

LABOR MOBILITY: STRUCTURAL IMPOSITIONS ACCOMPANYING THE INCORPORATION OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE INTO THE GLOBAL LABOR MARKET



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ABSTRACT: Globalization processes have affected certain subaltern social groups, such as the indigenous Nauha communities of Guerrero state in Mexico. These types of economic insertion forcibly imply great labor mobility, flexibility, and deregulation in order to achieve productive incorporation into given labor markets. Indigenous groups are performing as a mobile workforce in order to survive and socially reproduce in hubs of capital flow and accumulation that possess specific forms of development and capital concentration. Their hypermobility, labor fluidity and multi-territoriality currently manifest within three specific networks: migrant agricultural labor, tourism, and international undocumented migration. These, in turn, combine to produce new migratory chains. This article explores the reasons why indigenous people, as a social sector, are so responsive to mobility demands –or, in any case, why it is they are so adaptable to itinerancy under the flexible accumulation regimes of current global markets.

KEYWORDS: indigenous migration, Nahuas of Guerrero, mobility networks, indigenous mobility, multi-territoriality.

RESUMEN: Los procesos de globalización han impuesto a ciertos conjuntos sociales subalternos como son las comunidades indígenas nahuas de Guerrero, formas de inserción a la economía que implican forzosamente una gran movilidad, flexibilidad y desregulación laboral como condición para su incorporación productiva en mercados de trabajo. Es justamente como fuerza de trabajo móvil que los indígenas están encontrando los elementos necesarios para su subsistencia ya que les permite enlazar su reproducción social a las corrientes de flujo y acumulación de capital que se caracterizan por atravesar particulares coordenadas espaciales de desarrollo y concentración de capital. Actualmente tres redes de movilidad, articuladas en un movimiento de conjunto, caracterizan su hipermovilidad y fluidez laboral y su multiterritorialidad: la que conforman como jornaleros agrícolas migrantes, la que los moviliza por los corredores turísticos y la que les articula a la migración internacional indocumentada, eslabonando entre sí nuevos encadenamientos migratorios. Una pregunta que se intenta responder en este ensayo es: ¿Por qué los indígenas son uno de los sectores sociales más vulnerables a la demanda de movilidad o, en todo caso, uno de los que mejor se «adaptan» a tal itinerancia bajo el régimen de acumulación flexible en los nuevos mercados globales?

PALABRAS CLAVE: migración indígena, nahuas de Guerrero, redes de movilidad, movilidad indígena, multiterritorialidad

INTRODUCTION

The social reproduction of the Nahua of the Alto Balsas region in the north of Mexico's Guerrero state is now inescapably tied to mobility¹ and emigration, mostly due to structural unemployment² and the unsustainable nature of part-time agricultural activities. The current essay takes its cue from what has become known as the anthropology of movement (Tarrius, 2000b: 46, 1987) and explores some specific cultural peculiarities that might foster population hypermobility and labor fluidity, encouraging the group's participation in migrant networks, transnational communities, and circular territories. In order to expand their opportunities as non-qualified workforce in highly competitive markets, the Nahua have combined several mobility processes on a national and international level, adding ready availability to their characteristics as a mobile workforce.

According to Gaudemar (1979: 37,133; Castillo, 1991: 17), labor mobility comprises three complex, interrelated moments: a) that in which the worker becomes mobile; b) that in which the worker adapts to market variables through the use of spatial ubiquity and qualifications, and c) when, as part of the workforce, the laborer is subjected to all the variations in duration, intensity, and productivity of the work process. It is because they are a mobile workforce that the Nahua of Guerrero are able to link their social reproduction to specific hubs of capital flow and accumulation: global metropolises, border areas, intensive agriculture regions, and areas of touristic development. Their mobility leads them to go through diverse economic and cultural niches (Kearney, 2000: 21) that entail new interpersonal and time and space relationships (Faret, 2001: 7). This contributes to the construction of what Tarrius (2000a: 8) has termed «circular territories»,³ with constant traffic between worlds categorized as different. This has eventually turned them into one of the most dynamic and adaptable subaltern sectors in the flexible regime of capital accumulation.

Initially, some family member becomes a street vendor in a city or enters the domestic service or construction industry in an urban area. In the past few decades, following the disarticulation of local economies and the weakening of peasant societies, globalization processes have forced the Nahua to look for new forms of insertion into the economy, so that their individual, familial, and communal mobility ends up mixing with that of people of other localities or indige-

¹ According to Faret (2001: 8) mobility is, by definition, a «de-localization»; it can also be seen as a displacement and reconfiguration of the individual's identity referents.

² The scant employment sources involve the production of traditional handicrafts, retail sale of these in local or regional circuits, and sporadic employment in agricultural or non-agricultural activities.

³ Tarrius (2000a: 8, 124; 2000b: 55) uses the term «circular territories» to refer to certain population groups characterized by movement between worlds designated as different. This notion evidences spatial socialization in accordance with a mobility-derived logic.



nous regions until, in some cases, they comprise veritable mobile networks. These eventually compound the «most atypical individual trajectories with the most uncertain collective destinations» (Tarrius, 2000b: 40).

These conjoined mobility networks⁴ have come to characterize indigenous labor mobilization since, as Gaudemar (Castillo, 1991: 17) posits, they acquire their market-adaptable mobile features through their spatial availability and qualifications and partake of all duration, intensity, and productive variations in the labor process. As Harvey (2007: 352) points out and from the point of view of capitalist development, freedom of movement and adaptability to changes in capital circulation have become a necessity for contemporary laborers.

Several mobility networks commonly intertwine in indigenous families. For example, parents and younger children continue to cyclically participate in networks associated to intensive agriculture while some of the older children settle in national touristic areas and others become undocumented migrants, traveling to the United States for varying lapses of time. For decades, these networks have been built collectively, either by a single generation or intergenerational cohorts. In these networks, communication flows through common and interdependent social channels the bonds of which allow the networks to intertwine and superimpose, creating new trajectories and routes within those that have already been consolidated. In each case, the goal is to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks. These links and superimpositions, which some authors have termed «migration chains» (Lara, 2006: 13), reformulate mobility practices among the indigenous population.

Through these practices, the indigenous population seeks to anchor itself to a wide range of precarious employment, fully assuming its unstable, insecure, and insufficient nature. This strategy of labor flexibility and deregulation situates them in unfavorable exchange conditions and economic niches that, while eschewed by other social groups, appear to constitute an important source of work for the migrant population (Canales, 2000: 171). This allows them to construct «circular territories» that, as Tarrius points out, also circulate collective knowledge, memories, and increasingly ample exchange practices the ethical and economic values of which create a culture. They also establish differentiation from sedentary societies, express hierarchies, and dissimulate, in the eyes of sedentary societies, no less radical types of violence and exploitation (Tarrius, 2000b: 58; 2001: 76). Current indigenous migration flows are configured by such mobility networks and migration bonds. These, as Canales and Zlolski (2000: 633) have pointed out, do not necessarily refer to a change in habitual residence; rather, they become a state and way of life, rendering differentiation between mobility and migrations obsolete (Tarrius, 2000^a: 43).

⁴ According to Gaudemar «mobilization must be understood as social processes that entail forms of mobility and, rather than merely make them possible, articulate them in a joint movement» (Castillo, 1991: 23).



1. NETWORKS OF INDIGENOUS MOBILITY

In the case of Guerrero's Nahua, mobility has consolidated around three mutually non-exclusive migration patterns: migrant agricultural workers routes, the presence of artisans and handicrafts sellers in tourist hubs, and undocumented international migration. These mobility processes have become a crucial element in the indigenous way of life.

1.1 Mobility associated to intensive agriculture markets

In the case of agricultural work, indigenous mobility networks are absorbed by labor markets linked to export-targeted intensive agriculture or agribusiness companies located in the northwestern and central parts of Mexico, where the Guerrero population provides most of the mobile workforce across the national territory. The Attention Program for Agricultural Laborers (Programa de Atención a Jornaleros Agrícolas, or PAJA) run by the Ministry of Social Development (Secretaría de Desarrollo Social, or Sedesol) estimates the number of agricultural workers at 3.4 million; out of these, almost two thirds are local or live in the vicinity of intensive agriculture spots, while 1.2 million come from distant areas (Sedesol, 2006: 1). The amount of indigenous workers has steadily increased among the latter and reached 48.9% of the migrant workforce in 2003 (Sedesol, 2006: 7). In 2000, almost three out of every 10 agricultural laborers (27.86%) came from Guerrero (Arroyo, 2001: 112). This was confirmed by the Survey of Migrant Laborer Households in Horticultural Regions of Mexico: Sinaloa, Sonora, Baja California Sur and Jalisco (C. de Grammont Lara, 2004: 50), which also showed that 29.3% of household heads were born in Guerrero (followed by Oaxaca at 24.2% and Veracruz at 17.6%). This survey also states that 79.5% of laborers have not settled in the horticultural region (*Ibid.*, 59). And yet, as Lara and Ortiz (2004: 4) point out, extant sources like the National Employment Survey and the National Household Income and Spending Survey do not provide trustworthy information regarding the extraordinary mobility agricultural workers must engage in to access the labor market. Data is usually imprecise, as it also varies year by year.

Indigenous migration in intensive agricultural markets is characteristically communal; that is, it encompasses individuals, relatives, and even whole families from a single place of origin. More than half of the laborers travel with their families to make use of as many workers as possible and thus earn more salaries. This includes a 17.8% contribution on the part of children aged 6 to 14 (Sedesol, 2006). Generally speaking, the places of origin comprise less than 1,000 inhabitants who engage in subsistence agriculture (Lara and Ortiz, 2004: 7) and tend to migrate because of lack of work and income (Arroyo, 2001: 107). The current



tendency is to remain in the salaried labor market continuously, following harvesting times in one or several states for periods of four to six months (Sedesol, 2006); earned income contributes substantially to family subsistence for the rest of the year in the places of origin (Barrón, 2003: 122). Even though as much as half the laborers report having land in their home villages, the proportion of those who continue to work as small-scale producers in their places of origin has diminished (from 35.7% in 1998 to 16.2% in 2003) due to agricultural/environmental deterioration, low production, or lack of resources (Sedesol, 2006: 4).

On the other hand, the strategic value laborer migration has in indigenous reproduction can be gauged by the number of indigenous laborers who migrate. In 2006, the Guerrero branch of PAJA registered the migration of 39,948 laborers: about half of them were children younger than 15 (PAJA-SEDESOL, 2007). As Lara (2006: 11) points out, laborer migration is a phenomenon that intertwines routes and articulates different types of spaces.

1.2 Mobility associated to the handicraft market

Starting in the 1970s, some Nahua villages in the Alto Balsas region left agricultural mobility networks to enter the production and sale of handicrafts as a new series of routes targeted nation's tourist centers through the direct sale of artisan products (Good, 1988: 37; García, 2006: 4; González, 2003: 4). The Alto Balsas artisans initially developed a circular pattern involving cities and tourist centers in their own state as well as neighboring regions: Acapulco, Taxco, Iguala, Chilpancingo, Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo, Cuernavaca, and Mexico City were the first migration circuits (García, 2006: 4; Good and Barrientos, 2004: 11). Later, the handicrafts market expanded to the Pacific and Caribbean coasts, as well as touristic cities all across the interior. Currently, Nahua salespeople from Guerrero can be located in more than fifty spots across Mexico. They have solid migration networks in the major cities and touristic centers, and some have even started settling there (García, 2006: 4).

However, after this relative bonanza, the internal market contracted and led to a dramatic fall in their earnings (Good and Barrientos, 2004: 36), at which point they reoriented their migration flows to other national and U.S. labor markets, reactivating migration circuits formed by fellow peasants during the years of the Bracero Program (García, 2006: 4).

1.3 Mobility to the United States

This is the result of the contraction of the Mexican internal market during the late 1980s and early 1990s as a consequence of structural reform policies and



the implementation of NAFTA. In this scenario, the Alto Balsas Nahua and many other indigenous and peasant groups from the rural areas of Puebla, Guerrero and Oaxaca (Durand and Massey, 2003: 85) opted for international migration to places where they could participate in the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors. The Nahua of Alto Balsas targeted Chicago, Los Angeles and Houston as their migration capitals,⁵ later spreading throughout the 18 U.S. states (García, 2003: 2; González, 2003: 4). These global cities operate as departure points for routes that cover urban and rural U.S. centers, since migrants are constantly on the lookout for better work and income opportunities.

The juxtaposition of these networks and spaces of labor mobility reveal the complementary nature of family and social networks and labor (Castel, 1997: 418). This also evidences the workings of what Haesbert (2004: 180) has called «network-territories»; their connections, fundamental to the social reproduction of both individuals and groups, give way to a new perception of space: multiterritoriality.

[C]onnecting their discontinuous land plots, we have the strengthening... [of] a myriad 'network-territories' marked by discontinuity and (articulated) fragmentation, which enable passage from one territory to another –an interaction we shall term multi-territoriality rather than de-territorialization or refusal of territory.

Multi-territoriality is characterized by the possible connection between diverse territories, understood as «the indispensable space for social reproduction, whether that of an individual, a group, or an institution». In the context of hypermobility and labor fluidity, multi-territoriality seems to be the productive and reproductive destination of certain mobile populations, some of which, as in the case of indigenous communities, are considerably better represented than others.

2. INDIGENOUS LABOR MOBILITY: MERE POLITICAL ECONOMY OR ALSO CULTURE?

Wondering why indigenous groups are one of the social sectors most prone to respond to mobility demands or, in any case, some of the best adapted to itinerancy under the new global and flexible accumulation regime is not an idle question. A potential response might lean in the direction of Harvey (2008: 265), who states that «in social issues, spatial and temporal practices are never neutral, they always express some type of class or social content» that, in this case, would be based on unequal value exchanges (Kearney, 2000: 14). In fact, the flexible accumulation regime imposes a vastly mobile socio-spatial dialectic on some sectors of subaltern classes in order to attain a subordinate productive incorporation into the

⁵ A migration capital is characterized by a very high concentration of migrants in a given locality or destination (Durand and Massey, 2003: 102).



labor market (Harvey, 2008: 248). Said mobility is part of the spatial organization of production and highly profitable when articulated to segregation (ethnic- or gender-wise), labor flexibility and deregulation; ethnic origin, fluctuating and periodical mobility, and lack of papers allow for the construction of segmented labor markets with differential labor reproduction costs and asymmetric power relations (Narotzky, 2004: 124, 131).

Nonetheless, political economy does not fully answer the opening question, since other pauperized groups could also take up labor mobility and, while this does happen in an international context, within Mexico it is indigenous groups that are best represented in mobile labor markets such as the agricultural northwestern and central routes. The question, then, could be rephrased: what aspects of indigenous culture intertwine with class conditions to favor labor mobility as a state and way of life? In other words, is this just an issue of political economy or does it involve historical and symbolic/cultural processes?

In order to answer these questions, I intend to follow Gaudemar (1987: 113-116), who suggests going beyond the idea that labor offer adapts to demand as determined by the needs of production and underlines the fact that the relationship between labor and capital is woven into other social relations that are not exclusively economic. He bases his approach on Bordieu's concept of *habitus*: the «conditions of existence» generate a *habitus*, both in the sense of a «structured structure» as well as a «structuring structure» that can, therefore, be interiorized.

Here it is important to point out that the indigenous population's conditioning to a highly mobile labor scheme has been a historical phenomenon that, at the very least, dates back to the Colonial period (Sánchez, 2001: 314), when large segments of the population went to work in the haciendas during certain times of the year as part of an indigenous economic system that traditionally combined subsistence agriculture with a segment of the market economy (Perafán, 2000: 3). This mobility persisted at least until the pre-revolutionary period (Warman, 1975: 189). Later, indigenous articulation into the market economy led to new regional and interregional mobility to sell communal resources, handicrafts, or workforce in commercial agriculture or construction. This indigenous mobility was –and still is– strongly configured by temporary criteria, as periodic agricultural work is defined in terms of the rains and dry season. Regarding space/time relations, Tarrus states that temporality (flows, rhythms, lapses, sequences) is the foundational element behind spatial mobility and that this best expresses the continuities and discontinuities that constitute processes of social transformation (2000b: 47).

In this sense, one could assume that the shift from primary activities in the community of origin to secondary and tertiary ones on a national and international level result in a violent rupture with preceding labor and historical conditions based on periodic rural work. And yet, the opposite seems to be the



truth. This cultural depository, highly sensitive to a cyclical conception of time, operates as a key to all collective activities and, therefore, is part of the ordering of social life (Wuthnow *et al.*, 1988: 280). It provides indigenous people with certain abilities missing in other social sectors, such as great adaptability in periodic, cyclical, fluctuating or unpredictable labor conditions. As Gurvitch points out (quoted by Harvey, 2008: 248), «there are social formations that are associated to a specific sense of time», establishing bonds that can be very complex and result from different types of practices between productive relations and cultural/symbolic systems (Escobar, 2000: 180; Thompson, 2002: 130).

My observations regarding the mobile potential of this cultural depository (its temporary *habitus*) follow the migration and productive trajectories of Temalac, a Nahua community located in Guerrero's north. In only 20 years, Temalac has gone from housing temporary agricultural workers to producing street sellers for the beaches of Puerto Vallarta, the town's current national enclave, and laborers for Waukegan, Illinois, their international hotspot,⁶ while simultaneously sending workforce to the agricultural regions of northwestern Mexico (González, 2003: 5). This *habitus*, understood as «a set of historical relations 'deposited' in the bodies of individuals in the shape of mental and bodily perception, appreciation, and action schemes» (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1995: 23), is the main semi-otic code that enables adaptation in the new economic and labor niches.

The fortunes of a community that for centuries (maybe even millennia) has worked the land under a temporary regime have led to the introjection of a cyclic conception of time that facilitates their adaptability to the highs and lows of the tourist season or the U.S. manufacturing industry, which requires a flexible and cheap workforce during certain parts of the year.

In short, the rural temporal regime has provided indigenous communities with the following tools.

a) They approach time as a fluctuation between periods of abundance/scarcity. Thus, the end of the agricultural cycle announces, in the best of cases, a brief lapse of food abundance. A good sign of this relative abundance is a full granary, and the filling or emptying of said granary serves as a metaphor for times of abundance and scarcity. This is at the center of the indigenous world view and traditional wisdom carried by migrants across international markets and national agricultural routes.

b) In the same way that the land must be allowed to rest between seasons, the workforce in the U.S. labor market must have a compulsory rest period. Work in the yards, open air restaurants, construction, and subcontracted laborer in the industrial parks around Waukegan stops during the winter months. In the case of the first two, the weather is the dominant factor: golf courses, parks, and

⁶ Since all of Temalac's migrants to the United States are undocumented, these indigenous laborers buy false documents and arrange their incorporation into the labor market through «employment agencies» (subcontracting firms).



terraces are closed down or require little maintenance. The same happens in the construction industry. It is during this time that this unemployed contingent seeks to find jobs with firms that subcontract factory workers. This wintertime workforce surplus allows subcontracting firms to fill factory vacancies with (usually female) laborers. This is a response to a basic capitalist law: the permanent re-composition of production processes (Gaudemar, 1979; 1991: 18) that circulate the workforce and prevent employees from staying in a given place for long, strengthening bonds or accumulating seniority.

c) Given their temporary *habitus*, the people of Temalac have internalized the need to implement other domestic reproductive strategies during the seasons they are displaced from the labor market. They engage in various jobs and the diversification and complementation of productive family activities. Productive complementarity and polyvalence are part of the body of knowledge needed to survive in a regime of flexible accumulation.

CONCLUSIONS

The construction of contrasting identities is a potential basis for inequalities in value exchanges (Kearney, 2000: 14) where racial, ethnic, cultural or geographical criteria contribute to the formation of a segmented workforce in accordance with the demands of capital. Harvey (2008: 325) points out that flexible accumulation tends to exploit this ample specter of presumably contingent geographical circumstances, reconstituting them as structured internal elements within its own encompassing logic. In this context, hypermobility and fluidity become a structural part of the temporary *habitus* of the indigenous population, and this operates as a cultural dispositive, code or collective memory that, in one way or another, improves their ability to deal with uncertainty and adversity vis-à-vis other social groups. As Tarrius points out:

what would initially appear as a minority, and interstice or enclave, often turns out to carry specific nubs. These new nubs superimpose on the social and spatial organization of the receiving place; they have meaning only in relation to an external logic that nevertheless influences their internal dynamics (2000b: 53).

As in the case of all cultural codes, this one will change and acquire new meanings as its carriers get involved in other productive activities that demand new symbolic figures. Nowadays, we can still consider it a «live, valid and updated past» (Warman, 1976: 12) the intelligibility of which certainly benefits those employers who utilize it for their own profit and to exploit this mobile workforce.



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