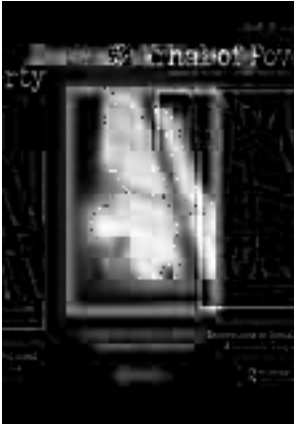


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Neoliberal Globalization, NAFTA, and Migration: Mexico's Loss of Food and Labor Sovereignty

GERARDO OTERO

This article explores the way in which the U.S. economy has faced the crisis of the Fordist stage of capitalism since the 1970s by focusing on a cheap-labor strategy to restore profitability. By endorsing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the U.S. government has endorsed a neoliberal globalization strategy that has led to the loss of food and labor sovereignty in Mexico.

The article explores the way in which the U.S. economy has faced the crisis of the Fordist stage of capitalism since the 1970s by focusing on a cheap-labor strategy to restore profitability. By endorsing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the U.S. government has endorsed a neoliberal globalization strategy that has led to the loss of food and labor sovereignty in Mexico. The article argues that the U.S. government's endorsement of NAFTA is a result of its desire to restore profitability to the U.S. economy by endorsing a cheap-labor strategy. This strategy has led to the loss of food and labor sovereignty in Mexico, as the U.S. government has endorsed a neoliberal globalization strategy that has led to the loss of food and labor sovereignty in Mexico.

The article argues that the U.S. government's endorsement of NAFTA is a result of its desire to restore profitability to the U.S. economy by endorsing a cheap-labor strategy. This strategy has led to the loss of food and labor sovereignty in Mexico, as the U.S. government has endorsed a neoliberal globalization strategy that has led to the loss of food and labor sovereignty in Mexico.

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the way in which the U.S. economy has faced the crisis of the Fordist stage of capitalism since the 1970s by focusing on a cheap-labor strategy to restore profitability. By endorsing the North American Free

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Trade Agreement (NAFTA), U.S. officials ensured access to an abundant supply of labor south of the border. For their part, Mexico's political technocrats placed their bet for economic growth on the comparative advantage of cheap labor. This has been a losing bet for the workers of both countries: Neoliberalism and Mexico's integration into the North American economy—without free labor mobility—have had a detrimental impact, particularly on Mexico. The counterpart of its loss of food self-sufficiency by growing dependency on U.S.-grains imports has been the loss of labor sovereignty. Defined as the ability of a nation to generate employment with livable wages for the vast majority of the population, labor sovereignty has been a casualty of Mexico's economic integration with its northern neighbors. The most visible result of this loss has been substantially increased out-migration rates, with vast numbers of displaced Mexican workers flowing into the United States in search for work, most often unauthorized or undocumented.

More specifically, this article explores the relation between food self-sufficiency and labor sovereignty in the midst of Mexico's integration to its northern neighbors, especially to the U.S. economy. It compares and contrasts food self-sufficiency in the three NAFTA countries around production for the domestic market, per-capita calorie consumption, and overall food trade. The main proposition is that food-self-sufficiency is a condition for a country to enjoy labor sovereignty, as defined above. Of the three NAFTA nations, Mexico is the least self-sufficient, and hence the one that expels the largest rate of migrants. Although Mexico's exports of fruits and vegetables to the United States and Canada increased substantially since the late 1980s, this sector did not generate nearly enough employment to absorb bankrupted peasants. Therefore, Mexico has become dependent on the importation of basic-subsistence grains, which used to be produced by smallholder peasant farmers. Many peasants became redundant in the Mexican economy, and their only way out, literally, has been to migrate to the United States or Canada. Although most migrants to Canada (a small minority) enter that country as part of state-sponsored guest worker programs (Otero & Preibisch, 2010), the vast majority of migrants to the United States do so as undocumented or unauthorized workers.

The presence of large masses of low-skill workers in the United States, authorized or not, raises huge issues of labor rights, discrimination, and exclusion. It has been documented that there is an inverse relation between numbers and rights (Ruhs & Martin, 2008): the more migrant workers there are in rich countries, the fewer their rights are, and vice versa. The fact is that employer demand for workers is "negatively sloped" with respect to labor costs, which means that more rights for migrants typically means higher costs. In North America, the United States tends to have much higher "numbers" than rights, whereas Canada tries to fit the Scandinavian

or citizens as of 2006, which raises the question whether both of NAFTA's rich countries are converging toward the numbers side of the equation to the detriment of workers' rights.

One question about the numbers-rights tradeoff is what can human and labor rights policy makers and activists envision in addressing it? As is seen below, answers to this question will depend on the perspective one takes in migration debates. Although this article briefly addresses this concern, its main goal is to address the root causes of Mexico's out-migration: its growing food dependency and its consequent loss of labor sovereignty. Consistent with this focus, the main structural solutions to workers' rights would lie in fixing Mexico's agrarian structure. Yet, though this issue is not addressed, those concerned with human and labor rights will have to address its effects on migrants in the United States.

The first section offers an outline of how the U.S. crisis of profitability, associated with the exhaustion of the Fordist model of capital accumulation, was addressed by shifting the whole model into what came to be known as neoliberal globalization (Otero, 1996, 2004). The second section describes what the new agricultural division of labor looks like in North America, and how Mexico has lost its food self-sufficiency. Concomitantly, the loss of food self-sufficiency has also resulted in Mexico's loss of labor sovereignty. The third section sketches the main contours of migration debates in receiving and sending countries, highlighting the chief challenges for human and labor rights. Finally, the article draws some policy and practical conclusions for human- and labor-rights policy makers and activists.

few remaining unionized workers are state and municipal employees. Not only are these workers confronting huge cuts in their pay and benefits, they are also facing the stripping of rights to unionization. This drive is led by Republican governors in at least seven states, starting with Wisconsin in 2011 ("Wisconsin Governor Passes," 2011).

The crisis of Fordism in the late 1960s and early 1970s was expressed as a crisis of profitability, as a consequence of an excess productive capacity in relation to effective demand. The productivity of U.S. workers, compared to those in other countries like Germany and Japan, was growing at a slower pace. This productivity-growth differential was eventually expressed in growing and unsustainable trade deficits between the United States and countries like Japan during the 1980s. Hence U.S. transnational corporations sought to relocate their manufacturing plants to the less unionized U.S. South and, increasingly, to cheap-wage countries like Mexico. This flow of investments into manufacturing in Mexico, however, reproduced and expanded the capital-intensive technologies that were necessary to compete internationally in the emerging global economy. Linkages between these investments and the rest of the Mexican economy were scarce (Sklair, 1989). This means that locally sourced components were few, if any, as most raw materials were imported from the United States or elsewhere. Similarly, the only market for Mexico-produced manufactures by transnational corporations lied mostly in the United States. In the end, the main goal of

large regional economic blocks like the European Union and NAFTA. Initially, it was not clear whether such regional arrangements would result in new regional protectionist fortresses beyond the nation state, or new regional conduits to neoliberal globalization. In the case of North America, it has been argued that NAFTA was an agreement through which the states involved tried to regulate the silent but ongoing process of economic integration (Del Castillo, 1996). Through the World Trade Organization (WTO), transnational capitalists have tried to insure that regional blocks would not become protectionist fortresses but facilitate the globalization of trade and investment (Sklair, 2002). And yet, the WTO has failed to break the protectionist barriers that the richer countries continue to have around their agriculture industries (Pechlaner & Otero, 2008, 2010). Mexico, however, unilaterally opened up its economy even ahead of NAFTA, starting in the late 1980s. The ravages of neoliberalism have been deeply felt in Mexico and the United States. Both countries have experienced a tremendous process of socioeconomic polarization resulting from the disarticulation of their economies. One expression of the ravages of neoliberalism and how it has contributed to the disarticulation of Mexico's economy is its food sector, to which we turn next.

FOOD DIVISION OF LABOR

The contrast between the predominantly luxury imports of Canada and the United States with those of Mexico is notable: there is no doubt that Mexico is far more food vulnerable than the other two NAFTA partners. Consequently, of the three NAFTA countries, only Mexico has seen food prices rise significantly during the global food crisis, starting in late 2006. Canada has actually experienced a 0.6% food deflation, likely caused by the appreciation of its currency by about 30% since 2002. In addition, "Canada's prices may be kept low because the country is producing much of its own food—possibly too much," according to Bank of Nova Scotia senior economist Adrienne Warren (Scofield & Strauss, 2008, p. B1, B6). Due to reverse trends in its currency, which has been devalued significantly against other major currencies, price inflation in the United States was 4% in 2007 (Scofield & Strauss, 2008, p. B1). For the most part, however, Canada is also substantially self-sufficient.

As the World Bank's president, Robert Zoellick, told reporters from Bloomberg BusinessWeek about the food-price crisis: "The [2010 food] price hike is already pushing millions of people into poverty and putting stress on the most vulnerable, who spend more than half of their income on food" (Pooley & Revizin, 2011, p. 8). According to the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), with Mexico being a "middle-income" country, its households spend close to 35% of their income on food. Still, any

price increases have a much more serious impact than they do in either Canada or the United States, where households spend on average 11% to 12% of their budgets on food. I thus focus on how Mexico has fared in the NAFTA-defined food division of labor.

Although Mexico unilaterally opened its borders for most products in the late 1980s in preparation for NAFTA, this agreement contained some selective protection and phase-out periods for various crops. Corn, beans, sugar, and milk were given the longest phase-out period of protection with 14 years, which ended in 2008. By 2003, most agricultural products became liberalized, contributing to stirring up a peasant protest movement (Bartra & Otero, 2009). Even the London-based conservative newsweekly *The Economist* ("Mexico's Farmers," 2002), an enthusiastic supporter of free-market policies, and *The New York Times*'s correspondent in Mexico City (Smith, 2002), expressed their dismay over the Mexican government's meager support for its agricultural sector. These articles highlighted the international context of widespread agricultural subsidies throughout the advanced capitalist countries. In the NAFTA countries, "[r]elative to the value of national agricultural production, budgetary expenditures on farm payments during 1999–2001 equaled 15 percent in the United States, 10 percent in Canada, and 7 percent in Mexico" (Zahniser, Young, & Wainio, 2005, p. 2).

Agricultural trade liberalization in Mexico has caused a big shift to high-value fruit and vegetable production for export over that of lower-value food grains for the domestic market; imports that have heavy subsidies for U.S. farmers. As a result of such new division of labor, by 2003, Mexico had become dependent on the United States for the importation of some of its most critical foodstuffs, including maize and meat, two of the leading agricultural imports. Significant amounts of corn were first imported from the United States in 1989, a tendency that continued to grow until 23% of Mexico's corn supply was imported by 2007. Once completely liberalized, corn imports grew by 19 times in January 2007 over the same month of the previous year. It should be clarified that Mexico imports yellow corn, used to produce animal feed, high-fructose corn syrup, or ethanol; whereas it continues to be self-sufficient in white corn for food production. But though white and yellow corn should properly be considered two different products, the reality is that the usually lower import prices of yellow corn have also caused prices for white corn to fall for producers.

Trade liberalization rendered Mexico highly vulnerable to price fluctuations instigated in other countries. A dramatic example of this is the corn crisis triggered in 2006, when then U.S. President George Bush introduced a subsidy to produce corn-based ethanol in an effort to reduce his country's dependency on Middle Eastern oil. Whereas ethanol policy may well benefit U.S. and Canadian farmers, tortilla prices in Mexico suffered a 60% increase in early 2007 due to increased dependency on maize imports (Roig-Franzia,

2007). Price increases were also seen in wheat and its derivative products (e.g., bread, pasta, etc.), as many wheat farmers abandoned this crop in favor of corn to tap on its higher price. By 2008, subsidies and bad weather in several grain-producing countries generated the highest food prices in decades. Reports in the news contained warnings of popular uprisings in about 40 nations around the world (e.g., "Amenaza alza de alimento," 2008).

A review of Mexico's agricultural trade data from FAOSTAT confirms the conclusions of other studies of its food dependency and vulnerability: its trade balance in agricultural production has been in deficit since before the start of NAFTA, but it has increased considerably since 1994 (de Ita, 2007; González Chávez & Macías Macías, 2007). In particular, I agree with the definition of *food dependency* given by Humberto González Chávez and Alejandro Macías Macías (2007) as

the situation that characterizes countries, social sectors, groups and indi-

agricultural producers are the most dynamic, however. Although there are 32,000 firms in the food industry, only 1,692 engage in exports, and only 300 firms account for 80% of all exports (González Chávez & Macías Macías, 2007, p. 58). Another possible beneficiary of Mexico's increased imports of cheaper food are consumers, but as suggested, consumer food prices have actually doubled from 1993 to 2007 (e.g., up 733% for tortillas and 736% for white bread) in relation to general inflation (up 357%) since NAFTA's implementation. The minimum wage has deteriorated by 21% in real terms during the same period (González Chávez & Macías Macías, 2007, pp. 67–68). Therefore, unlike in Canada, Mexican consumers have not benefited from trade liberalization.

and U.S. firms and consumers. Agricultural liberalization, then, has provoked the greatest population exodus that Mexico's countryside has experienced in its history. As a result, far from having achieved increasing living standards for Mexicans, NAFTA has actually increased the country's food vulnerability and dependency, a point not lost on its detractors. It is this very confluence of negative impacts that sparked the widespread peasant resistance movement and may yet influence the future direction of neoliberal globalization in North America.

MIGRATION DEBATES: HUMAN AND LABOR RIGHTS

The economic and demographic factors behind international migration are well established: advanced capitalist countries, located mainly in the geographic North, have low or negative natural population growth, so to keep economic growth at a stable pace they must rely on migrant or immigrant workers. This demographic characteristic leads to a growing thirst for labor in the North, which citizen workers no longer want to perform (harsh and low paid menial work), becomes a powerful magnet for migrants from less developed countries. Conversely, developing countries tend to have larger

which defend human rights for all, against their executive branches if they try to summarily violate migrant's human rights.

In sum, it is a fact of life for advanced capitalist countries to require more workers than their populations can provide, but there is considerable ambivalence in their population about accepting new immigrants or guest workers. The question in terms of labor and human rights is whether these workers are incorporated into destination societies on a parity basis with the rest of their citizens. Before addressing this question, however, let us first establish what have been the main research questions and debate around migration in receiving or destination countries. This is followed by a discussion of perspectives on the effects of migration on sending countries.

Migration Seen from Receiving Countries

There have been several gatherings of migration experts in the United States, addressing the key questions around this theme. In 1996, for instance, there was a conference that Alejandro Portes and Josh DeWind (2004) characterized as having centered around three main themes focused on migration to the United States: what motivates people to migrate, how are migrants changed, and finally what are the impacts on receiving societies. Citing Hirschman et al., Portes and DeWind (2004) rephrased the latter topic as follows: "What impacts do immigrants have on American life and its economic, sociocultural, and political institutions?" The phrasing of this question seems to imply that migrants have a direct causal impact, on their own, on "American life" or any receiving society. Yet the question should be rephrased in relational terms, given that whatever impact migration has depends on the origin and types of migrants, as well as on each receiving society's modes of incorporation of migrants: migrants will become more or less, better or worse incorporated to societies, and so on, depending on how each society receives and responds to them. Discrimination may have one type of impact, whereas a welcoming and egalitarian reception will likely have a very different societal impact. Incorporation will also be a function of the types of migrants, the labor markets they are attracted to, and so on.

A brief exploration of the literature on migration and guest worker programs yields three main positions in the debate, which will be labeled nativist or xenophobic, liberal or neoliberal, and social democratic. Nativist or xenophobic positions are those associated with authoritarian positions in receiving countries, which tend to reject migrants as an option for economic growth. The result from this kind of attitude is that "immigrants' economic skills have been systematically discounted, resulting in an income gap between immigrants and nonimmigrants" (Cohrs & Stelzl, 2010, p. 689). Joel Fetzer's (2000) work, for its part, concludes that battles over immigration will be resolved depending on whose values prevail, the cultural values

of nativists or those whose economic well-being will be protected (see also Shayerah, Fennelly, & Federico, 2008).

Some studies have argued about the negative “economic consequences of illegal migration on domestic unemployment and wage structures, on the added costs of social services, and on the changing demographic picture in recipient areas” (Todaro & Maruszko, 1987, p. 101). These authors concluded that increasing employer penalties and funding to immigration authorities to increase the cost to migrants for attempting illegal entry to the United States will work: “Clearly, our results indicate that these policy measures can be effective in reducing migration rates to considerably lower levels” (p. 111). Todaro and Maruszko could be said to have been legitimating the “tough policies” on migration. The authors, always based on the individual-level

Hellman argued for a shift away from the official U.S. focus—in which the United States features as the epicenter of the world—to a migrant focus. If solutions were to focus on migrants, Hellman suggested, then serious attention should be given to the fact that most want to realize a Mexican rather than an American dream. The problem is that Hellman's answers ultimately do shift back to a focus on the United States. Stressing her disappointment with the receiving country's bipartisan policies for being mean spirited and punishing of migrants, the book does an excellent job in showing that “there is little chance that any socially just legislation [for migrants] could be put for-

the already existing two-tiered system of human and social rights, creating a new feudalism in America (Franz, 2007). For Vogel (2007), “transient servitude” is the true nature of the guest workers.

Migration Seen from Sending Countries

that it is a “one generation phenomenon” that has limitations and tends to be a trend mainly for educated immigrants (p. 10).

As Portes (2009) pointed out, however, the “positive developmental potential of settled professional communities abroad depends, as in the case of cyclical migration, on the existence of an infrastructure capable of absorbing technological innovations and investments” (p. 17). In particular, he distinguished between manual labor and high human capital migration. Within the former, he explained that the scholars who contend that migration has a positive developmental impact on the sending country might be right when the migration occurs in cyclical flows. Yet “permanent out-migrations tend to have the opposite effects” (Portes, 2009, p. 8). The only major benefit in this case is the potential expansion of transnational communities (pp. 8–10). High human capital migration, in contrast, can lead to so-called brain drain of the sending country. If this migration maintains a cyclical nature, however, the benefits for the development of the home country can be significant (pp. 13–17).

Moreover, Portes (2009) argued that a “world system” approach can be used to expand the scope of the analysis (p. 14). He explained that “cyclical flows” where the workers return to their homeland provide the most benefit for the sending countries (p. 19). Portes argued that the current policies between the United States and Mexico are unbalanced and should be revised to be “mutually supportive” for the development of both nations (p. 19).

The critical perspective considers that sending countries are losing valuable workers and decimating their basis for sustainable development. Delgado-Wise and Cypher (2007), for instance, argued that NAFTA is based on a “cheap labour export led model” (p. 120). For them, NAFTA primar-

Similarly, for David Ellerman (2005), migration becomes a developmental trap for the sending countries. In this relation, which involves a semipermanent "3 Ds Deal," the sending countries forgo self-development in favor of being a long-range bedroom community to supply the labor for Dirty, Dangerous, and Difficult jobs in the North or receiving countries.

CONCLUSIONS: TOWARD A NORTH AMERICAN UNION?

There are two quite different ways of addressing the issue of human and labor rights for Mexican migrants: building a North American Union with free labor mobility across NAFTA partners or, for Mexico to rearticulate its economy so as to rebuild its countryside and food self-sufficiency. The former approach would make it viable for the United States to continue using Mexican labor force without infringing on the human and labor rights of workers.

Short of constituting a North American Union, the second alternative would focus on promoting sustained economic development in Mexico, so as to make it possible for its citizens to stay home, make livable wages, and strengthen their families and communities. Both approaches would take considerable social mobilization to implement, and given the sharp divisions on migration issues in the United States, the North American Union alternative may lie in a distant future. This article concludes, therefore, that Mexican politicians and activists should bank on the second alternative, one that is rarely considered in migration debates, focused as they are on receiving societies.

As a less than democratic nation, the fact that Mexico's ruling class and government technocracy bought into neoliberalism had little to do with how broader sectors of the nation perceived it. Although the trends are dire, the massive protests by peasant groups and their supporters are sufficient to question whether neoliberal globalization and the 1-00.3(g).2(over)uingon rec
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become independent factors that could alter dominant trends in the world economy from the bottom up.

Thus, this article has a two-pronged conclusion. For the United States, human rights activists will have to continue in their struggle for equal treatment of all workers residing in their nation, regardless of citizenship status. Only thus can labor standards be guaranteed to have acceptable levels according to International Labour Organization (ILO) parameters. The optimal way to address this result would be by promoting the formation of a North American Economic Union, similar to the European Union, so that the owners of labor power can flow as freely as the owners of commodities and capital do. The owners of commodities and capital already enjoy largely unrestrained mobility to seek the highest prices or profits, not only throughout North America, but also throughout most of the world. If proper protections of human and labor rights in North America accompany its economic union, then workers would be protected from the whims of the owners of capital. Given that this scenario can only be accomplished in the long term, if at all, for the short and medium terms, it is indispensable for Mexico to try and restore its labor sovereignty. This goal will also require the restoration of its food self-sufficiency and the reconstruction of its countryside.

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