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Joe R. Feagin and Jose A. Cobas, *Latinos Facing Racism: Discrimination, Resistance, and Endurance* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Maria Chavez, *Everyday Injustice: Latino Professionals and Racism* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*