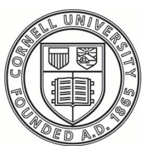
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They Never Come Back: A Story of Undocumented Workers from Mexico

Frans J. Schryer

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They Never Come Back: A Story of Undocumented Workers from Mexico

Abstract

[Excerpt] This book tells the stories of undocumented migrant workers, as well as the people they leave behind, using as an example people from the Alto Balsas region in the Mexican state of Guerrero. This part of Mexico is a good example to use because the proportion of migrants to the United States who are undocumented is very high, possibly over 90 percent. These migrant workers experience the inconsistencies of U.S. immigration policy; their stories illustrate how the economic integration of the North American continent, which at the same time restricts the movement of labor, is mirrored in people's lives. Migrants from this part of Mexico started working en masse as undocumented laborers only about fifteen years ago. Hence their experiences better illustrate these contradictions than the stories of those who emigrated before 1990. The workers described in this book are also representative of a recent trend in migration from the southern half of Mexico, where many people speak an indigenous language as their mother tongue.

Many books have been written about Mexican undocumented workers. Some writers emphasize the negative aspects of illegal migration by showing how such migrants are likely to be abused, and how they have few rights. Shannon Gleeson, who did research on immigrants' rights, focuses on the vulnerability of undocumented workers. She used the expression "those who work in the shadows." Others show the positive side by portraying migrants as resourceful agents, rather than passive victims. Judith Heilman points out that the women she interviewed enjoyed a new freedom from restrictive gender roles, while men learned new skills. Scholars and journalists have shown that these contrasting sides of migration are part of a single process of economic integration. The purpose of this book is not to replicate the studies that already exist. Rather, I will show how the contradictory nature of continental economic integration is reflected in the conflicted feelings and ambiguous situations of undocumented workers and those they leave behind.

Keywords

undocumented workers, Mexico, illegal migration, immigration policy

Comments

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They Never Come Back

A Story of Undocumented Workers from Mexico

Frans J. Schryer

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Contents

Preface vii

Introduction 1

1. What Happened to the Mexican Miracle? 11
2. "Struggling to Get Ahead" 26
3. "No One Lives There" 41
4. "I Feel Sorry for Them" 50
5. "It Used to Be Easy to Cross the Border" 59
6. "In the United States All You Do Is Work" 70
7. "For Me It Is about the Same" 82
8. "Mexicans Are Good Workers" 89
9. "We Can Never Hang Out with Our Friends" 103
10. "They Only Send You Back if You Are Bad" 111

11. "We Must Carry On Our Ancestors' Traditions" 119
12. "I Don't Have Much in Common with My Cousin" 127
13. The System Is Broken 135
Suggested Readings and References 153
Acknowledgments 159

Introduction

Millions of undocumented Mexicans living in the United States feel boxed in. They might want to attend weddings in their hometowns or spend time with dying grandparents; but they need to keep their jobs and face increasing risks if they leave and then reenter. Consequently, few go back and forth anymore. These workers face additional challenges since it is now almost impossible for them to obtain a work permit or even identity documents. Consequently, to obtain work they have to acquire false documents or use the names of friends or relatives with valid Social Security numbers or work permits. Many cannot get or renew a driver's license yet they need to drive as part of their job or to find work. So they drive without a license. They do not like living this lie, but what other choices do they have?

The influx of undocumented workers is a consequence of the economic integration of the United States, Canada, and Mexico. The same McDonald's restaurants and other fast-food chains are found in each county. The major car makers have assembly plants all over the continent. Several large Mexican firms now do as much business in some parts of the United States

as they do at home. Nowadays you are as likely to find an Avon lady or someone selling Amway products in a small town in southern Mexico as in Toronto or in downtown Los Angeles. You will see the same kind of iPods or cell phones wherever you go. The greater ease of circulation of goods and capital, especially after the implementation of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), alongside further restriction on the movement of workers across borders, is a contradiction. An increase of undocumented workers, notwithstanding an agreement to reduce the need for Mexicans to find work in the United States, is another contradiction. Before the turn of the century Mexican men made frequent trips back home to visit their families, and mothers raised their children in Mexico. Today women are joining their husbands in the United States and young couples are migrating together, resulting in an increase in children born in the United States. Such children automatically become American citizens yet any brothers or sisters born in Mexico are aliens. Such alien offspring are Mexican citizens who will not learn about Mexican history; likewise children born in the U.S., but whose parents were forced to return to Mexico when they were still young, will grow up not knowing English or American history. All these contradictions are the outcome of a dysfunctional and hypocritical immigration policy.

Imagine if you found out that you are a Mexican when you thought you were an American. Imagine if you had no other choice but to move to a neighboring country as the only way to make a decent living, and then you are cut off from your family even though the place where they live is not that far away. Imagine if you had to make the choice between going back home to attend your father's funeral or keeping the job you need to support your children. Imagine going to a bus terminal after being away from your hometown for twenty years and realizing only after two hours that the stranger pacing back and forth is actually your father who is supposed to meet you and bring you and your baby back to the place you were born.

This book tells the stories of undocumented migrant workers, as well as the people they leave behind, using as an example people from the Alto Balsas region in the Mexican state of Guerrero. This part of Mexico is a good example to use because the proportion of migrants to the United States who are undocumented is very high, possibly over 90 percent. These migrant workers experience the inconsistencies of U.S. immigration policy; their stories illustrate how the economic integration of the North American continent, which at the same time restricts the movement of labor, is mirrored in

people's lives. Migrants from this part of Mexico started working en masse as undocumented laborers only about fifteen years ago. Hence their experiences better illustrate these contradictions than the stories of those who emigrated before 1990. The workers described in this book are also representative of a recent trend in migration from the southern half of Mexico, where many people speak an indigenous language as their mother tongue.

Many books have been written about Mexican undocumented workers. Some writers emphasize the negative aspects of illegal migration by showing how such migrants are likely to be abused, and how they have few rights. Shannon Gleeson, who did research on immigrants' rights, focuses on the vulnerability of undocumented workers. She used the expression "those who work in the shadows." Others show the positive side by portraying migrants as resourceful agents, rather than passive victims. Judith Hellman points out that the women she interviewed enjoyed a new freedom from restrictive gender roles, while men learned new skills. Scholars and journalists have shown that these contrasting sides of migration are part of a single process of economic integration. The purpose of this book is not to replicate the studies that already exist. Rather, I will show how the contradictory nature of continental economic integration is reflected in the conflicted feelings and ambiguous situations of undocumented workers and those they leave behind.

I became aware of this feeling of ambivalence soon after I started doing research in the Mexican state of Guerrero whenever the topic of migration came up. All the children of Manuel, a widower I met in Mexico, now live in California. He told me in 2003: "They want me to come and live with them, but I don't want to spend the rest of my life in the U.S. My children send me money once in a while—a little, just enough for me to buy booze. That's what I do all day. I drink." He complained that his children never phone him. A year later I saw my landlady praying in front of a home altar. She pleaded with the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's patron saint, to bring back her children; she had not heard from her sons for over six months. In talking with people throughout the Alto Balsas region, I kept hearing the expression, in the indigenous Nahuatl language, "*Xkaman waahloweh*" (they never come back). From their tone of voice, I sensed a feeling of frustration, loss, and disappointment. However, I was not particularly interested in the topic of migration when I first came across this expression.

During my first visit to rural Mexico, as a volunteer for a student project in the 1960s to help the poor, I became aware of how important it was for

day laborers to have access to land so they could supplement their meager wages by growing corn. As a graduate student the research for my thesis in the Huasteca, a remote rural region located on the eastern side of Mexico, involved looking at how people make a living and their involvement in village politics. In the 1980s, now as an employed and practicing anthropologist, I examined an ongoing struggle over land and learned the Nahuatl language in order to interview peasant leaders. At that time no one I encountered in that part of Mexico even imagined the possibility of looking for work in the United States. When I subsequently chose another site for fieldwork, located further south and in Mexico's western half, I wanted to study the craft industry and the governance structure of indigenous communities.

The focus of my investigation in Guerrero changed in 2008 while conducting a survey in a town chosen for an in-depth study. Like many towns in the Alto Balsas region, its inhabitants move around a lot, making trips to other parts of Mexico as vendors or leaving home for extended periods to look for work, so it did not make much sense to go from house to house. Instead, I compiled a list of names and started looking for someone to go through that list. I approached Magdalena, a fifty-year-old woman living with her brother and sister-in-law. Magdalena had previously helped me with the transcription of taped interviews. Like many people her age, she once worked her family's corn plot and as a teenager she had made clay figurines. Today Magdalena is partly paralyzed and cannot walk as a result of an accident. She has never been in the United States, but she watches videos sent home by relatives and knows almost everyone from her village. Her answers to my questions opened up a window onto another world and inspired me to examine undocumented workers.

I gained further insights into international migration when I began making trips to several cities in the United States. A teenager, Delfino, told me:

> Living in the U.S. is very different. At home girls are not allowed to go to dances or parties without a chaperone. Here parents are not as strict, but the police—they're tough. If you make a mistake, you will end up in a big jail and you are likely to be deported. At home, we had this little jail, more like a room. If a man got drunk and hit someone, they would lock him up overnight. But the next day he would appear in front the mayor and say he was

> sorry. He would give the village authorities money to buy mescal. Then they would let the man go—not in the U.S!

As I got to know more people from the Alto Balsas region working in the United States I encountered mixed feelings that were different from those I had found in Mexico. Delfino likes living in a big urban center in the United States and is well on his way to learning English. He appreciates the organized, orderly way things are done, although he resents the fact that his brother is going to get credit for the high school diploma he will obtain using Delfino's ID. Delfino finds it difficult to juggle different identities using other migrants' documents. He does not always know which name to use in which situation.

I detected ambivalence when I spoke to Paula, a young woman who left Mexico to discover what it would be like to live on her own, and to get to know her older brothers. She had not seen them since she was three years old. What she likes most about her new life is that she is no longer labeled an *ichpochlamantsin*, a term for a woman who is not yet married or living with a man. Paula is proud that she has figured out how to navigate the highways that crisscross the city where she is now living. But not everything is going as well as she had hoped. Paula began working in a restaurant in California while living with one of her brothers. He would not let her go to parties or drive on the freeway, so she moved to another state. A brother in Texas did not impose such restrictions and she got along well with him. He was supposed to get her a work permit. Paula looked up to him because he had worked his way up to become manager of two pizzerias. Yet in the end, Paula's brother did not succeed in getting her proper documentation. He is now back in Mexico after separating from his American wife. Today, three years later, Paula is still in Texas, living with a cousin and working a double shift at a donut shop. She too has mixed feelings:

> I got my job as cashier because I went beyond high school and know how to use a cash register. I have picked up enough English to figure out what people are ordering; but sometimes drive-in customers come in because they are lost. They ask me for instructions on how to get to a certain place. I cannot help them. My boss complains that I am not learning English quickly enough, but I can hardly understand him. He is Chinese [he is actually

> Korean]. And I don't like that I drive without a license and that I am using my aunt's Social Security number.

As I continued to talk to people on both sides of the border, I came to appreciate the close intertwining of people's lives. It became clear that everyone's well-being is dependent on the failures and successes of others. When there is less work in California, relatives at home receive fewer remittances. When artisans in Mexico can no longer find customers, they too will migrate; their relatives in the United States will have to make room for more newcomers.

Almost all of the migrants from the Alto Balsas are undocumented workers, and their experiences have been a mixed blessing. Yet they continue to work in the supermarkets, construction sites, offices, and landscaping centers of American cities. Employers continue to hire them, knowing full well, or not wanting to know, that their workers are using false Social Security numbers or do not have green cards. I learned that the owner of a restaurant chain, who was levied a hefty fine for hiring undocumented Mexican workers, sold off half of his restaurants as franchises to entrepreneurs who had just emigrated from Cambodia. The new owners, in turn, hired these same workers. Employers need migrants willing to accept jobs many Americans are no longer willing to do on a permanent basis. Native-born Americans also work as busboys or dishwashers in restaurants, clean hotel rooms or put shingles on roofs, but they are more likely to quit because they prefer jobs with better pay and social benefits; many would rather go back to school to undergo training to enter more lucrative trades.

Today boys and girls from the Alto Balsas want to work in the United States as soon as they finish school because, until recently, the strategy of entering the United States as an undocumented worker paid off. There are no jobs in their home region and there is no future in growing corn in small plots on marginal land. Older family members who used to make a decent living selling crafts tell their children that tourists are no longer buying. At the same time, young people don't want to continue their studies in Mexico to become teachers, accountants, or lawyers, the way the children of better-off families used to do twenty years ago. They see how well migrants have done, how those who come back for a visit have the latest model cars. They know that in Mexico a nurse or a teacher, after years of study, will earn less than someone doing yard work or shelving groceries in

Los Angeles, Atlanta, or Houston. Young people continue trying to cross the border, no matter the cost or risks, and regardless of the likelihood that they will succeed. Those who have already been in the United States want to go again, and those currently there hope that with the right contacts and enough effort it might still be possible to obtain a green card.

In 1986 Congress passed a law making it possible for migrants who entered Mexico prior to 1982 to become legalized. At that time some people from several towns in the Alto Balsas got their papers, and at least forty of them are now American citizens. Those who have proper documents can drive back to Mexico to attend hometown festivals and visit family. But those cases are rare; I can think of only four other people who have since obtained work permits. If a young person is lucky enough to have an uncle who is "legal," and who also has the same surname, it might be possible to enter the United States without paying a lot of money. That uncle will have to drive to the border and pretend to be the father, but once in the United States that "son" or "daughter" will still have to buy false papers. Undocumented migrants, who live in a perpetual state of insecurity, represent a shadowy part of American society.

Organization of the Book and Research Overview

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the Alto Balsas as the background for my case study, placing this region into the broader context of the social and economic development of Mexico, with additional comments on the nature of Mexican race and ethnic relations. Chapter 2 focuses on the craft production that provided the inhabitants of the Alto Balsas with a viable alternative to migrant labor from around 1950 to the mid-eighties. This and the following ten chapters include direct quotes as a way of allowing both undocumented migrants and those who have never or seldom left Mexico to tell their stories. Some people will be heard only once, while others will come back again and again as I trace their personal lives and their careers on both sides of the border. For example, Delfino, the young man in the van mentioned in the preface, makes his next appearance in chapter 9. I follow the stories of other migrants who used to go back and forth between Mexico and the United States. Many of these chapters shift between Mexico and the United States to highlight the connections between migrants

and those they leave behind. The emphasis in chapters 3 and 4 is on the impact of migrant labor on life in the sending communities, while chapters 6 to 8 provide insights into the world of work, including relations between migrant workers and their employers. The stories in those chapters illustrate the challenges and opportunities, as well as the hardships, faced by undocumented workers. I try to strike a balance between successes and failures by including examples of errors and mistakes, as well as acts of kindness. Deportations are the subject of chapter 10, and chapter 11 shows how the customs and form of governance typical of indigenous communities shape the lives of migrants. Chapter 12 examines the differences between various categories of young people, depending on their legal, status, how long they have been in the United States, as well as whether or not they have gone back to Mexico. In chapter 13, which provides an overview of the quandaries faced by migrant families, I draw more on the research of other scholars and we hear less from the migrants themselves. In this final chapter, I return to the theme of the broken system of immigration as a way of linking my case study to ongoing discussions on public policy.

Because my book is not specifically geared to an academic readership, I do not use footnotes, with one exception in this chapter. None of the chapters, even those that draw on secondary sources, include bibliographical references, although I do mention the names of specific researchers. Readers who want to know who published the books consulted, with titles and dates of publication, can consult a final section called "Suggested Readings and References."

It is customary for an author to add some comments on how and when the research for an ethnography was carried out. In my case, I spent the bulk of my time in the Alto Balsas region of Guerrero, with each trip lasting anywhere from several weeks to several months, adding up to well over a year. That does not include additional short visits to Chilpancingo, the state capital, the city of Iguala, or other parts of Mexico. (I do not consider the one-week vacations I sometimes take in Mexico with my wife as part of my research, although on two occasions I did take notes on short conversations with craft vendors on the island of Cozumel and the coast of Nayarit.) All this took place during a period of over a decade, from 2001 until 2013. I carried out a survey in one of the bigger towns of the Alto Balsas region to obtain basic demographic data plus information on land use and migration. Starting in 2011, two years after I moved to Toronto, I

started conducting interviews once a week from my home office with several people in that same town in the Alto Balsas. Those phone interviews, which include questions about recent deaths and marriages, and who has since come back to Mexico, were still being done at the time I was putting the finishing touches on the final version of this book.

I did not spend as much time in the United States as I did in Mexico, nor had I done previous fieldwork there. Eight visits to three urban centers in the United States, lasting from one to three weeks each, added up to about three months over the course of the last five years. During all but two of my trips, I stayed in the homes of undocumented workers. I had already met some people in Mexico, while others were completely new contacts. I also visited several workplaces in the United States. During my visits to the United States, I spoke to people from four different towns in Guerrero, although I concentrated on migrants from the town where I did my survey. In each city, one person helped me figure out who now works there or who lived there but has since gone back to Mexico or moved to another American city. I wanted to make sure that the information I had already obtained in my Mexico survey was accurate, and to get an idea of the number of U.S.-born children. By the time I finished this book I had information on 3,791 people.

I did not conduct fieldwork in the regions on opposite sides of the border between the United States and Mexico, nor did I ever accompany anyone from Guerrero across the border; but enough men and women have told me about their experiences of crossing the border to allow me to at least touch on this aspect of their migration experience in chapter 5. To obtain a more complete picture of indigenous migrants from other Mexican regions in the United States, I drew on the work of other scholars. My book likewise brings in the findings and insights of researchers who specialize in international immigration and immigration policy. My contribution is to put a human face on the facts and figures, as well as on the arguments presented in other studies.

Finally, I want to alert readers that my book does not dwell on the obvious unfairness of undocumented workers not being paid overtime and not getting sick leave or vacation pay. The aim of this book is not to make the argument that people are unable to earn enough money or that they are being exploited, but rather to show that they are living in a state of ongoing uncertainty. The real tragedy is that so many people will never be able to

achieve their full potential. Undocumented Mexicans are perpetually kept waiting, hoping against hope that they might eventually become "legal." They do not know what the future holds in store for them. They can never feel at home. That feeling of insecurity might be the reason so many people want to use their savings to build a house in Mexico, even if they know deep down in their hearts they might never live in that house. Similarly, it is ironic that I cannot provide the names of real places and real people.[1] I do this to protect my informants, even though they would have preferred for readers to know who they are; the way I write about migrants is a reflection of the contradictions inherent in an economic system that makes illegal the work that is needed to make the system work.

1. The stories in this book are based on what real people have told me, but their names have been changed to mask identities. Every pseudonym corresponds to a different person. In the cases of place names, I occasionally used the real names of cities in the United States and towns in Mexico, but I have also switched around the name of places or used deliberately vague phrases such as "hometown." All references to states (California, Guerrero, Texas) are real.

1

What Happened to the Mexican Miracle?

Many tourists visiting Mexico are shocked when they see shantytowns, grown men shining shoes, and small boys darting in and out of traffic to clean windshields at traffic lights. But poverty or prosperity is relative. Around 1990, when I showed a student from mainland China a photograph of a village in one of the regions where I was conducting fieldwork, he said, "Mexico must be a rich country; those people seem well-off compared to China's countryside." Indeed, overall standards of living have risen over the past fifty years throughout Mexico. In the region where I did my research, older people tell me they used to be much poorer. When I asked them how their lives today differ from the past, they kept on telling me that they used to suffer a lot:

> When we were growing up we did not wear shoes, but sandals with soles made from used car tires. There was no electricity and we used candles. There were no roads. Women got up at four in the morning to fetch water at springs that often ran dry. We lived in thatched or palm-roofed huts

> without chimneys, so the smoke from cooking hearths would sting our eyes. Women used to grind their cornmeal by hand. Our hair was full of lice, and we were bitten by bedbugs.

People told me that it was impossible to meet their needs solely by growing corn. Most men worked as day laborers in neighboring regions to earn money to buy salt, a new hat, or cotton cloth for making clothes. The only luxuries were Mexican hot chocolate or *pan dulce* (sweetbread) for special occasions. No one drank bottled beer or sodas. Most towns did not have schools. Such living conditions were identical to what I observed in the 1960s as a student volunteer in another part of Mexico. Both regions were left behind in the economic growth following World War II. But since then both regions have seen a rise in living standards and better public services.

Nowadays there are elementary schools in every village and most houses are on the electrical grid. Many towns have a health clinic. The problem is that there are few opportunities to get ahead, even by moving to another part of Mexico. This is the main reason young people opt to go to the United States. None speak or understand English, but they have all gone to school where they learned Spanish. These same young migrants are familiar with the terrain of their place of origin. Each mountainside or ravine where they fetched water for their family donkey, or helped to transplant chili plants while growing up, has its own name: Lamasapotitlan, Wei Tlahli, Itsahchiampoyoh, Tekorral, Tepeyekapitstle.

The History of the Alto Balsas

The Alto, or Upper, Balsas, named after a section of the Balsas River, consists of eighteen towns located on both sides of that river. This area was once part of the pre-Columbian region of Mesoamerica, prior to the Spanish conquest, and corresponds to the central and southern portions of what is today Mexico plus most of Central America. The best known groups in this region were the Mayans and the Aztecs, whose rulers used sophisticated calendars and built pyramids. The language of the Aztecs, or Meshica, from which the word Mexico is derived, is still spoken today in the Alto Balsas. It is called Nahuatl, and people who speak it are referred

to as Nahuas. Yet they do not identify themselves as Nahuas, and most of them do not call their language by that name. They will tell you they speak Mexicano, which actually means they do not speak Spanish as their home language! Children do not learn about their own region's history when they go to school to learn how to speak and read Spanish.

Historians have discovered that, prior to the Spanish conquest, people in the Alto Balsas paid tribute to rulers who lived in Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital that was then larger than any European city, including Madrid. I will not dwell on the tragic story of how Spanish conquerors destroyed most of Tenochtitlan, now known as Mexico City. These new rulers imposed the Roman Catholic branch of Christianity, which did not fully take root. Even today indigenous Mexicans practice a form of folk Catholicism with many pre-Columbian elements. During the three hundred years when Mexico was under Spanish colonial rule, intermarriage resulted in the formation of a new social group called mestizos. Today Spanish-speaking Mexicans consider themselves to be mestizos, as opposed to *indígenas*, which refers to those who speak an indigenous language. Most Americans would not be aware of such distinctions among the Mexican migrants who live in their midst.

By the eighteenth century Mexico, then called New Spain, was the envy of the world; its mines produced gold and silver and large landed estates called haciendas rivaled the properties owned by the European aristocracy. New Spain was a key component of a commercial empire. Spanish galleons moved goods from the Orient to Europe via Mexico; cargo brought on board in the Philippines was unloaded in Acapulco on Mexico's Pacific coast to the south of Alto Balsas. There spices and silk were put on the backs of mules to be driven to the port of Veracruz located on Mexico's Atlantic coast, and then again loaded up for another sea journey. The Nahua muleteers who transported these goods during the first stage of the overland journey were a vital link in a global economy. Given the dry nature of their terrain, which only allows one maize crop per year, the inhabitants of the Alto Balsas were itinerant traders during the dry season. Apart from transporting goods for wealthy Spanish merchants, they struck out on their own; they transported dried food on the backs of donkeys, to be exchanged for salt on the coast. These traders sold the salt in the highland regions of northern Guerrero. Nahuas also knew how to get people and goods across the turbulent Balsas River on rafts. This tradition of traveling and trading

helped them to later adapt to new forms of making a livelihood; today people frequently travel back and forth between their home region and other parts of Mexico. By 1960 some Nahuas were going back and forth to the United States.

For most Mexicans today, working in the United States is an attractive alternative to staying in Mexico, but this was not always the case. During the colonial era, the French, English, and Dutch colonists in what are now the United States and Canada were poor cousins in comparison to the Spanish colonists and their descendants in New Spain. This was still true when the English colonies that became the United States of America declared independence in 1776. By 1870 a then much larger American republic was well on its way to becoming a powerful nation. But people then living in the Alto Balsas would not even have heard of the United States of America. Many of them were not even aware that they were citizens of a county called Mexico.

The Painful Emergence of a Mexican Nation

Mexico became an independent country early in the nineteenth century, but its new rulers were the same people of Spanish descent who were its landowners, merchants, and professionals then and throughout the colonial era. Mexico's colonial rulers had used Nahuatl in addition to Spanish for court cases, land records, and commercial transactions in many regions. Ironically, Mexican independence in 1821 meant the adoption of Spanish as the only official language; Nahuatl became an oral language only. Between Mexico's independence and today, the proportion of Mexicans speaking Nahuatl and other local languages gradually declined, yet today 15 percent of Mexico's population still speak an indigenous language, of which there are more than fifty. Most people born in the Alto Balsas still speak Nahuatl at home, even in downtown Los Angeles, Houston, and in the suburbs of Atlanta.

The first half of the nineteenth century was a period of rapid decline, when Mexico was engulfed with political infighting between Liberals and Conservatives, as in the rest of Latin America. Mexico also lost its independence for a while, in 1863, when foreign forces occupied Mexico City. The French government imposed an Austrian emperor, but his short-lived

rule ended with his execution by a firing squad after Liberal forces defeated the French army. The victorious Liberals abolished old forms of land ownership, including the Catholic Church's extensive landholdings. Anyone who has attended school in Mexico knows the national history sketched out so far; all Mexicans, including undocumented workers from the Alto Balsas region now living in the United States, would recognize the name Benito Juarez, a prominent nineteenth-century Liberal lawyer and national president. They know he was a Zapotec Indian.

Land reforms implemented during the last quarter of the nineteenth century had a disastrous impact on many towns in Mexico whose communally owned land had remained intact throughout the colonial era. Such towns, treated as Indian republics, once had their own elected officials as part of a form of limited self-rule during the colonial era. The Mexican state decided to privatize all remaining communal village lands, resulting in an even greater concentration of land ownership in the hands of large landowners. Nevertheless, some indigenous towns found ways to prevent their land from passing into the hands of outsiders. This was the case for towns in the Alto Balsas. In the case of Ahuehuepan, a group of better-off villagers even managed to buy additional land. The Liberals also wanted to make schooling available to everyone as a way of promoting democracy, yet a large proportion of Mexico's population did not speak Spanish. In the Alto Balsas only a handful of people could read and write Spanish, even as late as 1970.

The older Nahua migrants today working in the United States have witnessed huge changes during their lifetime, including the introduction of schools. However, compulsory education and other recent developments are the culmination of a long process of urbanization and industrialization set in motion over 150 years ago as a result of the policies implemented during the reign of Porfirio Díaz. Díaz was first elected president of Mexico in 1877 and ruled with an iron fist for several decades. He and his entourage of advisers promoted foreign investment, resulting in the construction of a large network of railroads and large-scale, semi-industrialized, agricultural enterprises. The new railways transported sugar cane, minerals, and other products northward to the United States. But uneven economic development and a lack of democracy resulted in the outbreak of ten years of civil war known as the Mexican Revolution. The Revolution, which started in 1910, led to widespread destruction, and

shattered the economy. In the Alto Balsas older people, whose parents witnessed these events, tell horror stories; girls hid in caves so that they would not be raped, and soldiers took whatever food was available, and ordered older women to prepare large quantities of tortillas. A few men in each town joined one or another of the revolutionary bands, but not because they had lost land. The Nahua towns still had their original communal lands, and prosperous families owned cattle, including oxen used as plough animals. Those animals disappeared and commerce was disrupted. It took several decades to recover from this social upheaval. The Mexican Revolution is firmly entrenched in the memory of Mexicans who learn about its heroes and villains when they attend school. The name of one of those heroes, Emiliano Zapata, is a powerful political symbol, as illustrated by the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas in southern Mexico.

Between the 1920s and the year 2000 Mexico was a de-facto one-party state, with several changes in the name of what became the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party). During this period, the country underwent many social, political, and economic changes. During the twenties and thirties, the Mexican state gradually reestablished centralized control after adopting a new constitution hammered out among competing factions. Officially, the new state was supposed to introduce social reforms and protect the rights of workers, but there was a huge gap between what was written in the constitution and what actually happened on the ground. One-party rule and limited reforms went hand in hand with political stability, and the national economy slowly recovered. However, not everyone benefited. For example, farmers in the Alto Balsas were still able to supplement their income through the salt trade but this became more difficult with the construction of a highway from Mexico City to Acapulco. Truckers now traveled to the coast to bring back salt, and the Mexican government placed restrictions on muleteers after 1931, the same year that saw the completion of an unpaved highway that passed through the town of Xalitla at the western edge of the Alto Balsas. People now went by foot or donkey to Xalitla to board vehicles to reach a large market in the city of Iguala. Others used this route to find work in the dry season in the more fertile fields of the valley of Iguala. Men worked for part of the year in small sugar cane mills or for a lumber mill, and young women from several towns used this same road to travel by bus to Mexico City to work as maids. Others became seasonal agricultural laborers in the nearby state of Morelos. At the

national level, land ownership continued to be highly unequal, despite the promises of the Revolution to better the lot of the landless peasants.

The widespread redistribution of land did not happen until after the election of Lázaro Cárdenas in 1934, when the government in power swung further to the left, in both words and deeds. The acceleration of land reform meant that a substantial number of landless peasants gained access to arable land and even people in regions like the Alto Balsas got additional land. Cardenas also expropriated foreign oil companies to create PEMEX, the national oil consortium. The name Cárdenas and the political movement and ideology associated with his name (Cardenismo) became an influential stream in Mexican politics. Over the next few decades this political current evolved into a movement of opposition to the one-party rule of the PRI, the same party to which many members of that oppositional movement once belonged. Indeed, the founder of the main leftist party today, the PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution), is Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, son of the man who nationalized the Mexican oil industry. This new political party has won the governorship of the state of Guerrero on several occasions, and ongoing electoral competition between the PRD and the old PRI is one of the defining features of local politics in the Alto Balsas region today.

Although the name Cárdenas is associated with socialism in Mexico, his policies as president actually promoted the further development of industrial capitalism, and facilitated the creation of privately owned commercial farms. The Mexican state also initiated a process of economic development based on high tariffs on imported goods to stimulate the creation of Mexican-owned factories. Other Latin American countries implemented a similar policy, known as import substitution. In Mexico, the subsequent growth of manufacturing and construction, starting in 1940, transformed the national economy. This was the start of what political scientists and economists called the Mexican miracle. Between 1945 and 1980 Mexico became an increasingly more industrialized and urbanized nation. Traditional subsistence agriculture became less important and poor rural inhabitants converged on their capital, Mexico City, which became what was at that time the largest city in the world.

The Mexican miracle had its winners and losers. Guerrero continued to be one of the poorest states, but within that state the Alto Balsas region experienced a short-lived boom, partly as a result of the paving of

the highway from Mexico City to Acapulco, at a time when the Mexican government was promoting tourism. American tourists were now able to drive to places such as Taxco and Acapulco. It did not take long for people in the Alto Balsas to realize that one could earn more money selling crafts to tourists than by working for wages. Craft production throughout Mexico expanded rapidly because of the emergence of a more prosperous middle class, including professionals and owners of small businesses who could afford to travel to beach resorts on the Pacific coast. They had the disposable income to stay longer and to buy the handicrafts at the same time that international tourism was expanding. What makes the Alto Balsas unique is that most of the Nahuas sold and many still sell these crafts directly to tourists, without middlemen. Consequently, most people no longer had to work as hired hands in neighboring regions. But the craft boom did not last long, as we shall see in chapter 2.

The economic growth associated with the Mexican miracle slowed down and the government incurred huge debts. To stave off incipient unrest in the countryside, the Mexican state, under President Luis Echeverria in the 1970s, resurrected land reform, and started providing credit to corn farmers and small coffee producers to stimulate rural development. It could afford to do so because of the discovery of offshore oil, which enabled the government to finance its social programs. The Alto Balsas continued to see the expansion of schools, the introduction of electricity, and the building of new roads. Such improvements in infrastructure, combined with limited political reform, ensured continued political stability. However, Mexico's continued dependence on oil revenues, the failure to invest in better refining facilities, and continued subsidies for state enterprises resulted in a further deterioration of its economy. The end result was rampant inflation, culminating in the revaluation of the peso. Even the most successful Nahua craft vendors started to feel the pinch.

Starting in the 1970s, Mexico saw the gradual transformation of a nationalistic, state-led model of development into one emphasizing commercial ties with the United States, the first step toward continental integration. The first phase was the promotion of textile assembly plants in a free-trade zone near the border (called *maquiladores*), and the end of protective barriers for manufacturers. These measures averted an economic crisis but did not help such regions as Guerrero. The next logical step, following the new economic theory of neoliberalism, was the signing of the North American Free

Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. U.S. investment now flowed freely, as it had done under Porfirio Diaz. However, new jobs created by American investors were offset by the loss of jobs in the Mexican-owned companies that had once been protected by tariffs. Emigration increased, even though it became more and more difficult to cross the border, since the free trade agreement did not include the notion of a free labor market. The people who designed NAFTA thought that it would create enough jobs that Mexicans would want to stay home. Instead the level of migration to the United States, which had always acted as a safety valve when the Mexican economy could not provide enough jobs, increased very rapidly. In the Alto Balsas, the further erosion of the craft trade meant that its population became more dependent on other sources of income at a time when the jobs that were supposed to come with continental economic integration did not materialize.

The Border and International Migration

People from Mexico have been going to the United States for a long time, taking into account that the entire Southwest, including California, was part of Mexico until 1848. It is difficult to calculate the extent of emigration prior to the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution, because people, as well as goods, were constantly streaming back and forth along an open border. At the turn of the century, some people from the more populated central part of Mexico also started heading for the border regions, usually by rail. However, few Mexicans stayed on the American side of the border prior to 1910, until political refugees started moving to the United States during the Mexican Revolution. By 1920, Mexico's economy was still weak and people again started going back and forth across the border. However, it does not make much sense to talk about international migration from Mexico to the United States prior to that time because there was in effect no border control. People living on both sides of the Rio Grande moved back and forth, as if there was no border; at the same time most people in other parts of Mexico were not interested in leaving their homes. This situation changed when labor recruiters started arriving from the American Southwest. These recruiters, called *enganchadores*, moved south along the rail lines that reached the more populated western and central Mexican states. The word *enganche* means "hook"; the labor recruiters, who acted as loan sharks, offered to pay

poor Mexican farmers advances to cover the cost of travel to the United States where they were guaranteed seasonal work in the burgeoning American economy. These recruiters did not go further south to areas such as the Alto Balsas, where no one even thought about the possibility of "going north." However, central and northern Mexico saw a massive exodus of people who soon constituted a significant proportion of the unskilled labor force in several key sectors of the American economy, especially in agriculture, construction, meatpacking plants, and railroad track maintenance.

The era of the *enganche* peaked in 1924, the same year that saw the creation of the U.S. Border Patrol. This era ended in 1929, just prior to the Great Depression. The Depression resulted in a high level of deportation of most Mexicans who had not already gone home voluntarily, including some people of Mexican descent who were American citizens. American business had first taken the initiative to import Mexican labor, but when that labor was no longer needed, the American government closed its border with Mexico until they again needed Mexican workers, such as in the 1940s and 1950s when a migrant program begun under President Franklin D. Roosevelt again provided work for Mexican farmworkers. This program, which coincided with the rapid urbanization of Mexico in the fifties, removed the pressures associated with the need for the Mexican economy to absorb an ever increasing number of people fleeing the countryside in search of work. A handful of men in the Alto Balsas took advantage of this program, but most people were still able to make a good living during the craft boom. The American bracero program (*brazo* means arm) lasted until 1965, but Mexicans nevertheless continued to cross the border at a time of high demand for Mexican labor in the United States. For the next twenty years a small number of agricultural workers still worked in the United States under a new kind of contract arrangement, but the bulk of migrants were undocumented. A bigger budget for border control resulted in numerous apprehensions of illegal migrants who were shipped back to Mexico after signing a voluntary departure order. Yet most migrants made numerous attempts to reenter and border officials often turned a blind eye. Some Mexicans decided to stay in the United States, but most undocumented workers simply went back and forth in what some writers label a revolving door system. The outcome was a de facto guest workers program that lasted well into the 1980s.

During this era of increasing migration, some people from the Alto Balsas started joining the stream of undocumented workers from other parts

of the country. Initially, most of them did not distinguish between the U.S. and Mexican states close to the border; they were just going somewhere far away to earn some extra money, just like the braceros who had gone away earlier to work with what was referred to in the Alto Balsas as "the signature of the governor." They had every intention of coming back soon. For the first time men, as well as a few women, went to Los Angeles to work in clothing factories instead of working on American farms. Working in the United States now became an additional option for people who wanted to earn money to build better houses. Remittances also financed community projects. For example, one group of migrants working in California used part of their earnings to cover the cost of a new set of wooden benches for their hometown church. During the seventies and eighties, most migrants came from just a few towns (Xalitla, Maxela, and Ahuelican), but people from other towns also started crossing the border after the collapse of the Mexican peso in 1982. In the Alto Balsas, increasing competition among craft vendors and the increasing costs of art supplies made this form of generating income more difficult. Some people who had previously been artisans and vendors now also opted to work in the United States. The downturn in the Mexican economy likewise had a devastating impact on those people who had earlier moved to the national capital to work.

Ruben from Ahuelican is an example of someone from the Alto Balsas then living in Mexico City. Orphaned at age three, he grew up in the household of an uncle who saw the importance of children going to school to learn how to read and write. Ruben was a promising student with a dedicated teacher who helped him continue his studies in the city of Iguala, after attending the village school for three years. In Iguala he worked as a domestic servant in return for room and board. At age fifteen his uncle came to bring him back to Ahuelican to help him take care of his animals. Consequently Ruben did not go to high school, in Mexico City, until he was seventeen years old. There Ruben again worked as a domestic while studying to obtain a high school diploma. That is where he met Juana, a young woman from his hometown, whom we will meet later. She originally came to Mexico City to work as a maid.

> When I met my wife, I was still living in the house where I worked as a male servant, and we stayed there for five years. All that time I was still finishing my high school courses, but I wanted to continue my studies to become an

accountant. I took an entrance exam together with thousands of other students, at the UNAM, Mexico's national university, and was accepted. I studied there for two years but did not finish. I had only one year left.

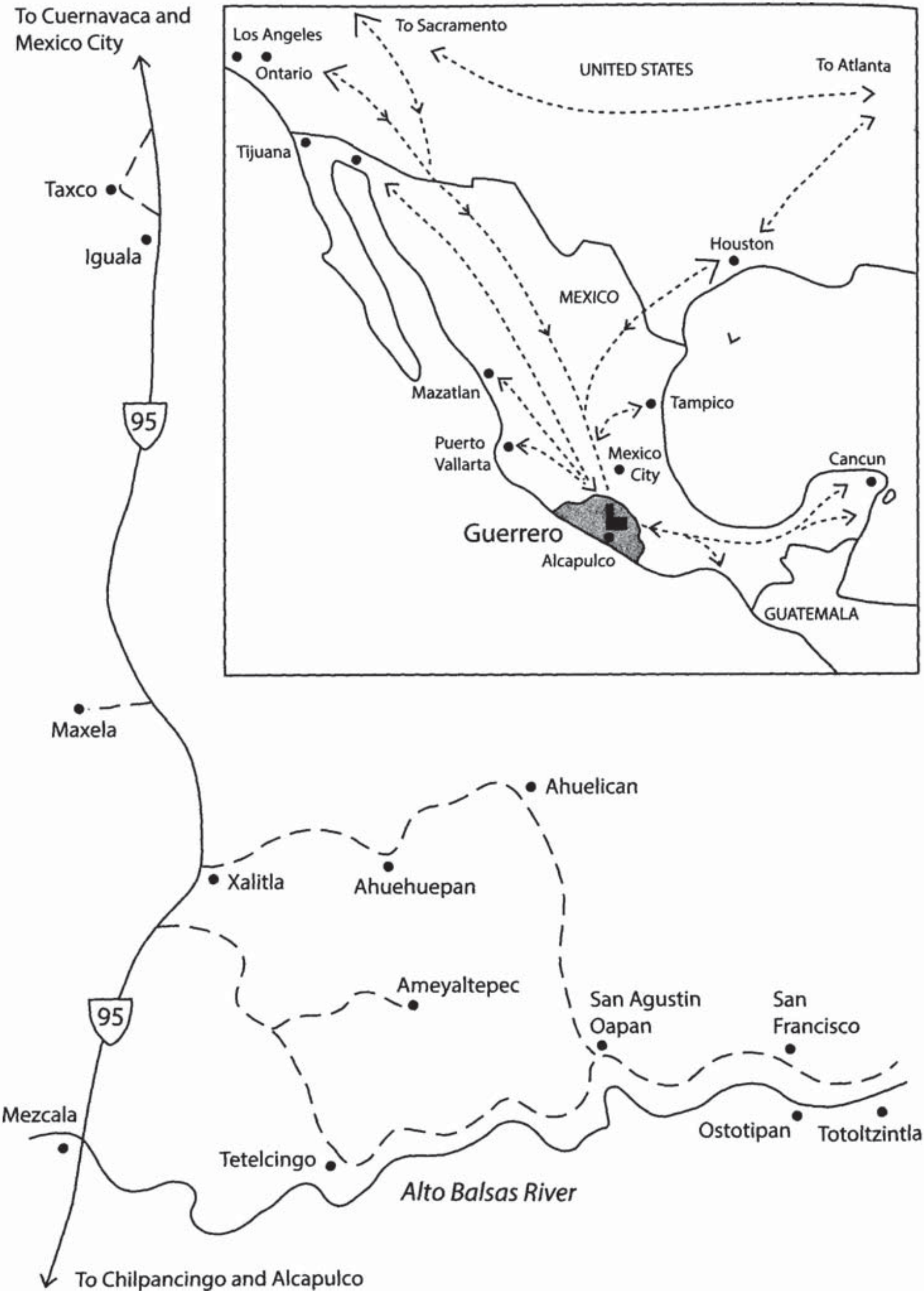
Ruben dropped out of the university in 1985, when his first son was born. In the meantime he and Juana had already moved in with Ruben's older sister in another part of the city. Ruben worked for two years as a filing clerk in a textile factory that made sweaters, while attending night school in a private school to obtain a diploma in accounting. When he lost that job he started doing manual labor for a company that built sidewalks and cut sewer pipes. Ruben and Juana made occasional visits to attend festivals in his hometown, but they spent most of their time in Mexico City. In the meantime, a number of men from Ahuelican started working as undocumented workers in large supermarkets in the United States. Ruben's brother-in-law, at that time living in Texas, offered to help Ruben to pay for the cost of crossing the border as an undocumented worker. Ruben had just obtained his accounting diploma and thought he might be able to use it to get a white-collar job working in a state archive somewhere in Mexico. When he found out he would first have do a year of social service work without pay, he opted to emigrate; he had to earn money to support his family, so he had no other choice but to move to the United States. Initially, Juana stayed in Mexico City but she joined Ruben in 1992. Around this time the wives and other family members of migrant workers from Ahuelican stayed behind to continue to grow corn for their own consumption, with the help of day laborers who were paid with money sent back by those working in the United States.

Starting in the eighties people all over Mexico became undocumented workers and their arrival in the United States seemed to be spiraling out of control. In 1986, the U.S. Congress, during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act that provided an amnesty for undocumented workers, but at the same time imposed stricter border controls. Suddenly 2.3 million undocumented migrants were eligible to be legalized. Workers who had been in the United States for at least five years were eligible to apply for work permits and could eventually become American citizens. Some men from a few towns in the Alto Balsas thus obtained the documents that enabled them to freely travel back and forth between the United States and Mexico. In the United States the rate

of illegal migrants, as measured by the number of people apprehended at the border, dropped dramatically, but only for several years; by 1990 the rate of border crossings exceeded that of the preamnesty era. Austerity measures under President Salinas de Gortari provided even greater incentives for Mexicans to migrate. The existence of a network of social ties between Mexicans already in the United States and those at home made illegal border crossings easier, because friends and relatives in the United States could help new migrants figure out how to cross the border and get jobs. This was the case in the Alto Balsas, where networks established since the early days of limited migration now spread throughout the entire region.

In 1990, the Alto Balsas faced a challenge greater than the one posed by inflation and the need to cross the border to find work. The Mexican government, which continued its program of rapid modernization, albeit at a slower pace, decided to build a new hydroelectric dam that would have flooded a large portion of the Alto Balsas. They had done all of their planning without consulting any of the affected towns. It is not this book's purpose to cover the ensuing social movement culminating in the cancellation of the dam project in September 1992. Suffice it to say that this movement, which was entirely peaceful, was partly financed by migrants then living in California. It is worth noting that the leadership for resistance against the dam project came from a handful of professionals, including several Nahua anthropologists who were born and raised in the region. Indeed, they coined the group name "Nahuas of the Alto Balsas" now used by all anthropologists as well as by journalists. I use the name in this book, even though very few people in the region are familiar with this term.

By 1994 people from about half of the Alto Balsas towns were working and living in the United States. However, the pace of out-migration, this time from the whole region, picked up significantly only after the signing of an international agreement that was supposed to slow down the pace of migration. One year after NAFTA took effect Mexico also saw a massive devaluation of the peso. From that point on, families became increasingly dependent on remittances from migrants in the United States and people from every town in the region became undocumented workers. Fewer men and women ventured off to other parts of Mexico, although almost a third of the population continued to follow familiar routes to sell crafts. The population of the region was now scattered across both Mexico and the southern half of the United States.



Origin and destination of migrants from the Alto Balsas region (Guerrero)

The Alto Balsas after NAFTA

Today it is becoming even more difficult to get jobs in both Mexico and the United States, yet consumerism is creating a demand to buy more and more things that used to be luxuries but are now considered to be necessities. Throughout North America more cell phones, blenders, and iPods are now available for lower prices, but the number of people who can no longer afford to buy what they need or want is also increasing, especially in Mexico. In 2005, a Nahua school teacher who lives in the same town as my local assistant Magdalena said to me:

> I told my oldest daughter that I wanted her to start helping us a bit because my salary as a teacher no longer allows me to support the whole family. Right now I am only making two thousand pesos (two hundred dollars) every two weeks. I would earn more but they are making deductions because of a previous loan. I could live on my regular salary if just my wife and I lived here. But Paula wants to buy expensive clothes in Iguala. She likes the latest fashions as shown on TV. She buys shoes that cost two hundred or three hundred pesos. She likes her cell phone and wants to buy a new one that she can use for making videos.

The teacher's daughter was unable to get a job in Mexico, so she went to the United States to look for work. There are many more jobs in the United States than in Mexico, even during periods of recession. Mexicans who do not have jobs can no longer make a living by growing corn if they live in the countryside, or by selling chewing gum or polishing shoes if they live in cities or bigger towns. Furthermore, the demand for crafts from vendors from the Alto Balsas has shrunk, and no longer provides a means of livelihood for all but the most experienced craft vendors with established clients.

In Mexico, dissatisfaction with the political status quo, combined with a further decline in the purchasing power of Mexican consumers, culminated in the defeat of the Institutional Revolutionary Party in 2000, marking the end of the policies associated with the regime that was initially responsible for the Mexican miracle. Yet despite some further growth in the Mexican economy, the number of people crossing the Mexican border kept increasing. This exodus did not abate until after the events of 9/11; yet Mexicans, including the vast majority of young people in the Alto Balsas, continue to look for work in the United States despite ever more sophisticated border control measures. The gap in wages and living standards between the two neighboring countries has not narrowed enough.