My Odyssey

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Beginnings

I was born and raised in a gritty little steel mill town in western Pennsylvania, where Mexico was considered an exotic foreign land. But as a high school student I was able to go there for a summer field trip, which cemented my affinity for all things Mexican. As an undergraduate at the College of Wooster I had the opportunity to write a senior thesis on the politics of Mexico's emerging middle class, which was my ticket into the PhD program in political science at Stanford University.

My dissertation project sought to document and explain how Mexico's "official party" manipulated the attitudes and behavior of people who had moved to Mexico City from rural areas. My choice of topic was a reaction to social mobilization theory, then fashionable in political science, which was being used—without evidence—to paint rural-to-urban migrants who had lost their moorings as potential agents of instability and political radicalism in Third World countries. This was an empirical question that cried out for testing with field data.

The "country communities in the city" that such migrants had formed on the periphery of what was then the Distrito Federal were prime sites for field research, and I jumped in. I found that, far from being nesting grounds for anti-state movements, the *colonias irregulares*, as the squatter settlements and unauthorized *fraccionamientos* were called, were fertile ground for the regrowth of conservative rural political traditions, including the *cacicazgo*. One of my earliest publications from the dissertation was an article, published in an ethnography journal, entitled "A Structural Analysis of Urban *Caciquismo* in Mexico." This line of research brought me into the nascent scientific study of clientelism, vote buying, and other political practices common in authoritarian systems around the world.

The subject matter was fascinating, but by the mid-1970s the static quality of Mexico's political institutions was evident to anyone who observed the system. I and other scholars freely used the metaphor of the "living museum of Mexican politics." Did I really want to spend the rest of my career being one of the academic co-curators of this museum, fine-tuning our understanding of why competitive, fair elections never happened, and why popular protests (excluding the 1968 student movement) were so muted? I am quite happy that I lived to see the emergence of a functioning democracy in Mexico, whatever its imperfections, beginning in the late 1990s. But in the 1970s, Mexico's prospects for democratization looked dim.

In 1975, I decided to reverse-engineer my dissertation project, studying a collection of rural communities in Los Altos de Jalisco that had long exported people to Mexico City and Guadalajara. In one of those serendipitous accidents of life, I found myself in towns where the flow of people had shifted from Mexican destinations to the United States (or had always been centered on "going north"). The fieldwork that my students and I did in those migrant-sending communities became my off-ramp from a preoccupation with the Mexican political system. Of course, there was some overlap in my interests. Mexicans leaving their homes in rural areas were refugees from

economic conditions created and perpetuated by generations of misrule and socially retrogressive policies pursued by each successive PRI-dominated government in Mexico City. But the international migration experience opened some significant new intellectual challenges for me, and I seized that opportunity.

I was the first US-based scholar to study the Mexico-to-US migration process from the vantage point of rural Mexican labor-exporting communities, using a mixed-methods, survey cum ethnography approach. That mode of research became more common in the 1980s and beyond, but in the mid-1970s it seemed a rather high-risk venture. Sending-community-based field research proved a very fruitful way of advancing our understanding of migration dynamics, especially when it is coupled with fieldwork in the US cities that received these migrants.

My students and I continued to do this type of community-based field research nearly every year through 2015, when I "retired"—for the second time—from the University of California, San Diego. By that point the Mexican Migration Field Research and Training Program that I had created at UCSD was well established and had produced fifteen books, coauthored by the students and edited by me and faculty collaborators. Reviewing that body of work recently, I was struck by how many of the immigration policy issues that continue to roil US politics were anticipated and ably documented by my teams of US and Mexican student field researchers.

As I became more deeply immersed in migration studies, I became more interested in reaching a broader, multidisciplinary audience. I started passing myself off as a sociologist, since the *migrólogos* whose work most interested me, and whose attention I sought, were largely sociologists. I take pride in having been a closet sociologist for all these years! I found a congenial home in LASA, a thoroughly interdisciplinary organization in which the breadth of a scholar's contribution and influence beyond his or her home discipline was viewed as an important strength.

Into the Policy Jungle

Any scholar focusing on contemporary Mexican migration to the United States is likely to be drawn into the business of policy analysis. US policies for "controlling" this migration flow have been so misguided, so oblivious to evidence from scientific research, and so hurtful to generations of migrating families that they cry out for serious scrutiny. Thus began my career in what is sometimes called "advocacy scholarship." I learned to write a pretty mean, 750-word op-ed and churned out over 110 of them, critiquing US immigration policies and proposing what I thought were more rational, humane, and effective alternatives. I gained a place on the enemies lists of the major anti-immigration organizations operating in the United States, like Numbers USA and FAIR. Recently I have become deeply immersed in two of the 2020 presidential campaigns, trying to make sure that ideas that could take us to a much better place on immigration policy get an adequate hearing in this election cycle.

But we live in the era of so-called alternative facts—an era in which the very notion of objective facts is questioned. Defying the scientific evidence has become fashionable in issue areas ranging from climate change to childhood immunizations and genetically modified foods. In the field of immigration, we have a ton of facts. We know a great deal about the drivers of migration behavior, the social and economic impacts of immigration, the demographics of immigrant flows and stocks, and the ways in which immigrant and refugee communities are impacted by public policies. We know these things from more than four decades of carefully executed social science research involving tens of thousands of field interviews conducted by research teams based at UC San Diego, Princeton University, the University of Arizona, and various Mexican partner universities. This mountain of scientific evidence should have had a huge impact on policy, but in our imperfect world the impact has fallen far short of "huge."

Intellectually and morally indefensible policies and regulations targeting economic migrants and asylum seekers continue to tumble out of the federal government, with specious rationales about

"deterrence" and "security" that fly in the face of settled empirical research findings. Arguably the most egregious of these measures is the "Remain in Mexico" policy, which to date has forced more than 65,000 asylum seekers to wait months or even years for their day in a US immigration court, struggling to survive in dangerous border cities where they are easy marks for criminal gangs and are highly vulnerable to COVID-19 contagion. Regrettably, that policy has been enabled by the Mexican government, under economic threat by the Trump administration.

Such policies do absolutely nothing to address the real drivers of migration, which are low-end poverty, endemic gang and drug violence, impunity, and climate change. But they are highly efficient for instilling fear in immigrant families and communities. They are cruel; they don't work in discouraging migration; and they generate a host of unintended consequences, not least inducing millions of would-be temporary migrants to settle permanently in the United States. Why should policymakers have expected these measures to work as claimed?

We have extensive, fieldwork-based research demonstrating, with great clarity and precision, the *weakness* of policy variables in shaping migration decisions. These findings suggest a politically inconvenient truth that holds true cross-nationally: governments have very limited capacity to control migration flows once they become well established and are fueled by employer demand in the receiving country. But if the findings come from small-N community surveys or ethnographic research, it is easy to dismiss them as merely "anecdotal" evidence.

Old assumptions about the economic impacts of immigration continue to fuel zero-sum thinking about policy options. There has never been a consensus among labor economists that the wage depression effects of immigration are both widespread and large enough to significantly dampen wage growth for Americans—even those with low education—nor that immigrants "take jobs" directly from the native-born. The empirical evidence is mixed but, on balance, it strongly suggests that most US workers and immigrants

are complementary to each other in today's labor markets, enabling businesses to grow faster and create more jobs for both types of workers. Most scholars believe that there are far more important constraints on wage improvement, like technological change and competition from abroad.

The yawning gap between immigration policies and our research products is certainly frustrating, to me and other scholars working in the field. For example, there is a very strong economics case to be made for significantly increasing our current intake of immigrants and refugees as a strategy for managing our deepening demographic and fiscal deficits. But apart from a few above-the-battle types like former Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke, political leaders are loath to make that argument publicly. Only one of the 2020 presidential candidates, Mayor Pete Buttigieg, dared to do so.

Other countries, such as Australia and the UK, have found their way to evidence-based immigration policymaking, at least for managing legal immigration flows. They collect large amounts of data frequently through employer interviews and other methodologies, enabling them to adjust visa caps to changing labor market demand. The contrast with the US is dramatic: Our allotments of employment-based visas are stuck in the 1990s. Why, for example, should we limit short-term, low-skilled service worker visas to 66,000 per year, in a $20 trillion economy? Why should we admit fewer people on permanent, employment-based visas than Australia, despite having 14 times more population? Because Congress sets the caps at whatever its members think the political traffic will bear. Until recently the US had the tightest labor market in 50 years, but our political class continued to approach visa reform timidly, as if we were still in the depths of the Great Recession.

Why hasn't the United States seriously considered a more flexible, evidence-based approach? More generally, why hasn't the US policy arena yielded more readily to the mass of accumulated scientific evidence? Partly because too many Americans have been left behind economically as a consequence of globalization and technology change, and

income inequality is out of control. It is still much too easy for politicians to scapegoat immigrants and asylum seekers for all manner of economic grievances, and to stigmatize them as tax burdens, law breakers, and potential security threats. The United States has a very long tradition of rancid immigrant-bashing dating back to Ben Franklin in the mid-eighteenth century, and in recent decades the persistent nativist strain in American political culture has bubbled to the surface again.

The New Politics of Immigration

Since 2015 the nativist current has been powerfully amplified by Donald Trump's sustained strategy of conflating immigration with violent crime and appealing to white nativism. Never in my lifetime has the partisan divide on immigration been so wide and hardened. When I first got into policy debates on immigration, in the late 1970s, we were discussing the merits of relatively benign policies, like imposing modest fines on employers who hire undocumented workers. In Congress, immigration legislation was being fashioned by mainstream politicians like Democratic Senator Ted Kennedy and Republican Senator Alan Simpson. The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, which gave us the only large-scale legalization programs in the last half century, was the product of a genuine effort to forge a bipartisan consensus on immigration policy. It was a different world.

Not in my wildest imagination did I expect that, 40 years later, I would be writing about policies designed to separate thousands of migrant children from their parents and put them in cages, the stashing of well over 60,000 asylum seekers in dangerous Mexican border cities to wait months or years for their first US court hearing, the collection of DNA samples from asylum seekers in detention, a gradually extending 30-foot-tall wall on the US-Mexico border, an unleashed deportation force that breaks up tens of thousands of families yearly, the obsessive pursuit of immigration arrests in the midst of a pandemic, mass immigrant incarceration in a gulag of for-profit prisons, the creation of a special "denaturalization" office within the Justice Department whose mission is to strip citizenship from naturalized immigrants who have committed unspecified crimes, the denial of

green cards to immigrant parents if they get food stamps or Medicaid for their children, and a grab bag of additional regulatory changes to obstruct legal immigration and whiten immigrant flows by making it much more difficult for brown and black people to gain access to visas.

Just when I convince myself that the Trump administration (and its enablers in Congress) could not possibly come up with a worse policy choice, the next day brings something even worse. How about an executive order encouraging states and localities to block resettlement of new refugees within their jurisdictions? Check! Or deploying militarized tactical units of Border Patrol agents—trained to engage in armed confrontations with drug smugglers—to US sanctuary cities to arrest anything that moves in those jurisdictions? Yes, it's happening! Or 24-hour-a-day surveillance operations by hundreds of ICE agents around the homes and workplaces of undocumented immigrants? Now under way. The mindless cruelty, the wrongheadedness, and the immorality of all this sometimes throws me off kilter. I find myself wondering why I didn't specialize in Byzantine history.

But scholars have a responsibility. Those with the means to do so should be producing the policy-oriented research that is essential to holding public officials accountable for their choices on immigration and refugee issues, even if the officials themselves are so impervious to empirical evidence and rational argument that they simply don't care what academics have to say. When the history of this ghastly era is written, it will be important that scholars be seen as having done their part to restrain the worst impulses of our political class.

What is different about immigration as a public policy issue? It is what political scientists call a high-valence, wedge issue. It raises fundamental issues of national and personal identity. It lends itself to zero-sum thinking and a false "us versus them" dichotomy. Rahm Emanuel, when he was President Jimmy Carter's chief domestic policy adviser, famously called immigration the "third rail of American politics." His argument was that

taking a position on just about any immigration issue would lose a politician more votes than it would gain.

This imagined calculus persists in the American political class, despite the growing importance of constituencies (like Latino voters!) for whom more generous immigration policies presumably would be attractive. How else to explain inaction on something so obviously needed and in the national interest like extending permanent protection to young undocumented immigrants brought to the US as children? Nineteen years after the first Dream Act was introduced, Congress still hasn't gotten it done. And why has comprehensive immigration reform legislation failed three times in Congress since 2006?

Immigration is also a contentious policy issue because it frequently entangles both domestic and foreign policy concerns. It is the quintessential "intermestic" issue. The long saga of US policy toward Cuban immigration is the most obvious example, but more recently the case of Central American transit migration through Mexico to the US border provides another illustration. The Trump administration's unwillingness to pursue a developmental "root causes" response to Northern Triangle emigration reflects strong domestic antipathy to foreign aid in general, especially among Republican voters. The administration's largely successful efforts to browbeat the Mexican government into doing the United States' dirty work on Mexico's southern and northern borders reflects Trump's demonization of Mexico and his use of tariff threats to get his way—both highly popular with his base.

The good news is that, these days, most Americans aren't buying the old-time restrictionist arguments. In fact, general public opinion is now significantly ahead of the US political class in accepting immigrants and in recognizing their contributions to the economy and society. National-level survey data show that public support for immigration is at an historic high, with nearly two-thirds of Americans wanting a higher level of immigration or to maintain the current level. Of course, restrictionist appeals still resonate in a segment of the electorate, but it is a contracting segment.

There are striking generational differences in tolerance, with Millennials and Gen-Xers far more likely to have positive views of immigrants than older generations.

The changing demography of both the United States and Mexico has the potential to reshape the US immigration policy debate and drastically shrink the gap between academic research and policies. Mexico's transition from a country of large-scale emigration to the US to mainly a transit country for migrants originating in Central America is now a reality. "Out-of-control" flows of Mexican nationals to the United States are a thing of the past. Mexico's transition to a low-fertility, even labor-short country is now far enough along that it can no longer be portrayed convincingly as a limitless reservoir of migrants that could inundate the United States.

The US transition to a country of diminishing native-born labor supply and, in many parts of the country, absolute population loss, is well advanced. The incentives that politicians and political parties have for immigrant-bashing are weakening. Eventually, as in Japan since 2017, immigration may come to be embraced by our political class as an essential part of the solution for managing demographic and fiscal imbalances. When that happens, the persistent gap between immigration research and policy may largely disappear. In short, demography may come to the rescue of the academy.

An Agenda for New Research

Immigration issues are still very much worth studying by Latin Americanists. For example, further research may lead to promising policy experiments that could make it easier and quicker for immigrants and refugees to integrate themselves into US society and develop their human capital. Policy evaluation research on new forms of targeted development and rule-of-law assistance could be used to justify heavier investments in this approach to reducing emigration from today's principal sending countries. New research could document the efficacy of place-based visas in steering newly arriving immigrants and refugees to those parts of the country whose populations and tax bases are shrinking and into occupations (e.g., home

health care aide) that are labor-short. These and other kinds of policy interventions could enhance the already strong economic complementarities between immigrants and the US-born population, but we need a stronger research base to justify scaling them up.

I have absolutely no regrets that my professional odyssey took me in this direction. Not only was I able to do my bit to hold politicians' feet to the fire; I was able to use my field research training program to introduce hundreds of students—undergraduates as well as grad students—to the joys and travails of collecting primary data, and to the exciting and important career opportunities available to those who choose to focus their careers on immigration issues. Last year I returned to classroom teaching, at Reed College, partly because I could not resist the temptation to introduce a new generation of students to this endlessly fascinating field of inquiry. Whatever I have done to inspire and prepare such students is a far more important legacy than the boxes of publications that will eventually end up in some landfill.

My professional odyssey over these years has been paralleled by a personal odyssey. As a gay person, receiving the Silvert Award in Mexico carries special meaning. Mexico preceded the United States in legalizing same-sex marriage by six years, first in Mexico City and now in 18 other states, including Jalisco. Same-sex marriages are now recognized nationwide. Much more remains to be done in combating discrimination in the workplace and elsewhere, in both the United States and Mexico. But amazing progress has been made during my lifetime, and I am grateful to be able to celebrate the advances.

I would like to close by thanking the Latin American studies *colegas*, including several based in Mexico City, who have been so supportive of my odyssey, both professional and personal. My former students have been equally supportive. For decades, my family and my UC San Diego Political Science colleagues indulged my obsession with building academic programs on immigration and US-Mexican relations. As I now work through my third retirement since 2009, I say to all of you: It has been a *gran viaje*. And if there are new chapters yet to come, I hope to have you along as *estimados compañeros de viaje*.

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