Living in Two Worlds
Chicanos and Latinos In the United States

Elaine Levine Leiter*

Laura Cano

Many Mexicans who have emigrated to the United States in recent years cannot expect socio-economic mobility there either for themselves or for their children. Mexico's labor market interacts with that of the U.S. to create favorable conditions for a hybrid "immigrant job niche" to flower in innumerable places throughout the United States.

While in a certain sense the constant flow of migrants blurs the border between the two countries, new boundaries inside the United States are emerging: the neighborhoods where Mexicans live and Spanish is spoken and the occupations in which the Latino work force is concentrated. The great number of U.S. labor market niches occupied by Mexican workers and the "Latino barrios" —where people tend to be crowded in and everything is in Spanish— are a kind of limbo, a space suspended or caught between two worlds.

The people living in these areas tend to measure their well-being by the Third World conditions they left behind. This makes their surroundings quite acceptable to them even when they are often the worst in terms of prevailing U.S. standards. Mexican workers generally have the least desirable and worst paying jobs and congregate in run-down neighborhoods where their children go to schools filled with children who also belong to the so-called ethnic or racial minorities. Given the low educational levels they arrive with and their lack of knowledge of English, they cannot have greater expectations in a labor market as segmented and stratified as that of the United States. Nevertheless, it can turn out to be even more difficult for their children than for them to find out who they are, where they are and why they are there.

Growing U.S. Latino Population

Between 1990 and 2000, the U.S. population increased by 13.2 percent, while

* Researcher at CISAN.

the Latino population grew 57.9 percent, more than the Asians' 53 percent, and more than predictions had forecast. In the last decade, the Latino population also grew the most in absolute terms: 12.9 million. The non-Hispanic white population only increased 6.5 million; Afro-Americans, 4.7 million; and Asians, 3.5 million.

While it is true that Latinos have among the highest birth rates, a considerable part (approximately 46 percent) of the enormous increase in their numbers in this period was due to immigration. Latinos were forecast to become the country's largest ethnic or racial minority by 2005, but that had already happened by the 2000 census, despite the fact that a good number of undocumented immigrants evaded the census-takers. The 2000 census puts the number of Afro-Americans at 33.9 million, or 12 percent of the population, and Hispanics at 35.3 million, or 12.5 percent of the entire population. Even though there are differences of opinion about the number of undocumented migrants, a certain consensus exists on two issues: half or perhaps more are Mexican, and about 40 percent of the total reside in a single state, California.

Latinos and the Job Market

Although there are enormous differences among all these people, who come from more than 20 countries, the rest of Americans identify them as Hispanics or Latinos, even when this label means nothing for the majority of them, who identify themselves as from their countries of origin. Throughout the 1990s, one factor that contributed to this enormous influx of Latino immigrants —both legal and illegal— to the United States was the ease with which they could find jobs. Mexicans who go north are generally seeking a better job or to join their relatives already employed there.

As is to be expected, non-skilled immigrants almost always enter the lower levels of the job and wage market where, in any case, they make more than they would in their home countries. On the other hand, several countries lose highly qualified professionals and technicians for the same reason. With notable exceptions —such as our Nobel Prize winner for chemistry and other scientists, professionals and artists— the majority of Mexicans who emigrate are low-skilled workers, who, even if they have more schooling than the average Mexican, generally have less than the least qualified U.S. worker. Mexican immigrants have earned the reputation of being good workers because they withstand long work days and lower wages than other groups. Since many are recent arrivals and undocumented, they generally do not protest bad or unfair treatment by the boss. They make few demands and do not answer back. For all these reasons, in several areas in which English is not a prerequisite, they have become businessmen's favorite workers.

> Mexican neighborhoods emerge from the quest for affinity and solidarity in a hostile environment.

Where racism and discrimination against Afro-Americans prevails, Mexicans are also more accepted as workers; however, many of the people who hire them to work in their shops and factories do not want them as neighbors. The availability of this cheap labor was one of the key elements of the 1990s economic boom. For the last 10 years, the U.S. economy created more than 20 million jobs, most of which did not require university schooling and were therefore low-paying. It is by no means fortuitous that Latinos' mean income —for both men and women— is much smaller than that of non-Hispanic whites and even than Afro-Americans, traditionally the worst paid, poorest sector of the U.S. population.

Mexicans are the most disadvantaged economically. Their mean pay —for both men and women— is lower than that of other Latino groups. These disadvantages are explained in part by the fact that Mexicans have lower educational levels at a time when schooling weighs more than ever in determining income. In general, women also earn less than men given the same schooling, and Afro-Americans and Latinos earn less than non-Hispanic whites with the same educational level.

The labor market's segmentation and stratification increased in the 1980s, creating greater labor and wage polarization. The number of positions and wages increased at the high end of the job market, but with a greater demand for education. At the same time, low-skilled, low-paid jobs also increased in number. Getting promoted from the assembly line to the board room is now practically impossible. Managers of big companies come out of the most prestigious universities' business schools, not the ranks of the workers.

The percentage of the work force employed directly in the production of goods tends to drop. On the other hand, low-paying service sector jobs requiring little formal education abound. There are fewer and fewer jobs that offer high incomes without requiring a high level of education. Therefore, in general, Latinos and most non-Hispanic whites do not compete for the same jobs, live in the same neighborhoods or send their children to the same schools.

Mexican Neighborhoods In the U.S.

Socio-economic stratification derived from —among other factors— a greater segmentation of the labor market can also be seen in the residential fragmentation and division of cities and their suburbs into very differentiated neighborhoods. Economic segregation is sharper and more effective for determining where people will live than any municipal ordinance, like those that exist in some places, prohibiting Afro-Americans, Jews or other groups from buying houses in areas reserved for white Anglo-Saxons. Latino or Mexican neighborhoods, like ethnic neighborhoods in the past, emerge from the quest for affinity and solidarity in a hostile environment. Staying in them for many years or even several generations, however, is also due in part to the economic limitations that make other places inaccessible.

Today, Mexican neighborhoods are sprinkled throughout the United States from Boston to San Diego. These areas have stores where tortillas, tamales and chili peppers are sold; signs and ads are in Spanish, just like the music and the voices that can be heard on the streets. Here, housing is more modest and cars older. Municipal clean-up and garbage services are usually less efficient than in other areas of the city. There are always more people in the street, but they are usually short and dark, with brown eyes. In addition, even though banned, street sales and itinerant salespeople that cannot be seen elsewhere are to be found here. There are also gangs, graffiti and drug sales. Sometimes people are afraid to go out on the street at night.

Los Angeles' Mexican barrio has existed since before the city was part of the United States. East Los Angeles, on the east side of the Los Angeles River, is in the heart of the largest Mexican area north of the Rio Grande. Of those living there, 96.8 percent are Latinos, almost all Mexican, or children, grandchildren or great-grandchildren of Mexicans. Their markets, restaurants and mariachi bands make some Mexican neighborhoods with a deep, long tradition, like those in Los Angeles, Chicago and San Antonio, tourist attractions for their cities. Others, like the ones in Boston or Atlanta only emerged recently and are much smaller.

Los Angeles is the country's second largest city in terms of inhabitants in general and Latino inhabitants in particular, who make up more than 46 percent of the total. The vast majority are Mexican, but the flow of Central Americans has increased greatly in recent years and now Los Angeles has the largest settlement of Salvadorans outside their native country. In eight of 10 of the U.S.'s largest cities, Latinos make up 25 percent of the population or more. For example, in San Antonio, they are almost 60 percent. In several small and medium-sized cities in California, Texas and Florida, Latinos make up two-thirds or more of the population.

Even when they originally come from remote villages, more than 90 percent of Latino immigrants congregate in U.S. urban areas. There, they have networks of contacts with family members and people from their hometowns who preceded them in their odyssey and who can help them get a job and a place to live, even if only a rented couch to sleep on for a few hours when it is their turn.

> Most Latinos live apart from the rest of the U.S. population; they are the most segregated group in terms of residence.

Survival strategies are myriad and small dwellings' capacity to absorb yet another inhabitant seems infinite. Going through the streets of East Los Angeles, where the houses are generally small and the apartment buildings not over two or three stories, it is difficult to take in the fact that this city is third nationwide, after New York and Patterson, New Jersey, in the number of inhabitants per square mile. It is also third nationwide for the number of people per dwelling, after two other nearby cities, Santa Ana and El Monte, where more than 70 percent of the population is Latino.

Besides living in crowded housing, most Latinos live apart from the rest of the U.S. population. They are today probably the most segregated group in terms of residence. They can be seen driving and riding everywhere to get to their jobs, but when the day's work

is over, they retreat to their barrios, both refuge and barrier. Many immigrants think that their children are the ones who manage to build a bridge between themselves and the alien world surrounding them, but wherever Latino populations are large, this becomes more difficult because children's contact with the world outside their barrio is limited.

Today, Latino children are the most segregated group in U.S. public schools; they have the least probability of having schoolmates who do not belong to an ethnic or racial minority. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, with its 11 sub-districts, Latino children constitute 70 percent of enrollment. In 10 of the 11 sub-districts, they represent more than 50 percent of students; in two of these, they come to 95 percent or more; in two more, 82 percent or more; and in still two more, 72 percent.

Exclusive Beverly Hills, an incorporated city in the middle of Los Angeles, has its own school district, just like Santa Monica. Generally, in the United States, rich and poor children do not go to the same schools because they do not live in the same neighborhoods. Schools in poor districts are poor because their financing depends largely on local property taxes. Latino children suffer de facto segregation, the result of economics determining where they live and therefore, the school they go to. They also suffer from another kind of segregation through bilingual programs and tracking (channeling students into study programs that do not include all the subjects needed for getting into the university). Undoubtedly, this academic and social isolation has a repercussion in their scholastic performance. For this reason, getting a higher education is doubly difficult for most young Latinos, which also limits their job options and therefore, their prospects for inter-generational, socioeconomic mobility.

Final Considerations

It is well known that for practically its whole history, the United States has been a country of immigrants. However, Mexican immigration has very particular characteristics. For a start, strictly speaking, the first Mexicans to arrive, in the mid-nineteenth century, did not emigrate from one country to another: it was the United States that took over the place they had always lived, making them foreigners in their own homeland and separating them from family members who remained on the Mexican side. That began a never-ending process of coming and going between the two countries, making this more than 150-year-old migration seem interminable. In addition, instead of diminishing, in recent decades it has increased enormously in direct proportion to Mexico's economic problems.

Economic exile may be the most difficult kind of all, precisely because of its ambiguity. It means having to go in one sense but not in another; wanting to go and at the same time wanting to return almost before leaving. It means always having to figure out if you have saved enough money to go back, even if you never go back. In the case of Mexican migrants who go to the United States, it means being better off materially, but many paying a very high spiritual price for that material well-being.

This is the longest border in the world between a country as rich as the United States and another where the majority of the population is as poor as Mexico's. The abysmal differences between one nationality and the other have turned the border into "an open wound," as Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa says. It is a place where, as she says, "The Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms, it hemorrhages again, and the lifeblood of two countries mix to form a third country —a border culture." And, beyond metaphor, the border is stained with the blood of thousands of Mexicans who have lost their lives in a desperate attempt to get to the "Other Side." Those who have made it often find that, even if they end up geographically far from the border, they have arrived in a border area suspended between two worlds. VM

Further Reading

Fullerton, Howard N. and Mitra Toossí, "Labor Force Projections to 2010: Steady Growth and Changing Composition," *Monthly Labor Review* (November 2001), pp. 21-39.

Hecker, Daniel E., "Occupational Employment Projections to 2010," *Monthly Labor Review* (November 2001), pp. 57-84.

Smith, Barbara Ellen, "The New Latino South: An Introduction," Informe preliminar del proyecto conjunto "Race and Nation: Building New Communities in the South," Center for Research on Women-University of Memphis/ Highlander Research and Education Center/ Southern Regional Council (December 2001), http://www.hrec.org/p-arn.asp or http://www. hrec.org/pdf-files/new latino south intro.pdf

2000 Statistical Abstract of the United States, http://www.census.gov/prod/www/statistical-abstract-us.html

U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employment and Earnings," http://www.bls.gov/ces/ (January 2001).