

The Migration and Labour Question: Lessons from the Mexico-US Corridor

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The nature of contemporary capitalism has been inaccurately represented and distorted by an apologetic notion of globalization, which emphasizes the increase in international flows of capital, information, technology and workforce. Underlying this partial and limited vision is a blind faith in a supposedly free and self-regulating market as a route to achieving a just and equitable society, but which has instead provided political cover for a project of capitalist expansion, neoliberal globalization, that has had severe consequences in terms of development and social justice for the past three and half decades. One of the main features of the new global architecture, boosted by the emergence of one of the most distressing global crisis since the 1930 recession, is the assault on the labour and living conditions of the majority of the working class (Harvey 2004). The migrant workforce is among the most vulnerable segments of the global working class (Márquez and Delgado Wise 2011a).

The purpose of this paper is to analyse some key aspects of the system in which contemporary migration is embedded, with particular emphasis on the process of segmentation and the precarization of labour markets. More specifically, the aim is to unravel: a) the nature of the dynamics of neoliberal restructuring under the aegis of neoliberal globalization, in search of cheap and flexible labour, as well as natural resources from the south; b) the growing asymmetries among and within countries and regions; c) the increase and intensification of social inequalities; d) the configuration of a gigantic global reserve army of labour associated with the emergence of severe forms of labour precarization and exploitation; and e) the predominance of forced migration as the main modality of human mobility under conditions of extreme vulnerability.

The lessons derived from the experience of the Mexico-US migration corridor not only provide important empirical evidence to support our overall argument, but they offer crucial data for demystifying the dominant visions in the field, and, perhaps more importantly: they set an important platform for disentangling the migration and labour question today.

Migration and Labour under the Neoliberal Regime

Although human mobility is a historical process with a certain degree of continuity, it has undergone major transformations in the context of neoliberal globalization, acquiring a new profile and dynamism. The working-class, primarily that from peripheral or underdeveloped countries, is forced to travel in conditions of increasing vulnerability due to lack of employment and access to decent livelihoods in countries of origin. International human migration travels mainly in a South-South and South-North direction; together, these two flows comprise nearly 70 per cent of the 214 million international migrants on Earth. There is also a significant contingent of internal migrants mainly located in the South that totals some 740 million. This means that, nowadays, one in seven people on Earth is a migrant (UN 2004 and 2010; Delgado and Márquez 2007 and 2009).

This implies a quantitative and directional change in population flows as well as a drastic restructuring of the labour market in a context of extreme exploitation and precarization. This re-composition is part of the complex restructuring process that

characterizes the global capitalist system under the neoliberal regime and which is essentially characterized by:

- Increased capital internationalization via a profound transformation of the geo-economic structure, commanded by large multinational corporations. This transformation results in a configuration of global networks of monopolist capital based on global chains of production, trade and services, and intra-firm trade mechanisms such as outsourcing or subcontracting. These networks spread like tentacles toward peripheral regions in search of natural resources and cheap labour force. Thanks to this new structure, large multinational corporations are able to carry out a global offensive against the international working, cheapening labour costs in an unprecedented fashion. The countries of Africa, Latin America, Asia and the former Soviet bloc have become suppliers of abundant cheap, flexible and disorganized workforce, as well as of national and international natural resources (Harvey 2007; Schierup, Hansen and Castles 2006; Delgado Wise and Márquez 2009; Foster and Magdof 2009; Bello 2006).
- Financialization. Financial capital is a significant fraction of international monopoly capital and utilizes speculative strategies typical of fictitious capital to generate easy profits in the short term. These undermine the performance of the so-called real economy and lead to massive fraud and recurrent crises. High volatility and speculative games also accelerate the “distillation” of capitals, which eventually benefit the concentration and centralization of monopolist capital while causing problems such as unemployment, famine and impoverishment. This perverse game not only involves the large capital and savings of the so-called first world but also the financial resources of the periphery, including sovereign wealth funds, investment funds, pension funds and public budgets. In essence, this is about resources being diverted from productive activity or the promotion of social development toward the world’s casino economy, with enormous costs for the majority of the population (Amin 2010).
- The restructuring of processes of innovation under mechanisms such as outsourcing and offshore outsourcing allows large corporations to have a growing contingent of scientific and technological southern workers at their service, transfer risks and liabilities, and capitalize on presumed benefits through the concentration of patents. This results in an unprecedented commodification of scientific work with a short-term vision and little social concern, one where physical and indirect emigration of highly qualified Southern workers plays a very important role (Petras 2001; Freeman 2005; Andreff 2009; Koepp 2002).
- Degradation brought about by privatization while disregarding the environmental, communal and national costs for the exclusive benefit of large multinational corporations, whose desire for profit takes unscrupulous precedence over social and environmental costs. This expansion and revival of extractive forms of natural resource appropriation has resulted in environmental predation, pollution, famine and disease, all of which threaten the balance between nature and society (Foladori and Pierri 2005).

At the centre of this process, which provides the foundation for the asymmetric and subordinate reintegration of peripheries into the sphere of neoliberal capitalism and conditions contemporary migrations, is a trait inherent to contemporary capitalist architecture: the massive oversupply of workforce. With the incorporation of the former Soviet Union, China and India into the world capitalist market, the world’s labour supply more than doubled, increasing from 1.46 to 3.1 billion workers. To this add the overflowing and violent liberalization of the workforce that has taken place in

peripheral economies as a result of the implementation of neoliberal structural adjustment programs. In a recent article, John Bellamy Foster, Robert McChesney and Jalim Jonna (2012) estimated that the global workforce reserve comprises 65 per cent of workers on the planet.

As a corollary, labour precarization has attained unforeseen levels. According to 2011 data from the International Labour Organization (OIT 2012): 1,520 million workers (49 per cent of the planet's workforce) labour in conditions of vulnerability (i.e., lack of job security and no access to basic labour rights); 910 million workers (29.4 per cent) earn less than US\$2 a day, which places them in a situation of extreme poverty; there are 203 million unemployed across the world and about half of the working population has informal employment. This is, clearly, a systemic kind of violence that must be understood and combated using all means at our disposal.

The deep multidimensional crisis (i.e., one regarding finances, overproduction, the environment and society) that currently afflicts the whole of humanity urges us to deepen our understanding, especially in regards to prospects of actual social transformation (Márquez 2010).

Uneven Development and Reintegration of the Peripheries

The concept of uneven development provides a suitable explanation for historical processes of polarization between social classes and geography. Unequal development does not entail a dichotomous or Manichean analysis, but aims to unravel the historical, structural and strategic dynamics of exploitation and domination employed by plutocratic elites who appropriate the economic surplus generated in the peripheries as well as the heart of the capitalist world system (Márquez 2010).

A central element of global architecture under neoliberalism is the deepening of uneven development trends inasmuch as these are processes of economic, social and political polarization between classes, countries and regions. There are two main trends: i) the intensification of asymmetries between countries and regions and ii) the increase of social inequalities. While this characterizes capitalist dynamics in general, it has become extreme under neoliberal globalization.

The primary tools in this case are the structural adjustment programs promoted by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which have served to disarticulate peripheral economies and ensure their asymmetric and subordinate reintegration to the economies of central countries. Direct and indirect workforce export is a key element of this process. The first refers to the global networks of monopoly capital (Márquez and Delgado Wise 2011) which operate as enclaves where the exported component, by virtue of the high degree of imported components, is limited to the low cost of the workforce incorporated into the merchandise. Currently, some 55 million labourers work in this type of manufacturing plants (Robinson 2008), including 66 million southern workers (Singa Boyenge 2007). The direct export of workforce via labour migration involves approximately 100 million workers from the periphery.

All of this configures a new international division of labour where the indirect export of workforce entails a net transfer of profits from the periphery to the center, and the direct export of workforce implies a transfer of the training and social reproduction costs of the emigrant population. Both mechanisms are associated to labour superexploitation.

The New Face of Human Mobility: Forced Migration

Migration has taken a new role in the labour division of neoliberal globalization. Mechanisms of unequal development produce structural conditions such as unemployment and inequality, which lead to the massive migration of dispossessed and marginalized populations. Looking for a means of subsistence or opportunities of social mobility, large segments of the population are literally expelled from their territories in order to relocate within their own country or abroad. Labour oversupply and worsening living conditions turn migration, particularly from peripheral countries, into a form of forced displacement (Delgado Wise, Márquez and Puentes 2013; Márquez 2010).

Forced migration flows have four outstanding features: a) they take place on a national and international level, and move mainly from deprived peripheral regions toward relatively more advanced areas in central or peripheral economies; b) they primarily affect the vulnerable, poor and marginalized who are barred from satisfying their basic material and subjective needs in their place of origin; c) they generate an oversupply of cheap and disorganized labour exploited by employers and corporations interested in keeping costs down, and d) they fuel mechanisms of direct and indirect labour export, both among low-skilled and high-skilled workers.

The number of migrants (most of whom come from peripheral regions) has increased over the past three and a half decades, from 84 million in 1975 to 215 million in 2010. The main flows are in a South-North direction (82 million), followed by the South-South direction (74 million). There is also a significant contingent of domestic migrants (750 million) that, as a whole, have reshaped the labour map and turned migration into a cornerstone of the capitalist restructuring process (UN 2004 and 2010; Delgado Wise and Márquez 2009). Undocumented migration flows in a South-South direction, including transit migration at an intra-national level in peripheral countries, is exposed to conditions of utmost vulnerability and occupies the lowest echelons in this displacement dynamics.

In line with the above considerations, it is possible to distinguish four types of forced migration: 1) migration due to violence, conflict and catastrophe (43 million, UNHCR, 2011); 2) smuggling and trafficking of persons (2.45 million, OIM, 2008); 3) migration due to dispossession, exclusion, and unemployment (132 million from the South without considering the bulk of internal migrants—UN, 2010); and 4) migration due to over-qualification and lack of opportunities (25.9 million, Lozano and Gandini 2011).

Forced migrations involve multiple risks and dangers, particularly in the case of the most vulnerable groups. These involve permanent exposure to conditions of labour insecurity and instability, as well as social exclusion in host societies. Furthermore, international migration is increasingly subjected to criminalization policies and practices and race- and gender-based discrimination, which not only increases vulnerabilities and risk but also often endangers life itself (Delgado Wise and Márquez 2009; Castles and Delgado Wise 2008).

The safeguarding of human rights is still a pending issue for most governments in countries of origin, transit and destination. Few nations are exempt from this responsibility. Either because of the stigma of illegality or racial prejudices—and often mainly because of economic interest—destination countries turn a blind eye on the labour and human rights of migrants. They also put up obstacles that hinder or bar them from easily obtaining legal residence and citizenship. Countries of origin or transit work

under a double-standard: while their governments denounce violations to the rights of their citizens in destination countries, the rights of foreigners in their own land are systematically violated.

Lessons from the Mexico-US Migration Corridor: Eight Demystifying Theses

To illustrate the aforementioned problem, we now turn to the Mexico-United States migration system, a highly representative case of the phenomenon we are analysing. In addition to being the leading capitalist power and spearheading the aforementioned restructuring strategy, the United States is the world's most important migrant receiver and remittance issuer. Mexico is a relatively industrialized peripheral country that has unquestioningly adopted neoliberal structural adjustment programs and is the world's main migrant sender and third remittance recipient. The two countries are also economically linked by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which primarily serves the strategic interests of U.S. transnational corporations. In contrast to the reigning myths about migration and development,¹ here we put forth six theses on the causes of migration, the contributions of migrants to the economic growth of receiving countries, the migratory transfer of resources from countries of origin to those of destination, and the inadequacy of remittances as a source of development for the issuing country.

Thesis 1. In the context of capitalist restructuring, forced migration has become a new form of population flow.

Massive migration flows are rooted in the increasingly narrow and precarious character of the formal labour market and the expansion of the informal sector, where conditions are so abusive that vast sectors of the population are forced to emigrate. The migrant workforce, in turn, must deal with restricted mobility (i.e., criminalization), devaluation, and conditions of extreme vulnerability, social exclusion, precariousness and exploitation.

Mexicans have been migrating to the United States for over a century, but the phenomenon has not remained the same. Important quantitative and qualitative changes have taken place; these are intimately related to changes in the development model, capital accumulation in the country, and different modes of economic insertion or regional integration with the United States.

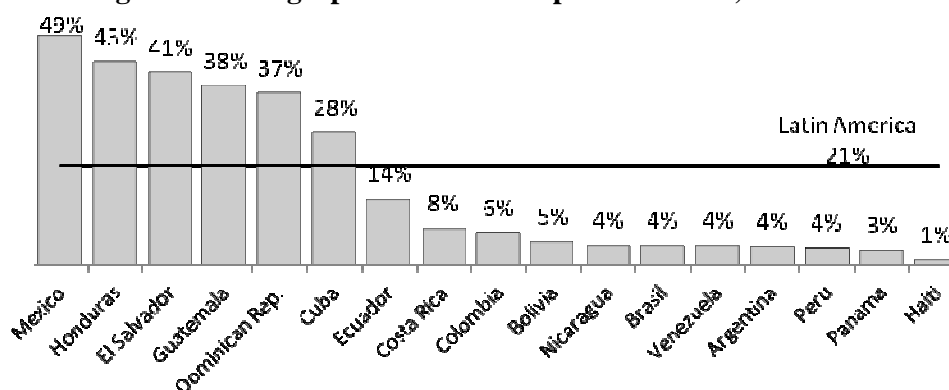
But beyond its quantitative and qualitative expressions, forced migration entails an invaluable population loss for Mexico on at least three fronts:

- 1) *The transfer of the demographic dividend.* The so-called demographic dividend occurs when, during a certain stage of a nation's demographic transition, the working-age population becomes proportionally larger than that of the dependent

¹ The dominant view on the nexus between migration and development is based on the idea that migration contributes to development in places and countries of origin. Among the assumptions that characterize this vision: 1) migration is a source of development for the sending country, with migrants as the agent and remittances as a motor or lever; 2) migration has its own dynamic, is self-generated and does not have a structural source; 3) migration represents a burden and remittances are a leak of resources for the host country; 4) migrants are responsible for a decline in labour standards and quality of life in the host society, and 5) migration is a strategy to combat poverty, economically empowering the poor.

population: those under 15 and over 65. This proffers a window of opportunity for the development of countries that can exercise labour sovereignty. International migration is an outlet for vast contingents of working-age population who cannot work or get adequate remuneration in their countries of origin. This signals a loss of labour sovereignty for the sending country (Márquez 2008). The host country, on the other hand, receives fresh resources to maintain the cycle of demographic reproduction in accordance with their labour needs. The implementation of the neoliberal model in Mexico has led to a veritable squandering of the demographic dividend; at 49 per cent, the country is the main Latin American workforce exporter to the United States, while the continental average is 21 per cent (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Demographic Dividend Export to the US, 2000-2008



Sources: SIMDE based on CEPALSTAT, Estadísticas de América Latina y el Caribe; and US Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS) 2000 and 2008.

Mexico's population transfer contributes to U.S. demographic reproduction. In fact, Mexican immigrants have been the main bastion of population growth in recent decades. Between 2000 and 2008, Mexicans were the national group with the highest population growth in the United States (4.8 per cent), contributing 1.1 per cent to U.S. population growth. Those groups considered as natives have below-average growth rates (CPS) 2000-2008.

- 2) *The loss of the central resource for national accumulation and wealth: the workforce.* More than a demographic factor, migration is a sign of deepening underdevelopment and the difficulties inherent to the undertaking of significant processes of social transformation. With 37 per cent rate in the 2000-2011

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