



CARAVANS

Migration Policies and Migrant Agency

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El Colegio
de la Frontera
Norte

Prologues by:
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(English version)

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(original version)



Prologue

International migration has become an enduring feature of our time. Indeed, one is tempted to say of modern economic and political life. People of course move around within national boundaries as well, but we do not usually think of those movements as “migration.” They occur for a wide variety of personal reasons: economic opportunities to be sure, but also for reasons of health, family commitments or simply in response to personal preferences and tastes, like to live in a warmer climate or for retirement. And in domestic migration people move in many different directions, crisscrossing each other and in the aggregate generally tending to balance each other out, so that the overall population distribution remains essentially unchanged. These intra-national movements are typically patterned but the patterns are complex, revealing themselves to the statistical analyst but not readily apparent to the naked eye, generally without obvious political and economic implication. International migration on the other hand, tends to occur in well-defined channels: Large numbers of people moving in the same direction for similar reasons over a prolonged period of time, channeled and directed by institutional arrangement and public policies designed to give economic and political priority to nationals. This book focuses on one such migration stream, the stream of migrants moving from Central America, across Mexico to that country’s northern border, hoping to gain entry and establish permanent residence on the other side of that border, in the United States.

The focus of this book is a change in the character of that migration process and of the organizational form through which it takes

place. In the early decades of the century, migrants traveled largely as individuals or in small groups and families, often without a well-formed plan of travel or detailed knowledge of the territory through which they were traveling, with ad hoc transportation arrangements and limited material support, dependent on coyotes, (i.e., smugglers or guides). But beginning in 2018, these basically independent emigrants began to form into much larger organizations or caravans, moving together in groups of over a thousand, sharing travel information and commanding resources and support in the territories through which they were moving, developing through discussion and debate a common strategy in the face of opposition from the Mexican national government, the individual Mexican cities and states through which they passed, and the US border patrols. In this way, the largely individualistic and fragmented migration stream was transformed into a social movement, a political force which the authorities were unable to direct or control, but which offered the migrants support and protection from the predators that plagued them along the route and which was able to better confront the variety of different obstacles they encountered along the way.

This study is of special interest for us in the United States because the Central American migration stream and the pressure which its members exerted on the border become a major issue and central concern in the 2016 Presidential election campaign, the focal point of a debate about the threat immigration posed to national identity. The debate continues today, increasingly bitter and contentious. The formation of the caravans and the heightened visibility that their progress through Mexico towards the US border gave to the migrants and the migrant process has made it symbolic of the failure of American immigration policy more broadly. This book takes on an added significance in that it was written in Spanish for a Spanish speaking audience and hence an English translation offers us an outsider's perspective on a central issue in our own country's political debates, debates which are likely to be

further aggravated—but in unpredictable ways—by the refugees from the Ukraine war and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

But the study can be read not simply against the backdrop of the US political debate, it constitutes a scholarly contribution to migration theory. As such, it should be read in the context of a large and growing migration literature spanning multiple different academic disciplines: economics, political science, anthropology and sociology to be sure but also urban planning, geography, and policy studies. One way to organize our understanding of international migration processes which grows out of this literature is in terms of a series distinct patterns, a typology of migration models.

These models differ along a series of dimensions: the relative importance of “push” factors at the place of origin versus “pull” factors at the destination; temporary versus permanent; unidirectional or circular; politically motivated or economic; refugee or not, etc. These dimensions also include, critically in terms of my own reading of this book, the importance of individual motivation and decisions versus social organization and community. Migration processes, moreover, are not static, they change and evolve over time. The weight of these different factors may also change as the migration stream develops and matures. In this sense, migration processes differ not only with respect to each other, but also with respect to themselves at earlier moments in their history.

One can think of the Central American migration process in contrast to two other models of the way international migration takes place. One of these is the model typically used by economists, originally developed to understand population movements within national boundaries and which, particularly it seems in the US, policy analysts and commentators seem to carry around in their heads. It hinges on a model of *homo economicus* (economic man), where migration is an individual decision driven by a calculus of benefits and costs. The benefits are thought of as the income differential between what can be earned at the place of origin and

what can be earned at the place of destination and the costs of movement between these two locations. The determining factors here are typically divided into “push” factors and “pull” factors, the former reflecting conditions at the origin, the latter conditions at the destination. This “model,” originally developed for internal migration, has, when applied to international migration, led to a literature which focuses on what these factors are and to a set of public policies which attempt to control and direct the migration flows by increasing the cost of movement and reducing the potential gains. In US policy, it has fostered a focus on border controls that increase the cost of movement and on employment sanctions that make it difficult for migrants to find work or when they do find employment, through workplace raids which make it difficult to hold the job and renders employers reluctant to hire them.

Mexican migration to the US offers a very different model. It hinges not so much on economic man as on what might be called social man, the tendency of human beings to form communities and to be guided in their behavior by community standards. In its initial phases, it was driven by the “pull” of employers in the US trying to fill jobs which national workers are reluctant to take, because of low wages, demeaning social status, instability and insecurity, minimal chances of advancement, and the like. The migrants recruited for such work are, at least initially, temporary, planning to return to their home communities in Mexico, often with projects rooted in those communities such as building houses there or investing in land and farm equipment. Because these migrants view their stay abroad as temporary they are not interested in job stability, chances of advancement or social status, which concern national workers. Indeed, they often will take jobs that they would not accept in their home communities because work abroad is essentially hidden from the eyes of neighbors in their home communities and hence does not affect their social status there. The character of the migration process however evolves over time. Inevitably, some of the initially

temporary migrants end up staying longer than originally anticipated. Because human beings do not live indefinitely as isolated individuals, they begin to develop social ties and attachments. As they do so, a stable community grows up around them at the destination. The existence of this community leads other migrants who initially planned to return to Mexico to remain instead. That community also begins to attract permanent settlers from the home country. As the community becomes more and more salient in the way in which migrants think of themselves, its members come to share the labor market attitudes of national workers. Their aspirations function less and less as a complement to those of the national workforce and instead they begin to compete with them for stable, secure, higher status jobs.

This process of “settlement” is, however, very much dependent on the ease with which the migrants can move back and forth across the border. To the extent that such movement is easy, people are more likely to maintain their commitment to the community of origin. The period of temporary migration is prolonged and the migration process remains basically circular. The migration stream continues to function as a complement to the native labor force.

The understanding of the process in terms of the first model, the one which developed in the context of internal migration, has led to policies designed to control the impact of migration by closing the border and limiting entry, making it difficult for migrants to move back and forth in response to the needs of their home community. The result however is perverse. These policies raise the cost of moving into the US the first time. But they also raise the cost of temporary or circular migration. Migrants who might otherwise stay for a short period of time and return periodically to renew their attachment to their home community in Mexico, now become afraid that they would not be able to get back if they leave, and so they elect to stay longer and settle more permanently in the US, promoting the transformation of the migrant stream from one complementary

to economic processes and social processes at the destination to one that is basically competitive with those processes.

Analytically, what distinguishes the two models is the role of community. The first model builds on the notion of homo economicus (economic man) while the second model is built around homo social, human beings ultimately attached to communities whose standards shape their behavior. I will return to this point below.

We can think of Central American migration as constituting still a third pattern or model. It is basically a push migration, driven by the breakdown of communities in the place of origin under the pressures of natural disaster, climate change, the drug trade gang violence, and political corruption. The pattern is distinctive, but it is certainly not unique.

Irving Howe's description of Jewish migration from central Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries paints a similar picture: A vast movement of people, driven from their homelands by gang violence and political oppression, traveling across continental Europe, with little prior knowledge of the territory through which they were traveling, and hence dependent on local guides who harassed and exploited them, crossing multiple national borders without papers to reach the seaports from which they could embark for the United States. This migration pattern is unlikely to be very responsive to the kinds of changes in the income differential between the origin or the destination upon which the first model focuses or to the cost of entry and reentry to which the second pattern calls attention. Indeed, border controls seem to have actually had a perverse effect because they led people to think that controls are likely to become tighter over time.

Understood in the context of this third migration pattern, the caravans then are an inflection point in the role of social organization and community. They constitute a shift from an essentially individualistic process to a collective one. Prior to the formation of a caravan, families decide on their own first to leave and then on

how to travel and where to travel. In the caravans, these decisions grow out of a collective process. The group decides these questions together and individuals act in conformity with these decisions. Interestingly, the social cohesion which is constituted by the caravans dissolves as they reach the border and the efforts to cross into the US (or alternatively to settle in Mexico or even return home) revert to the individualistic mode of the pre-caravan era. A critical issue, both for analysis and for policy, is thus how the balance between individual and collective motivation varies back and forth and why it does so.

But for the US audience, the ultimate promise of the insights about the caravans as a collective action which are developed in this book is that they have the potential to open a new path to the formulation of practical policy. It does so at a time when policy at the country's southern border is paralyzed. The debate about what to do about it, moreover, is completely polarized between a right wing which would close the borders entirely and a left which, while not explicitly advocating open borders, opposes every policy initiative which might limit entry. On both sides, however, the policies that are being debated are basically those of government agents, primarily the US government. The "broadening of the debate" has come to mean cooperation with Mexican authorities or with the governments of the Central American countries from which the bulk of the migrants come. The migrants themselves remain passive players in these policies, acted upon but without stature and without a voice in the formulation or execution of policy. In this context the caravans constitute a new institutional actor with the potential to play an active part in the policy making process. The capacity to do so is inherent in the internal structures for collective decision making that have developed and in the leadership which has emerged to guide the debate and implement the decisions that grow out of it. Those structures have already enabled the caravans to engage in negotiations with local authorities in the territories through which they are moving over

issues related to shelter, transportation, and food assistance. One could imagine extending the range of negotiations to visas or entry permits to the Mexico or the US, and setting forth conditions and rights; for example, a conditional right to send their children to public schools in return for agreeing to leave the country when the children graduate.

The negotiations might be further extended to mechanisms for finding and distributing employment opportunities in Mexico and/or the United States. Perhaps the caravans might even generate a grassroots leadership for the economic development projects in local communities at the places where the migrations originate in Central America. Undoubtedly there are other ideas that a new voice with different powers and a different constituency would generate. But to have faith in this approach, to navigate paths of action of this kind, we will need the kind of understanding of the caravans as a phenomenon which this volume provides.

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