The Making and Unmaking of a Community of Latino Labor Migrants in Israel

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In the mid-1990s about 15,000 Latin American labor migrants resided in Israel without a legal permit, comprising 15 percent of the estimated population of the country's undocumented migrants (Central Bureau of Statistics, July 30, 1998, Press Release 159). By 2010 their numbers had fallen drastically. What factors drove thousands of non-Jewish migrants from Latin American countries—mainly Ecuador and Colombia—to move through unofficial venues to the Jewish state with which they had no apparent previous connection? And what factors enabled the dismantling and dispersal of a vibrant community that in the course of a decade seemed to have had become an integral part of Tel Aviv's metropolitan ethnoscape?

Based on extensive case study analysis of "Latinos" (as they were usually labelled) in Israel during 1997–2005, our research raises interesting insights into the dynamics of recent migrations from Latin America in less traditional immigration contexts than the North American and Western European, and more generally into undocumented migrations worldwide. First, whereas much of the literature highlights the significance of socioeconomic factors pushing and pulling migratory flows, the Latino experience in Israel highlights the multiple forms in which religion—as practice, institution, and identity marker—intersects with migration-related phenomena, influencing the choice of destination and the making of identity in migrant communities.

Second, much literature has dealt with processes leading to the establishment of migrant communities and their survival strategies in an adversarial context. Our case also underscores the political interventions that bring about the dismantling of existing communities and the unmaking of migratory flows, showing that migration control policies form an inextricable part of the remaking of national boundaries.

Finally, our case points at the dynamics of global labor migrations in ethnonational states that actively encourage the migration of ethnic migrants and discourage the migration and settlement of nonethnic migrants. The immigration of Jews of Latin American origin has been perceived throughout the years as part of the ongoing nation-building project of the "ingathering of exiles." Upon arrival through the Law of Return they become incorporated in the social, economic, and political life of the nation as full citizens. Conversely, Latin American nonethnic migrants arrived through informal channels, they were channeled to social positions that set them clearly apart from the Jewish Latin American immigrants, and their presence is perceived as a threat to the predominantly Jewish identity of the state and society. Thus the Israeli context shows how difference in ethnoreligious definitions of nationality, and not only legal status and class positions, create distinctions and structured relations between immigrants from the same countries of origin.

Latinos in Israel: Between the Push of Latin America and the Pull of the Holy Land

Undocumented Latino labor migration to Israel can be explained in terms of three intersecting dynamics: push, pull, and mediating factors.

Push Factors

The structural and political conditions that affected most Latin American countries since the early 1980s provide the general context for understanding Latin American migrants' motivation to emigrate. The transition to democracy in this period was not necessarily accompanied by deep socioeconomic reforms and stability, leading instead to austerity plans dictated by the International Monetary Fund, economic stagnation, and growing socioeconomic inequality. These generated powerful pressures for emigration among skilled blue-collar workers and the educated urban middle classes (Lijphart and Waisman 1996).

The impact of structural push factors resurfaces in our empirical data on pre-migration characteristics of labor migrants and the reasons they adduced for migrating.

Table 1 summarizes the sociodemographic characteristics of the Latino labor migrants and their human capital attributes prior to migration. Half the respondents in our sample came from Colombia. Approximately a quarter migrated from Ecuador, and the rest from Bolivia, Peru, Chile, and Venezuela. The bulk of Latinos arrived between 1993 and 1995, a period when Israel began officially recruiting overseas labor migrants (albeit not from Latin American countries), and the length of their stay in Israel averaged four years.

Migrants, men and women, were concentrated in the central labor-force ages (34 years on average), and displayed gendered differences in pattern of migration by family situation. More male migrants were single and came independently. Yet 25 percent of the women migrated alone (compared to 3 percent among men), leaving their children in the home country and suggesting that the role of income provider impels men and women alike to look for migration as an alternative to local employment.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of Latino migrant workers in Israel

	MALES	FEMALES
Age	32.7 (7.9)	34.3 (8.2)
Marital status		
Single	48.4	34.1
Married/living together	36.4	29.5
Divorced/separated	15.2	29.6
Widowed	—	6.8
Year of arrival (%)		
1989–1992	21.1	11.4
1993–1995	42.5	36.4
1996–1998	36.4	52.2
Patterns of migration		
Family migration	21.3	15.9
Family migration (single parent)	3	9.1
Both spouses, leaving children	6.1	11.4
Single parent, leaving children	3	25
One spouse, leaving spouse + children	15.3	9.1
Independent migration	51.3	29.5
Occupation in country of origin		
Professional and technical	18.8	11.4
Clerks and sales	31.2	36.3
Services/craft	50	52.3
Education		
Years of formal education	12.9 (3.6)	11.0 (3.1)
% holding academic degree	22.6	14.3
Income in country of origin ($)	415.0 (240.1)	256.3 (195.5)
Occupation in Israel		
Domestic work	41	100
Construction	19	—
Light industry	22	—
Services	18	—
N	33	44

Standard errors in parentheses.

Over a quarter of all respondents reported having children residing with them in Israel. Fifty percent of these children were between the ages of six and twelve and attended primary schools at the time of the interview. The explicit no-family policies for nonethnic migrants of the Israeli migration regime exerted a great pressure on families raising children under the constant shadow of deportability. At the same time, having children also enlarged the circles of association and interaction of Latino migrants with Israelis beyond the worksite to teachers, volunteers, and parents in schools in South Tel Aviv, where most undocumented migrants lived. Albeit partial and segmented, these forms of social integration accorded Latino families a social personhood anchored in everyday cooperation and interpersonal networks of solidarity, which proved crucial during the antideportation campaigns that led to the naturalization of children and their families in 2005 and 2010 (Kemp and Kfir, forthcoming).

Reasons for Migration

The reasons migrants gave for their move reflect the grim economic situation in their home countries. The majority gave economic reasons for leaving their countries of origin, adducing mainly lack of opportunities for upward socioeconomic mobility. The levels of human capital and socioeconomic attainment of Latino migrants prior to arrival, presented in Table 1, show that their average educational attainment was relatively high; half of them had worked in white-collar occupations before migration and many of them were self-employed. Respondents reported they earned US$378 on average, yet women reported earning 50 percent of men's income. These low income levels contrast

with their expected earnings in Israel—between US$1,000 to $1,500 per month.

Second to economic reasons, the existence of social networks in Israel was also singled out as one of the determinant reasons for migration. Many of our respondents told us that they originally thought of emigrating to Europe and Australia but finally came to Israel because they had someone there to help them upon arrival. Before their departure, almost half our interviewees had family members or friends residing in Israel, and almost two-thirds had at least one family member living there during their stay in Israel.

Religious motivations were the third reason reported for choosing Israel as a destination. One fifth of our respondents claimed that as the Holy Land, Israel has a unique attraction for Chistians worldwide who aspire to visit the country as pilgrims. Religious motivations were translated into action through the creation of religious organizations that formed the backbone of the emerging Latino community.

Pull Factors

Whatever the migrants' motivation, immigrants would not have gone to Israel in the absence of a propitious political economic opportunity structure for their reception. The segmented and dual structure of the Israeli labor market is crucial for understanding the demand for their labor mainly in the domestic and services sectors. Israeli demand for a low-skilled labor force was met in the past by Jewish immigrants from Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa region, and later by Palestinian cross-border workers from the occupied territories in West Bank and Gaza. However, following the deterioration of the security situation in 1991 and the signing of the Oslo agreements, Israel enacted closure policies that prevented the entry of Palestinian workers, opening the gates to the official recruitment of labor migrants from overseas (Kemp and Raijman 2008). At the time of our fieldwork, there were some 169,000 labor migrants in Israel, which is 10.6 percent of the total labor force; only 40 percent of them had work permits.

As in other countries, the official recruitment of labor migration brought about an influx of undocumented migrants hailing mainly from Eastern Europe, South Asia, Africa, and South America. Most entered the country on tourist visas that forbade them to work and became undocumented by overstaying them.

Patterns of recruitment of Latin American migrants were informal and proceeded through the direct recruitment by Latin American Jewish families living in Israel; invitations from friends and family already living and working in Israel; and through private entrepreneurs, such as travel agencies in the home countries that spread the image of Israel as a land of opportunity. These commonly offered prospective migrants religious pilgrimage packages to the Holy Places as the first venue for gaining acquaintance with Israeli society and as an easy way to enter the country.

As undocumented labor migrants, Latinos had a limited range of economic alternatives available in the Israeli labor market regardless of their skills (see bottom panel of Table 1). The great majority of Latino women and 41 percent of men were employed as domestic workers or *nikyoneros* (cleaning guys)—a hybrid of Spanish and Hebrew. Latino men also worked in construction and in service and light industries. For some of our respondents, their downward occupational mobility in Israel was traumatic even though they saw their stay in Israel as a transitional experience (Raijman, Schammah, and Kemp 2003).

Mediating Networks and Community Institutions

During the 1990s, independent social networks and institutional frameworks developed among Latinos in Israel (Schammah et al. 2000). As elsewhere, these connected present and prospective migrants, reducing the uncertainties of migrating to a new place, offering their members social capital, and filling the void left by the absence of traditional frameworks that could satisfy their social, cultural, and economic needs.

Religion-based networks also served as a social space for interaction, mutual aid, and the formation of community life (Kemp and Raijman 2003). Throughout the 1990s Latino migrants in Israel created a wide array of educational, political, and recreational associations. Yet religious organizations were the most prominent, and interviewees often offered moral classifications of the members of the community according to their degree of participation in religious life.

Latinos attended two kinds of religious organizations: the Catholic Church in Jaffa, which congregated once a week for Latino gatherings around the Mass offered in Spanish; and independent religious organizations, mostly evangelist, established by and for migrant workers. By the early 2000s, nearly ten Latino evangelical churches operated in south Tel Aviv. Evangelical communities comprised more than a thousand congregants, about half of them regular attendees. Arguably,

then, about 7 percent of the Latino migrants were active in evangelical churches. Churches served simultaneously as spiritual center, bank, school, employment bureau, and a shelter from the vicissitudes of everyday life.

The churches' public nature stood in contrast to the desperate attempts by undocumented migrants to disguise their presence in times of deportation campaigns. As religious places were protected from police intervention, they often offered congregants a physical as well as spiritual sanctuary. A less obvious way in which religion was linked to migration was in the use that migrants made of religious claims to support their inclusion in the host society. Such was the case with Evangelist churches, where members usually translated their interpretation of Christian theology into a claim of belonging, in line with hegemonic definitions of belonging and membership in Israel. For example, in our conversations with pastors and congregants and in the collective prayers, they often emphasized their desire to "work for Israel" as Christians. "Working for Israel" acquired a double meaning in the context of migrants, who during the day worked at domestic chores for Israelis and feared deportation, and in the church articulated their desire to support the Jewish state and help solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (perceived in religious terms) as their raison d'être in the Holy Land.

The Unmaking of the Latino Community

Usually theories that describe the emergence of new ethnic communities do not deal with the mechanisms that may dismantle the formal and informal associations created through the migrants' own initiatives.

Israeli state policy on undocumented migration took a dramatic turn in 2002 with the creation of the immigration police. After years of turning a blind eye to immigrants, since the establishment of the police, 118,105 people have left Israel, 40,000 of them as deportees. Recognizing the central role played by community networks and organizations in the lives of undocumented migrants, the police directed their activity at dismantling entire communities. Extensive policing and intelligence work was dedicated to locating and deporting community leaders and raiding places where labor migrants held community gatherings and spent their leisure time (Kamp and Raijman 2008).

Since the establishment of the immigration police, Latino migrants felt under siege. Being "illegal" became a permanent burden affecting migrants' everyday lives, and it constituted a recurrent theme in community gatherings (Raijman, Schammah, and Kemp 2003). The official portrayal of undocumented migrants as a threat to the Jewish character of the state, internal security, and the socioeconomic well-being of the native population runs counter to the positive image that Latinos had accrued in Israeli society for over a decade. This image relied, among other things, on the ability of Latinos to "go unnoticed" and pass as Israelis. Attempts at creating a union called the Organización de Trabajadores Latinoamericanos (OTL) in 1998, which would function as a channel for interaction with Israeli authorities, were nipped in the bud when police raided the homes of some community leaders. From interviews with Latino leaders, we learned that members of the community believed that the escalation in the arrest and deportation policy was a direct reaction to the community's organizational activities.

Deportation campaigns were particularly hard on families. As many families realized that they were not immune to deportation and that integration into Israeli society was not a viable option for non-Jewish migrants, parents began thinking about the moment of returning home to their countries of origin. In 1999 preparing children for return led to the creation of La Escuelita, a Sunday-school-like framework operated by migrants and Israeli volunteers (Kemp and Raijman 2008).

In the relatively short history of La Escuelita two distinct periods can be identified: the first from its foundation until the wave of deportations in 2005, the second from 2005 to the present. La Escuelita was the initiative of a Colombian migrant worker who operated an "underground" kindergarten for undocumented Latino children together with a municipal organization. Operated by volunteers from the Latino and the South American Jewish community, its main objective was to preserve the cultural heritage of Latinos' children until they returned to their (parents') countries and to facilitate the children's return to those countries.

In 2005 La Escuelita changed its principal objective. The deportation campaigns targeted families but in fact deported mainly men. Many of the women who had resolved to remain in Israel with their children were eventually naturalized as a result of two government decisions in 2005 and 2010 that granted legal status to children and their families (Kemp 2007). The determination to stay and the legalization campaigns reshaped the focus of La Escuelita's activities: it became a center for helping children and adults to assimilate in Israeli culture and society and meet the needs of those that remained. Today the target groups of educational

activities are mainly female migrant workers, aged 25 to over 50, originating from five countries: Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Puerto Rico (Lerner 2014). With respect to children, the emphasis is not on Spanish language but on offering tutoring as a complement to the regular school's educational agenda. Whereas arrest and deportation policies resulted in the dismantling of most of the other community institutions, La Escuelita exemplifies how migrants' associations and initiatives change and adapt to new political constellations.

Conclusions

Detention and deportation strategies implemented in Israel since the mid-1990s, and most harshly in the 2000s, made a forcible impact on the precarious organization of the Latino community. Deportations and the mass exodus of Latino labor migrants exerted a devastating effect on the social organizations that during the 1990s promoted a Latino sense of community. The social spaces that were run by and for Latinos and that provided the basis for the community were crushed, and friendship and kin networks formed around these informal social organizations were decisively truncated. When community leaders, church pastors, and Latino migrants were detained and deported by the state, social and religious activities ceased and the community finally collapsed. Detention and deportation are some of the more visible forms of internal enforcement prevalent not only in Israel but in other host countries such as the United States and countries in the European Union. The practice of deportation is another way for states to reaffirm the contours and importance of national citizenship and sovereignty in the global context (Menjívar 2014). As our case study has shown, policing of immigrants and enforcement controls through detention and deportation shape the everyday lives of immigrants and their families and communities in major receiving countries, and intensify their socioeconomic vulnerabilities.

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