

## CONJUNCTION AND DEBATE

## THE USES OF IDENTITY AND CULTURE IN TRANSMIGRATION ROUTES THROUGH MEXICO

RODOLFO CASILLAS\*

Transmigration through Mexico has become increasingly important over the past 30 years, and most of these transmigrants come from Central America. Undocumented transmigrants face legal obstacles that seek to prevent their movement or punish it administratively, so they generate strategies that enable them to achieve their goal. The most common thing is to look for the support of social networks. One type of network is of a humanitarian, legal nature; it does not seek any profits and is disseminated across strategic, fixed places in South-North migration routes. Another network type is that of migrant smugglers; it is illegal, charges for the service it provides, and relies on other legal networks and service providers. Unlike humanitarian networks, its strategic location is more flexible and mutable, depending on the circumstances.

Elements of national, social and cultural identity are essential to undocumented transmigrants and their net-

works: they provide an initial basis for the relationship, allowing it to develop and reach its appointed end. But social and cultural identities also permeate the relationships established between transmigrants and the locally-based networks through which they pass. Thus, a specific identity and culture become crucial links during the transmigration process, linking the various actors involved, both institutional and social, legal and not.

Legality and economics are undeniable factors but, without identity and cultural mediation, the former would make no sense or have specific weight in the social migration process. This article intends to show how identity and culture are overtly used by the different stakeholders involved in the transmigration process: local migration agents, humanitarian networks, criminal networks, and related local environments.

Mexican research has produced a vast body of studies on Mexican emigration; the country even has specialized educa-

\* Profesor e investigador de la Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (Flacso), México. Direcciones electrónicas: [rodolfo.casillas@flacso.edu.mx](mailto:rodolfo.casillas@flacso.edu.mx) y [casillasan@gmail.com](mailto:casillasan@gmail.com).

tion and research centers that address migration and border issues. Much less literature and fewer institutes and funds have been devoted to transmigration. In this case, contributions focus on migration dynamics, identification of the institutional and social actors involved, characteristics of migration policy, and the like; there is very little on its cultural aspects. There is even a tendency to speak of Central American transmigrants in an undifferentiated manner when, in fact, out of the seven countries in the region, only four comprise the transmigration flow, even if specific numbers differ. This matters, because international transmigrants travel with their own aspirations, workforce, religion and culture—that is, with the set of elements that provide social identity. This set of elements serves as a resource before and during the trip, as well as upon arrival and integration into the place of destination; at the same time, it also provides a tool for those who would harm them at one point or another. Here I will address some of these elements and their importance in transmigration.

According to Simmel,<sup>1</sup> the negative legal value that can be ascribed to the set of relationships established by subordinate groups does not demerit its sociological importance in the formation of certain group relations and the group's use of identity and cultural elements. In this regard, the following paper addresses sociological issues and not legal ones.

The social responses generated by subaltern groups given extant legal constraints and conditions are a fundamental factor. That is, the social construction of support networks, whether humanitarian or contractual. In this regard, international migration constitutes a network of vast social and institutional relations that link local and international actors in a variety of ways without the need for personal acquaintance; individual specificities allow for particular types, modes, durations, costs, risks and benefits in each case.

In the case of Central American transmigrants from four key countries, national, social, religious and cultural identity elements play an important role in the formation of traveling groups, the selection of a means of transport, specific routes, the type of social relations established during the trip, and ways of responding to contingencies and risks. Given the limitations of the law and the institutional porosity of border crossings, the answer is social permeability, which stimulates exchanges on national borders.

It is well known that the freight train and public transport are the two preferred mass transit modes of traveling for transmigrants going through Mexico. The strategies are different in each case and, generally speaking, the freight train carries far more people and is almost free, though it entails greater risks and duration. Therefore, it tends to be the first op-

1. See, Georg Simmel. *El secreto y las sociedades secretas*. 2010, Ediciones Sequitur, Madrid.

tion for men who have a reduced organization culture and less social support. This explains why Hondurans travel by train the most, arrive in shelters in greater numbers, suffer more violence and, in relative terms, tend to fall into the hands of Immigration officials more often. On the other hand, Salvadorans incur fewer costs of all kinds during transmigration, also in relative terms; in El Salvador, the social fabric has been under construction for some time, whereas social atomization prevails in Honduras. Salvadorans' physical traits and accent also make it easier to mimic Mexicans along certain routes. Furthermore, amongst Honduras, the Garifuna stand apart even if they are part of a large group that goes on the train; they arrive at the shelter and are caught by Immigration. Put another way, there are cultural differences between countries and inside them that become evident during the international trip: they ways people group themselves, assist and accompany each other.

Even before leaving, today's transmigrants already partake of a social imaginary (and have perhaps been doing so for an indefinite amount of time) that includes nearby, advising voices. Without ever having left their doorstep, they already participate in the collective knowledge. They are therefore not alone, even if they are only part of a small group: they travel as part of a social fabric, however circumstantial and ephemeral, that, in its territorial movement, weaves social networks with other traveling migrants, and

articulates temporary identities that are as durable as transmigration itself and as cohesive as the context might demand. They embody a national otherness—a Central American mobile otherness as tens or hundreds of hopefuls get into the metal wagons of the train.

Although the history of transmigration as a social and undocumented process is recent, some outstanding identity and cultural elements, both in favor of and against transmigrants, can be discerned.

Elements in favor:

1. The social experience acquired during the previous transmigration allows them to generate bonds of social organization. Nowadays, it is highly unusual to find someone traveling alone; groups tend to join among themselves because more people mean increased protection.
2. They have built social networks that support them throughout Mexico, the United States and Canada.
3. They have built communal bodies in places of origin or destination with boards, member directories, calendars, etc. Sports clubs, congregations, district or town or religious associations are examples of this.
4. They have established a set of relationships with similar community bodies in places of transit and temporary or permanent destination that can facilitate various transactions, economic as well as supportive.

5. They have quotidian bonds with different formal instances of social, regional, multilateral and ecclesiastical bodies, which have played an important supportive role and could eventually contribute to development projects.
6. They have the active support of civil society organizations (CSOs), who defend their rights in several countries across the continent. At any point and in the eyes of migrants, these can provide trusty, reliable aid.
7. They know how the laws and regulations work, as well as the implicit rules of coexistence in the places of residence—i.e., they are familiar with the institutional and everyday orders.
8. They know what to expect from local political leaders, members, representatives, etc., and, above all, they have an idea (still insufficiently developed) of the power of their vote where pertinent, all of which means they have a differentiated knowledge of structures of government and the political rights of citizens.
9. They know the power they can deploy from their usual places of residence, as consumers and service contractors, particularly in the United States and, to a much lesser extent, in Mexico and Central America.
10. They know the importance their economic remittances have in their home towns, their importance to social peace and governability in the hundreds and hundreds of places that receive their money, and how they activate local econ-

omies, create jobs, lead to demand of goods and services, and might even encourage savings and investment.

However, there are also elements that work against them:

1. Transmigrants do not employ the logic of formal institutions; rather, they avoid it or tolerate it when they have no choice, but deviate from it at the first opportunity. This partially explains the distant and even utilitarian relations between governments, migrants and their representation in places of transit and destination; they only partially participate in institutional schemes and social representation.
2. There is no interest in constituting and exercising formal power, particularly by transmigrants who know they are breaking immigration laws. The incentives are survival and adaptation at first, management and growth later (if a later stage comes to pass).
3. The prevailing culture is one of primary community (kinship and immediate bonds); this is favored over national identity and similar social situations faced by other relatively vulnerable migrants. This prevents existing social networks from providing better results.
4. At the same time, there has been a process of differentiation between recent migrants and fellow nationals who already reside in the North. A wide range of intermediate situations have

led to gaps between these communities, their leaders and organizations, as each side seeks to defend its interests with their available means, barring any immediate alliances or joint actions. I.e., the organization and leadership problems among Central American organizations in the United States for the May 1st marches.

5. There is a limited cultural background regarding the exercise of citizen rights and the electoral vote, as well as a limited awareness of citizen power regarding the management and performance of elected representatives. This prevents a sector of the population from making use of these powers and, in the process, benefiting their erstwhile fellow nationals. In addition, there is a specific sense of nationalism which, in conjunction with the above, restrict the political ability of those who could influence local, regional and, eventually, national politics in the United States.

The elements have been put to the test, in an unprecedented level, by highly developed criminal organizations for the past seven years. Express kidnappings and, subsequently, mass abductions became

the new types of violence against transmigrants at first, and migrants in general later. Up to that point, increased risk had been effectively counteracted by larger groups. The social fabric had been transmigrants' capital until the Zetas found in them a new niche in the criminal market. They learned the transmigrant *modus operandi*, as well as that of traffickers and other criminal sectors. Schematically speaking, here are some basic tenets of transmigration structures later applied to the Zeta rationale:

1. As far as migrants themselves are concerned, the Zetas learned that they move in groups; these always have a guide<sup>2</sup> and meet in common, public or private assistance spaces; they progressively receive electronic remittances in order to transmigrate; there are established collectors of these remittances, usually a local; groups of migrants stay in shelters or migrant homes,<sup>3</sup> where they go over strategies and establish agreements on the go; the groups are related by nationality, age, destination, blood or place of origin;<sup>4</sup> many of them have relatives in the United States, who are the ones sending the remittances;

2. A migrant states: "The Zetas and all that also get on the train; they take kidnapped people there, convince them, tell them they are going to take them to the other side for 2,500, and those who let themselves be convinced they end up taking. Because they have guides who come along the way and these guides go about convincing people... those who let themselves be fooled by them are delivered by them to the Zetas" (M16 Israel).

3. "They say that in hostels there are members of the Zetas themselves who are finding out about the people there, seeing if they have relatives in the United States" (M22 Bairo M)

etc. What the Zetas had to do was infiltrate these groups, and the most suitable people to do so were other Central American migrants or former migrants. Hence the importance of having Central Americans involved in operational tasks.

2. As far as migration routes go, they learned these were terrestrial, public transport and freight train being the favored ones. The trains carried large groups of migrants, up to 500 people.<sup>5</sup> It was necessary to infiltrate migrant groups before boarding the train to detect, classify and distinguish groups so that, when they stopped the running train,<sup>6</sup> they would know which cars to go in; they could not take everyone,

nor select on the go: they had to have made the choice previously and with deliberate criminal logic to administer resources, including the use of force.<sup>7</sup> Again, Central American assistants proved the best allies.

3. Regarding trafficking networks, they learned that these are unit chains with invisible commands, but visible operating segments (guides, escorts, recruiters of services, collectors, etc.). They had to attack these visible links and did so. When they caught a guide with migrants, they charged a given amount per person. If there was no payment, they killed the migrants in front of the guide, or abducted them. The message was clear: if they did not

4. Another migrant states: "When migrating there's all this counting going on. If Zetas are only way back, they only count there. "So many here," is the first thing they say. Everyone knows, and when they get to you, one wonders, how come they know how many of us there are? Because people tell us, 'we already knew you were this many'; it's the guards who are counting. They count the cars and how many people go in them; when one comes up here to pay they already know you are there" (M9 César A).

5. There are many testimonies regarding the "raids" of kidnapping groups. Among them: "In Medias Aguas the train stopped and then we saw that this armed guy was coming from the top, where the machines begin, to the end, and another from the end to the top, and there were trucks on both sides. And suddenly someone said [they were] kidnappers, and many people began to run" (M10 Juan C).

6. Says a migrant: "On the road they only say it's dangerous and this and that. So one's already careful, on the watch, awake, because they told us not to sleep, be watchful and all that. And then I was followed there and one climbed onto the train; we were all quiet, the train stopped and one climbed in. In Reynosa. And then said: "Hey, 10, 10," he said, "come over here, there's four here"... by radio and then, after a while, came others and started chasing us; they almost got me but, thank God, could not grab me" (M55 Joel). Another migrant points out that a way to stop the train is taking out the air: "The Zetas arrive with trucks where there are no houses or anything, take the air out of the train, get the people and take them hostage to the border. Then they start extorting money, up to \$6,000 per person" (M16 Israel). Another migrant indicates that this delays the trip a lot: "This time it's more complicated because I have been gone for three weeks. First, Immigration has been chasing us, and then the supposed Immigration, which is really the Zetas. They have stopped trains, we've had to run and sleep in the hills, because one tries to take care of oneself, doesn't want to get caught" (M28 Marce J).

7. A migrant tells of how kidnappers climbed onto the train but, fortunately, were not after him. Note the following testimony: "Like I told you, I was on the train... we caught a train in Ixtepec, at night, I was in some cars and other people too and they kidnapped the people right there; but it was like they

pay tax on the goods, there would be no goods and, therefore, no business. Guides and coyotes understood and negotiated payments. Then, the Zetas identified the chain of command and, in the case of the most sophisticated organizations, established top-down agreements. In other cases they still charge for use of the territory.<sup>8</sup>

4. In regards to institutional corruption, they learned that the targets were low-ranking officers, at least were undocumented migrants on the street were concerned, but that they obeyed higher authorities. There are two key public bodies: Immigration and the local police. So, on the one hand, they negotiated with commanders. On the other,

and taking into account that municipal law enforcement institutions were no longer in charge of detaining undocumented migrants but police officers themselves knew the migrant *modus operandi*, they sought to control or influence command, or get someone trustworthy appointed (hence the term “*polizetas*”). Local immigration agents were bribed, blackmailed or threatened into providing information or, in extreme cases, directly and personally delivering migrants, as has happened in several states across the Gulf of Mexico migration route.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to this set of insights and practices, the participation of Central

were following orders to get certain people, because three more of us were there and they didn't take us... I just saw everything they did there, and they only told us to us: “move”... There were a bunch of people, they removed their shoes, they took all their clothes to take them like that, led them to the hills; the train started again and they took those people” (M13 Antonio). Another migrant, points out: “There were many problems in the Cementera, those who work with the Zetas were there... We were there like three days... and these guys were firing shots, which they say guide the Zetas; they were armed, some threatened, saying that they charged this much to get there and that if they got on the next train they would kill us if we didn't pay 50 pesos per head to get on the train... They had some 30 Brazilians with them... like, kidnapped, because they get tons of money from them... in other cars there were those of us who had no money” (M17 Elvis R).

8. In the segments of interviews included in Appendix X one may note the apparent relationship, grasped by the migrant, between the *pollero* and organized crime.

9. Note the following testimony: “Because here in Nuevo Laredo the police pick you up, they pick you up, they pick me up, we are both Central Americans, then they grab two others there and begin collecting them in jail. When they have some fifteen, twenty motherfuckers, they deliver them to organized crime” (M4 Óscar L). During fieldwork we realized that Nuevo Laredo is not a trustworthy place, neither for migrants nor key informants: “The Nuevo Laredo police are known by all; there is nothing written in the newspapers or any official accusation, but everyone knows that the Nuevo Laredo police works for organized crime. That is why, when we have problems here, we cannot call the local police; if you do they still won't show up in most cases” (IC5 Jean). In an interview, some key informants in the north of the country have pointed out that not even the police is trustworthy because some members have been bought (IC5 Jean, IC6 Francisco).

Americans is essential, especially in operations. That is why migrant and in-former testimonies recurrently state that it is Central American men and women who carry out the detection, selection, grouping, and accompaniment work and deliver migrants to the kidnappers.

High caliber weapons, used both discreetly and indiscriminately, went a long way in the process of subordinating and convincing migrant smuggling networks; while coyotes and traffickers do engage in violence, they do not possess the strength and brutality of the Zeta arsenal. Barring even violent confrontation, what prevailed were negotiation attempts to reduce the claims of organized crime, which were successful but not in their entirety.

Beyond modes of coercion that induce, force or convince some Central Americans to join the criminal network, there are other more subtle elements of persuasion. Some sociological issues explain the existence, extent and transnational social reproduction of this criminal market, currently only capitalized by the Zetas. According to different sources, these are:

1. The historical resentment shared between socially excluded sectors in Mexico, Central America and the United States. All parties have been excluded, rejected, expelled or merely tolerated by institutional regimes. Looking for Central American migrants to join the criminal network can entail the collection of historical debts, or at least pay-

back. The case is similar for those who have been expelled by U.S. Immigration in operatives that, for years, have systematically expelled both undocumented migrants and criminals of either Mexican or Central American descent from U.S. territory. Once on the border, they are found by or find their way into criminal networks.

2. The search for social status within the governing organization and opposition to antagonists. A way of improving status is to stand out for some reason. In this case, this entails the skill demonstrated in action, boldness, courage, and maximizing the use of force and violence.
3. The sense of social belonging within an excluded minority group that, rejected by state authority or social competitors, exacerbates particular identity elements and extols those who embody them. This other element indicates the generation of a kind of “social family” that receives members, gives them everything and, while demanding unquestionable commitment, nevertheless protects them and their families.

Exclusion from the general social fabric fosters the generation of alternate specific and delimited social weaves that are largely reactive to those elements that exclude them (e.g., the Zetas, originally excluded from institutional life, then excluded from the social life of the drug cartels). Exclusion within exclu-



sion maximizes opposition. In generates a fundamental, smaller and parallel social identity with its own requirements for entry, stay, social and career advancement, safety and familial protection. Therefore, social reproduction tends to occur in similar social sectors, which is why they approach children, adolescents and families belonging to certain social strata and certain countries. This search for manpower occurs logically in certain urban, semi-urban and rural spaces where bonds that appeal to a shared social imaginary of exclusion can be quickly and easily cultivated.

The more exclusion there is the more specific identities these networks will carve, so that which arouses general condemnation becomes a reason for pride and satisfaction; they will become further entrenched in their particularities. This is why extreme violence, torture and mass murder of migrants exalt the perpetrators according to their own rationale. This way, social conflict has no diverting channel or solution, only a confrontation that is only expressed in violence.

The first part of this article focused on the responses of subaltern groups of Central American transmigrants to the limitations and conditions of immigration laws. The second has provided an overview of how the criminal network known as the Zetas has recovered and converted transmigrant identity and organizational and cultural elements for illegal purposes. Without a doubt, the social origin and

ascription of the Zetas allowed them retrieve socio-cultural legacies they share with both transmigrants and migrant traffickers, turning the latter into their victims and subordinates. These social processes are a sociological goldmine, for they, prove once again, that chaos has order, albeit a different one. But can subordinate transmigrants design successful strategies against the exacerbated exclusion embodied by the Zetas? Can society and its institutions constructively recover this wealth of organizational, identity and cultural expressions? These questions remain.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- SIMMEL, Georg (2010), *El secreto y las sociedades secretas*, Madrid: Ediciones Sequitur.