

# THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF THE DIALECTICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DEVELOPMENT AND MIGRATION



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**ABSTRACT:** This paper analyzes the theoretical and practical aspects that underlie the relationship between development and international migration by examining the stance of labor-sending underdeveloped countries from the perspective of a political economy of development. Said perspective offers a theoretical alternative to the unidirectional formulation of the migration-development nexus adopted by the major international organizations, which is based on the assumption that migrants and their resources represent the agency and instruments needed for development. We intend to examine migrants' actual role in the accumulation and regional integration processes led by the labor-receiving developed countries, and look at how they have come to support the precarious socioeconomic stability of their countries of origin. We use the case of Mexico, the world's leading migrant-exporter and remittance-receiver, as an empirical referent for our analysis.

**KEYWORDS:** Migration and development, political economy of development, compulsory migration, social transformation, Mexico-United States migration. Introduction.

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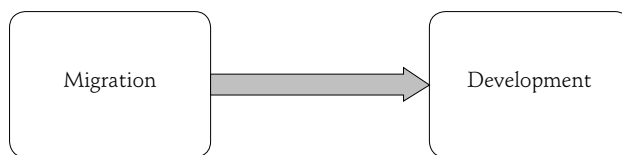
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Most of the studies that address the relationship between migration and development tend to focus on the first factor, as if migration were an independent variable and development possibilities were subject to and depended on the resources and initiatives of migrants. Nevertheless, given the analytical complexity of this relationship, it is necessary to come up with an alternative approach that does not center on the phenomenon of migration but focuses on the other side of the equation—that is, on the macroprocesses of development (see Figure 1). This new analytical perspective views migration as an aspect of the problems surrounding development and approaches development as a field of structural dynamics and strategic practices that take place on the global, regional, national, and local levels. The predominantly theoretical and political approach taken by developed, migrant-receiving countries has created a hegemonic vision that must be transcended and complemented in order to incorporate the viewpoints of the underdeveloped, sending countries. Given the predominance of nationalist or local-based approaches, it is also important to promote international comparative analyses that examine the interactions between processes of migration and development and the specific experiences taking place within them in the context of global capitalism.

FIGURE 1

The unidirectional approach to the relationship between migration and development



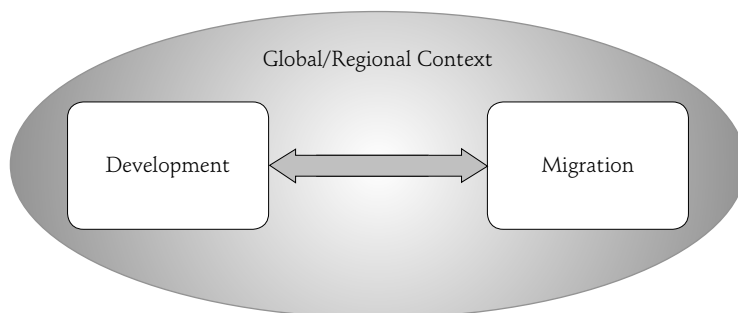
We are of the opinion that the problem of international migration should be systematically incorporated into the field of development studies and that processes of underdevelopment/development should be seen as a source of international migration (see Figure 2). In order to achieve this, we must shape theoretical objectives through interdisciplinary exercise; that is, formulate outlines and propositions based on the context, agents and processes of a multispatial environment. We must additionally problematize and contextualize the notion of development in order to break through normative frameworks that, failing to consider the need for structural and institutional change, limit the formulation of any socioeconomic improvement to abstract terms. Moreover, in a context of large migration flows, the problem of development involves additional challenges such as the asymmetric relations between countries, the reconfiguration of productive chains and the concomitant restructuring and precarization of the labor markets, trans-territorial social inequalities and, more specifically, the de-



cline of the material and subjective foundations that propitiate a given population's emigration, along with issues involving their integration into receiving societies and their preservation of transnational ties.

FIGURE 2

An alternative approach to the interrelation between migration and development



From a theoretical and conceptual point of view, the initial challenge for researchers examining these issues is the lack of appropriate theoretical background. Also, the topic of migration has not been properly incorporated into the field of development studies. Having acknowledged the vast amount of academic work done in relation to these topics, we think that, in order to create a more integral approach to migration-development interrelations and establish a concise theoretical and practical link between these two subjects, we must come up with a comprehensive analytical framework that includes aspects of socioeconomic regional integration and looks at the development challenges faced by the sending countries.

This critical reconstruction also means that we should transcend the partial views of the phenomenon that have emerged from an agenda mainly centered on developed, migrant-receiving countries. These involve issues like immigration regulation, national security, codevelopment, and the criminalization of migrants. It is crucial that we incorporate the experiences of underdeveloped, migrant-sending countries and view them in the context of contemporary capitalist development and the asymmetrical relationships between sending and receiving nations. The task of theorizing from an underdeveloped perspective, which implies a comprehensive view of capitalist asymmetries, is not new. From the 1950s to the 1970s, ECLAC's theories of structuralism and Marxist-derived theories of dependency provided a solid basis for this type of study (Marini, 1974; Dos Santos, 1974; Furtado, 1969; Cardoso and Faletto, 1969; Frank, 1969; Bamberra, 1978). Decades before the rise of transnationalist theories, these studies had already gone beyond the framework of methodological nationalism. Generally speaking, analysts from developed countries have displayed striking ignorance of (or disregard toward) theoretical contributions made by analysts from underdeveloped nations.



The present paper is divided in two main sections and some final, general conclusions. The first section presents our theoretical approach to the nexus between migration and development, which follows a comprehensive analytical scheme centered on the viewpoint of labor-exporting countries. The second one shows the interpretive capabilities of our proposed approach when applied to the case of Mexico-United States migration in the current asymmetrical context of North American integration.

#### THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DEVELOPMENT AND MIGRATION: TOWARD A NEW ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE

An offshoot of political economy and Latin American structuralist and dependency theories, the political economy of development provides an unparalleled set of analytical tools by taking into account the following factors:

1. the wide range of interactions in the North-South (or development-underdevelopment) dynamic without losing sight of the differences intrinsic to each region;
2. the interaction between different spatial levels (local, national, regional, and global) and social dimensions (economic, political, cultural, environmental);
3. ways of creating an interdisciplinary, critical model that aids in the reconstruction of reality as well as theoretical reflection, challenging the preponderant “economistic” and “structuralist” views;
4. a notion of development that surpasses the limitations of normative and decontextualized concepts and takes into account the necessary role of social transformation (i.e., structural, strategic, and institutional changes) in the improvement of living conditions among the general population. This process of transformation must involve a range of actors, movements, agents, and social institutions operating on a variety of levels and planes.

Within the framework of the political economy of development and in the current context of neoliberal globalization, the relationship between international migration and development involves a dialectical interaction that surpasses the preponderant unidirectional view of migration-development. In the specific case of South-North (or underdeveloped-developed) migration, there are several links to take into account:

1. *Underdevelopment constitutes a catalyst for compulsory migration to developed countries.* In the context of neoliberal globalization, developed countries employ an imperialist strategy of economic restructuring that internationalizes productive, commercial, and financial processes at the same time that it allows the countries in question to appropriate the natural resources, economic surplus, and cheap workforce of underdeveloped nations. The relationships maintained between industri-



alized countries and peripheral and postcolonial nations exacerbate the latter's conditions of underdevelopment. Underdeveloped countries find themselves with redundant population reserves (and, therefore, surplus population), while their members are unable to find working conditions that ensure their personal and family reproduction. This is the direct result of reduced accumulation processes derived from their asymmetrical relationships with developed nations (an unequal exchange that translates into diverse forms of surplus transference). These conditions are not socially sustainable and lead to compulsory or forced migration, which we understand as population movements occasioned by the lack of proper living and working conditions, or life-threatening political or social conflicts. Compulsory migration can result in substantial population loss for countries of origin, sometimes even leading to relative or absolute depopulation. The loss of qualified and unqualified workforce is also associated with the neglect of productive activities and the loss of potential wealth.

2. *Migrants contribute to the receiving country's development.* Industrialized nations demand large quantities of qualified and unqualified workforce; in some cases, this human merchandise is rendered increasingly vulnerable and is additionally devalued by the lack of required documentation. Firstly, this ongoing demand results from developed nations' increased accumulation capacity, which is derived from the transference of resources and surpluses from underdeveloped countries; secondly, it is the consequence of processes of demographic transition and an ageing population. Immigrants contribute to an overall cheapening of the workforce since they tend to be employed in work-intensive areas of production where they rescue or substitute a national workforce that tends to earn higher salaries and benefits. Although the qualified immigrant workforce belongs to an elite sector it is still comparatively cheap, as an immigrants' salary is lower than that of a national citizen employed in the same position. In the case of both qualified and unqualified migrants the receiving country reaps substantial benefits, having invested nothing in the formation of the human capital it now enjoys. Not only do immigrants provide static comparative advantages derived from a reduction in production costs: they also bring comparative dynamic ones through their participation in accelerated innovation processes. Overall, working immigrants and their families internally strengthen the receiving country's market through consumption. Even the so-called "nostalgia market" entails the creation of consumer demand, which fortifies internal economic activity. On the other hand, immigrants' taxable contributions enrich the country's fiscal fund but do not translate into the kinds of social benefits enjoyed by the national population, which denotes a criterion of social exclusion. Immigrant workers also help pay for the current crisis faced by pension systems due to the massive retirement of the Baby Boomer generation. Although these contributions counteract some of the effects brought about by the dismantling of the welfare state they obviously do not constitute a long-term solution.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The advance and development of migration dynamics have created a complex social transnational space that engages societies of origin and destination and serves as a dynamic field of eco-



3. *Migrants help maintain precarious socioeconomic stability in their countries of origin.* Migrants' salary-based remittances contribute to the subsistence of family members in the country of origin.<sup>2</sup> To a lesser extent, remittances also help finance small businesses in a subsistence economy. The participative remittances collected by migrant organizations finance public works and social projects in the places of origin. In some cases this practice has become institutionalized: Mexico's Programa Tres por Uno (Three for One Program) has been replicated in other countries. Migrants with savings or entrepreneurial plans use their money to finance micro-projects in their places of origin. The most important type of remittance is, however, the salary-based one employed for family subsistence, which means that the resources sent by migrants are rarely destined to processes of development and social transformation. In a macroeconomic context, remittance sums serve neoliberal governments that, not bothering to come up with actual development alternatives, use them as a source of currency that sustains a fragile macroeconomic stability. In some cases, remittances have even been used as a guarantee when incurring foreign debt. In the absence of any kind of project, migrants are now portrayed as the "heroes of development," an utterly cynical move that renders them responsible for the promotion of said development while the state, opting for the conservative stance of minimal participation, is no longer held accountable. The strategy of market regulation postulated by fundamentalist neoliberals lacks any sort of development plan that involves migrants as well as other social sectors and promotes processes of social transformation. In truth, underdeveloped countries fulfill a particular role as workforce reserves and their potential development is obstructed by increasingly reduced national elites, which are subordinated to the interests of governing circles in developed countries and, to a great extent, the interests of U.S. capital.
4. *The promotion of development as social transformation could curtail compulsory migration.* Globalization depicts migration as inevitable; we must endorse, both in theory and practice, the viability of alternative processes of development and do so on different levels. We must first redefine the asymmetrical terms that developed countries, aided by principles that have by now turned into fetishes (e.g., democracy, liberty, and free trade), use to dominate underdeveloped ones. This involves an exposé of imperialist practices, which have created oceans of inequality and condemned vast regions of the world to marginalization, poverty, social exclusion, and unfettered migration. Those neoliberal governments in underdeveloped countries that argue migration is an inevitable process and triumphantly capitalize on the benefits of remittances are operating under a logic that will inevitably collapse. A genuine process of social transformation involving the migrant and non-migrant sectors of society would not only seek to contain the overwhelming flow of compulsory migration but also revert the ongoing processes of social degradation that characterize underdevelopment and even pose a threat to human existence (Harvey, 2007; Bello, 2006).

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conomic activity. Economic opportunities in this field are usually seized by the large corporations of developed countries (Guarnizo, 2003).

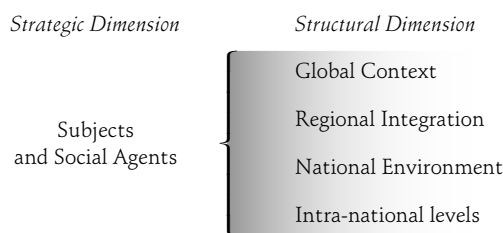
<sup>2</sup> For the different types of remittance see Márquez Covarrubias (2006).



Having taken all of the above into account, an approach based on the political economy of development would posit that international migration is the result of problems in the development process and that the migration phenomenon has to be examined in this context in order to reveal its root causes and effects. In order to study migration, its cause-and-effect interrelation with development, and examine the different stages inherent to this dialectical interaction, we must take into account two fundamental analytical dimensions: strategic practices and structural dynamics (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3

Analytical dimensions of the political economy of development.



### *Strategic practices*

These refer to the clashes between the diverging agendas that constitute the structural complex of contemporary capitalism and its inherent problems of development. Generally speaking, there are two major projects: the hegemonic and the alternative. The hegemonic one is promoted by the great transnational corporations in conjunction with the governments of developed countries, which are led by the United States and allied to the power elites of some underdeveloped nations, as well as certain international organizations. Because the neoliberal venture has lost legitimacy in recent years, rather than speak of hegemony we should speak of domination: more often than not, these policies are being implemented through military action and imposition rather than consensus. The alternative project comprises the sociopolitical actions taken by social movements and classes—as well as collective agents and subjects—in support of a political scheme designed to change the structural, political, and institutional dynamics that impede the implementation of alternative development policies on all levels (global, regional, national, and local).

The capacity to regulate development and migration is mostly in the hands of transnational corporations, developed migrant-receiving nations, international organisms, and associated capital, the influence of which spans from the global to the local. The governments of underdeveloped migrant-sending countries tend to lack a concise national project, are subordinated to the interests of



the powerful groups, and have limited influence in their own national and local milieus. And yet, the dynamism and maturity acquired by some national diasporas (e.g., the Mexican one) give way to new kinds of social subjects. This is particularly true in the case of migrant organizations, many of which promote development in their places of origin. Their actions are transnational in character and, though their involvement is not as intense in the countries of origin as it is in the countries of destination, their incipient participation in local development is noteworthy. Migrants, whether organized or not, maintain permanent and dynamic bonds with their places of origin and contribute (especially when organized) to the local processes taking place in the marginal spaces produced by the new world order. Subjects of migration have their own sphere of influence and, while some act across different levels, others are confined by their own niche and do not greatly influence the performance or interests of other actors.

### *Structural dynamics*

These refer to the asymmetrical ways in which contemporary capitalism is articulated. It includes the spheres of finance, commerce, production, and the labor market, as well as technological innovation (a strategic tool for the control of the aforementioned spheres), the use and allocation of natural resources, and their environmental impact. These structural demarcations shape the relationships between *i*) developed countries, *ii*) developed and underdeveloped countries, *iii*) underdeveloped countries. They also determine the spaces in which the diverse social sectors, groups, movements and classes relate to each other. All of this is expressed differently depending on whether it takes place on a global, regional, national, or local level.

1) *Global context.* Developed nations are currently immersed in a wide and complex process of capitalist restructuring that is taking place on a global scale. In addition to ongoing strategies such as IT and communications innovations, economic tertiarization, and the internationalization of finance, the current major global strategies are the internationalization of production and the transnationalization, differentiation, and precarization of labor markets. In this sense, contemporary capitalism has created a new world order structured around neoliberal globalization—a system that reproduces the economic asymmetries between developed and underdeveloped countries on an unprecedented scale at the same time that it deepens social inequalities, poverty, and marginalization on a global scale. The welfare state is being dismantled in both migrant-receiving and migrant-sending countries; meanwhile, the flexibilization and precarization of the labor market continues to increase and the environment irreversibly deteriorates. In this context—and despite its presence in the discourse of international organ-





isms and governments—development has been abandoned and its goals have been eschewed. This is why, now more than ever, the pending issue of development is one of the major challenges facing contemporary humankind.

2) *Regional integration*. Developed countries now comprise regional economic blocks that, among other things, seek to territorially expand their internal markets, increase their production platform, and guarantee supplies of cheap labor, natural resources and economic surplus. This is the case, for example, with the North American block and the European Union. Transnational labor markets are based on the availability of cheap workforce and its impact on the ongoing productive restructuring (a sequel to the international capitalist crisis of the 1970s), which seeks to reduce production costs as a competitive strategy. For those underdeveloped countries that participate, directly or indirectly, in the scheme of regional integration led by the great capitalist powers, the exporting of cheap workforce results in their increased international dependency. The configuration of a regional block involves a series of strategic articulations that include the transnationalization of financial markets, production restructuring, and the internationalization of production among other processes. It additionally fosters the permanent cheapening and precarization of the workforce as a competitive weapon against other regional blocks in an attempt to further production and restructure and increase profit margins. The economy of cheap work has been taken to unforeseeable extremes in the past few decades. It now lies at the heart of global capitalism and illustrates the way in which the immigrant workforce gained access to developed nations: international labor migration has grown exponentially and become a crucial cog in the new global machine.

Migrants' contributions now affect, to varying degrees, the economic, social, and cultural development of sending and receiving countries. Still, many receiving countries exploit immigrants, subject them to xenophobia and racism, and blame them for a wide variety of social problems—to the extent that they are considered criminals and their human, labor, social, and political rights are taken away. When an underdeveloped nation inside a regional economic block becomes the source of substantial migration flow toward a central country, this creates strong dependency ties that threaten labor sovereignty at the same time that they consolidate a specific migration system. This does not mean that the central nation will come to depend on the cheap workforce of the sending country, since many other regions can supply that. In the specific case of the North American block, Mexico's relationship with the United States is conditioned by an asymmetrical pattern of subordination. Socioeconomic asymmetries stem from the widely divergent structural situations in the two countries, and while the United States is the world's major capitalist power, Mexico is a dependent party that subordinates its political agenda and geo-strategic decisions to the interests of its northern neighbor. These processes of regional integration are not exclusive to



trans-hemispheric North-South interactions; they also take place among countries in either hemisphere and have resulted in a certain reconfiguration of migration flows as countries of emigration simultaneously become countries of transit and immigration and South-North and South-South migration chains are established.

3) *National environment*. The neoliberal policy of structural adjustment causes a cycle of economic depression in underdeveloped economies, constrains the internal market, weakens the labor market, and encourages emigration toward developed nations. The emigrating workforce, which in its home country appears as broadly-based overpopulation, is ultimately a working reserve at the service of productive restructuring processes commanded by transnational corporations and northern countries. These processes comprise, on the one hand, the destruction of productive chains and social production relations and, on the other, the construction of new bonds between developed and underdeveloped countries, which exacerbate the dependency and exploitation of underdeveloped nations in both regional and global contexts. This also involves the dismantling of a development model (or a model of import substitution in the case of Latin America) that included the presence of a welfare state and the introduction of a new social policy that does little more than channel meager resources to the most vulnerable sectors of society in an attempt to paint a human face on the social disaster brought about by neoliberalism. During the 1980s, the Washington Consensus implemented neoliberal policies of structural adjustment such as commercial and financial liberalization and institutional privatization. Recently, the international organisms involved in the post-Washington Consensus sought to humanize their choice of policies by raising subjects such as the fight against poverty, the promotion of equality, and social inclusion. The United Nations' development goals for the millennium take the same stance, but bypass any structural or institutional changes.

4) *Intra-national levels*. Migrant-sending localities have become dependent on remittances that enable consumption and ensure family and social subsistence. Remittances are also expected to promote local development, and sending countries tend to socially and institutionally perceive migrants as the pillar upon which the precarious macroeconomic, political, and social national situations rest. As if this were not enough, both sending countries and international organizations think of remittances as a purportedly strategic resource that will propitiate development, either nationally, regionally, or locally; therefore, they will not commit to providing sufficient resources to propel actual development. In fact, remittances supplement the negligible public funds assigned to social development under neoliberal decentralization programs.

Finally, it is at the local level that socioeconomic spaces are reconfigured and internal and international migration patterns are traced.



THE DIALECTIC BETWEEN DEVELOPMENT AND MIGRATION:  
THE CASE OF THE MEXICO-UNITED STATES REGIONAL INTEGRATION SCHEME

Since the late 1970s, the United States has promoted the implementation of neo-liberal structural adjustment policies in Latin America, which have been carried out by several international organizations in tandem with the Latin American elites and national governments (Veltmeyer, 2000). In accordance with new models of regional integration, these policies focused on exports.

The export-based Mexican economic model and the particular mode of regional integration determined by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) are the result of strategic policies implemented by agents of large transnational corporations and the U.S. government under the umbrella of certain international organisations. In fact—and as has been amply documented—NAFTA itself was created and implemented by a sector of the U.S. political class allied to the large transnational corporations and their counterparts in Canada and Mexico (Cypher 1993; Faux 2006). In the case of the latter, the government and a sector of the Mexican business elite led by the Consejo Coordinador Empresarial (Entrepreneurial Council), which is linked to the Comisión de Organismos Empresariales de Comercio Exterior (Commission of Entrepreneurial External Commerce Organisations) participated actively in this process (Puga 2004; Cypher and Delgado Wise, 2007).

Mexico soon became Latin America's major exporter and the world's thirteenth, supposedly because of the successful implementation of the economic reforms. At first glance, 90 percent of its export platform was comprised of manufactured products, 39.4 percent of which was classified as "technical progress-diffusing goods" (CEPAL, 2002). This stance can create an optical illusion, and an examination of the subject becomes necessary: what is it that the country really exports?

*The basis for Mexico's cheap labor export-led model*

The way in which Mexico entered the orbit of U.S. capitalism under neoliberalism and, particularly, in the context of NAFTA, plays a fundamental role in the understanding of the model of "development" adopted in the country. As has been documented elsewhere and contrary to what Mexico's progress along the secondary-exporting path would indicate (i.e., the establishment of a successful model of manufactured exports), the country's export model is based on cheap labor (Delgado Wise and Márquez, 2005; Delgado Wise and Cypher, 2005). This model, which is crucial to the U.S. productive restructuring process, comprises three



inter-related mechanisms that, taken together, indicate the asymmetrical integration of the country's economy with that of the United States:

1. *The maquiladora industry*, made up of assembly plants and involving a strategy of productive relocation led by large U.S. corporations in order to take advantage of low labor costs in Mexico. The result is that the nation experiences a very low level of integration with the domestic economy and, in addition, is subject to a further dismantling of its productive apparatus.
2. *Disguised maquila*, or manufacturing plants with productive processes that are more complex than maquila assembly operations but operate under the same temporary import regime as maquiladoras (e.g., the automotive and electronics sectors).

It should be noted that maquila and disguised maquila share two characteristics: (a) they are practically devoid of productive upstream and downstream links to the rest of the national production apparatus, and (b) they are subject to intense processes of labor precarization. Maquilas issue wages that are around 1/10 of those in the United States, while the difference in disguised maquila is 1/7. Due to their high levels of imported components (between 80 and 90 percent of the total export value), their contribution to the Mexican economy is basically restricted to the wage earnings; in other words, the value of the labor incorporated into the exports. This means that the country is engaging in the *indirect exportation of labor*, or a transfer of the workforce that does not require workers to leave the country (Tello, 1996). This is a crucial conceptual element that demystifies the purported success of Mexican manufacture exports and reveals retrograde movement in the export platform.

3. *Labor migration*, which involves the mass exodus of Mexicans to the United States as a result of the constrained size and precarization of the Mexican formal labor market and the process of neoliberal regional integration.

If we add indirect labor exports to the *direct exportation of the work force* through labor migration, the true makeup of Mexico's exports is revealed. This is why we characterize the current model of export growth as *the cheap labor export-led model*.

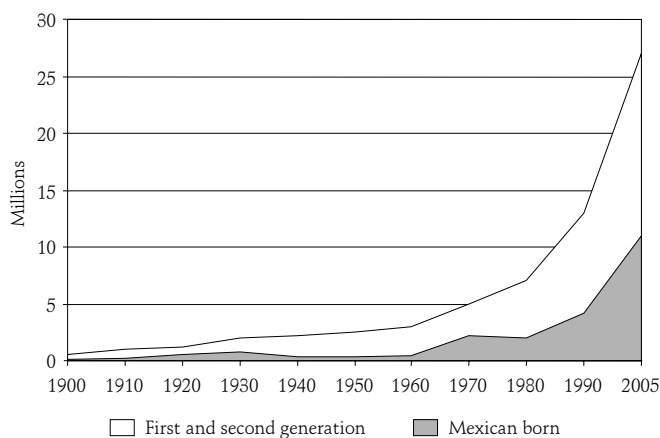
### *The new migration dynamics*

As can be clearly seen in Figure 1, migration from Mexico to the United States has experienced an exponential growth during the past two decades. This growth was accentuated by the implementation of NAFTA, which turned Mexico into the world's major migrant sender to the United States.



FIGURE 1

## Population of Mexican origin in the United States



Source: Conapo estimates based on the Current Population Survey.

The sheer dimensions of the migration phenomenon speak for themselves: in 2007, the U.S. population of Mexican origin—including Mexican-born documented and undocumented migrants (12 million) as well as U.S. citizens of Mexican ascendancy—was estimated at 30 million people. It is the world's largest diaspora to be established in a single country. According to UN (2006) estimates, during the 1990-1995 period Mexico was the country with the largest annual number of emigrants (a total of 400,000 people vis-à-vis 390,000 from China and 280,000 from India). Between 2000 and 2005, the Mexican annual exodus rose to 560,000. The country has consequently experienced an exponential growth in received remittances and, along with India, is the world's major recipient (IFAD, 2007). In 2006, Mexico's received remittances amounted to 23.7 million U.S. dollars (Banco de México, 2007).

Practically all of Mexico's territory shows incidence of international migration. In 2000, 96.2 percent of national municipalities experienced some type of migration-related activity. This territorial expansion has resulted in the emergence of new migration circuits (historical, indigenous-traditional, emerging, etc.) with particular dynamics and problems (Zúñiga, 2004). At the same time, even though the Mexican immigrant population in the United States is still concentrated in a handful of states, in the past few years it has expanded throughout most of the national territory. Migration circuits have also stretched to the eastern and central-northern areas (Zúñiga and Hernández-León, 2005), which is where some of the most dynamic centres of industrial restructuring are located (Champlin and Hake, 2006).

In educational terms, 38.9 percent of the Mexican-born, U.S.-residing population aged 15 and older has a higher education. This number increases to 52.4 percent when we take into account all of the U.S. population of Mexican origin.



In contrast, the Mexican average is 27.8 percent, which means that the country is losing qualified workforce and there is a clear selective trend. Yet, when compared to other immigrant groups in the United States, Mexicans have the lowest overall educational level, which evidences Mexico's serious educational lag (OCDE, 2005).

A less evident type of relocation, one that escapes the usual stereotypes involving labor migrants, is that of Mexican-born U.S. residents with college or graduate degrees. Out of a total of 385 thousand individuals, 86 thousand have graduate degrees and 10 thousand have PhDs (CPS, 2005). This means that brain drain is becoming a substantial problem.

These changes have been accompanied by transformations in the migration patterns, which have moved from circular to established migration and show increased participation on the part of women and complete families (Delgado Wise, Márquez and Rodríguez, 2004). Even though the evolution of migration flows often leads to established migration, in this case the tendency has been accompanied by a unilateral closing of the border that, in contravention of its goals, has not contained the exodus; rather, given the return risks and difficulties, it has encouraged new migrants to prolong their stay indefinitely. These changes and Mexico's decreasing birth rate have resulted in a worrisome and growing tendency toward depopulation: between 2000 and 2005, 832 of the nation's 2,435 municipalities, or one in every three, had a negative growth rate (INEGI, 2006).

Given the hemispheric extension of the economic political integration promoted by the U.S. government, Mexico has also become a transit country and must address the concomitant problems. In 2004, nearly 400 thousand people moved through the Mexican southern border; most of them were Central American undocumented migrants (INM, 2005).

### *The paradoxes of export growth*

In order to bring this section to a close, we wish to point out that the labor force export-led model on which the Mexico-United States migration process is based involves two paradoxes that evidence the unsustainable nature of the present scheme of economic integration:

- *Economic integration under NAFTA does not promote an equal degree of development between Mexico and the United States; rather, it has contributed to the deepening of asymmetries between the two nations.* While, in 1994, the U.S. per capita GDP was 2.6 times higher than the Mexican one, in 2004 the gap had grown to 2.9. In 1994, U.S. manufacturing wages were 5.7 times higher than in Mexico; in 2004, the difference was 6.8. Paradoxically, this growing income gap does not mirror productivity levels, which have declined. In fact, Mexico has shown more productivity in certain sectors, particularly those related to the labor force export-led model.



TABLE 1  
Mexico-United States Asymmetries, 1994-2004

ASYMMETRY	MEXICO		UNITED STATES	
	1994	2004	1994	2004
Population (thousands)	88,402	104,000	263,126	293,655
Population growth rate	3.2 <sup>a</sup>	1.3	1.2 <sup>a</sup>	1.0
Per capita GDP (current USD)	7,332	10,059	19,304	29,673
Underemployment (% of the EAP)	43.7	37	8.8	7.6
Research and development budget (% of the GDP)	0.29	0.43 <sup>b</sup>	2.42	2.68 <sup>b</sup>
Population with a college degree (% of individuals between 25 and 64 years of age)	11.9 <sup>a</sup>	15.4 <sup>b</sup>	33.3 <sup>a</sup>	38.4 <sup>b</sup>
Manufacturing wages (USD per hour-worker)	2.1	2.5	12	16.2

a 1995 b 2003

Sources: OCDE, INEGI.

- *Economic integration has not encouraged the creation of job opportunities in Mexico; rather, it has become a motor of direct labor force exporting and increased socioeconomic dependence on remittances.* Remittances are the source of foreign currency with the most consistent growth rate in Mexico. This is highlighted by the relative loss of importance of other sources of external financing (e.g. foreign direct investment, or FDI, and manufactured exports). According to official data, remittance reception in Mexico has increased thirty-fold during the implementation of neoliberal policies.

Having taken all of this into account, we can state that migration unintentionally operates as crucial cog in the neoliberal machinery, providing it with an appearance of “stability” and, paradoxically, a “human face.” On a macroeconomic level, remittances serve to extend the life of a development model that is already showing signs of unsustainability. On a microeconomic one, they help ease poverty and marginalization inasmuch as they involve a transfer of resources that lack any solid ties to savings strategies, productive capacity, and economic growth.

#### *A tentative project of transformation*

The profound need for change in the structural dynamics and strategic practices at work in the current schemes of regional integration and neoliberal national development have given way to two types of social agents, which can be separated into two groups: those “from above” and those “from below.” The current economic project has clearly been implemented “from above” by the agents of U.S.



capital and power in tandem with Mexican allies; they work within a political coalition that seeks to maintain neoliberal integration and push it to its very limits. In short, this is an actual class project that promotes economic asymmetries, social inequalities and phenomena such as poverty, unemployment, labor precarization, and migration.

In contrast, those “below”—particularly in Mexico—are mostly unhappy and disenchanting, although they sometimes engage in open acts of opposition, resistance, and rebellion. It is true that there is currently no collective agent that can articulate a project that counters the one being implemented by neoliberal elites. However, we should point out that a number of disperse social alternative movements have willfully, even optimistically, sprung up.

The Mexican agricultural sector, one of the quarters that has been hardest hit by the implementation of NAFTA and is suffering in the productive, commercial, population and environmental areas, has given rise to movements like El Barzón (The “Plow”), El Campo No Aguanta Más (The Countryside Can’t Take Any more; Bartra, 2003) and the campaign Sin Maíz no hay País (No Corn no Country). Other denouncers of the neoliberal system include the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation, EZLN) and its Otra Campaña (Other Campaign), as well as some sectors of the social and electoral left who have converged into the Coalición por el Bien de Todos (Coalition for the Good of All) and the Convención Nacional Democrática (National Democratic Convention). There are also other more or less important national sociopolitical movements, but what is worth noticing is that the widespread popular discontent (which could even extend to the majority of Mexicans) is not expressed in an organized manner and has not produced an alternative development project.

On a binational level, the actions of opposition forces have been even more scattered. Initially, the Red Mexicana de Acción frente al Libre Comercio (Mexican Action Network in Opposition of Free Trade) communicated with likeminded organizations in the United States and Canada that opposed the signing of NAFTA but, since then, its actions (which involve agreements between unions and social organizations on both sides of the border) have been few and far between (Brooks and Fox, 2004).

The idea that migrants are agents of development has been promoted for over a decade. This proposal, which is in no way sustainable when applied to large-scale social processes, suggests that migrants should be held responsible for promoting development in their countries of origin. And yet, as Fox (2005) has pointed out, migrant society has produced social actors who operate on three levels: *i*) integration into U.S. society (e.g., unions, the media, and religious organizations); *ii*) networking and promotion of development in places of origin (i.e., native organizations), and *iii*) binational relationships that combine the previous two (i.e., pan-ethnic organizations). For example, Mexican migrant organizations fund public works and social projects in their communities of origin with





the aid of the Programa Tres por Uno. And, during the spring of 2006, U.S.-residing immigrants participated in massive marches in favor their working, political, social, and civil rights.

Generally speaking, migrants and their organizations affect the political, social, economic, and cultural aspects of sending and receiving countries to varying degrees. However, it would be a theoretical mistake to present migrants themselves as a collective agent of transformation. If we intend to portray them as agents of development, then we had better examine the strategic projects and structural dynamics present on the different planes and levels, as well as the interests that prompt participation “from above” and “from below.” This will allow us to understand the role played by migrants. Stating that they cannot be considered agents of development does not entail a pessimistic message advocating immobility. Quite the opposite: this can help us disentangle possible forms of articulation between migrant organizations and social sectors that seek a new type of development agenda, one that can be applied on the global, regional, national, and local levels. Only then will we be able to discuss the configuration of an agent of social transformation that includes migrant participation.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS

The theoretical framework proposed in this paper focuses on four aspects we consider fundamental for understanding the relationship between development and migration:

1. *A critical approach to neoliberal globalization.* Contrary to discourses that advocate its inevitability, we posit that the current phase of capitalism is unsustainable and illegitimate, and our present world order should undergo substantial changes.
2. *A critical reconstitution of the field of development studies.* The favoring of a singular mode of analysis based on the belief that free markets work as powerful regulatory mechanisms, efficiently assigning resources and providing patterns of economic convergence among countries and their populations, has resulted in failure. New theoretical and practical alternatives are needed, and we propose a reevaluation of development as a process of social transformation through a multidimensional, multispatial, and properly contextualized approach. This integral approach requires the inclusion of the viewpoints of the underdeveloped societies and the consideration of strategic and structural aspects, which should be examined at the global, regional, national, and local levels.
3. *The construction of an agent of change.* The globalization project led by the United States has ceased to be consensual: it has only benefited capitalist elites and excluded and damaged an overwhelming amount of people throughout the world. Economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental changes are all needed, but a transformation of this magnitude is not viable unless diverse movements, classes, and



agents can establish common goals. The construction of an agent of change requires not only an alternative theory of development but also open dialogue: the sharing of experiences, the conciliation of interests and visions, and the construction of alliances inside the framework of South-South and South-North relations.

4. *A reassessment of migration and development studies.* The current explosion of compulsory migration is part of the intricate machinery of neoliberal globalization. In order to understand this process we need to redefine the boundaries of studies that address migration and development: expand our field of research and invert the terms of the present migration-development equation in order to situate the complex issues of development and underdevelopment at the center of the frame. This entails a new way of understanding international migration. Migrants should not be held responsible for the promotion of development in their places of origin. At the same time, it is important to highlight their direct contributions to the development of receiving countries and their impact in their places of origin. It is essential that we identify viable pathways to new stages of development where migration can be voluntary instead of forced. This requires new theoretical and methodological approaches that can result in the creation of new research agendas, concepts, analytical categories, and information systems. This is an invitation to engage in constructive debate and the creation of new forms of collective, interdisciplinary, inter-institutional, and international research.

Finally, we can add that this analysis of Mexico's regional assimilation into the orbit of U.S. capitalism illustrates the pertinence of our theoretical proposal, highlighting the complexity and multidimensional character of this issue much more effectively than the current prevailing studies and concepts.

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