

Late Twentieth Century Migration *Poblanos* in New York

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The last two decades of the twentieth century saw thousands of *poblanos*—people from the state of Puebla—arrive in New York. Little by little, the Big Apple took in people born in Chinantla, Chiautla, Piaxtla, Ahuehuetitla, Tulcingo del Valle, Chitela, Tecomatlan, Tehuitzingo and many, many more towns from Puebla and surrounding states.

I would like to reflect here about this population flow. While it began in the 1940s, its expansion changed life in the places of origin and day-to-day existence in destinations like the state of New York and several counties in New Jersey and Connecticut.

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The road from the Mixtec area of Puebla to New York is long and dangerous. You have to cross most of Mexico, stay for a while in the border city where you have a contact (usually Tijuana), pay a large sum of money in dollars and take your chances, risking your life to cross the border, trying to avoid immigration officials, to illegally enter the United States. And all this, in the hope of finding in New York the good fortune so ardently desired by many and so harshly won by so few.

Oral history has it that a single family started out on this route in the late 1930s, but it was almost 40 years later when migration of *poblanos* to New York became a clear social, demographic, economic and political trend. All of this has been dealt with by experts in

the question like Roberto Smith of Columbia University—whom I met in New York—who has been studying this migration for many years.

U.S. census data shows how New York has become a top priority destination for Mexicans. The census, in addition to reporting the size of the population, its socio-demographic characteristics and territorial distribution, also has political and economic functions, as Víctor Arriaga says, “determining the number of congress-persons from each state, the number of votes in the Electoral College and the apportionment of almost U.S.\$38 billion [in 1990] in federal funding to the states and cities for education, health and housing.”¹

An item in the census gives us the rate of inclusion of Mexicans when each

person who identifies him- or herself as Mexican is automatically included in the group designated as “Hispanics,” where their origin is specified.

The 1990 census registered 22,354,059 Hispanics in the United States, 13,495,938, or 60 percent, of whom were of Mexican origin.² The 2000 census registered 39.2 million Hispanics. If the proportion remains the same, this would mean that today there are 22 million persons of Mexican origin or descent in the United States, that is, the equivalent of all the Hispanics in 1990. If we then add in the undocumented migrants—not included in the census—and the natural population increase in recent years, we would get a much higher number, possibly close to 30 million.

According to the 1970 census, New York was not a favorite destination of Mexican migrants, who were concentrated mainly in California (41 percent) and Texas (35 percent), and to a lesser extent in Arizona (5 percent), Illinois (3.5 percent), New Mexico (2.6 percent) Colorado (2.3 percent), Michigan (1.4 percent), Washington (0.7 percent) and Florida (0.5 percent).

However, between 1970 and 1980, migration to New York increased, a trend which has continued until today. In 1980, there were 39,000 persons of Mexican origin in New York State, while ten years later, the 1990 census registers 93,244. This makes for an average yearly increase of 8.8 percent. Just as New York became a new destination for Mexicans, in the 1980s there was also an increase in states like Oregon, Nevada and Kansas. Only Nevada registered a higher rate of increase in that decade. In 1980, then, the Mexican population in the United States began to be redistributed due to a change in migratory flows.

Jobs in Mexico and New York and Educational Levels			
	Mexico	New York	Junior High School Level or More
Managers	1	1	1
Professionals	6	1	1
Technicians	9	5	4
Office clerks	3	5	4
Semi-skilled services	15	138	80
Agricultural jobs	8	16	17
Commerce and artisans	37	26	12
Non-skilled agricultural, commerce and service jobs	121	94	53
Armed forces	6		
Students	99	4	—
Housewives	21	21	—
Total	326	311	172

Source: Taken from the 1991 survey on employment done by the author.

Today, according to the 2000 census, New York has 2,867,583 Hispanics, or 15 percent of the state population; in 1990, they represented only 12 percent. New Jersey registered 1,117,191 Hispanics in 2000, 13.3 percent of the population, whereas in 1990, they constituted only 9.5 percent. If the proportion of Mexicans among the Hispanic population remains the same as it was in 1990, this means that there are now 114,703 Mexicans there, a figure that shows an important underestimation of this group in that part of the country, which may be due to the fact that, to protect themselves, undocumented migrants tend to avoid being counted in the census.

In 1992, I witnessed the return of 73 undocumented workers who were deported to Tijuana by plane by immigration officials. That was a Thursday; the following Monday, 69 of these people reported for work in the U.S.

RESEARCH ON THIS MIGRATORY FLOW

For more detailed information on the migratory flows, we have data from my 1991 research project which was gathered from two sources: first, Mexico’s Consulate General office in New York which gave me access to almost 2,000 personal files of people who requested proof of nationality so they could return to Mexico; and second, a month-long survey done among 340 individuals in different parts of the city.

COMPOSITION OF THE SAMPLE

In the early 1990s, the presence of Mexicans in the whole city became more and more visible, prompting research into the ones entering New York illegally.

During my research, I observed that services are in the hands of Mexicans,

particularly domestic and gardening services. In a great many vegetable, fruit and flower shops, the sales personnel are Mexican and the owners, Korean. Corner flower vendors who exhibited their wares in supermarket carts were Mexican, as well as dry cleaners' employees and waiters in innumerable restaurants, from the most up-scale to the informal. There are even places with veritable reproductions of a Mexican neighborhood diner—complete with jukebox, folding metal tables advertising a Mexican beer company and plastic tablecloths—where you can order Mexican soft drinks like Jarritos or Orange Crush and Pepsi-Cola bottled by Embotelladora La Nostalgia, from Chicago, Illinois. You can also meet barmen from the Metropolitan Opera House who offer to introduce you to Plácido Domingo and see Mexican street vendors offering *churrros*, tacos and chewing gum. And around Mexican Independence Day, Mexican flags abound.

METHODOLOGY

This whole spectrum of Mexican colors and aromas was basic for designing the survey that aimed at determining the place of origin and demographic, social and economic profile of these Mexicans. The survey was applied in metropolitan New York at the Mexican consulate, where people who want to return to Mexico go to get the papers they need to do so, places where baseball, basketball and soccer are played, Hispanic churches, Mexican restaurants and vegetable shops.

The documents in the Mexican consulate indicated that 45 percent of those who requested proof of nation-

ality were from Puebla, 13 percent from Oaxaca, 12 percent from Mexico City's Federal District, 7.5 percent from Guerrero, 4.9 percent from Morelos, 4.4 percent from the State of Mexico, 3.1 percent from Michoacán and 1.5 percent from Tlaxcala. Seventy percent of these migrants were between the ages of 20 and 39, and 46 percent between the ages of 20 and 29. Ninety-two percent of the migrants were of peasant origin, mainly children of agricultural laborers, although they had a wide variety of jobs in the United States: salesperson, accounting clerks, carpenters, welders, auto body mechanics, primary school teachers, businessmen, soldiers, artisans, painters, watchmakers and itinerant singers.

Of those surveyed, 47 percent came from Puebla; 15 percent, from Mexico City's Federal District; 8 percent from Guerrero, 7 percent from Oaxaca; 6 percent from Morelos; 4 percent from the State of Mexico and 3.5 percent from Michoacán. Also, 63 percent were between the ages of 20 and 29 and 74 percent were men.

The survey also indicated that 70 percent of the migrants entered the U.S. through Tijuana, while others came in through Nogales, Laredo, Agua Prieta or Mexicali. The average cost was U.S.\$867, which included crossing the border and the air fare from Los Angeles or San Diego to New York. Only 8.1 percent arrived through the international airport in New York; that is, this is the number who had their immigration papers in order. Seven percent traveled with their spouse or children, while 43 percent traveled alone.

A central factor feeding migration are established social networks: when asked why they had chosen New York,

63 percent of those canvased said they had relatives there and 17 percent responded that they had a job. However, 80 percent came looking for work. They also said that in New York, immigration officials treat Mexicans better than elsewhere.

In terms of housing, 5 percent paid less than U.S.\$500 a month rent; 56 percent, between U.S.\$500 and U.S.\$999; and 7.5 percent, between U.S.\$1,000 and U.S.\$1,500. Because rents are so high, apartments are often shared by more than two people so that the monthly rent per person ranges from U.S.\$200 to U.S.\$500. Group solidarity in matters of housing, seeking employment and leisure time is one of the characteristics of the Mexican population in New York.

Educational levels were high: only 10.6 percent of those interviewed had not finished primary school, while 17 percent had a complete primary school education; 11.8 percent had not concluded junior high school, but 31.8 percent had; 21.4 percent had finished high school or had some college; and 3.2 percent had graduated from college.

People from the state of Puebla generally had a lower educational level, but more personal contacts and less difficulty in finding a job. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Víctor Arriaga, "Demografía y participación política en la sociedad estadounidense," *Censos y elecciones* (Mexico City), October-December 1990.

² United States Department of Commerce, *Census Bureau Releases 1990. Census Counts on Hispanic Population Groups* (Washington, D.C.), 12 June 1991.