

## MIGRATION AS A RITE OF PASSAGE

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This paper is concerned with a time in individual development when movement away from the society within which one was socialized serves to mark a change in social status. As you will remember van Gennep (*Rites of Passage*, 1960 reprint) was attentive to the relationship between the initiates change in status and the change in location in space of the individual. Van Gennep paid particular attention to the fact that as the individual changes status not only is he separated in space from the total community, but during this time also experiences new life situations. Only after these experiences does he return to the community to be welcomed back from outside. I shall be looking at the migration experience as such an activity which provides opportunity for change in status through separation from the home community, new socialization and subsequent return.

Relatively little of the literature dealing with migration concerns the migrant, but rather focusses on the act of migration, on the purposes or reasons for the migration: either from the point of view of the sending society (a group phenomenon) or of the receiving society (even more impersonally conceived). And we have heard, and nauseum, of push-pull factors, of step migration, and of migrants as a source of cheap labor. When we pay attention to the statistics we find (as if we didn't already "know") that 25% of all entries to the United States from Mexico have occurred between 1960 and the present, and that the destination of many migrants in recent years has moved away from the border states where there has been a traditionally large Mexican-American population, to many other parts of the country. Furthermore, in recent years, there has been a shift away from the "traditional" agricultural labor that marked the *bracero* period, back to a pattern of job-seeking more similar to that of the earlier period of "voluntary" migration when many migrants found work on the railroads and in the northern steel mills and auto plants.

It is possible, of course, to find shelves and shelves of memoirs detailing all sorts of migrant experiences, commenting on the new

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societies that have been built by migrants (like the United States, for example), and of the ways in which such migrants have influenced and been influenced by the societies into which they have moved (like the Spanish in Mexico). There remains some disagreement, however, about whether (and, if so, what sort of) economic and social benefits accrue to the villages, towns and cities to which some of the migrants return (like some towns and villages of Guanajuato, Jalisco and Michoacan). The impact of investment capital (minifunds, usually) or of innovative ideas concerning work or things to be produced has not yet been measured. Various studies on migration have noted a number of determining factors important in the decision to migrate including such matters as family cohesion, the kind of community within which the individual lived, the local inheritance laws and the partibility of the land. It would be helpful to know what sorts of alternative choices are available to the migrant not only at the time of exodus, but also what determines who returns home and why. Studies in urban settings in New Guinea (Port Moresby and Lae) suggest, on the one hand, that people migrate to gain information, income or skills which would help them when they return to their villages; and on the other hand, that relatively few actually do return to their villages; most settle and serve as contact points and instructors in city ways for other incoming migrants (Zimmerman, 1973, unpublished Ph. D. dissertation).

Clearly, most of these questions and observations are embedded in a set of assumptions tying migration to a desire for economic gain. At some point in the developmental cycle, such assumptions are very justified. But other explanations need not, therefore, be put by as irrelevant. So, keeping these matters in mind I shall first touch on migration as a phenomena, and then turn to those who return from experiences abroad in a context of migration as a rite of passage. It is the rare person today who has not, at some point in their lives, migrated somewhere—even across town to a new neighborhood, but usually further than that. Seldom do the upwardly mobile stay put to “advance” (whatever that may mean) *in situ*. Actors migrate, professionals and academics migrate, and business executives and middle-level management keep the land values in the suburbs rising as their companies transfer them here and there. Despite ample evidence to the contrary, when the social scientist thinks of migration, the first image that comes to mind is of unskilled and semi-skilled workmen moving en masse. Those who write about migration frame their research studies in terms of Appalachians moving to Detroit for Henry Ford’s \$ 5 a day, or of Turks or Algerians moving to West Germany or France, or West Indians going to Great Britain to fill jobs which the local popula-



tion either couldn't or wouldn't fill. Migration, in the social science literature, is a lower class phenomenon and the assumption is often made, and often backed by the selected evidence that is collected, that in these instances it is the poorest people who leave to seek work elsewhere. As I will detail in a moment, our data suggest otherwise.

In 1951 Wilbert E. Moore (*Industrialization and Labor*, Ithaca) pointed out that the most successful recruitment into the then developing industries of Mexico did not follow a step-wise movement, but that those attracted to the factory jobs came most frequently directly from the more isolated farmlands. In 1979, Piore, in a book called *Birds of Passage* (Cambridge Univ. Press), turns to look at the role of the receiving society in stimulating migration, and seeking precisely the sort of migration that will meet its needs (thus fulfilling some of the hypotheses made by earlier observers on the nature of the migrant population). In this light he suggests the following: first, that migrants don't travel at will, but are stimulated by active recruitment (through a variety of media), so that there is a knowledge of where work exists. Secondly, that labor from afar (migrants) are sought for those jobs which those already in the country no longer wish to do, as these tasks are perceived as too demeaning. Thirdly, with time, successive generations descendant from the original migrants and living in the new country are less impressed than were their parents and grandparents with the munificence of the wages or the dignity afforded by the work. These descendants of migrants adopt the cultural values of the society into which their parents had moved and they were born; they share the local conception that certain sorts of jobs, the very ones their fathers sought, are undesirable. Hence, there is a continuing need to recruit labor from afar to fill the void. And finally, the migrant experience adversely affects the attractiveness of traditional activities in the homeland. If the offspring of migrants do not wish to follow in their parents' footsteps, they certainly do not want to follow in those of their grandparents.

If we turn now to look, not at the devices created by societies needing laborers, but rather at the situation in one of the sending societies, we can see to what extent the earlier hypotheses are born out by the data, and what additional insights are to be gained by the shift in emphasis.

Paracho, the town which we have been observing, sometimes at first hand, sometimes through correspondence, for over 30 years, is in the Sierra of Michoacan, one of the four states of Mexico which was, until post World War II years, renowned for its export of migrants to the United States (the other major migrant-export states then being Jalisco, Guanajuato and Nuevo León). Originally, we



sought a place where we hoped to find both returned migrants and non-migrants within the same family — my co-researcher (Gabriel Lasker) being interested in evidence for selection for migration in terms of biological differences between siblings, while I was concerned with what the migrants thought important enough to bring back with them on their return, either in terms of changed aspirations, or the wherewithal to make possible old aspirations which might have motivated the migrant activity in the first place. Instead of non-migrants, of whom there were relatively few, we found what could only be called “pre-migrants”. At the time of our first field trips virtually all young men *assumed* that they would at some time be going north to the states.

Paracho is somewhat atypical of rural Mexico in that it is literally land-poor, with — at the time of our early studies — only 54 men with enough land to be full-time agriculturalists (out of over 800 heads of household). Almost since its establishment in the 16th century the townsmen have subsisted by manufacture and trade and have been as knowledgeable about market and price as were (and are) the *minifundistas* about monetary matters which concern *their* interests (the size of the “share” due the landowner where they worked on shares or halves, the parts of the constitution which referred to their rights as farm workers, changes in government price support, etc.). There was no lack of what might be termed economic intelligence among the working people of Paracho. With a long history as a craft town, sensitivity to consumer demand was very sharp, and over the centuries the items made and the mode of transport used to get goods to the buyers changed in response both to markets and technology. Nor has all of the human export been of untrained, unskilled workers ready to do menial jobs for a pittance. For at least 60 years before we first appeared (and probably longer than that) education has been a high priority within the town, seen by the adults as the means for youth to get training which would enable them to leave and use their skills elsewhere: our informants made lists of priests, doctors, engineers and lawyers who went (migrated) from the town to other parts of Mexico by the dozens and, “hundreds of teachers, we couldn’t name or even remember them all.” And long before any form of labor migration was a dream in any individual’s mind, virtually all of the men (and more than a few women) had walked, or joined mule trains to take locally-made goods to distant places within Mexico itself for sale or exchange. Before the Revolution several *comerciantes ambulantes* had gotten into Texas with their wares. Indeed, one of the returned migrants had outdone the anthropologists by having spent a winter in complete darkness, living “underground with the Eskimo in Alaska!”



A trickle of migrants from Paracho began to travel north in the the early years of the century, but the decade plus of the revolution saw a great exodus (helped along as much by local fighting (the town was burned twice —by rival forces) as by purposeful recruitment from the "Industrial North." It was healthy to leave town in those days and virtually everyone did.

In our census we found that 60% of the men over 18 had (by 1952) been to the United States for varying periods of time —ranging from 3 months (somewhat less in the case of a few unsuccessful wetbacks) to 31 years, starting about 1904 and extending through the period of *bracero* contracts. There were virtually no families without some sons or brothers (or occasionally daughters or sisters) who had been to the United States.

There were, however, some differences between those who had and those who had not had migrant experiences (either as *voluntarios*, *braceros* or wetbacks). Contrary to Moore's findings that the less well off elected to move, those from Paracho who went once or more often represented what could be referred to as the adventuresome middle. The wealthiest men stayed home to protect their property. And in most instances their sons, who anticipated inheriting from papa, also stayed home (travel to work was not very appealing although there are a few instances of one or another son of an influential being encouraged to travel abroad by their fathers —sometimes to work, or to learn English, or to learn more about the demands (interests) of those at distant marketplaces). Those who literally had no funds lacked even transportation costs and (during the period of *bracero* recruitment) also lacked anything with which to bribe those guarding the entry-way to the contractors who interviewed the hopeful. These were the *sedentes*, the stay-at-homes, the non-mobile (either in space or in status). Even going wetback required then (and requires now) pesos. And there were also a few ready to take up a contract, who had the money, but who lacked callouses on their hands and were turned back because, "no callouses, no work."

Despite the difficulties associated with crossing the frontier the younger men interviewed (18 through the late 20's) all acted as if they expected to get north sometime. Had they been to the States, we asked. "No, not yet." "I expect to go soon" "I'm planning on going" and even "Can you help me? Can you fix it up?" were the replies. For this age group, not yet tied into the local occupational structure, the journey north of el rio Bravo represented the adventure away from home. It was not seen as a trip taken because there was hunger in the home, or because there wasn't work in the village, and it was surely not because of the urge to work under difficult conditions to earn the generous wages to help support the family.

Rather, the sense we got was that the youngest men in the town wanted to go to see for themselves. Even the young men who had returned from their first contracts did not complain as much as did the older ones (late 30's and up) about having to "work all day in the hot sun, like an animal, without stop." They had mostly enjoyed their stay abroad, had come back with money in their pockets, were important for a time among their companions whom they filled full of their adventures. To say that there was a direct parallel between a brief migrant experience and the notion of a "Junior Year abroad" would be an overstatement. But the experience of temporary migration to the United States did serve to differentiate among young men in the village —not materially for too long, as in most instances the dollars were soon gone, but long enough for some slight advantage for the returnee, with enhanced status among ones' age mates, with some having the foresight to invest part of the savings in the local economy, in finding a job or, occasionally, just having the funds to waste on music, dance, drink and girlfriends.

Subsequent contracts did not fit the same adventuresome mode. Two to three (or ten) years later, these same men had family responsibilities and travel to work abroad was undertaken with overt and intense pecuniary interest. But for the first-time migrants the experience represented a turning point, a momento of separation from family and friends, and an opportunity to acquire a new status on return — a change not marked by elaborate ritual observance, but by small-scale family rejoicing and a renewed (albeit different) appreciation of the homeland and home town.

Thirty years later the town is no longer small (it was 3,400 when we first arrived in 1948, it is closer to 12,000 today) and today it is, itself, not just a refuge for the dispossessed from volcanic eruptions, or from revolutionary and counter-revolutionary coups in nearby towns, but is a recipient of step-migration from elsewhere in the countryside —of people coming to Paracho seeking work (and usually finding it). As population density is up, so also are generation gap problems exacerbated. No longer does everyone know everyone else. Many young adults now report that the place is "boring" with nothing to engage their interest and they are anxious to move (or migrate) to more lively places. Thus, outward movement continues— perhaps not in the same flood to the United States as in earlier decades, but more adventurously than before, as people leave to settle elsewhere in Mexico (and not only to Mexico City but to the Yucatan, to Monterrey, to the Tierra Caliente and to the west).

Of van Gennep's three stages of initiation rites of passage: separation, margin or limen, and reaggregation, it is the middle stage



which, in our analysis, provides the young migrant with direct experiences of a world very different from his own, passing a "threshold" (or limen, as van Gennep states) from the state of youth to that of young adult. And through participation in the adult world, yet not under the immediate tutelage of family or native community, there is the opportunity to "stand aside not only from one's own social position but from all social positions and of formulating a potentially unlimited series of alternative social arrangements." (Turner, 1974, pp. 13-14) It is the opportunity of looking inward from an uncircumscribed position that provides the potential for social change even where the re-admitted initiate (returnee) is once more under the constraints of the original society. The experiences of the migrant while abroad change the person, and change his perceptions of his society. It is both from some of these returnees and from other migrants from elsewhere moving to Paracho on their outward journeys that changes have been (and continue to be) introduced into the community, changes which have completely transformed the place over the last 30 years.

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