

A Flawed Analysis of Mexican Migration

Book Review by Phil Martin

Sociologist Douglas Massey believes that the U.S. cannot control Mexico-U.S. migration, and that U.S. legislation aimed at reducing unauthorized Mexico-U.S. migration has harmed migrants and the interests of Mexico and the United States. Massey and his co-authors urge the U.S. government to acknowledge that Mexico-U.S. migration is inevitable, and to regularize and manage Mexico-U.S. migration “to promote economic development in Mexico, minimize costs and disruptions for the United States, and maximize benefits for all concerned.”

The book has seven chapters. Chapter two outlines “natural laws” that govern international migration,

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Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration
by Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan J. Malone
New York: Russell Sage Foundation
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Chapter three is an historical survey of Mexico-U.S. migration, Chapter four explores the data that aim to prove the Mexico-U.S. migration system “worked” between 1965 and 1986, and chapters five and six explain the “failure” of IRCA and other U.S. legislation to reduce illegal immigration in the late 1980s. Chapter seven is Massey’s proposed solution — more immigration visas for Mexicans, a massive guest worker program, an end to border enforcement, and stepped-up labor law enforcement.

Smoke and Mirrors ultimately fails as a “scientific guide” to educate Americans about Mexico-U.S. migration and to provide a foundation for policy making. The book’s major flaw is that it recommends only changes in U.S. policy. Massey makes no mention of Mexican policies that allow for growing inequality, that favor some regions over others, and that tolerate corruption. Many Mexicans assert that Mexico

needs a new round of domestic reforms — electoral reforms, fiscal reforms, reforms in the agriculture, electricity and energy sectors, and reforms in the labor market. Instead, *Smoke and Mirrors* asserts that the mistakes have all been made by the U.S. government, and only changes in U.S. policies are recommended.

Massey and his colleagues have spent years interviewing migrants in the west-central states from which Mexican workers were recruited in the 1940s and 1950s to work on U.S. farms, and from which most Mexican migrants still come. They find that in these traditional areas of emigration, young people still leave for the U.S. despite stepped-up U.S. border controls and employer sanctions. The central argument of the book is that U.S. control efforts after 1986 turned “a relatively open and benign labor process” of circular and sojourner migration into one marked by “an exploitative underground system of labor coercion, one that lowered wages and working conditions of undocumented migrants, legal immigrants, and American citizens alike.”

The evidence offered for the book’s assertions and recommendations comes from data assembled by the Mexican Migration Project which interviewed migrants in seventy-one communities over the past fifteen years. The appendix warns that MMP data are not “strictly representative” of Mexican migrants, but asserts that “the MMP offers valid and reliable data for studying patterns and processes of Mexico-U.S. migration” (p.170).

The theory of economically motivated migration has been refined over decades, and predicts that movements will be from areas of lower to higher expected incomes. The book calls this theory simplistic, and argues that missing markets and other factors motivate migration. There is no doubt that the so-called new economics of migration focused attention on additional factors that enter into migration decisions. But on a scale of 1 to 10, expected income may be 8, while the fact that a poor family cannot buy insurance for crop failure, and thus migrates when the crop fails, can suggest the wrong policy response — even if crop insurance were available, most poor farmers would not buy it.

Chapter three outlines the history of Mexico-U.S. migration, emphasizing that U.S. recruiters played an important role in getting Mexican migrants accustomed to working in the U.S. Massey is right to criticize the migration management belief that the U.S. can turn the

Mexican labor tap on and off at will — what he calls the U.S.’s desire to “have its cake and eat it too.” The Massey argument is that the U.S. has the choice of accepting Mexicans legally or illegally, and legal is better than illegal. However, during the 22-year Bracero program, both legal and illegal Mexico-U.S. migration increased — there were more apprehensions than Bracero admissions over the 22-year program (both apprehensions and admissions count events, not unique individuals).

There are several factual errors — Okies and other U.S. farm workers did not disappear after 1942, when Braceros arrived in the fields (p.35), five million Mexicans were not Braceros — many were admitted year after year, so one to two million Mexicans generated almost five million admissions (p.39), and growers were not dis-satisfied with the Bracero program — they fought very hard to continue it in 1963 (p.41). Massey’s argument of inevitable Mexico-U.S. migration assumes that migration continued illegally when the Bracero program stopped, but between 1965 and the late 1970s there was little illegal immigration, which is one reason why Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers were able to raise some California farm workers’ wages to twice the minimum wage in the late 1970s.

Chapter four argues that there was “a stable, smoothly functioning migration system...in the mid-1980s” (p.71) in which young Mexican men migrated illegally to the U.S. and worked, on average, eight months a year for \$4 an hour. Most Americans who were close to U.S. labor markets would disagree that this represented a “smoothly functioning migration system.” The UFW, for example, had “wet lines” along the border to try to prevent illegal entries that could break its strikes, and testified in Congress in favor of a beefed-up Border Patrol in the early 1980s. The Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy heard testimony that U.S. employers were lowering their labor costs by turning to contractors and other intermediaries who hired unauthorized workers to lower wages. These problems with illegal immigration led to the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986.

Chapters five and six blame IRCA for disrupting the “smoothly functioning migration system” that moved Mexican sojourners in and out of the U.S. The Mexican government began to switch its economic policies toward export-oriented growth in 1986, and the U.S. agreed to

NAFTA in 1993. However, the book criticizes the U.S. for embracing NAFTA and simultaneously trying to reduce illegal Mexican-U.S. migration — even though an important argument in favor of NAFTA was that it would bring about faster economic and job growth in Mexico that would slow migration eventually.

We are told that “the benefits of Mexico-U.S. migration have historically exceeded the costs for all concerned” (p.105), and that “post-IRCA immigration policies have failed to stop undocumented migration; they have produced a host of negative consequences for immigrants and natives alike; they have spread these unfortunate effects as widely as possible throughout the country; and that they have maximized their negative impacts” by turning Mexican sojourners into settlers (p.136). If the benefits and costs were so clear, why does Congress vote for ever-increasing expenditures for border enforcement, and why do polls show that a majority of Americans want more done to reduce illegal migration?

The book’s policy recommendations were summarized in a 1998 article entitled “March of Folly.” As in this book, the article argued that Mexico-U.S. migration was not driven by fundamental economic factors — higher wages and jobs in the U.S. — but instead by market consolidation, human capital and social capital. Market consolidation — using markets to allocate resources rather than government — opens new opportunities for Mexicans in rural areas, while introducing new risks, prompting migration in order to obtain money than cannot be borrowed from a bank, for example. Human capital refers to the fact that successful entry into the U.S. changes a person, making him more familiar with procedures for crossing the border and getting a U.S. job, while social capital extends this knowledge to friends and relatives, smoothing the path for them to migrate.

Smoke and Mirrors proposes reforms with three key elements: a guest worker program so that Mexicans can enter the U.S. legally in exchange for paying a \$300 fee, a reduction in border enforcement with the resources shifted to interior labor market enforcement, and renewed efforts to promote economic development in Mexico.

The book’s analysis is useful for highlighting cumulative causation, explaining how a migration flow, once set in motion, can assume a life of its own, much as

a snowball rolling down a hill gathers speed and size, so that migration can beget more migration if underlying demand and supply factors do not change. However, the theory seems to operate only in one direction, to explain why migration can increase over time, but not how it can decrease.

The failure to include in the book a theory explaining why migration decreases means that following its policy recommendations could wind up further increasing legal and unauthorized migration. For example, the recommendations in this book would do nothing to reduce the demand for Mexican workers in the U.S., so fewer border controls could increase Mexico-U.S. migration. Ending the Bracero program showed that there is flexibility on the U.S. demand side of the labor market — the demand for low-skilled Mexican labor could be curbed sharply in U.S. agriculture, construction, and services, with few consequences for the average U.S. consumer.

The major strength of the book is to document the evolution of networks that have helped to turn potential into actual migration in parts of rural Mexico. However, Mexico-U.S. migration is still very selective — Mexico has 2,400 *municipios*, analogous to U.S. counties, and most migrants come from about 100, or five percent of them.¹ Massey and his colleagues are pessimistic that migration from these migration *municipios* can be curbed; Cornelius and other experts on Mexican development believe that Mexico-U.S. migration could be reduced with targeted development strategies. The Massey solution — opening up more migration channels — may wind up making Mexico-U.S. migration less manageable.

NOTES

1. Cornelius, Wayne. 2002. “Impacts of NAFTA on Mexico-to-U.S. Migration” in Chambers, Edward and Peter H. Smith. Eds. 2002. *NAFTA in the New Millennium*. UCSD Center for U.S. - Mexican Studies and University of Alberta Press. www.usmex.ucsd.edu/pubs/usmexpress/nafta.html