

Waking from the “American Dream” Young Migrant Returnees In Las Margaritas, Chiapas

Iván Francisco Porraz Gómez*

The word “return” has many meanings involving going back to a place or a previous circumstance one left behind. However, for some young migrant returnees who try to reconstruct their life stories after their experiences in the United States, coming home does not always mean “coming back to oneself,” to “my customs,” or “to my starting place,” since it is a fact that has marked their present.

This article aims to analyze the return experience that some Chiapas-born migrants go through after moving toward the so-called “gringo dream.” To do this research, I approached rural youths in Las Margaritas, Chiapas, which for several decades has been incorporating itself into the international labor market. I look here at their view of the return, as well as the new patterns, styles, and practices of youth created in that process.

FINAL POINT FOR MIGRATING

According to the most recent report by the National Statistics and Geography Institute (INEGI),¹ the municipality of Las Margaritas has 111 455 inhabitants, making up 21.82 percent of the regional population and 2.22 percent of the state’s. Of these, 49.14 percent were men and 50.86 percent, women. Of the total, the 47 219 (40.38 percent) five years of age and older spoke an indigenous language.² “Today, 90 percent of

When many young people talked about their migratory journey and the reasons they returned, they did so sadly and with contradictory feelings.

the 37 677 Tojolobals in southeastern Chiapas live in the municipalities of Las Margaritas and Altamirano; the remainder are distributed in the municipalities of Comitán, Maravilla Tenejapa, Ocosingo, La Independencia, and La Trinitaria.”³

Chiapas ranks first among Mexico’s 32 states and capital city in poverty and extreme poverty. Las Margaritas stands out as one municipality that suffers from them the most: 75 339 of its inhabitants (60.76 percent) live in extreme poverty. Out of its 398 boroughs, 143 (36.39 percent) are categorized as highly marginalized, while 136 (34.61 percent) are classified as very highly marginalized. Las Margaritas youth are weighed down by poverty, ancestral marginalization, and government decisions, which cancel out any possibility of a reactivation of production that could bring them into the work force. This is why migration is increasingly part of their life projects.

WHEN YOUNG MIGRANTS THINK ABOUT RETURNING

A world with restricted privacy, substantial pressure, and external mandates is not something young people feel as their own, and they are ruled by rebellion and a thirst to live differently. Because of their social condition, the rules of the

* Guest researcher at the Center for Research and Study in Social Anthropology (CIESAS), Southeast, and professor at the Autonomous University of Chiapas School of Social Sciences (FCS-UNACH); pacon_83@hotmail.com.



Photo courtesy of the author

market, and the dominance of institutions that define a system of relationships barred to undocumented migrants, in their case the international migratory experience is reduced to expecting to become part of the work force. This also sparks rebellion. In turn, it fosters the construction of a social identity that—no matter how fragile—will allow them to incorporate or reinterpret their circumstances and create new signifiers and symbols that allow them to assess and define their available courses of action and make sense out of their current lives.

When many young people talked about their migratory journey and the reasons they returned, they did so sadly and with contradictory feelings. Diego, for example, said,

In the United States, I felt good, sometimes enjoying my work and life there, and many things. But I didn't think that one problem would lead to many others. The truth is that when I was doing really well, I experienced a tragedy, but maybe it was my mistake. I dared to do something that is forbidden there and, well, the police arrested me. I went to jail, and, well, here I am back again. (Interview by the author in July 2010, Las Margaritas, Chiapas)

Diego's story is no different from that of many Mexican migrants. Forced return is a tragedy that obliges them to come back in unforeseen conditions. Their hope of saving up for a truck or a house is ended, particularly when they had not expected to return to their place of origin, when living the "American dream meant living it there." But they have had to return. Diego's problems with the law made it impossible for him to go back to the U.S., to which he adds,

Bottom line: I didn't want to come back here. I decided that I wanted to be there, but it wasn't possible, especially when you're in trouble with the authorities. Yeah, that's pretty grim; they've got you on file there, and crossing the border meant risking getting locked up for quite a few more years in jail, and I wasn't up for that anymore. (Interview with the author, July 2010, Las Margaritas, Chiapas)

Young migrants repeated
 "feeling like a stranger in the place where
 I was born." What does it mean to be
 a stranger in the family home?

Another problem, access to medical care, is also a determining factor for returning. This was Benjamín's case; he returned to save his life when he became ill and was unable to get treatment in the United States:

I remember that the second time I went, everything was going along fine until I got sick. First, stomach pain, then it got worse and they told me I had a very serious health problem and needed an operation; but maybe my health did worry me. . . . That was hard. At night I would think, I'll go to Margaritas; I'll finish selling my house and rent; or if I had a pet, I'll sell it, to be able to get out from under the expense and my illness. But, as I say, it's really hard. Just imagine: to get a job as a policeman here in Mexico you already need to have finished middle school. If not, there's no work, even picking up drunks; there just isn't any if you haven't got schooling. The truth is that I did have a bit of a hard time; after that I came back to Mexico; but here they lent me a hand so I could get the operation. It was something wrong with my liver, and, well, now I'm okay, but it was hard. Here, I think, I didn't get to live the American dream again, did I? But I had to see, or just wake up, to see that this is my reality, here in Mexico. (Interview by the author, July 2010, in Las Margaritas, Chiapas)

After crossing the border, Benjamín's health problems sometimes made it impossible for him to work, which is why he decided returning was the way to save his life and even cover the debt he had incurred when he migrated to the United States. After recovering his health and paying his debt, he realized he could go back again; however, he was still very mindful of his unfortunate experience there.

Another case I looked at was Noel's; initially, he was reluctant to talk about his experience as a migrant in the United States. While his friends talked about their adventures, love affairs, and other stories, Noel was quiet, nodding his head to what some of them were saying. It was necessary to create a climate of trust to get a young migrant who had enjoyed his bachelorhood, his "freedom," his dollars in the United States, to talk about his experience and how his life turned around beginning with a relationship he had with a young woman in California:

Look, sometimes I don't even want to remember what happened, because it makes me sad and I hadn't expected it to end like that. I was living with a girl from Los Angeles, in California. And, well, we were good together; we worked a lot, but we also

Returning takes on multiple meanings for migrants: it can mean they have been a success or a failure, or have lost their freedom, with no possibility of negotiating to stay.

raised a lot of hell. I was addicted to cocaine, "dust," and once I got crazy with her; we hit each other and her friends came around and cut me with a knife. I have scars on my arms. Some friends took me to the hospital. I was arrested and it was all over for me. They didn't press charges, but they threw me out of the United States. (Interview by the author in July 2011, in Las Margaritas, Chiapas)

Noel was deported by immigration authorities, and given that he had no savings, his hope of residing in the United States and getting citizenship ended abruptly. In his words, going back to his place of origin meant "feeling like a stranger in the place where I was born. I see things now that I don't like here."

This is why it is indispensable that we explore the world of young migrants, look into the ways they have appropriated the spaces of the center and the peripheries they are expelled from or are exploited by the power of capital. These ways reveal resistance and opposition that, while the same matters of postmodern and global culture are at stake, their use of their human capital (their age and labor power), makes them agents who mobilize, who put into play their capacity for agency, and define the terms of their dissidence and the dimension of their interactions with agents and institutions surrounding them or in a broader context.

YOUNG RETURNEES AFTER MORE THAN FIVE YEARS IN THE U.S.: "BEING A STRANGER WHERE I GREW UP"

Something repeated by young migrants was "feeling like a stranger in the place where I was born." What does it mean to be a stranger in the family home? Can you be a foreigner in your own home? These and other questions arise from the experiences some of these young people shared. Most of them had made the decision not to return to Las Margaritas. However, life's twists and turns brought them back again, and

We must explore the world
of young migrants and look into the ways
they have appropriated the spaces of the center
and the peripheries they are expelled from.

they felt that they were not the same, that that home, that neighborhood corner, that community no longer felt the same to them. “I don’t feel comfortable,” was a recurring thought among them.

Many of the young returnees who go back to their places of origin are repatriated or are in conflict situations did not fulfill the objective promoted by the imaginary of migration (material goods, the house, the car). To the contrary, they recreate and re-signify the transformations of their social and cultural life outside their communities. They use a very particular aesthetic, style, or look, as they say, making visible the northern clothing both of the *pochos* and the young rocker. They experience the space as something denied them, despite having grown up there. That “feeling strange,” different, leads them into conflict with their surroundings and their loved ones. As Rossana Reguillo says, young people are exposed to situations of greater vulnerability and poverty when they live with the “privations typical of their age, their appearance, their style.”⁴

Although the environment in the receiving country is *per se* a space of exclusion because they are Latinos, Mexicans, or indigenous, they are able to appropriate practices and knowledge linked to the youth cultures and life models of contexts not their own. By contrast, when the environment brings with it cultural change that does not jibe with that defined by the family and community—that is, being successful in the form of dollars or remittances—the local response is exclusion, open rejection, or fear as a pretext to justify their rapid exit from the place of origin.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Analyzing young returnees implies examining the ethnographic and sociological condition of rural youths in the context of migration between Mexico and the United States. This makes it possible to understand how they construct their reasons for emigrating and how they see themselves when

they return. This introspection translates into objective products (being able to send remittances and save money) as well as into subjective matters (their achievements and failures, which have repercussions both for them and their families). In this sense, the dialogue opened up with young migrant returnees and their testimonies make it possible to understand how they defend themselves in contexts of conflict, which can be anyplace, ranging from the home and the community to governmental and private institutions.

Also, the way they deal with the destination country, where they come up against racism, discrimination, violence, and intolerance in both discourse and practice, which have become normalized behavior in society, means that these young migrants’ lives unfold in a climate of uncertainty due, for example, to the threat of being deported if they are arrested. Returning takes on multiple meanings for migrants: it can mean they have been a success or a failure, or have lost their freedom, with no possibility of negotiating to stay.

A micro-, meso-, and macro-analysis of the return, from the point of view of the young migrants themselves, brings into play an experience that can be multidimensional or limited. Given the time they have lived as migrants, it also brings into play the personal contacts and cultural repertoires learned, exposing a hybrid being. This reveals valuable dimensions for further research. Young migrant returnees run into problems regarding their trajectories and deployment in defined times and spaces, but they are also excluded inside their own families when they have not accumulated possessions. This leads them to be stigmatized, and even more so when the young person was forcibly returned, that is, repatriated. ■■

NOTES

¹ INEGI, “Perspectiva estadística. Chiapas,” December 2011, <http://www.inegi.org.mx/est/contenidos/espanol/sistemas/perspectivas/perspectiva-chs.pdf>.

² Consejo Nacional de Población, “Indicadores sociodemográficos, 2005-2050,” http://www.conapo.gob.mx/es/CONAPO/Indicadores_sociodemograficos.

³ Hadlyn Cuadriello Olivos and Rodrigo Megchún Rivera, *Los tojolabales, pueblos indígenas del México contemporáneo* (Mexico City: CDI, 2006), pp. 3-4.

⁴ Rossana Reguillo, “Condición juvenil en el México contemporáneo. Biografías, incertidumbres y lugares,” in Rossana Reguillo, comp., *Los jóvenes en México* (Mexico City: FCE/Conaculta, 2009), p. 339.