

The American Community in Mexico

A Research Agenda

*Alejandro Mercado Celis**

The relationship between Mexico and the United States has been explored from the point of view of different disciplines and analytical dimensions. For example, economic studies have emphasized the macro-economic relationship, using neoclassical models. Without questioning the contribution these studies make to understanding the two countries' economic integration, clearly research is needed on its micro-economic aspects including a look at qualitative variables involving the social practices underlying them.

A critical point for research is the role the U.S. community in Mexico has played in industrial restructuring and the incursion of Mexican companies into the U.S. market. U.S. citizens have participated in Mexico's economic life throughout modern history, but documentary sources do not deal exhaustively with the topic, unlike the case of other groups of immigrants, like the Lebanese, the Jews and the French.

While the lack of studies on the U.S. community in Mexico is surprising, it may well be due to the way the group integrated itself into the country. First, it should be pointed out that the majority of this particular community, in contrast to oth-

ers, does not reside permanently in the country; it is a community in continual movement and flux. Second, the reasons for U.S. citizens' stay in Mexico are also different, linked to diplomatic activities or specific economic projects which do not require a definitive move to Mexico. However, in the last 20 years, this has changed. For example, places like Ajijic in the state of Jalisco, and San Miguel de Allende in the state of Guanajuato, have attracted large numbers of retirees, and a growing number of U.S. students come to avoid the exorbitant costs of higher education at home (the Autonomous University of Guadalajara has enrolled many of them). Also, growing U.S. investment in Mexico due to the free trade agreement has brought with it a flow of executives and technicians who seem to be remaining in the country for longer periods.

Beyond the obvious economic effect of U.S. investment in Mexico, it is particularly interesting to research the secondary effects of the presence of the U.S. community in the country. To illustrate this process, I will use a case study of mine. For different reasons, the Guadalajara metropolitan area has attracted one of the largest communities of U.S. citizens resident in Mexico. Their presence and direct and indirect participation in the industrial districts of the area is having an important

impact on the way these systems are developing, as well as creating possibilities for access to the U.S. market.

To understand how the U.S. community residing in Guadalajara is creating conditions that affect local industrial restructuring, we first have to describe the characteristics of industry in the area. Industrialization in Guadalajara is particularly interesting because its manufacturing structure and specialization in certain products make it similar to the structure and specialization of certain Italian industrial districts: based on small companies working in traditional products like furniture, jewelry, shoes and clothing, among others, they have been able to capture international market niches and effectively compete with large multinational corporations. Guadalajara and its metropolitan area—dubbed "the big city of small companies" by Patricia Areas—concentrate an important number of small and medium-sized firms specialized in "design-intensive" industries. Thus, a large proportion of Guadalajara's industry has evolved in design-intensive consumer goods, using craft-based production techniques in small firms. The main sectors make a variety of household items like ceramics, glass and iron crafts, as well as different wood products and wooden furniture for the home. There are also high

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Mexican style furniture produced by the American community residing in Ajijic, Jalisco.

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indices of specialization in jewelry and silver hand-made products.

Each of these sectors has its own characteristics, level of development and particular problems. However, their geographical proximity indicates interesting common aspects. First, they share a history and heritage expressed today in two ways. One is the tradition of craft production that has allowed them to reproduce and sustain economic activity over a long period in the face of changing economic conditions. The other is the historical construction of an aesthetic identity that defines the particularities of Guadalajara products and gives them the benefits of a collective, recognizable image on the national and international markets. Second, to varying degrees, all these sectors share a common institutional space. By this, I mean that their markets and other related economic institutions are very close or even overlap. For example, retail distributors and exporters tend to group these products in the same place, as in the case of home furnishing stores or specialized craft-design stores.

Third, the sectors share microspaces within Guadalajara's metropolitan area, Tonalá and Tlaquepaque being the core centers. Traditionally, these cities have concentrated both production and commercial districts as well as a variety of common services.

Now, how and where does the American community in Guadalajara enter into this picture? It participates both directly and indirectly through different activities, the most important being its direct impact on design-intensive industries as producers. Some studies report the establishment of crafts workshops owned by U.S. citizens or in association with local artisans. According to these studies, some of these actors' have played an important part in introducing new techniques and designs. These techniques may have increased the scale of production and therefore market reach, but currently it is not possible to evaluate precisely the impact and dissemination of economic practices brought to the area by these actors. However, an outstanding case is that of the U.S. producer known as Billy Moon, who has built a very dynamic man-

ufacturing and export operation based on the local aesthetic heritage and the knowledge and training of the local work force. His company produces wooden furniture and covers a broad spectrum of home furnishings. His main showroom and workshop is in Ajijic, which, as we have already mentioned, is the main place of residence of the U.S. community in the area.

Acting as intermediaries between the U.S. market and local producers is another activity the community participates in. This may well be a critical aspect of the dynamic of the industrial district. On the one hand, the U.S. intermediaries are creating a space for information that solves local producers' problem of seeking export markets. At the same time, because the production firms are very small, they have neither the resources nor the knowledge—like speaking English and a variety of specific skills involved in the contracts—to do their own promotion.

Another important form of intermediation that seems to be gaining strength in the area is sub-contracting. In this case, the

intermediary agent puts U.S. producers or distributors into contact with local producers who sub-contract to produce a specific item in predetermined quantities. This is another form of exporting that changes the risks producers face when seeking to enter foreign markets. However, it is equally possible that this kind of exporting also curtails opportunities for economic learning processes given that models and quality standards are not determined or formulated by producers. On the other hand, intermediary activities may also be spreading information within the industrial agglomeration in the sense that being in direct contact with U.S. markets means the possibility of monitoring trends and designs in those markets.

The U.S. community in Guadalajara may also have very important indirect effects on local producers. From the 1970s

on, and more and more in the 1990s, Guadalajara has attracted multinational corporate investment in the electronics industry. The location of these companies has meant the creation of a high-income group that has probably generated demand for local products of high material and aesthetic quality. This group would also include the retiree community of Ajijic and people linked to the Autonomous University of Guadalajara. Lastly, the area has traditionally also attracted a large number of U.S. tourists. One way or another, all of these groups have probably helped to disseminate local styles and products in the United States, consequently creating better conditions for export. Thus, the impact of the American community is expressed both in its direct involvement as producers or as intermediaries, or indirectly through the dissemination

of awareness of Guadalajara crafts and products in the U.S. market.

The case I have briefly presented brings home the need to take up lines of research around what we could call in general "the United States of Mexico." Both countries have been penetrated by an immense variety of social, political, cultural and economic processes which make it possible to observe "the other" in "our" space.

At the same time, it is in the microeconomic and microsocial processes where we can finally observe general integration processes. Recognizing this level of analysis and understanding the concrete actors will facilitate comprehension of the general process. Equally, incorporating the social practices governing integration may generate strategic spheres for public action that could take advantage of already existing social spaces and networks. **MM**

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