

Colonial Remnants And “Indigenous” Specificity in Migration

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INTRODUCTION

When discussing indigenous migration and young indigenous migrants, the question invariably arises of why we make the distinction underlining “indigenous” and not simply talk about Mexican migration to the United States in general. Why do we need to point out the specificity of this kind of migration and the social subjects involved? The reason is that they are a population segment that has been profoundly affected by the historic process of colonialism.¹ During this period, diverse ethnic-racial categories were created in order to fix the borders of identities to ensure domination.²

In the collective —and then nationalist— imaginary, the mestizo-indigenous dichotomy was determined to manage and create the bases for the power relations rooted in racist and ethnic classifications. Thus, the so-called “indigenous” are all

those who belong (or recognize themselves as belonging) to an ancestral First People that existed prior to the Spanish Conquest; mestizos, on the other hand, would be all those social groups that have resulted from a racial mix; and “whites” are those who consider themselves the descendants of the Spaniards.

This mestizo-indigenous dichotomy undoubtedly creates limitations, considering the transformations and resignifications that social actors experience as they move to new regions to settle.³ However, we can ask ourselves what consequences this ethnic and racial differentiation has had on society and how it affects the different social groupings.

I should point out that all times and spaces are different, and the ways of naming things have their own dynamic. In this sense, it is not a matter of thinking that the indigenous population has been passive and simply taken on the dominant forms of social classification without filtering them. However, the indigenist integration policies imposed from the

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mid-twentieth century focused on transforming the First People's cultures. Proof of this was the imposition of the Spanish language to integrate the population by homogenizing ethnic diversity, in accordance with the Mexican nation-state's directives.

Other forms of cultural dispossession can be linked to territorial displacement and the destruction of sacred lands, the exploitation of natural resources, or the abandonment of the countryside as part of a national economic strategy aimed at creating a work force for industry. All of this produced social conflicts that emerged out of processes of discrimination, as mechanisms of racial and ethnic legitimacy that ensured the dominant power of certain social groups over those that had traditionally existed throughout Mexico.

Outstanding in this exercise of handling ethnic and cultural complexity is the historic post-colonial process of subordinating certain social groups through concepts like social class, the ethnic group, and race, three central items on which the relations of exploitation/ domination/ conflict are based.⁴ The use of language has been one of the most effective discriminatory devices due to its level of interiorization in the historic memory of Mexico's indigenous population.

This is where I return to the initial question posed in this article: Why is it necessary to specify in ethnic and racial terms the kind of migration we are talking about? The case of Mexican indigenous migration to the United States makes it possible to broaden out the discussion on this issue. In the nation-state, this population group has been considered sub-national and therefore their cultural and civil rights are not fully recognized.⁵ This has meant that they have not had regular access to a classroom education to the same extent as the mestizo population or that their incorporation into the labor market has been precarious, among other examples. That is, the Mexican nation-state's national integration policies have generated mechanisms that have put these social groups at a disadvantage *vis-à-vis* what has been called the mestizo society, represented by the state.⁶

HISTORIC MEMORY AND THE INCORPORATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE UNITED STATES

The next question is how this background affects the process of incorporating young descendants of indigenous migrants into the United States. I will look at the case of the children of Zapotec-, Mixtec-, and Triqui-speaking agricultural work-

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ers' children whose parents came from different towns in the southern state of Oaxaca. Together with Chiapas and Guerrero, Oaxaca has the highest poverty rates in Mexico, and the three states concentrate the largest indigenous populations in the country.⁷

Indigenous migration from Oaxaca has been one of the country's most vigorous since the mid-twentieth century. They have settled both in rural and urban areas, staying permanently in different places in Mexico and the United States.

I am centering my attention on young Oaxacans living in Madera County and Fresno in California. Both places have communities living near the farms that offer jobs to documented and undocumented workers alike. California's Central Valley agribusiness has been the source of employment *par excellence* for Mexican migrants in general, and specifically for the Oaxacan community.

Research into the agricultural labor market in Mexico and the United States has shown the importance of segmenting the work force by gender, ethnicity, social class, and immigration status as part of a strategy for subduing it.⁸ These conditions are ripe for creating a vicious circle in which Mexican immigrants of indigenous origin are susceptible to being subjected to exhausting workdays under the sun.

Carlos,⁹ the young son of Mixtec agricultural workers, born in Fresno, California, says,

I'm not going back into the fields, and thanks to this job [his current job], I'm hardly ever out in the heat, except on Tuesdays and Thursdays when I'm in charge of the carts outside the store; but it's not hard; I'm just bagging. I prefer this to working in the field; that's no life, that's not a job; it's something lower than a job. It's like misery; it's for the ones who don't know how to read or stuff like that; it's not a decent job. (Carlos, September 10, 2010, Fresno, California)

The literature specialized in Oaxacan indigenous migrants and their incorporation into agricultural work underlines the contradictions inherent in the following duality: agri-industry anchored in the global economy, using cutting-edge tech-

Young Oaxacans, whether Mixtec, Zapotec, or Triqui, are a group of migrants whose profound historic, cultural, and social heritage has been transmitted over generations.

nology, versus the low wages of agricultural workers that favor the growth of these companies. The social categories of class, immigration status, ethnicity, and gender act vigorously in these sorts of contexts, in which employers in a given labor market resort to precarious pay for workers in order to balance production costs and technological creation.

We can see that the incorporation of young migrants of indigenous origins into their destination societies takes place on two levels: one is the institutional-governmental level, linked to immigration policies, institutional absorption, and three fundamental aspects: education, access to housing, and employment. Another level is the ethnic-racial relations that segment the population and that we can characterize as subjective, while inter-ethnic relations produce scenarios of conflict that can manifest in different spheres of social life—the United States has been very prolific and stimulating in its inter-racial debate.

Even when a young Oaxacan, whether he/she be Mixtec, Zapotec, or Triqui, has been born in the United States, the issue of belonging to a specific people and the manifestation of his/her ancestry in different ways, like community and political organization, continuing to celebrate patron-saint fiestas, using his/her language, or transmitting values from the home, all act as negotiating mechanisms about cultural identity in the process of integration into the receiving societies. That is, this is a group of migrants whose profound historic, cultural, and social baggage has been transmitted over generations. This can be explained taking into account oral transmission, the use of the mother tongue, attachment to their hometowns, and the value placed on ancestors.

In this scenario, we must consider incorporation into receiving societies as a process that will not necessarily take a specific route. In any case, it will deepen when young Oaxacans begin to see their own culture as a guarantee of recognition when they feel deprived of rights in the United States. Even if they have immigration documents, they do not always feel they belong to that country's society given their being categorized as sub-nationals in their places of origin, which is then reinforced in their destination countries.

The indigenous nature of migrations shows signs of internalized post-colonialism among the population.¹⁰ This is therefore transmitted generationally, the effect of which is the subordination-domination of certain social groups. All this ideological production about otherness continues to exist among descendants of indigenous people and is manifested in different scenarios. Let us look at what Sara says about it:

I've seen lots of young people who were brought [to the United States] very young, like I was. Their parents might have spoken Spanish or not, but I feel like I was discriminated against, not only here, but also in Mexico, because I'm darker-skinned, I'm short, and I speak another language. So they [young people] suffer from the same conflict, right? Who am I? . . . I feel like the schools here [California] don't do their job. They don't in Mexico either. They don't explain why we are how we are, that it's more than just the color of your skin, right? It's something more than a culture that you aren't even familiar with because they don't teach you. So, I think that, like, that's what's needed, you know? We need talks to be able to understand the history of culture, more than anything, the history of why we're like we are, why we're here, and that it's nothing we should be ashamed of; the exact opposite: we should be proud of what we are. And I think that that's what young people need, that kind of identification and awareness of knowing. (Sara, September, 2010, Fresno, California)

For young Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Triquis, the integration process implies developing sociability strategies to be accepted because several aspects of their lives make them vulnerable, like their physical attributes (they are dark-skinned and short), their culture (the use of their native language), and their social class:

We still feel a little like outsiders, especially anyone of indigenous origin, because people always look at you sideways, even Mexicans: "Oaxacans are shorties, we're dirty, we're I-don't-know-what." But that's not everybody. There are some people who think we're nice and hard-working. (Carmen, no date, Madera, California)

As mentioned above, language is a fundamental factor for understanding how the colonialist structures have acted and the consequences for the descendants of indigenous. For many families, the transmission of the Mixtec language became something devoid of meaning given the ideological

demands of the Mexican nation-state, which has sought to impose a single language, Spanish, on the entire population. As Martina says,

My Dad used to tell my Mom not to teach us Mixtec because if she did, we weren't going to speak very well and we were going to have a hard time and be discriminated against more than we are now. So we just spoke Spanish so we wouldn't have a hard time. So, I didn't learn it until I grew up and had children of my own because I wanted them to learn it because it makes me sad to think that I'm from Oaxaca and I don't know how to speak the language. I feel that our not speaking it is like saying that the Spaniards won; we lost our language. So, I'm trying to learn again and so are they. (no date, Madera, California)

Migration and interaction with other socio-cultural groups has shown the descendants of Oaxacan indigenous that it is possible to remain close to their origins through defending different aspects of their culture. This is a response to the need to feel part of a world they were brought into in their childhood and where they have developed different forms for ethnic-cultural survival. The ethnic awareness that is awakened in interacting with other ethnic groups occupying the same space is part of a complex process of integration in which they resignify and reconcile memories of colonialism in the face of the new signifiers and challenges found in receiving societies.

IN THE MANNER OF AN EPILOGUE

In the early twentieth century, sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois proposed a debate about “double consciousness,” emphasizing that in the context of racialized difference, individuals are able to self-identify and situate their cultural limits *vis-à-vis* others.¹¹ Franz Fanon's approach centers on the mental nature of conflict, on psychological situations that affect the population of descendants situated in a multi-ethnic reality: the one inherited from their groups of origin and the one that the discriminatory, racist scenario reveals to them. According to post-colonial authors, these complex contexts form the subordinate subject, who has to modify his/her subjectivity *vis-à-vis* others, but in the framework of unequal social relations.

Walter Mignolo calls this conflict the remnants of the colonialist-modernity relationship surpassing the limitations of territorial thinking and overflowing historic memory.¹² In this sense, indigenous social actors themselves name and place

new values on their national historical, post-colonial heritage through new narratives, often very different from the traditional image of the Mexican indigenous, as a new configuration of their identity, to a certain extent the product of human mobility. ■■■

NOTES

¹ For Boaventura de Sousa Santos, internal state colonialism is a vast social system of interlocking relationships (or a “social grammar”) that cuts across sociability, public and private spaces, culture, mentalities, and subjectivities. “Epistemologías del Sur,” in *Utopía y praxis latinoamericana. Revista internacional de filosofía iberoamericana y teoría social* vol. 54, year 16, July-September 2011, p. 14.

² For Rita Laura Segato, “Every state, whether colonial or national, installs its own ‘others’ to create positions of superiority to hold power; one way of achieving this is by pushing identities considered ‘residual’ or ‘peripheral’ to the nation out of the way.” In her book, Segato presents a wide-ranging dissertation about the ideological continuity between the colonial period and the creation of the nation. *La nación y sus otros: raza, etnicidad y diversidad religiosa en tiempos de políticas de la identidad* (Buenos Aires: Prometeo Libros Editorial, 2007), p. 138.

³ Laura Velasco, “La subversión de la dicotomía indígena-mestizo: identidades indígenas y migración hacia la frontera México-Estados Unidos,” in Laura Velasco, *Migración, fronteras e identidades étnicas transnacionales* (Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2015).

⁴ Aníbal Quijano, “Colonialidad del poder y clasificación social,” in *Contextualizaciones latinoamericanas* vol. 5, year 3 (July-December 2011), p. 33.

⁵ Naturally, this does not apply only to the indigenous population; we could say the same for parts of what is called the mestizo population. However, I am interested in focusing on the former here.

⁶ John Rex, “Multiculturalism and Political Integration in Modern Nation State,” in *HMiC: història moderna i contemporània* no. 3, 2005, pp. 249-261.

⁷ According to National Council for Evaluating Social Development Policy (Coneval) data, poverty levels among the indigenous population are practically twice those of the rest of the population: 55.1 percent of Mexicans who do not speak an indigenous language are poor, while 79.3 percent of the indigenous population falls into this category. Coneval, “Pobreza 2010,” http://www.coneval.gob.mx/cmsconeval/rw/pages/medicion/pobreza_2010.es.do.

⁸ Sara María Lara, *Nuevas experiencias productivas y nuevas formas de organización flexible del trabajo en la agricultura mexicana* (Mexico City: Juan Pablos Editores, 1998).

⁹ All names of the people quoted are pseudonyms.

¹⁰ Or, as Franz Fanon said, from the point of view of the effects on people's mentality when subjectively fixing identities. See *Black Skin White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986).

¹¹ Bruce D. Dickson, Jr., “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness,” in W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver, eds., Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999).

¹² Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs. Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).