

THE REMITTANCES-TO-DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE AND THE POLITICAL AGENCY OF THE COLLECTIVE MIGRANT¹

MATT BAKKER*

The amount of migrant remittances sent to Latin America and the Caribbean over the last decade has experienced remarkable growth. Remittances receipts in Mexico have skyrocketed over this period, from a total of just under \$3.7 billion in 1995 to over \$23 billion in 2006 (Banco de México, 2007). By 2004, Mexico was receiving more remittances than the total sent to all of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean – including Mexico itself – as recently as 1999 (Lozano Ascencio, 2004).

As migrants' monetary transfers have grown, they have caught the attention of global financial institutions – including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Inter-American Development Bank, and a variety of organisms tied to the United Nations – which have sought to generate policy instruments to channel remittances in directions that would enhance the “development potential” of those flows. As a result of this widespread attention, a significant consensus is emerging among migrant sending states, philanthropic foundations and the global financial institutions on the importance of migrant remittances in

* University of California, Davis.

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stimulating income-generating enterprises in migrant-sending regions – a consensus that I term here the “remittances-to-development discourse.” Not surprisingly in the current political-economic context, market mechanisms have been emphasized in this discourse. The market orientation of the remittances-to-development discourse is embedded within a wide-range of policy proposals and documents promulgated by states and international institutions which I analyze below. This remittances-to-development discourse, consistent with neoliberal premises, situates the potential for migration-led development in the individual migrant entrepreneur and the market. The discourse promotes an ambitious vision of “financial democracy,” in which market-driven, inclusionary changes in the formal banking and money transfer industries offer to make each and every poor migrant and remittance recipient an entrepreneur.

Concurrently, a number of migrant organizations have also begun to focus on contributing to “development” in their communities and regions of origin. This paper analyzes the interaction of one such migrant organization, the Southern-California based *Federación de Clubes Zacatecanos del Sur de California* (FCZSC), made of up Mexican migrant organizations from the state of Zacatecas, with the global development apparatus. As the role of migrant remittances in official remittances-to-development discourse gained prominence in recent years, the hometown association (HTA) leaders of the FCZSC have increasingly engaged with state-centered actors in Zacatecas and with the international “donor community” in the promotion of remittance-driven, job-creating investment in their home state. This newfound objective for the FCZSC represents a significant shift from the social and infrastructure projects that its member HTAs have pursued in past decades. While those earlier projects brought FCZSC leaders into negotiations and relationships with officials from local, state, and federal levels of government in Mexico, this new move brings the HTA leaders who are the main protagonists of my story into a much wider gamut of relations than those forged in earlier years. How should we understand the FCZSC leadership’s growing imbrication with state officials, the international financial community, and their neoliberal remittances-to-development discourse?

ON THE POLITICAL CONSTRUCTION OF MIGRANT SUBJECTIVITY

The agency of transnational migrants has often been invested with liberatory potential and seen as a mode of inherently counter-hegemonic challenge to territorially bound nation-states and neoliberal globalization (Kearney, 1991; Rodriguez, 1996; Portes, 1998). Despite the early call by Guarnizo and Smith to curtail such celebratory imagery and engage in more nuanced analysis of the “dialectic of domination and resistance” in the study of transnationalism, unceasingly celebratory representations of “transnationalism from below” continue to hold significant sway in the social sciences (Guarnizo and Smith, 1998: 6).



In the Mexican case, recent work on the emergence of “the collective migrant” has continued this theme of the transformative nature of transnational migration (Delgado and Rodríguez, 2001, 2002; Moctezuma, 2002, 2003, 2005; Delgado, Márquez, and Rodríguez, 2004; Delgado, 2006). This collective migrant emerges as translocal networks and “filial communities” begin to formalize migrants’ sense of membership and obligation to their communities of origin, and take the form of the migrant association or HTA (Moctezuma, 2003). This new “transterritorial social subject” is seen as “a contradictory by-product of historical development and the maturation of migratory networks” (Delgado, 2006: 41) that, by adopting increasingly formalized organizational forms, “strengthens the ties of cultural identity, belonging, and solidarity with the communities of origin” (Delgado and Rodríguez, 2002) and “become a key subject in questions related to regional development” (Moctezuma, 2002). In some formulations, the “collective migrant” is represented as beginning to forge “alternative paths” that, although incipient, challenge the hegemonic neoliberal model of North American integration (Delgado, 2006).

The concept of the “collective migrant” and related typologies (see Moctezuma, 2002 for further elaborations) are useful in helping to delineate analytically between different types of migrants. These distinctions are undoubtedly important in assessing the potential for migrant-led development and designing public policies aimed at encouraging it (Goldring, 2004 provides a cogent analysis of different types of migrant remittances, their internal logics, and public policy alternatives). However, we should be cautious in the application of the “collective migrant” concept to analyses of the political realm. While the theorists of the collective migrant acknowledge that their new transterritorial social subject represents only a small fraction of the migrant population (Moctezuma, 2005), albeit its most “dynamic,” “decisive,” and “organized” parts (Márquez, 2006a: 326), their formulation shares much with the earlier conceptualization of “the transnational community” (e.g., Portes, 1998). Similar to the idyllic imagery of egalitarian and homogeneous communitarian relations conjured up by the “transnational community,” the collective migrant is presented as a coherent unity unquestionably acting on behalf of the larger migrant population and the social networks and filial communities from which it has emerged.

As Guarnizo (1998) pointed out about the earlier formulation of the “transnational community,” the assemblages resulting from contemporary transnational migration are thoroughly fractured by internal class, ethnic, gender, political and regional divisions. Thus, rather than relying on the idyllic trope of “community,” he suggests these assemblages should instead be conceived of as “transnational social formations” (Guarnizo, 1998). Given these internal divisions and inequalities, the invocation of “*the* collective migrant” as a single, unified social and political agent is problematic, particularly in regards to the constitution of HTAs as a potential transformative subject challenging neoliberal globalization.



Although recent work has vividly captured the growth of HTAs and their increasingly complex organizational structures (Moctezuma, 2005; Rivera-Salgado, Bada, and Escala, 2005; Lanly and Valenzuela, 2004; Rivera and Escala, 2004; Bada, 2003) the assertions regarding the transformative potential of the “collective migrant” have not themselves been supported by robust empirical evidence documenting the actual content of migrants’ ideological projects and political practices. This lack of attention to the ideological content of HTA practices is a significant limitation in contemporary scholarship because the meaning of such practices cannot be derived unambiguously from the material context of their emergence. This limitation is particularly problematic at the present moment because, at first glance, migrant HTA leaders’ participation in collaborative projects with the neoliberal Mexican state and various other organs of the international “donor community” might easily be seen as supporting a strongly divergent conclusion. Recent scholarship on neoliberal globalization has explained both the growth of the NGO sector and the consequences of that sector’s activities in terms of the self-serving attempts by global and state-level elites to construct a “community face of neoliberalism” (Petras, 1997: 11; see also, Petras and Veltmeyer, 2001; Dolhinow, 2005; Yaworsky, 2005). It takes little imagination to extend this type of analysis to the current activities of HTAs. Through such extension, the work of HTAs can be seen as functional to the neoliberal project, diffusing social conflict and offering political legitimacy for the neoliberal practice of decentralization (Márquez, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c).

In the contemporary moment, neoliberalism forms the institutional and ideological context in which any engagement with state officials and projects necessarily takes place. Thus, simply by engaging in collaborative projects with state officials, international foundations, and global financial institutions, migrant HTAs have become, in one sense or another, “agents of neoliberalism.” However, it would be intellectually unsatisfying to dismiss the HTAs’ collaboration on these grounds. Such an interpretation can only be sustained if we rely on an absolutist distinction between fully autonomous struggle and total cooptation. The migrant leaders under study here demonstrate the limitations of such a distinction. These are no cultural and political dupes blindly obeying the dictates of more powerful actors and forces. They are driven, as I show below, by their own hopes, desires and dreams; in short, “collaborative” arrangements involve complex negotiations between a variety of social actors and interests and entail a great deal more agency than a “cooptation” interpretation would allow.

And yet it would be equally problematic to unquestionably attribute transformative potential to the practices of transnational migrant activists. Migrants’ articulations of their political interests do not necessarily constitute a direct challenge to hegemonic discourses and structures of inequality. The political valence of migrant practice – and that of all other social and political subjects – is always an empirical question, not one that can be read directly from material conditions or



structural position in the global political economy (Mouffe, 1979; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Hall, 1996).

What we need, then, is an account of the cultural politics of transnational migration that focuses squarely on the actual content of the political identities and “interests” that migrants construct in the course of their day-to-day lives. This type of account necessarily involves an analysis of the ideological tools migrants wield as they make meaning of their current situation and strategize about the future. This article endeavors to elaborate just such an analysis, focusing specifically on the cultural politics of migrant-led development. To do so, I adopt an agency-oriented theoretical perspective (Smith, 2001) capable of exploring the ways in which HTA activists interpret, engage with, and sometimes resist the currently hegemonic neoliberal discourse on the migration and development problematic.

In addressing these issues, I draw upon a variety of qualitative sources, including over a dozen in-depth interviews with leaders of the FCZSC and related organizations in Southern California, as well as with Zacatecan state officials and return migrant politicians in Zacatecas. These elite interviews were gathered as part of a larger project on the construction of migrant transnational citizenship across the U.S.-Mexico divide that was conducted in collaboration with Michael Peter Smith. The interviews are supplemented by ethnographic data gathered through participant observation in a variety of sites in Southern California and Zacatecas as well as extensive archival materials, including official documents of the Mexican and U.S. states and a variety of international foundations and financial institutions.

Although the types of qualitative research materials gathered for the current project are often put to use in addressing theoretical issues at a strictly micro level, it is worth stating at the outset that I have larger ambitions. This project follows a theoretically-informed, extended case method in seeking to link micro-level observations and interview data to the larger transnational and global forces, connections, and imaginations that connect the global to the local in the everyday lives of my research subjects (Burawoy, 2000). The ethnographic subjects drawn together in this article are particularly amenable to the transnational ethnographic endeavor. The migrant leaders of the FCZSC are not only continually engaged as individuals in the practice and imagining of transnational living, but they are also some of the globe’s most prominent transnational migrant activists. The border-crossing connections these migrants create as they engage in a multiplicity of social and political networks, ranging from the trans-localities formed between their villages of origin and Southern California, to the corridors of power in Sacramento or Washington, D.C., through to the cosmopolitan globe-trotting circuits of the international political and financial elite, provide an intriguing glimpse into the political possibilities and challenges of this age of globalization.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. In the following section I offer an analysis of the “remittances-to-development discourse” as it plays out in



the U.S.-Mexico transnational sphere and in the policy models designed by the Inter-American Development Bank. The next section moves to an analysis of the FCZSC's turn to the promotion of migrant-financed, job-creating "productive projects" in Zacatecas. This section focuses on how Zacatecan migrant leaders themselves imagine migrant-led development, the impediments to its realization, and the policies and practices necessary to overcome those obstacles. Here I highlight the moments of discordance between the market-oriented, anti-statist neoliberal rhetoric of the official remittances-to-development discourse and the political imagination(s) of the FCZSC leaders. The concluding section returns back to our theoretical questions and assesses the disjunctures of "migrant-led development" in theory and practice.

DE-CONSTRUCTING THE «REMITTANCES-TO-DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE»

In the U.S.-Mexico context, the content of the remittances-to-development discourse is perhaps best exemplified in the agenda of the "Partnership for Prosperity" pact created by Presidents Fox and Bush in 2000. That partnership was envisioned as a vehicle to "foster growth in [the] less developed parts of Mexico ... harness[ing] the power of free markets to boost the social and economic well being of citizens, particularly in regions where economic growth has lagged and fueled migration" (Partnership for Prosperity, 2002). A key avenue in realizing this goal was thought to be the encouragement of more competition in the remittances-services industry to lower costs and push more migrants into the formal banking institutions ("banking the unbanked," in the official lingo).

Vicente Fox's address to the audience gathered at the forum "Commitments to *El Paisano*: Remittances and Services" in 2001 helps to illustrate how the idea that remittances could become an important "development tool" is presented on the Mexican side of the U.S.-Mexico transnational space. After re-asserting a "belief in freedom of enterprise," Fox suggested that his government sought to expand the migrant 3 × 1 matching grant program to the federal level so that:

the investments and transfers that our *paisanos* send can go not only to consumption, as they do currently, but also toward investments in their communities, [and] also toward investments in productive projects ...; productive projects that the *paisanos* themselves and their family members in their communities will be owners and shareholders of; productive projects that will allow for the financing and generation of the sources of employment that are needed in order to be able to hold onto the young people of the future (Mexican President Vicente Fox, March 3, 2001).

This market-oriented language provides a clear demonstration of the particular form in which the Mexican government now views and seeks to engage



with Mexican migrants living abroad. No longer following a “policy of having no policy” (García y Griego, 1988, quoted in Martínez, 1998), over the last three presidential administrations the Mexican state has crafted a coherent set of migrant re-incorporation policies that seek to capitalize on the political, social and economic resources of Mexican nationals whose lives straddle the dividing line of the Rio Bravo/Grande. Fox’s language makes clear just how deeply these migrant re-incorporation policies have become enmeshed with the neo-liberal ideological project. Seen through the optic of the neo-liberal Mexican state, migrants’ political claims and social concerns are to be addressed through the market and “private enterprise” and they and their family remaining in the community of origin are heralded, not as citizens, but as potential investors and share-holders in “productive projects” capable of generating employment opportunities, putting a halt to migration and, in the process, transforming the historic role of these communities as sources of migrant labor for the United States.

These examples demonstrate just how much the market fundamentalism at the core of the Mexico-U.S. partnership has been extended into the realm of state-transmigrant relations. Migration is presented in these state representations as a problem to be remedied and, by isolating the causes of migration squarely within the economic realm, local economic development is assumed to be a magic bullet that will slow migration flows. These key policy statements illustrate clearly how state-level elites have constructed “the migrant” as a neo-liberal subject. Migrants and their remittances, if only they could be effectively and efficiently incorporated into financial markets, are envisioned as the agents of neoliberal “development” in migrant-sending regions and the bearers of a post-migration future. Let us now jump scales to see how the migrant (and *his* remittances) is represented by and incorporated into the policy schemes of the global development apparatus.

In the arena of the global financial institutions, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) has become the development community’s leading promoter of conceiving and utilizing remittances as a “development tool.” Beginning in 2001 the IADB, through its Multilateral Investment Fund (MIF), has been working throughout Latin America and the Caribbean in promoting a vision of migrant remittances as a “development tool” to be utilized by states in the hemisphere. To this end, the MIF has commissioned studies and convened conferences across the region to discuss remittances and their potential impact on development, as well as funding a variety of region-wide or nation-centered projects. As a result of the bank’s intensive work in the area over the last half-decade, the MIF “Program on Remittances” has now developed an elaborate discursive model of the role and impact of remittances in the “development” of migrant-sending regions in particular states. This model centers around a two-pronged remittances-to-development strategy in which financial markets are the key medium through which the MIF hopes to achieve its goals. The first of the objectives pursued by the MIF is to



increase the financial resources available to remittances recipients, while the second is to increase the “development impact” of those remittances.

The neoliberal, market-oriented discourse of the MIF Program on Remittances is probably best illustrated by reference to “Remittances 2004: Transforming Labor Markets and Promoting Financial Democracy” presented at the IADB/MIF conference “Sending Money Home: the 2004 Map of Remittance Flows to Latin America” held in New York in March 2005. This policy document succinctly presents the conceptual apparatus governing the MIF’s discursive model of remittance-led development. Although the document begins with what might be read as a standard Marxist account of international labor migration – stating, for instance, that “[t]he basic equation in the Americas, and throughout the world, is quite simple: developed countries need migrant labor, and families back home need remittances ... So people move “North” by the millions, and money moves “South” by the billions” –that account is taken in neoliberal directions. The migration process is presented as “profoundly entrepreneurial,” as migrants– “like entrepreneurs who seek markets around the world” –criss-cross the globe “in search of comparative advantage.” Interestingly, the language of transnationalism is employed to argue that, the migrants’ entrepreneurial spirit notwithstanding, “the driving force [is] ... a commitment to family values These are transnational families, living and contributing to two countries, two economies, and two cultures at the same time.” In recognition of the profound effects of these transnational migration flows on global labor markets, the report stresses the need for the adoption of “new rules and mechanisms to meet the modern realities” of migrant labor in world labor markets.

What might this vague reference to “new rules and mechanisms” mean? Is this a gesture towards liberalization of immigration policies in the industrialized North, a plea for open borders? Not in this neoliberal development recipe. Instead, this call for new rules and mechanisms is an allusion to the goal of moving remittance providers and recipients into the formal banking sector, what the report terms “financial democracy.” After estimating that only some 10% of remittance recipients “have access to” bank accounts and other financial services, the report envisions that, by the end of the decade, “Millions of poor people can be brought into the financial system, and remittances can be leveraged by linking flows to local microfinance institutions, home mortgages, and even the securitization of bonds.” Returning to the individual/familial-level emphasis, remittances are presented as “individual decisions made in the best interest of individual families.” In the neoliberal utopia presented in “Remittances 2004” the challenge for the MIF and its collaborators is simply to give migrants and their families “more options to use their own money” because when migrants and their families have those options “they will do the rest” (MIF, 2005).

Despite these utopian pronouncements championing individual migrant entrepreneurship, the neoliberal Mexican state and its partners in the global fi-



nancial institutions face a fundamental problem: the recent increase in remittances has not made great strides in reducing poverty in Mexico (Lozano and Olivera, 2005), much less giving the mass of remittance recipients a large pool of disposable income or savings that could be directed toward “productive” investment. Recognition of this basic fact has forced Mexican state officials to seek partnership with migrant hometown associations and to attempt to channel the collective social and economic capital of these associations toward job-creating, productive investment. How do Zacatecan migrant activists imagine the possibilities for migrant-led development?

MIGRANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF «MIGRANT-LED DEVELOPMENT»

What has driven the migrant leaders of Southern California to promote a move from their traditional “community development” activities towards “productive projects” in their home communities? Is their view of migrant-led development wholly consistent with the neoliberal vision expounded by the U.S. and Mexican states and the international financial institutions? Or is there some dissonance between the views “from above” and those “from below”?

Migration as option rather than necessity

In our interviews, the objective of turning migration into a choice for rural Zacatecans was often represented as the principal reason why the Zacatecan migrant leaders were promoting the turn to productive investment. It might seem somewhat contradictory for these migrant leaders, whose own lives, for the most part, have been enriched through the migration process to be so desirous of stemming the tide of migration to *el norte*. After all, as we were repeatedly told, the leadership of the FCZSC is almost entirely made up of (male) migrants who moved up from impoverished peasant origins to become successful business owners in Southern California. However, a careful analysis of the intricacies of their descriptions of this goal, and the migration experience more generally, help to explain this apparent contradiction. Consider the voices of Efrain Jiménez, the “Philanthropic Director” of the FCZSC, Guadalupe Gómez, a former president of the federation, and Martha Jiménez, one of the federation’s most active female leaders, who express a good deal of the complexity of sentiments shared by most of our interview subjects:

[Migration] will never stop, because, for instance, in Zacatecas it’s a way of life: you go North. ... It’s a way of life to look for better opportunities. That’s why people like us come, because there is no hope over there. Why did my father come to the US?



Because cattle died. Because it never rained. Because in Zacatecas you need to bombard the clouds with nitrogen. ... So it's about a necessity.

(Interview with Martha Jiménez, Los Angeles, California, March 24, 2005)

We want to create a solution for emigrants. So all Zacatecans they come to the United States because they have to. And we don't want that. *We want that to be an option, not a necessity.* See! For a Zacatecan to stay, who lives in Zacatecas, we want them to have that option to come to the US if they want to ... but not a necessity. Because right now they have that necessity, they don't have [any] choice, they have to come over here.

(Interview with Efrain Jiménez, Los Angeles, May 13, 2004, my emphasis)

I'm concerned about the future of our communities in Mexico. And we're concerned about the future of Mexico. We have the resources to develop [into] another Canada or another country that can one day say that its citizens will travel not because they have to, but ... because they want to. They want to come here because they want to go to Disneyland, because they want to go to Magic Mountain. You know, that's ... it's got to be one day ... this would be the objective, the long-term objective.

(Interview with Guadalupe Gómez, Los Angeles, May 14, 2004)

On their face, these fragments illustrate two important points that add some much needed complexity to the economic reductionism of the official remittances-to-development discourse. First, these voices suggest that migration from Zacatecas is experienced as both an economic necessity and a communal expectation or rite of passage in migrant-sending communities. Second, they suggest that even if economic development and job creation are "successful" in Mexico's migrant-sending regions this is still unlikely to put a stop to migration, as some people will continue to "choose" to migrate in search of the ever-illusory "better opportunities" and greener pastures represented in timeless myths of the journey to *el norte*.

But even more importantly, these excerpts grant us access to a subtext underlying the turn to productive investment. That these migrants, some of the proverbial handful of Mexican migrants to meet with real economic success in the U.S. and, thus, sustain the migration myth, would not fully endorse migration as a livelihood strategy might come as somewhat of a surprise. And yet they express ambivalence about the migration process that betrays any undifferentiated view of its impacts on individuals and communities. The ambivalence expressed towards the migration experience and towards the differential opportunities available to migrants in the U.S. was most strikingly expressed in our interview with Manuel de la Cruz, a former FCZSC president in Los Angeles and current "migrant deputy" for the center-left *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD) party in the Zacatecan State Congress. He began with a nationalist reading of the dangers of U.S.-bound migration:

Mexico does not need to be sending so many migrants, for so many people to be leaving. It is a real shame, it's sad that we have had to live this ... they arrive in the



United States and they don't have any rights. They work and work and everything that they should receive in benefits is retained by the U.S. government even though the United States didn't spend a single penny ... in making that source of labor. Here when they study, the students that are most successful, they finish their degree and they can't find work. So they go to the U.S. That is terrible! It's dreadful! What can we expect of a country like Mexico if it continues like that? It's going to continue diminishing, it will dry up. Or the time will come when we're like Puerto Rico. Damn! (laughs) A Commonwealth of the United States!
(Interview with Manuel de la Cruz, Zacatecas, Zacatecas, June 25, 2004).

Within moments, however, De la Cruz recognizes that: "my interests are over there [in the U.S.] and the only thing that is here is my wish that Mexico progress. My children are there, my houses are there, everything is there and here is where my heart is at. (laughs). What can you do? What can I do?" (Interview with Manuel de la Cruz, Zacatecas, Zacatecas, June 25, 2004).

These mixed feelings, perhaps more amplified in the discursive representations of the state's first "migrant deputy" than among most migrants, are a testament to the enduring legacy and continuing sting of racism, discrimination and exclusion that Mexicans face in their everyday lives and engagements in political affairs in the United States. This dark side of the migration experience helps explain why these successful migrants are so strongly in favor of slowing migration, of giving potential migrants other choices.

How do the Zacatecan migrant leaders envision their desired transition from "migration as necessity" to "migration as option"? What are the obstacles to its enactment?

Productive projects: the next step towards progress?

HTA leaders are deeply concerned about the future of their home communities; the activities of their clubs are, by definition, aimed at the "betterment" of those communities through the construction of public infrastructure and the provision of more "modern" urban amenities. The success that migrant leaders have experienced in creating the matching-grant program and funding projects in their home communities has helped to propel them into more expansive forms of community involvement. Thus, for the leaders of the FCZSC, their participation in the various incarnations of the 3 × 1 program led to more far-reaching consequences as these migrants gained social and political capital that could be mobilized towards other ends. Goldring, for instance, notes how the Zacatecan HTA leaders' participation in the 2 × 1 program provided an interactive arena where the discursive and political projects of "migrant-led" and "state-led" transnationalisms confronted each other and gave migrants a space to "renegotiate the[ir] relation-



ship with the national state” in ways that challenge traditional corporatist and clientelistic readings of state-society relations in Mexico (Goldring, 2002: 70). The sense of efficacy generated by these productive engagements with state structures and government officials “empowers” migrant leaders to act in increasingly political ways in other spheres of their lives. For the FCZSC this empowerment enabled certain of its leaders to take on a fuller and more explicit engagement with politics in both the U.S. and Zacatecas, as well as a turn to more comprehensive views of the possibilities and requirements for migrant contribution to “community development” in their “home” state.

The turn to productive investment and job-creating projects by the FCZSC, while still clearly in its infancy, represents just such a comprehensive vision of community development as migrant leaders seek to move beyond simply contributing to basic infrastructure, urban services, and cultural and recreational amenities. The following excerpt from our interview with Manuel de la Cruz illustrates how migrants view this move beyond “social projects”:

Matt Bakker (MB): So then you view positively the transition that the FCZSC is making from social projects to productive investment?

Manuel de la Cruz (MD): Of course. Because we’ve already taken the first step. You can’t do a productive project if you don’t have communication links or the basic services, like sewage, potable water, schools, clinics. But, if we already have them ... we already did that.

MB: So it’s like a second step?

MD: It is the next step, the second step; it is obligatory that we begin and establish productive projects to continue progressing. We cannot stay like that. We cannot leave the villages abandoned, beautiful. We can’t do that. So that our people no longer have to migrate or stay over there, there has to be the creation of jobs.

(Interview with Manuel de la Cruz, Zacatecas, Zacatecas, June 25, 2004)

Despite de la Cruz’s rhetoric, it is not clear that migrant-government collaborative projects have already completed the “first step,” providing the communication and infrastructural networks that would be necessary to attract investment and generate the employment opportunities that might help change *zacatecanos*’ perception of migration as a necessity. In fact, Felipe Delgado – a long-time migrant leader and successor to de la Cruz as “official representative” of the Zacatecan government in the United States – spoke quite frankly about the difficulty he faced in attracting investors to the state due to the deficiencies of its transportation and communications infrastructure. For example, Delgado told us, “Roads are more difficult than in the United States. I mean [imagine] if you are creating glass or products like [that] ... We have to work a lot in order to have an infrastructure [like there would be] in any other part of the world. So, I do promote my state in different ways, but it is very difficult” (Interview with Felipe Delgado, Los Angeles, California, November 13, 2003).



This voice from the regional state identifying infrastructural barriers to the successful attraction of investors and job-creating enterprises begins to pierce the utopian representations of migrant remittances as a potential development tool. In the official discourse of the international financial institutions and the U.S. and Mexican states, the problems facing migrant-sending regions are largely the consequence of a lack of capital that could be remedied by channeling remittances into the formal financial sector and, eventually, toward investment. The migrant leaders we spoke with, however, were fully aware of other local contextual issues besides capital shortage that constitute barriers to a healthy economy. The migrant leaders did not express the same optimism as the policymakers “from above” that the economic causes of migration might be resolved simply because “the missing billions” of migrant remittances had suddenly been found by national and international policymakers.

The types of local contextual barriers that migrant leaders identify range widely. For some, the main source of problems is the unclear and uninviting policy and regulatory environment in Mexico; we were told by one pessimistic federation leader, for example, that Zacatecan HTAs still preferred “social projects” to “productive projects” because “the laws aren’t clear” and “they tax you based on your investment [not] on your profit” (Interview with Felipe Cabral, Hawaiian Gardens, California, May 15, 2004).

A recurring theme in our interviews with migrant leaders was the difficulty facing the agricultural sector. This should, of course, come as no surprise as small-to-medium sized agricultural producers have been devastated throughout Mexico as a result of trade liberalization and cuts in government supports in the neoliberal period. Yet, what is interesting in this is the divergence among migrant leaders on where to situate the cause of the problems faced by the state’s *campesino* sector and the potential solutions to those problems. Felipe Delgado, for instance, identified the over saturation of markets with traditional agricultural crops as causing economic hardship for *campesinos*. However, Delgado does not suggest that this is simply the result of supply outstripping demand; he told us instead that “in our state we have a problem year after year, that we just grow beans: beans, beans, beans. By the end of the year we have thousands and thousands of tons of beans.” While arguing that there is “no market” for so many beans, Delgado, far from attributing this to abstract market forces, points to an identifiable agent affecting *campesino* livelihoods – the market intermediary or “*coyote*” – telling us: “The *coyotes*, they buy for nothing the kilogram of beans,” paying the producers perhaps 20 cents per kilo, whereas “at the market you find that it is \$1.70 a kilo.”

Echoing an opinion shared by other regional state leaders, the solution Delgado finds to the problems caused by the *coyotes* that control access to the market is to bypass them altogether and move toward non-traditional, export-oriented production. In this vision, greenhouse production is the preferred solution for two reasons: first, because the controlled environment of the greenhouse can save



costly electricity and scarce water resources; and second, because greenhouse production of non-traditional produce, such as bell peppers and tomatoes, can be effectively timed to fill a niche in the U.S. market, providing these products during the two to three month period when competitors from the U.S. and the Mexican state of Sinaloa have finished their harvest. In recent years Zacatecas has seen a significant increase in greenhouse production, but, according to an official with the Secretary of Economic Development in Zacatecas, “it is very hard to convert the traditional farming guys to greenhouses” because of the cost this would entail – approximately \$1 million per hectare of greenhouses (Interview with Robert Barker, Zacatecas, Zacatecas, June 24, 2004). Consequently, at the time of our interview, there were only around 20 hectares across the state dedicated to greenhouse production.

Other migrants would prefer to see the concerns of these “traditional farming guys” addressed more directly. Francisco Javier González, for example, an HTA leader who heads the FCZSC’s political splinter group *Frente Cívico Zacatecano* hoped for a much more immediate and practical solution to the economic woes of the state’s *campesinos*: state-led price guarantees. In speaking about what he had expected from the “democratic transition” promised by the insurgent gubernatorial candidacy of Ricardo Monreal in 1998, González recounted a conversation he had with the then Governor-elect: “I told [him], ‘Ricardo, if you are going to do something, you have got to fix the prices on beans, on corn, on cattle. So that people can work.’ That is one thing that we wanted from democracy: that prices be set once and for all, for *campesinos* mostly, so that they wouldn’t have to be battling it out at the very end.” (Interview with Javier Francisco González, Norwalk, California, November 13, 2003).

Taking this or other actions to address the interests of the traditional *campesino* sector is likely a necessary component of any economic recovery, if for no other reason than because of the resistance of *campesinos* to economic modernization plans that would require them to abandon their livelihood strategies and traditional cultural identities that are so tied to the land. The resilience of *campesinos* and their resistance to being easily incorporated into state-directed economic transformations has led to a striking irony in the labor market of Zacatecas, this land of massive labor emigration: potential investors report that the state does not have a sufficient supply of labor! For example, in Jerez, one of the state’s largest *municipios* with nearly 55,000 inhabitants, Taiwanese investors balked at a project in 2005 after a labor market study revealed that the *municipio* did not contain the requisite, stable labor force of 500 employees that could commit to full-time, year-round employment. A political insider in the municipal government of Jerez under migrant mayor Andrés Bermúdez explained the *municipio*’s failure to attract the investors by recounting to me the population’s response to the queries of the labor market researchers: “Half of them said, ‘Sure, it’s just that at planting time [I’m not available]. And when it’s time to irrigate, I’m going to have



to go irrigate. And when it's time to harvest, I'm going to have to go harvest'" (Interview with Raymundo Carrillo, Jerez, Zacatecas, August 9, 2005).

Iskander (2005) reports a similar finding from the state of Guanajuato, where migrant-funded *maquiladoras* faced chronic labor shortages as workers, once trained, left for higher paying positions in other more traditional textile-producing regions, or dropped out of the labor market completely upon receiving remittances from relatives abroad. However, as the above quotation suggests, in Zacatecas the labor shortage appears to be much more related to people's attachment to the land and the agricultural cycle, i.e. their resistance to "proletarianization" (see Eckstein, 2001: 18, for a similar discussion regarding peasant resistance across Latin America).

The dialectics of the state in migrant discourse

The role of the state in migrant discourse is complex and apparently contradictory. As the result of the deep-seated corruption engrained during the PRI's 71-year rule, the state, and the political class that controls it, are vilified and represented as a primary cause of the dismal economic conditions that make migration a necessity. Migrants' ringing criticism of the state does not, however, lead to the adoption of an anti-statist, market idolatry. Instead, migrants attribute a strong and important role for the state in the "development" endeavors that they are engaged in. Bringing these two views together helps to capture the FCZSC leaders' nuanced view of the state and to set such views apart from the anti-statist logic of neoliberal ideology.

One way that the migrant leaders' views of the state emerged during our interviews was through their discussions of the meaning and importance of migrant participation in the generation of public goods and infrastructure. Our interviewees fell into two camps in discussing the importance of their participation in the various matching-grant programs. One set of migrants marshaled their participation in the matching-grant programs as part of their efforts to gain greater recognition and expanded rights for migrants in a political context in which their opponents often asserted that such recognition and rights should not be extended because migrants' residency abroad resulted in them becoming "disconnected" from the necessities and desires of the state's true inhabitants. Another set of migrants adopted a contrasting position that focused on the fiscal limitations facing government in Mexico that rendered it incapable of meeting all of the country's infrastructural needs.

In reaction to their opponents' charges of being "disconnected," the first group highlighted migrants' "voluntary" cooperation in activities that were really the state's responsibility. This position is well articulated—in strikingly transnational terms—in the following excerpt from our interview with former FCZSC



president Guadalupe Gómez, in which he responds to my query about how he and the other leaders maintain “connected” to realities on the ground in Zacatecas:

We go over there to find out what the needs are in different communities and we support those clubs that are helping these communities obtain those services through this 3 × 1 program. You know, we are talking about very basic services that are the responsibility of the government. It is the responsibility of the government to provide potable water, sewer systems and electricity. A very basic system, right? Well, we are not only doing that, we are building roads, we are paving streets, we are enriching the life of the people that are there. And ... we don't have to. I'm a, you know, we're American citizens. I'm an American. I vote here! So tell me that I am disconnected, when I travel the whole state, different communities where we have clubs and I see all of these needs.

(Interview with Guadalupe Gómez, Santa Ana, California, May 14, 2004).

Manuel de la Cruz expressed the contrary view, responding directly to the arguments of other migrant leaders that they are voluntarily providing what is actually the government's responsibility:

Everybody says, “it's the government's obligation.” Well, yeah, but the government has got to cover a lot of areas. It would be impossible for the government to come to this place if it has these other priorities over here. But if you, as an organization, offer, “I've got 33% to build a project here,” when that is money that is outside of Mexico, that is not even in Zacatecas, only if that government bureaucrat were crazy would they not accept what we're offering.

(Interview with Manuel de la Cruz, Zacatecas, Zacatecas, June 25, 2004).

Without a doubt these competing positions are best understood within the context of the on-going political struggles for migrant political empowerment currently unfolding in Zacatecas and throughout Mexico. The differing social and political positionings of the migrants within these struggles is clearly related to the rhetorical devices they use in vilifying and/or heralding the migrant and the government. Thus, it comes as no surprise that migrant agents of the regional state, like de la Cruz, the former “official representative” of the state government, line up on the side defending the state as doing the best it can with limited resources, whereas migrant leaders, like Lupe Gómez and his allies, struggling to gain political power while maintaining autonomy from the state take the opposing position.

Yet, the analysis of these different views offers us more than simply demarcating a fundamental cleavage in the battles over migrant political empowerment. Despite the politically motivated disagreements of these opposing camps, migrants' representations of the meaning of migrant participation in the matching-grant programs share a basic understanding of the fundamental role of the state in pro-



viding collective goods and promoting improvements in people's livelihoods. While this is not altogether surprising, even in the neoliberal era, when confined solely to the provision of public infrastructure, this shared interpretation takes on greater importance for our understanding of the politics of neoliberalism when the state's role is seen as extending deep into the sphere of production, that semi-sacred realm of neoliberal ideology that is supposed to be evacuated by the state and left entirely to the "private" dynamism of "the market."

This extended view of the role of the state in both the provision of public goods and infrastructure and in production is a key component in migrant discourse on remittances and "development." Consider the following excerpt from our interview with Martha Jiménez, where she expresses a fairly radical vision of the role of the state in facilitating the transition to sustainable and socially just productive projects:

If we are able to transition to create the productive projects, we are going to be able to make people stay there a little bit longer. ... [I]f we are helped by the Mexican government to create real sustainable projects that can create jobs, we can make it. ... We're going to make the Mexican government, through the Economy Department, create the means necessary where, if I want to have a *maquiladora* that treats people with justice and pays good salaries, I can have it.

(Interview with Martha Jiménez, Los Angeles, California, March 24, 2005).

This is certainly far removed from the pie-in-the-sky neoliberal discourse in which promoting competition amongst remittances service providers and providing migrants' access to formal financial institutions would single-handedly unleash migrants' pent-up entrepreneurial energies and, thus, bring "development" to their home communities. In the migrants' view it seems that the state should continue to play a fundamental role, indeed an expanded one, in the economy.

Although there are surely differing opinions on what it would mean for the Mexican government to "help" migrants to create sustainable projects and to "create the means necessary" for those projects to impart justice and fair salaries on their employees, the FCZSC project currently being carried out with the financial assistance of the Rockefeller Foundation and the technical assistance of the Development Studies Program at the Autonomous University of Zacatecas (UAZ) gives some indication of what the *zacatecanos* have in mind (see Delgado, Márquez, and Rodríguez, 2004 for an example of the policy prescriptions coming from the UAZ team). As described to us by the Rockefeller-funded "Philanthropy Director," Efraín Jiménez, the migrants' vision includes the direct participation of the state and federal governments in the financing of productive projects: "it is my work to look for a way to persuade our government to match our invest-



ment into certain projects.” In fact, Jiménez’s goals go even farther. Here is how Jiménez explained to us the reasoning behind his campaign proposal, during a losing bid for the presidency of the FCZSC in 2004, to create a 4 × 1 program to would include the participation of the United States government:

What I would tell to them is, “if you want to stop immigration, instead of spending millions of dollars on building that big fence ... you are trying to stop people who have brains, they are going to find somehow to go to the fence. You are not trying to detain cows ... We will find a way, because we have brains. So instead of spending those million dollars on those fences that set us apart, more than we are already, why don’t you spend those millions of dollars on creating jobs in Mexico.”

(Interview with Efraín Jiménez, May 13, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Returning to the theoretical issues raised earlier, what does the present analysis offer to an understanding of the cultural politics of transnational migration? What is the theoretical significance of the discordance between the migrants’ understanding of migrant-led development and the official remittances-to-development discourse?

As my analysis of the key discursive moments of migrants’ own construction of the relationship between remittances and development shows, the FCZSC’s collaborative engagement with the purveyors of the official remittances-to-development discourse represents something quite distinct from full-scale cooptation. There are three major points of divergence that serve to counter any simplistic reading of this form of “collaborative” politics as simply cooptation.

First, in the view of the FCZSC leaders migration is both an economic and a cultural process. This perspective contrasts sharply with the highly economic model of the remittances-to-development discourse that views migration as the consequence of rational, individual calculations in the face of structural economic push and pull factors. Second, the migrants’ view of the causes of “underdevelopment” in Zacatecas are much more complex than the neoliberal model’s assessment. These causes are not simply attributed to a lack of capital and incomplete financial markets; instead migrants highlight a number of local contextual barriers to viable investment opportunities and sustainable economic development. Finally, the migrants remedy the total silence of the remittance-to-development discourse on the role of the state in the regional development process. For migrants the state may have been the primary cause of the economic conditions driving migration, but they attribute that to the state’s capture by a corrupt political class and not to the nature of the state itself. In fact, the migrant leaders believe the state must play a fundamental role not only in funding the public goods and



infrastructure that can make private investment feasible in Zacatecas, but also as a key partner in the realm of production as well.

In rejecting an interpretation of the politics of migrant-led development as nothing more than submission to the dictates of the hegemonic discourse of neoliberal globalization, however, we should not overly valorize the resistance and contestations of the Zacatecan migrant leaders. As Sarah Radcliffe has recently noted, direct protest and “coordinated rejection” of neoliberalism in Latin America (and across the globe, one might add) are “severely compromised and perhaps unlikely in the immediate future.” And yet, in the face of these daunting circumstances we do still find individuals, collective organizations, and even some regional governments engaging in myriad “contestations, reworkings, and compromises with neoliberalism” (Radcliffe, 2005: 328). It is precisely within this constellation of accommodation and resistance to the hegemonic neoliberal project that we can appropriately situate the practices of the Zacatecan migrant leaders: they may not articulate a fully-formed alternative to the dominant model, but the development-oriented projects they pursue, and the significant role reserved for an active and interventionist state in those projects, represent a significant deviation from the legitimating discourse of neoliberalism.

The particular form of political engagement undertaken by the Zacatecan migrants with the Mexican state and the international “donor community” highlights the importance of the continuing legacy of earlier political regimes and structures. These historical remnants are apparently not so easily pushed aside with the imposition of a new economic model. In the context of the reigning political-economic model, state elites may attempt to promote a new neoliberal form of “market citizenship” in which citizens should look to “the market” and not states as the ultimate purveyor of social goods and protections (Schild, 1998; Harvey, 2001; Goldring, 2001, 2002). However, the understandings held by the emerging transnational citizens under study here of the role and responsibilities of the state in guaranteeing the general welfare are not so easily jarred from the moorings of earlier modes of political representation and legitimacy. This suggests the need to depart from the sweeping assertions of those who would see the formal economic changes wrought by neoliberalism as also effecting broad and diffuse socio-cultural changes, such as “a renewed faith in the market” or a dismantling of traditional nationalist sentiments and resistance to imperial domination (Portes, 1997).

Migrants may hold no romantic yearnings for a return to the corrupt and semi-authoritarian past of one party rule in Mexico, yet nor are they easily swayed by the political elites’ abrupt about-face in eschewing the revolutionary nationalism of the past in favor of a more accommodationist, neoliberal project of North American integration. Enduring popular mistrust for the ruling elite tends to dispose migrants and other citizens toward a healthy skepticism and



disbelief in the face of the lofty promises of politicians and planners. In the end, the migrant leaders are neither the victims of a de-politicizing remittances-to-development discourse, nor lifeless recipients of broad and diffuse socio-cultural changes brought about by neoliberal reforms from above, but historically-situated, living and breathing human agents capable of seeing and acting politically.

In recognizing the political agency of the migrant leaders in this era of neo-liberal ideological hegemony, we should not overlook the fact that these migrant leaders, while largely sharing a common class position, are divided along numerous vectors of inequality. The social cleavages in the FCZSC are perhaps most evident in the battle lines drawn in the struggles over migrant empowerment in Zacatecas, where we see migrants divided by political ideology and degree of partisanship, non-partisanship, or anti-partisan orientation with respect to the changing political landscape. The migrant leaders of the FCZSC differ as well in terms of other social divisions, such as gender and social class origins. Gender is clearly a key structuring element in HTAS, assigning men to active leadership roles and consigning women to more passive supporting positions (Goldring, 2001 a and b). As a result, “migrant leadership” is almost exclusively a male domain, although not completely so thanks to the relentless struggle of a handful of female activists. Divisions based on social class background tend to play out in terms of the patterns of accommodation or resistance to the emerging power structure and party alignments in Zacatecas. The existence of these substantive divisions and social distinctions within HTAS like the FCZSC shows clearly the limitations of essentialist notions such as the “collective migrant” or the “transnational community” and forces us to view transnational social spaces as arenas of contention, as sites of contested meanings and diverse political projects.

While these very real social differences and political divides cutting through the social space of the FCZSC and the larger Zacatecan transnational social formation constitute significant obstacles to any efforts to turn migrant political energies along more radically democratic paths, these divisions are not fully irreconcilable. These now-competing social identities can be envisioned as elements capable of being brought together in wider political projects aimed precisely at offering a conscious alternative to the hegemony of the current neoliberal economic model and the traditional gender stratification that offer vast swaths of Mexican society few opportunities, making the harrowing trek *hacia el norte* seem preferable to staying put. This is, of course, the central political dilemma of our time, finding the means to stitch together “chains of equivalence” across multiple differences and antagonisms and, thus, begin forming political coalitions capable of offering new hegemonic possibilities (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). But until such coalition building becomes an explicit political project, tropes such as “the collective migrant,” by positing a unified migrant identity and collective agency as already emergent, only serve to mask the difficulties of this task and deflect attention from its actual construction.



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