

Latin American Developments in the “Age of Migration”

by NESTOR RODRIGUEZ

LARGE-SCALE WORLDWIDE MIGRATION since the late twentieth century has been referred to as constituting an “Age of Migration” (Castles and Miller 2008). Movements of populations across Europe, Asia, and Africa make up major parts of the migratory experience in the Age of Migration, but so does Latin American migration to the United States. Indeed, as the recipient of the largest number of international migrants—with the majority of these migrants coming from Latin American countries—the United States emerges as the prototypical destination case in the Age of Migration.

The migration to North America of millions of Latin Americans since the late twentieth century has produced many impacts for Latin American sending communities. This article is not the forum to give a full accounting of these effects (which would require a multi-volume effort), but it is an opportunity to consider some salient developments. From the perspective of migrant households and local communities, these developments include the spatial expansion abroad of household survival strategies, a historic movement northward of indigenous populations, and the emergence of new and problematic community conditions produced by massive deportations from the United States.

These developments have brought social change to Latin American communities experiencing emigration to North America. But what is less clear is that the social change represents social development in a manner that lifts more than the migrant households that draw on the benefits of migration for survival in their Latin American settings.

As figure 1 shows, Latin Americans constitute the largest foreign-born population in the United States, twice the size of the Asian foreign-born population, which is the second largest immigrant population in the country. Mexicans account for over half (58 percent) of the Latin American immigrants in the United States.

In the late twentieth century, social scientists began to explore a host of questions regarding the rise of immigration waves, especially as they concerned population movements from developing countries to advanced industrial societies. Some of the early research concerned the dynamics and composition of the migration patterns (Portes and Bach 1985), and subsequent studies focused on impacts in settlement areas (Chavez 1992). An ambitious study of the latter approach in the late 1980s concerned how new immigrants were changing social relations across U.S. urban areas (Bach 1993). Subsequent research turned to how migration patterns were affecting the sending communities, or how migration was creating a new level of international (“transnational”) relations among migrant households and communities of origin (Levitt 2001).

Internationalization of Households

As a growing research literature on “transnational” migration and communities demonstrates (e.g., see Levitt 2001), Latin American migration to the United States has produced strong ties between migrant settlements in the United States and sending communities in Latin America. For many Latin American communities, migrant remittances form a major resource for economic survival or a substantial part of

the resources necessary for daily consumption. This is a striking feat, given that this is an outcome of a survival strategy that originated with little or no support from governmental or intergovernmental measures and that now involves millions of migrant households. By most recent accounts, migrant labor remittances to Latin America reached \$69.2 billion in 2008 (Inter-American Development Bank 2009). In Mexico, migrant remittances have supported local community projects, and even stimulated the development of federal, state, and local matching funds in some cases (Thompson 2005). But money is only one form of the many migrant remittances that arrive in Latin American communities from the United States. Others arrive in cultural forms (music, styles of dress, etc.), bringing many Latin American communities into the symbolic interactional sphere of U.S. society (while at the same time bringing some U.S. communities closer to Latin American cultures).

Yet, it is important to recognize the source of the “transnational” image. While “transnational” refers to social ties that extend across nation-state boundaries, and thus across two national cultural settings, what originally was conceived as transnationalism was actually a stretching across borders of the *national*. That is to say, the origins of international social relations established by first-generation immigrants to households and communities back home were very much a product of their original Latin American culture. It was the internationalization of their national background—the taking of their national culture abroad. Regardless of how it is conceived, the fact remains that large numbers of working-class and peasant communities in Mexico, Central America, and other Latin American areas now have extended their spatial base of household survival and social reproduction abroad into North America, and many have done so autonomously, with little or no state support.

Northward Trek of Indigenous Populations

One of the most striking developments of the Latin American migratory currents to North America in the Age of Migration is the presence of indigenous migrants. These include a large number of different populations with pre-Columbian origins that emigrate from Mexico, Central America, the Andean region, and other Latin American areas. Among the

indigenous groups that have attracted research attention in the United States have been the Mixtecs from Mexico (Kearney 1996), Maya from Guatemala (Loucky and Moore 2000), and Quichua-speaking migrants from Ecuador (Kyle 2000). No doubt, many other indigenous migrant populations remain little explored or even unknown to researchers, such as the Náhuatl-speaking migrants who have settled in Houston. In addition, there is the case of the Garifuna migrant population from the Caribbean coast of Central America that has settled across various U.S. cities. Of mixed indigenous and African origin, the Garifuna trace their roots to the Caribbean slave trade in the 1600s in the island of Saint Vincent.

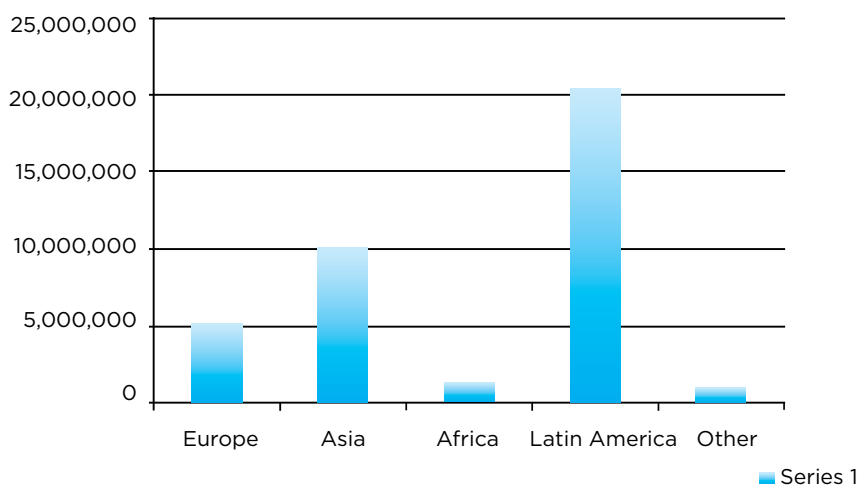
Indigenous migration to North America is prominent for several reasons. One reason is simply that it is historic, especially as it concerns indigenous populations south of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. These are populations that have survived over thousands of years, and only in the late twentieth century developed salient migration patterns into North America. It is likely that members of these populations trickled north in earlier eras, or maybe even in the earlier twentieth century, but the magnitude and distance of the present indigenous migration has not been reported previously in the modern era.

A second reason for the prominence of the present indigenous migration from Latin

America to North America is that it represents a sociohistorical timeline apart from the large flow of mestizo migrants. Present influxes to North America of Latin American mestizos are occurring along the timeline of modernity launched in the early modern phase in the sixteenth century, which witnessed the beginning of European penetration in the Americas. The present migration of indigenous migrants to North America, however, is but the most recent phase in anthropological timelines that have seen a variety of socio-spatial developments and experiences that pre-date the modern era (Carmack 1981). This can lead to different perceptions about the significance of the migration. The experience of Latin American mestizo migration is very much about crossing nation-state borders, but for the indigenous the migratory experience includes historical eras when nation-state borders did not exist or when they were not as pronounced.

Visits to the western highland department of Totonicapán in Guatemala, which is a sending area for many Maya who migrate to North America, find that elderly Maya in the region consider the current pattern of northward migration by youth in the department to be but the most recent experience of long distance travel for economic gain. The elderly talk about when the ancestors of the present migrants traveled by horse and mule teams to trade handicraft products in other parts of Central America. Similar

Figure 1. Origins of 38.1 Million Immigrants in U.S. Estimates, 2007



to the present migrants, the ancestral traders left the area for lengthy intervals.

We may not uncover the sociohistorical meaning of present-day migration to North America for indigenous migrants because little research has been done in this regard from the perspective of indigenous concepts. Recent published research indicates, however, that some Maya turn to indigenous religious rituals to draw spiritual protection for the trek north (Hagan 2008).

Massive Deportations

The Age of Migration has not been a period of open ports and borders through which migrants can easily pass. While a record number of migrants are on the march across world regions, many restrictions have been erected to control the movement of people, especially as the Age of Migration went into full swing in the 1990s. In the United States several legislative measures have been adopted to gain greater control of international migration. One measure in particular, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) signed into law in 1996, has had far-reaching effects in Latin American communities (Rodriguez and Hagan 2004).

IIRIRA has many measures to increase control of immigration, particularly as it concerns so-called deportable aliens. In addition to advancing the construction of physical barriers at the

southern border and increasing the number of Border Patrol agents, the law provides measures to increase the apprehension, detention, and deportation of migrants who are considered “deportable,” especially under the new regulations. These new measures include increasing the list of offenses for which non-citizen immigrants can be deported under the somewhat nebulous category of “aggravated felonies,” making these offenses retroactive without limit, promoting the involvement of local police in immigration enforcement, and limiting the power of immigration judges to make discretionary decisions in deportation cases.

Deportations from the United States rose dramatically after the enactment of IIRIRA. As figure 2 demonstrates, the number of deportations increased more than sixfold, from about 50,000 per year before the enactment of IIRIRA to more than 300,000 for fiscal year 2007. Mexican and Central American immigrants made up about 90 percent of 319,382 deportees in 2007, with Mexico alone making up 65 percent (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2008, table 37). As figure 3 demonstrates, the three Central American countries with the largest numbers of deportations underwent a doubling or almost tripling of the number of deportees (“returnees” as they are called in these countries) they received from 2000 to 2007.

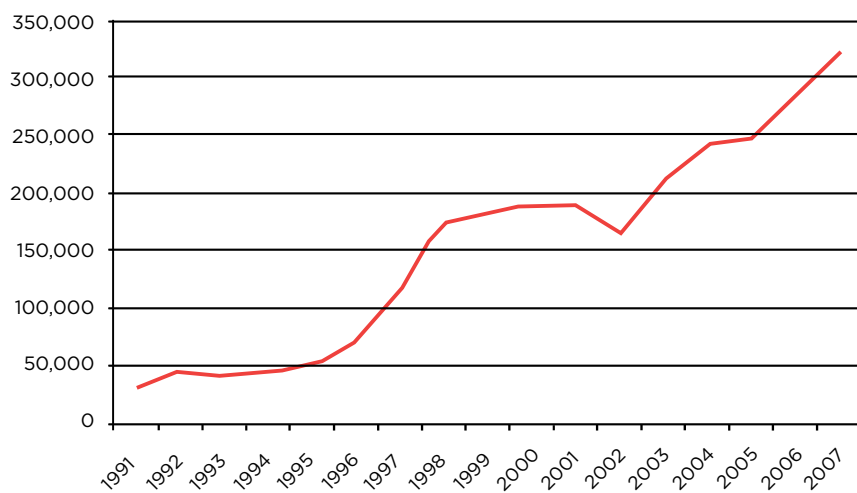
Survey research on deported migrants conducted in El Salvador indicates that depor-

tations produce several negative impacts for the migrants and the country (Hagan, Eschbach, and Rodriguez 2008). Deportations terminate the ability of deported migrants to send remittances to family households. In other words, thousands of poor families in El Salvador lose a critical economic survival strategy. From this perspective, and considering the widespread use of migrant remittances for economic survival in Mexico and Central American countries (especially El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), IIRIRA is a serious threat for the economic welfare of millions of Latin Americans. The threat is not just for the families of recent unauthorized migrants, but also for the Latin American families of migrants who had lived in the United States for more than ten years with legal status. About a third of the Salvadoran sample of three hundred deportees had lived in the United States for more than ten years, and two-thirds of these had been in the United States legally.

Another negative impact of massive U.S. deportations to Latin American communities is that the migrant removals add to unemployment. Many of the Latin American communities to which migrants are deported have limited economic opportunities, which is why the deportees emigrated in the first place. The arrival annually of thousands of deported migrants only adds to the number of unemployed workers looking for work. In some ways, the returnees face the greatest challenges to finding work because they are sometimes labeled as deviants and undesirable, making potential employers hesitant to hire them. Reacting to the hype of U.S. officials that deportations rid the United States of dangerous elements, Salvadoran newspapers, for example, have characterized returning deportees as criminals. One news media theme is to emphasize the gang connections of deportees (e.g., see *El Diario de Hoy* 2006).

Although the majority of deportees to Central American countries are repatriated for immigration violations, and not for having committed crimes, a number of deported migrants have gang affiliations, especially as some law enforcement forces used deportations to combat gangs in the United States (O’Conner 2000). In El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, U.S. deportations have fueled the rapid growth of gangs, adding another layer of social problems that community institutions in these generally poor societies have to address.

Figure 2. U.S. Annual Deportations 1991-2007



Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2008)

Accompanying this social impact are the large numbers of Mexican, Central American, and other Latin American migrant families who daily live lives of fear and anxiety about the future of their binational households. Survey research in 2008 found that 72 percent of foreign-born Latinos and 35 percent of U.S.-born Latinos worry “some” or “a lot” about deportations (Lopez and Minushkin 2008). These are not baseless concerns, since growing numbers of Latin Americans are deported annually.

Conclusion

The Age of Migration has produced new developments across Latin American sending communities of migrants to North America. Migrant remittances have supported large numbers of Latin American households, indigenous populations have undertaken the trek northward in historic proportions, and massive U.S. deportations have produced new challenges for communities in Latin American countries. While these developments represent social change, it is not clear that the overall end result amounts to sustainable social development for the Latin American region.

In some Mexican cases, migrant remittances have supported projects that benefit whole communities, especially as governments provide matching support. But this is not the prevailing outcome across the many Latin American communities from which Latin Americans migrate to North America. A migration-related development that does seem to be shared in common in many of these communities is the uncertainty produced by massive U.S. deportations as families are separated and deportees plan to remigrate to the United States. Adding to this uncertainty, the deaths of hundreds of unauthorized Latin American migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border annually (Eschbach et al. 1999) bring into focus the human cost paid by the migrants. The true net outcome of Latin American migration to North America in the Age of Migration remains to be calculated.

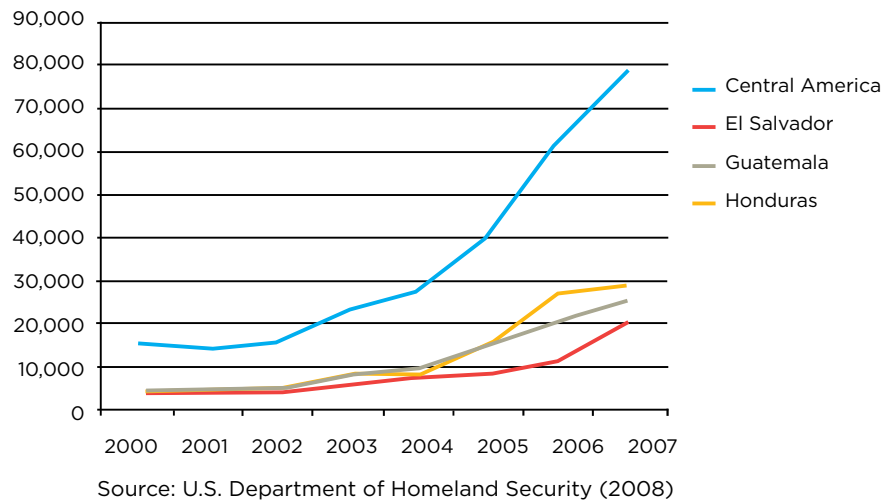
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Figure 3. U.S. Deportations to Central America 2000–2007



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