Mixtec Activism in Oaxacalifornia

Transborder Grassroots Political Strategies

GASPAR RIVERA-SALGADO
University of California, Santa Cruz

In the context of the globalization of capital and the increased mobility of labor across international borders, this article analyzes the experience of indigenous migrant workers from the state of Oaxaca who have formed permanent communities in northern Mexico and in California. It focuses specifically on the experience of the Mixtec transnational community whose participation in the Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional has strengthened and changed the ethnic identities that hold together these communities across a fractured geography of different borders (at the local, state, and international levels) and has served as one of the bases to organize across these transnational borders. This analysis contributes to an understanding of how the activism of transnational political organizations promotes the construction of new political alliances along ethnic lines in a post-melting-pot California and the consolidation of indigenous migrant organizations within the context of increasing U.S.-Mexican economic integration.

On February 10, 1997, the local media in the Fresno area reported on a rally that a group of migrant farmworkers had organized in front of the Mexican Consulate offices in that city, located in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley of California. What caught the attention of the media was that this organization, composed of indigenous Mixtec farmworkers, had simultaneously organized a press conference in the northern border city of Tijuana and a caravan traveling from the Mixtec town of Juxtlahuaca to the City of Oaxaca. Along the way, the protesters had managed to symbolically take over the ancient city of Monte Alban. The main demand of this binational political mobilization, which had been coordinated across the 2,000-mile distance between Oaxaca and California, was to ask the Mexican federal government to recognize the agreement on culture and indigenous autonomy that they had signed with the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in February 1996. On the other hand, the organizers of this

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mobilization also demanded that the governor of Oaxaca attend to the specific demands of the 22 communities belonging to the Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional (Binational Indigenous Oaxacan Front; hereafter, the Frente).

This display of collective action at the binational level carried out by Mixtec migrants made me think about the impact that the massive migration of indigenous peoples from Oaxaca has had on such notions as indigenous community and ethnic identity. I asked myself, Where does Oaxaca begin or end for these indigenous migrants? Does it begin or end on the streets of Los Angeles, California, where for the past 6 years Zapotecs and Mixtecs have organized a cultural festival known as the *Guelaguetza* for a massive audience that last year reached almost 2,000 people? Does it begin or end in the agricultural fields of the San Joaquin Valley in Central California, where more than 40,000 Mixtecs work and where one can go cheer for one's favorite team of *pelota mixteca* every Sunday in the city of Madera? In the everyday practice of these migrants, their community of reference has transcended the limits of the U.S. and Mexican borders and has become a deterritorialized space[1] (sometimes called Oaxacalifornia), which has allowed for the eruption of novel forms of organization and political expression (see Kearney, 1995a).

The incorporation of large numbers of indigenous peoples in the U.S.-bound Mexican migratory flow illustrates just how dramatically migration patterns are changing. Not only is an increased number of migrants attempting to cross the border, but also new groups have joined the migratory stream (Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 1994a). Indigenous peoples such as Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Triques from Oaxaca; Nahuas from Guerrero; and Purepechas from Michoacan form the largest share of this new immigration wave (see Anderson, 1997; Zabin, Kearney, Garcia, Runsten, & Nagengast, 1993). For example, recent research has documented that Mixtec farmworkers now make up 7% of California's agricultural labor force. This research has also demonstrated that many of these new indigenous migrants came to the United States for the first time during the mid-1980s and that they tend to concentrate at the bottom of the agricultural labor market in California, performing the most physically demanding and the worst paid jobs (Zabin et al., 1993). However, far from being passive victims of exploitative conditions, indigenous migrants have responded very creatively to the multiple challenges they face in both countries by forming binational political organizations that allow them to undertake collective action both in their communities of origin and in the multiple satellite communities they have established along their migratory circuit. These vibrant indigenous organizations stand in sharp contrast to the less overtly political and more informal organizations prior mestizo migrants have developed, despite long-standing migration from the traditional sending regions in west-central Mexico (encompassing the states of Jalisco, Michoacan, Guanajuato, and Zacatecas) (see Dinerman, 1982; Mines, 1981; Massey, Alarcón, Durand, & González, 1987).

Some questions arising from these observations are, Why have indigenous Mexican migrants done better than other mestizo migrants in developing

binational grassroots organizations to defend their political and economic rights and mobilizing politically on both sides of the border? and How does the political activism of these transnational communities affect politics on both sides of the border, at local, regional, and state levels? In this article, I will try to tease out some important elements for discussion that will hopefully frame some of the answers to these questions. I will base this reflection on my fieldwork and direct participation with one of these binational indigenous organizations—the Frente.

This article seeks to accomplish four goals. First, it will discuss the theoretical implications of transnational approaches to migration. It will also provide the political context of the transnational activism of indigenous migrant farmworkers. The article will then explain in more detail the context of indigenous migration from Mexico to the United States. Finally, it will discuss specific examples of transnational activism and its impact on politics in the communities of origin and destiny.

METHOD

To understand the migratory and political experiences of Mexican indigenous workers who migrate to California, I collected several forms of data between June 1996 and August 1998. A major source was 40 in-depth interviews, conducted in Spanish on both sides of the border, with a socially diverse sample of Mixtec (17), Zapotec (13), and Purepecha (10) migrants (30 men and 10 women). In addition to the interviews, I conducted participant observation research in three municipalities in the Mixteca region in Oaxaca (Juxtlahuaxa, Tecomaxttlahuaca, and Tlacoptepec), two Zapotec municipalities (Tlacochahuaya and Macuiltianguis), and two Purepecha municipalities (Cheran and Paracho) and their various communities of destination in California (Fresno, Madera, Watsonville, Santa Cruz, Los Angeles, and Oceanside). Participant observation was conducted on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border at various religious and social community activities, political rallies, and everyday settings such as work and home.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF TRANSNATIONAL APPROACHES

Recent literature on international migration has focused on the emergence of transnational communities. These studies have furthered our understanding about transnational action, community building, and the formation of transnational political communities in the United Sates, Mexico, and the Caribbean (e.g., Basch, Glick Schiller, & Szanton-Blanc, 1994; Georges, 1990; Glick Schiller, 1995; Glick Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Goldring, 1992; Kearney, 1995b; Kearney & Nagengast, 1989; Rouse, 1989; Smith, 1995). In

this literature, transnationalism is defined as "the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Basch et al., 1994, p. 7). At the heart of the transnational approach to international migration is the argument that the current restructuring of global capital produces a new set of political, economic, and social relations between the sending communities and governments and the citizens abroad. In this view, migration represents a "multi-level process (demographic, political, economic, cultural, familial) that involves various links between two or more settings rather than a discrete event constituted by a permanent move from one nation to another" (Gold, 1997, p. 410).

Transnationalists conceptualize migration

> as an on-going process through which ideas, resources and people change locations and develop meaning in multiple locations, suggesting that by retaining social, cultural and economic links with various locations and contexts, people can surmount the impediments traditionally associated with long-distance and international borders. (Gold, 1997, p. 410)

At the same time, transnationalism reminds us that migrants remain heavily involved in the life of their countries of origin even though they no longer permanently live there. Transnational social relations thus allow migrants to develop and maintain multiple relations in more that one nation-state.

It is also argued that the present transnational migration represents a different experience from those of past migrations: It now involves the constant movement of people and heightens social and economic dependence between transmigrants and nation-states within a field of global social networks (Appadurai, 1996; Basch et al., 1994). Therefore, although the proponents of the transnationalist approach argue that there are many examples of transnational political, economic, and social relations from the past, the current connections between immigrations and their home societies are of a different order (Glick Schiller et al., 1992).

The processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their countries of origin and their countries of settlement are the product of the current global capitalist system and have created a situation in which migrants construct, maintain, and reproduce transnational links as a response to shifts in the global economy. The global restructuring of capital has created dislocations in industrialized states (deindustrialization) and in the Third World (economic adjustment programs), giving rise to increased migration in a context of economic vulnerability in both host and sending states, and has "increased the likelihood that migrants would construct a transnational existence" (Glick Schiller et al., 1992, p. 9). Unlike previous population movements, the current migration takes place in a globalized context of economic uncertainty that, in turn, facilitates the construction of systems of social relations that transcend national borders. In short, the circulation of goods, ideas, and information is embedded in

these systems of global social relations that are maintained, reconfigured, and reproduced "in the context of families, of institutions, of economic investments, business, and finance and of political organizations and structures including nation-states" (Glick Schiller et al., 1992, p. 11).

Another key assumption of transnationalism is the notion that race, ethnicity, and nationality are constructed categories that are reconfigured and strategically deployed both by nation-states and by individual transmigrants. Caribbean leaders, for example, have created deterritorialized nation-states that define state boundaries not in geographical terms but rather in social terms in order to include citizens abroad. Political leaders "who claim to lead deterritorialized states have taken steps both practically and symbolically to serve as representatives, protectors, and spokespeople for their dispersed populations" (Basch et al., 1994). For instance, in the wake of the 1994 presidential election in Mexico, the opposition candidate Cuáuhtemoc Cárdenas appealed to thousands of Mexican migrants, during a multicity tour throughout California, for support in his attempt to become the first opposition Mexican president. Cárdenas emphasized the importance of Mexican citizens abroad in constructing the "new Mexican nation." Cárdenas's visit to his California constituency was an attempt to cement the loyalties of Mexicans in the United States by strengthening their identification with the Mexican nation and, by extension, the political contests of the Mexican state.

While politicians and government officials are engaged in nation-building projects, transmigrants themselves construct transnational identities. Again, within a global context of economic uncertainty, transmigrants find full incorporation into the host country either difficult or undesirable. Glick Schiller (1995) argues that transmigrants "settle in countries that are the centers of global capitalism but live transnational lives" for three reasons: Global restructuring of capital leads to unstable social and economic conditions in both host and sending nations; racism in the United States and Europe further exacerbates transmigrants' economic and social vulnerability; and nation-building projects, attempting to ensure immigrants' loyalties, reinforce ties with their home communities (p. 50). Consequently, transmigrants fashion multiple identities within a global landscape of the "delocalized transnation" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 33). The transnational approach to identity—based on nation, race, gender, and ethnicity[2]—focuses on the ways in which it is problematized and becomes particularly salient as a result of migration. Such identities, transnationalist theorists argue, are reconfigured and deployed both to "accommodate and resist their subordination within a global capitalist system" (Glick Schiller et al., 1992, p. 12).

It is in this point (accommodation and resistance by migrants) that this study seeks to press and expand the transnationalist approach. Although the existent transnationalist literature correctly draws our attention to the ways in which transmigrants construct and reproduce political, economic, and social ties and identities in both sending and receiving countries, it has neglected to explore a number of other ways in which social and economic structures facilitate and/or

constrain migration. I would like to expand especially the transnationalist analysis of ethnicity and migration by paying close attention to transmigrant identity and the shifting power relations that exist in the communities of origin and destination. This approach will allow me to attend to ethnic identity among indigenous Mexican migrants as a structural system (like gender and race) and not as subjective identities that are reconfigured as a consequence of migration. For example, since the 1970s, a growing body of literature on women and migration has demonstrated how gender has always figured prominently into patterns of settlement and migration, producing different strategies, experiences, vulnerabilities, and social networks among women and men (Donato, 1993; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994a, 1994b; Morokvasic, 1984; Pedraza, 1991). Therefore, to integrate an analysis of ethnicity into migration research, one should pay close attention to the relationship between indigenous peoples' social location and migration both at home and abroad.

From this, it follows that ethnicity and race facilitate and constrain movement in ways similar, though not identical, to structures of gender. In labor recruitment, employment opportunities, and political activism, both home and abroad, race ideologies help explain patterns of migration and settlement. However, the role of ethnicity and race in movement and patterns of settlement has received far less academic attention than the role of economic and gender variables. Especially troubling is the fact that ethnic identity is frequently either ignored or treated as a consequence of migration flows and is considered to be a problem "here," but not "there." Until very recently, few scholars of Mexican migration have seriously considered ethnicity as an important point of departure to understand the movement and migration of the Mexican population (Kearney & Nagengast, 1989; Zabin et al., 1993). These authors suggest that a very complex pattern of labor recruitment, employment opportunities, and political activism emerges by considering the ethnic identity of Mexican migrants. For instance, Kearney and Nagengast (1989) argue that indigenous migrants such as the Mixtecs struggle to define unique cultural and ethnic identities in the United States and resist incorporation into the racial hegemony of a bipolar system. This experience is similar to that of Puerto Ricans and Dominican migrants in New York (Grasmuck & Pessar, 1991; Rodriguez, 1991). Jamaican immigrants, like other West Indians, face racial prejudice in the United States, but their high rates of professionals and entrepreneurs allow them to compete successfully against other Black immigrants and nationals for better positions in the U.S. labor market (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990). Haitian immigrants often have competing identities that create divisions—based on class, color, and region—among the Haitian community in the United States and that prevent political unity (Glick Schiller et al., 1987). The experience of these migrants illustrates the changing character of U.S. race relations, but we have to link reconfigurations of race ideologies in the United States with the racial and ethnic experiences of these immigrants in their countries of origin.

This study seeks to further our understanding of how ethnicity shapes the migratory experience and patterns of incorporation among Mexican indigenous migrants. I will address indigenous migrants' ethnic identity, focusing special attention on the historical context and the specific politics and economics of their migratory experience, to understand the ways in which they construct meaningful lives in situations not of their own choosing. Furthermore, I intend to show the ways in which migrants become agents of social change by organizing and implementing creative strategies for collective action to fight for their survival. In the next section, I will provide the background to contextualize the migration of Mixtecs to the United States. I will then explore in some detail the political activism of Mexican indigenous migrants on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border.

THE CHANGING FEATURES OF MEXICAN IMMIGRATION TO CALIFORNIA

Before analyzing the political activism of Mixtec migrants, it is important to contextualize their migratory experience in relationship to the long history of U.S.-bound Mexican migration. Although a substantial flow of Mexican migration into California can be traced to the late 1920s with the expansion of agriculture in this state that created a great demand for labor, during the past two decades the deepening labor market links between Mexico and the United States have diversified the patterns of Mexican migration and settlement in rural and urban California. Until the early 1970s, the typical Mexican migrant was a lone male in his 20s who worked seasonally in U.S. agriculture and spent the rest of the year in his home community in west-central Mexico (Cornelius, 1988; Massey et al., 1987; Mines, 1981). During the 1970s, many migrant village social networks from the traditional sending areas "matured," and a significant number of workers from them settled with their families in California, bringing an increase in the proportion of women and children in the Mexican-born population in California (Cornelius, 1988; Massey et al., 1987). This process of settlement was aided by improvements in the wages and working conditions of farmworkers in California between the mid-1960s and the early 1980s (Zabin et al., 1993).

In the past decade, Mexican migration to the United States has intensified dramatically with the incorporation of new groups of migrants to the U.S.-bound migratory stream (Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 1994b). The case of the migration of indigenous peoples from Oaxaca, Michoacan, Guerrero, and other states illustrates the incorporation of new groups of nontraditional Mexican migrants into California's agriculture and other labor markets (Zabin et al., 1993). The migration of indigenous workers has at least two other particular dimensions. One is that even though indigenous migrant workers such as Mixtecs have a long history of migration outside the Mixteca region to other

Mexican states such as Veracruz, Mexico City, and Sinaloa, it is only recently that they are crossing the U.S.-Mexican border in large numbers (Kearney & Nagengast, 1989; Zabin et al., 1993). The second dimension is that in spite of their relatively brief experience as international migrants in the United States, indigenous workers have been able to forge strong political organizations to address the many challenges they face as both migrant workers and indigenous people living and working outside their traditional territories.

The development of new migrant networks from southern Mexico coincided with the increased settlement of migrants from traditional sending regions. Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Purepechas form the largest share of these new migrants, but they also include other ethnic groups from Oaxaca, mestizo and indigenous groups from Guerrero and Puebla, as well as migrants from the most isolated villages in the traditional sending regions. Although socioeconomic and historical conditions differ from region to region, a brief description of the Mixteca region illustrates the context of the dramatic explosion in migration from nontraditional sending regions in Mexico. The Mixteca region of western Oaxaca, in southern Mexico, is one of the poorest and ecologically most devastated areas in Mexico. This region is the homeland of some 450,000 Mixtec people, who constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in Mexico. In recent decades, as a result of deforestation and ensuing soil erosion, tens of thousand of Mixtecs have been forced to leave Mixteca as circular and permanent migrants in search of wage labor. In the 1960s and 1970s, large and increasing numbers of Mixtecs began migrating to northwestern Mexico and to California, where they have now established sizable and growing communities. By the 1980s, the composition of the labor force in California included both the established satellite communities of settled immigrant workers from traditional sending areas and newer migrants from southern Mexico (Kearney & Nagengast, 1989).

Many of the communities in which these Mexican immigrants and migrants reside have become Mexican enclaves. Along with the development of these ethnic enclaves, the proximity of Mexico, the constant renewal of the migrant flow, and the economic insecurity experienced by migrants on both sides of the border have led to the development of transnational communities (Kearney & Nagengast, 1989).

In some ways, for indigenous migrants workers and for Mixtecs in particular, the development of transnational communities is paralleled by the transnationalization of labor-intensive fruit and vegetable production. Commercial agriculture on the Pacific coast (northwest Mexico and California) effectively constitutes a single production zone. Many of the same commodities are produced on both sides of the borders with the same basic technology and financing, and both areas of this transnational agricultural production zone rely on much of the same migrant labor force. To the degree that this migrant labor force originates in different indigenous regions of Oaxaca, commercial agriculture in this zone is dependent on these regions, just as indigenous communities are dependent on income earned in this zone. An irony of this situation is that the indigenous

communities' dependence on wages earned in northern commercial agriculture perpetuates underdevelopment in those communities through a process of transference of value in the form of cheap labor force and subsidies for the elder workers as they retire and return to their home communities. All the economic and social costs of raising and supporting Mixtec children as they grow up is borne by the migrant communities in Oaxaca and not by the communities in northern Mexico and in the United States that benefit from their labor when they become old enough to enter the labor force. Thus, conditions of development in the North and underdevelopment in the South are two sides of the process of integration between the United Sates and Mexico (Zabin et al., 1993).

Consistent with such a structural relationship, the subsistence agricultural communities of indigenous regions in southern Mexico and commercial agriculture in California and northern Mexico can be seen as interdependent. Although indigenous migrants participate in the consolidation of transnational agribusiness production, they also participate in a richer cultural exchange between the United States and Mexico by bringing back to their communities of origin commodities, styles, and attitudes acquired in the North. Paradoxically, their insertion into the U.S. labor market also allows for reinforcement of much that appears to be quite traditional. For example, traditional fiestas, which are central to indigenous communities, have not only been perpetuated but actually made more elaborate with funds from migrant earnings. It is not uncommon for migrant workers who have done relatively well in *el Norte* to volunteer to serve as *mayordomos* (sponsors) of the festivities celebrating the patron saint of their communities. The expense for these festivities can run into thousands of dollars, all paid by relatives and extended families of the main mayordomo. Many of the migrants living permanently or working temporarily in the United States return to Oaxaca during these celebrations, adding even more excitement to these events. The vitality and the growth of these traditional ceremonies have a two-fold significance. One is that they can be taken as an indicator of the persistence of an indigenous ethnic identity that makes them a distinctive migrant workforce in the North. The other is the way in which indigenous migrant workers' self-help projects are organized in California, as will be explored in the following sections of this article.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF TRANSNATIONAL POLITICAL ACTIVISM

As noted above, the incorporation of indigenous peoples into the U.S.-bound Mexican migratory flow coincides with the increased settlement in California of Mexican migrants from traditional sending regions and the general increase in ethnic diversity in the state (Palerm, 1989). This situation poses questions about the construction of new political alliances along ethnic lines in post-melting-pot California, within the context of the current national anti-immigrant backlash in

which California has taken the lead with some recent voter initiatives. Propositions such as 187 and 209 and the "English for Our Kids" initiative, which were conceived in California, are beginning to spread to other states in the country. Although there was some activism against these propositions, this activism was spearheaded by some very well-established service-providing organizations but did not spread to take the shape of a grassroots movement. Some efforts were also made to try to bridge the diverse immigrant communities in California and build coalitions among different immigrant organizations.[3] However, these efforts fell short of providing the bases for a long-term alliance among the organizations that participated in these temporary experiences of interethnic coalition building.

The consolidation of indigenous migrant organizations occurs within the context of further U.S.-Mexican economic integration via the North American Free Trade Agreement and the neoliberal restructuring of the Mexican economy in response to the current economic crisis, which has been especially harsh for rural and indigenous people. The sustained deterioration of the Mexican economy resulted in the 1994 Chiapas uprising in which people demanded profound political and economic reforms in the country and greater autonomy for indigenous communities. The increasing economic deterioration of the living standards in rural Mexico, especially in southern Mexico, which is overwhelmingly indigenous, has radicalized many of the indigenous and peasant organizations in the region. As indigenous organizations in Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Chiapas (these three states form the region known as the Mexican Poverty Corridor) increase their political activism, the response by the state and federal government has been the further militarization of the region, making even more tense the already volatile situation that exists there.

These events on both sides of the border provide the political context for the current activism of indigenous migrants. In examining the organizations forged by indigenous migrants in California, it becomes apparent how these are shaped by responses to the adverse working and living conditions they confront as migrant workers in the United States. Toward this end, indigenous migrant organizations, such as the Mixtec-Zapotec coalition, the Frente, have forged coalitions with unions (e.g., United Farm Workers), nongovernmental organizations (e.g., California Legal Rural Assistance), churches, student organizations (e.g., MECHA), and Native American organizations to address the frequent violation of their labor and human rights in this country. Meanwhile, in Mexico, the activism of Mixtec organizations goes beyond their own communities. In early 1996, the Zapatista National Liberation Army invited several indigenous migrant organizations to participate in the first Indigenous National Congress in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas. During that meeting, the Frente, which has offices in both California and Oaxaca, was appointed by the congress's general assembly as the official conduit between the Indigenous National Congress and the indigenous migrant population in the United States.

The grassroots organizations that indigenous migrants have formed in the 1990s are part of a long history of political activism among Mexican and other immigrants in the United States. Immigrant organizations based on the home community are common to many immigrant groups that have settled in this country and have played a fundamental role in the economic empowerment and social incorporation of immigrants into U.S. society. East European Jews who came to the United States during the Great Migration between 1880 and 1923 provide perhaps some of the earliest forms of associations of immigrants from the same hometown with the development of *landsmanshaftn*[4] (Soyer, 1997; Weisser, 1985).

According to Weisser (1985), the importance of landsmanshaft organizations was that they offered immigrants the possibility of "continuing the cultural and social traditions of the Old World in such undiluted form that there was little ambiguity about [their] cultural identity" (p. 6). The problem of cultural identity continues to be a very important issue for current debates about present-day immigrant groups such as Mexicans.

The landsmanshaft principle was in no way peculiar to Jewish migrants. In fact, it is one of the most common forms of immigrant organization throughout the world, and groups as diverse as Chinese in Singapore and Ibo in Calabar, Nigeria, have formed associations based on village or region of origin.[5] In the case of Mexican immigrants, hometown associations have been crucial in allowing them to participate in efforts and movements to change conditions in their homelands since the turn of the century. The concern for and loyalties to their communities of origin can be seen as an indication that these immigrants maintain ongoing connections and hold meaningful stake in the affairs of their home communities and that they hope to return there some day.

The organization that serves as the case in this study, the Frente, can be described as a coalition of organizations, communities, and individuals of indigenous origin from Oaxaca, Mexico. The Frente is composed of communities and organizations of Mixteco, Zapoteco, and Trique peoples, most of whom have had to migrate temporarily or permanently from their state of origin (Oaxaca) to other northern Mexican states and to the United States for their own economic survival. The members of the organization are concentrated in the Mexican states of Oaxaca and Baja California Norte as well as in the U.S. states of California, Oregon, and Washington. The Frente was formed in 1991 when five organizations of indigenous migrants met in California to form the Mixteco-Zapoteco Binational Front. In 1994, this initial group enlarged its membership and became the Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional. Approximately 2,000 individuals are active participants in the Frente at this time. The Frente is a member of the Congreso Nacional Indígena (National Indigenous Congress in Mexico) and has played a key role at the national level in the articulation of indigenous rights based on a grassroots perspective.

The aim of the organization is to promote and defend the human rights of indigenous migrants and improve living and working conditions for indigenous

migrants on both sides of the border. The Frente has a strong rights orientation and carries out extensive education and advocacy for human, civil, and labor rights. At the same time, it is carrying out organizing to address the economic development needs of its members on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border.

One of the Frente's most successful projects is the indigenous-language interpreter program. Through this program, 15 Oaxacan indigenous interpreters were trained to provide relay interpretation in work, health, educational, social service, and legal settings. The languages represented were various dialects of Mixtec (a total of 13 who spoke various dialects of mixteco alto and mixteco bajo) and Zapotec (1 speaker each of zapoteco del valle and zapoteco de la sierra). This program has been so successful that members of the newly elected government in Mexico City have contacted the leaders of the Frente to ask for advise in developing a similar program targeted to indigenous migrants who live in that city. In addition to the indigenous interpreter projects, the Frente also carries out projects in collaboration with other U.S. and Mexican partners and allied organizations. These include the Binational Indigenous Women's Project (with Lideres Campesinas), focused on addressing issues of domestic violence and leadership development for indigenous women; Defense of Human and Labor Rights (with California Rural Legal Assistance in the United States and Asesoria Legal Indígena A.C. in Baja California), providing training and outreach services to defend and provide education on indigenous migrants' rights; and Community Development Projects (with Oxfaur America and Unidad de Capacitación e Investigación Educativa para la Participación A.C.), establishing community gardens and other community development projects, especially those focused on food security issues, in the area of Escondido, California, and in the Mixteca region of Oaxaca.

The Frente currently operates two regional offices from its headquarters in Livingston, California. The regional office in Juxtlahuaca coordinates the work of three municipal offices that serve more than 22 communities in five municipalities. The Maneadero office serves the Maneadero Valley and the San Quintin Valley region in Baja California Norte.

TRANSBORDER POLITICAL ACTIVISM OF MIXTEC MIGRANTS

The Frente sees itself not as a service providing organization but rather as a grassroots social movement. Therefore, the political mobilization undertaken by the Frente, as described in the beginning of this article, illustrates the level of sophistication this migrant organization has reached, coordinating collective actions at the binational level over the 2,000-mile distance between Oaxaca and California. This mobilization also shows how the Frente has developed a binational approach to political action to defend and protect the human rights of its members and other Oaxacan migrants as they move from their home state

northward to Baja California Norte and into the United States. Much of the Frente's work at the binational level has already been framed within a rights perspective, but it has also addressed labor and human rights beginning in migrants' communities of origin and carrying forward into the United States.

Another important feature of the transnational activism of Mixtec migrant workers is their active participation in the local political life of their communities even when they are not physically present. The political participation of migrants both strengthens and transforms their communities' cultural and social resources (such as traditional forms of self-government—the *cargo* system, leadership accountability to popular assemblies, and strong corporate community political identity). Levitt (1998) argues that the social remittances (ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital) migrants send back play an important role in transforming the social and political lives of their communities of origin. The ideas and practices that Mixtec migrants bring back are remolded, and traditional practices in their communities have adapted to the transnational context to incorporate these community members who have become more prominent in spite of the fact that they work and live abroad. During my fieldwork in California, I have met many Mixtec migrants who have been summoned back to their communities to perform the tasks they had been elected to carry out by the local community assembly. In many cases, these migrants have been absent from their communities for many years working and living as far away as Oregon, California, or New Jersey.

Pablo offers an explanation of the mixed feelings a lot of Mixtec migrants have about returning to their communities to serve in their elected positions in the local governments.[6] He describes the importance of being a good citizen to his community despite the many hardships Mixtec migrants have to face in carrying out the community's mandate.

> I returned because I felt I did not have any other choice. It was either returning or loosing my family's land. At first I did not want to do it [return]. Life is very hard here in Cuevas. You come and serve your community for no pay, and they do not care about how you are going to survive. At least the older people serving the community have their sons and daughters in el otro lado [the other side] who support them while they have their cargo [elected position]. I decided to return and serve, because I know that is what my father, if he was alive, would had wanted me to do, to be a good citizen. He was killed in a dispute for land with the neighboring community. I guess my job now is to try to keep the limits of our community intact. . . . I will ask for permission to go to work for a few months to el otro lado to make ends meet this year. The good thing is that this is my second and last year.

By redefining their conceptualization of citizenship and community, many Mixtec communities, like San Miguel Cuevas, have decided through their community assemblies to incorporate into the local political process their *paisanos* who have migrated. According to their redefinition of citizenship, a migrant who relocates abroad does not sever his or her ties with the community and can

continue to enjoy the same rights and obligations as the rest of the members of the community who stay, as long as the migrant continues to serve the *cargos* the community assembly decides to confer on him or her. Therefore, their definition of community has been expanded to incorporate the many members of their communities who reside abroad. People in Mixtec villages in Oaxaca refer to their communities as including the local population as well as the population dispersed along the migratory network that extends to northern Mexico and into the United States. This illustrates how, through the constant movement back and forth of migrants and the concurrent flow of information, money, goods, and services, the communities of origin and their various satellite communities in northern Mexico and the United States have become so closely linked that in a sense they form a single community, a transnational community. The transnational concept, the way I would like to use it here, has two relevant dimensions. The first is its geographic sense, which refers to such phenomena as migration, commerce, and communication that cross national borders. The second refers to the notion of transforming and transcending the nation-state as a modern social and cultural form (Kearney, 1995a).

The political activism of migrant populations such as the Mixtecs in California and their ability to participate in the political processes of their communities of origin directly challenge the hegemony of the Mexican state to define the boundaries of the national political community and the rights that its members can enjoy. One can hardly imagine an effective way that the state and federal governments could regulate the process by which 560 Oaxacan municipalities and hundreds of small villages elect their representatives every 4 years. The municipality of Juxtlahuaca, where I carried out my fieldwork, is composed of 62 *agencias municipales*, or villages, which are the smallest political organizational units in Mexico. Each of these agencias elects its own council of representatives according to its own customs and traditions. In other words, it is not the Mexican state that determines where the boundaries of a Mixtec migrant political community[7] begins or ends through judicial mechanisms (laws and regulations) but the indigenous community itself, which has redefined and expanded the contours of the community through its political practice to incorporate the thousands of migrants who work and live 2,000 miles away in a different country.

The ability of Mixtec indigenous communities to adapt to the transnational process of migration—their political and cultural capital—is closely related to the high degree of autonomy they have traditionally exercised to regulate their internal affairs. In this sense, autonomy, understood as “the right to exercise collectively the free determination” of indigenous peoples, is not a concept or an idea that was born yesterday (see Regino, 1996, p. 2). I could list many examples of how in their everyday practice these indigenous communities have governed their communities and exercised their authority through their own traditional mechanisms for a long time. This ability of the indigenous communities to regulate their community affairs turns out to be of great importance, especially for those communities with a high rate of out-migration.

In other words, Mixtec indigenous communities have completely reversed something that had been seen as a catastrophe for their long-term survival due to their high rate of out-migration and have transformed their migratory experience into a source of synergy that assures their cultural, social, and economic reproduction. Indigenous autonomy, understood as the mechanism to govern and exercise their authority, has been fundamental to their response to the migratory experience. Within this context, it has been necessary for Mixtec indigenous communities to reconceptualize and expand the concept of political community, redefining this notion in a way that allows for the incorporation of the immense indigenous population dispersed throughout many geographical borders.

A 1991 survey by the California Institute of Rural Studies revealed that Mixtec migrant workers represented 7% of the California agricultural labor force. This means that a "reasonable estimate of the peak-season population of Mixtecs in California would be approaching 50,000" (Runsten & Kearney, 1994). This number, although a conservative one, gives us an idea of the dimensions of the Mixtec migratory network that stretches throughout northern Mexico and the United States. However, I have to point out that the 1991 survey focused only on farmworkers in the agricultural sector and did not gather data about Mixtecs in urban centers such as San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. In this survey, 203 Oaxacan communities (among them Zapotec, Chinatec, Trique, and Mixtec), belonging to 81 different municipalities, were represented. The data suggest that indigenous Oaxacan migration has multiple sources in that state, but it tends to concentrate in specific subregions. The most represented communities were located in three districts in the Mixtec region: Juxtlahuaca, Silacayoapan, and Huajuapan de León.

It would seem to the casual observer that the great geographic dispersion of the Mixtec migration network represents a fatal blow to the long-term viability of the communities that are experiencing this process of heavy out-migration. However, the Mixtec indigenous peoples have responded in a very creative way to the challenge of sustaining the social and cultural fabric of their communities throughout these geographical spaces.

The active participation of Mixtec migrants in the affairs of their communities of origin has strengthened their ethnic identity, which has allowed them at the same time to build binational political organizations and to maintain very close ties with their communities in Oaxaca (see Kearney & Nagengast, 1989). This process has allowed indigenous migrants to participate in the most relevant affairs in their communities without being physically present. Many Mixtec migrants not only continue to be consulted about many political decisions in their communities, but they also maintain their rights and obligations as members of their specific political communities. In practice, this means not only that Mixtec migrants have the right to participate in the internal governing process of their communities but also that they are obliged to participate in the process of exercising their communities' authority by being eligible to be considered for elected positions within the local governing structures.

In this context, the transnational organizations of Mixtec migrants, such as the Frente, perform two basic tasks: First, these organizations institutionalize political practices that allow for collective action in all the different places where the Mixtec migratory network is located (i.e., the transnationalized space sometimes called Oaxacalifornia); second, at the community, state, and international levels, they institutionalize cultural exchange practices and the circulation of information that gives meaning (read *subjective belief*) to a political community that transcends many geographical borders.

As can be seen, the political practices of the transnational indigenous migrant organizations have gone far beyond the recent attempts by the Mexican state to recognize the particular situation of millions of Mexicans who have been incorporated in the U.S.-bound migratory process. Therefore, it is not surprising that organizations such as the Frente consider the recent changes in the Mexican constitution, which will allow Mexican immigrants who acquire U.S. citizenship to still maintain their Mexican nationality, as too little too late. The main problem with this constitutional amendment, according to the Frente, is that it will not recognize the political rights of these Mexican nationals because they will not be able to vote or be eligible for public office. In other words, this recent change in the Mexican constitution will allow migrants to maintain their Mexican nationality, which would allow them to enjoy the protection of their civil rights by the Mexican state (rights such as buying property along the coasts and borderlines), but they would have to renounce such political rights as voting during presidential and local elections, and they would not be allowed to hold elected office. For indigenous migrants who are active participants in the affairs of their communities of origin, this represents a step back rather than an improvement in their political rights.

Another recent development is a 1996 law that granted Mexican citizens the right to vote in presidential elections while living abroad. Some indigenous migrant leaders recognized this as a step forward in the recognition of the political rights of Mexican migrants in general. However, they claim that although electing the next Mexican president in the year 2000 is very important, it is more pressing to be able to shape policy at the state and local levels because these are the political institutions that affect indigenous communities the most. For these leaders to be able to participate fully in all political decisions that affect them at the local and community levels would be the ideal situation, but that would require the recognition of their double citizenship: being full members of two nations with all the rights and obligations that they now enjoy in their communities of origin in the Mixteca region in Oaxaca.

CONCLUSION

This article is an attempt to further refine the general body of conceptual work on transnational migration through its application to a specific case study.

Although transnationalism correctly draws our attention to the ways in which transmigrants construct and reproduce political, economic, and social ties and identities in both sending and receiving countries, it has neglected a number of other ways in which social and economic structures facilitate and/or constrain migration. To expand the transnationalist approach to immigration, this article grounds the experience of Mixtec transnational communities in history and social structure rather than in identity concerns, illustrating the way in which ethnicity influences the process of migration, settlement, and political behavior among Mexican migrants.

This study shows that indigenous migrants have done better than other mestizo Mexican migrants in developing binational grassroots organizations to defend their political and economic rights, and in mobilizing on both sides of the border because indigenous migrants have been and are able to mobilize unique cultural and social resources and traditional forms of self-government, including active participation of the community in the local government through the *cargo* system, leadership accountability to popular assemblies, and strong corporate community political identity, that they successfully adapt to the transnational context.

My research also shows how recent patterns of migration that have developed in Mexican indigenous regions such as the Mixteca region in Oaxaca, along with the emergence of new transnational forms of organization, are having a profound impact on the ethnic identities of indigenous migrants. On one hand, long-term transnational migration is not reducing ethnicity but instead is causing it to emerge and intensify. On the other hand, the political activism of these indigenous migrants is also transforming their communities of origin dramatically, allowing for the emergence of new forms of transnational political communities due to the transnational political practice of these migrants and their organizations. These migrants and their transnational organizations will play an important role in the national political discussions on both sides of the border, from immigration issues and labor to human rights in the United States, and from the indigenous autonomy debate to the presidential elections in the year 2000 in Mexico.

NOTES

1. For a more general discussion of the concept of deterritorialized spaces, see Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton-Blanc (1994).

2. Notice that the concept of class identity often drops out from this literature.

3. The San Francisco–based Immigration Network was the most developed effort on the part of a diverse group of immigrant service-providing organizations to come together to provide some resistance to the anti-immigrant propositions. The efforts of the network were very much concentrated in the San Francisco Bay Area and in some cities of the Central Valley. However, the Immigration Network did not develop as strong of a presence in Southern California.

4. Soyer (1997) explains the meaning of *landsmanshaftn* as follows:

> The Yiddish word *landsman* denotes a person (a man or woman, but usually a man) from the same town, region, or country as the speaker. The plural form is *landslayt*. A *Landsmanshaft* is thus a formal organization of *landslayt*, or, more loosely, the informal community of *landslayt*. The plural of *Landsmanshaft* is *Landsmanshaftn*. (p. 1)

Landsman would be the equivalent of *paisano* in Spanish, among Mexican immigrants.

5. For a great description of Chinese, Ibo, and other immigrants, see Fallers's (1967) edited volume *Immigrants and Associations*.

6. Pablo migrated from San Miguel Cuevas to Madera, California, when he was 16 years old. After a brief stay in California, he moved to Canby, Oregon, where he lived for 8 years before going back to his community. By that time, he spoke Mixtec, English, and Spanish, fluently, and he had earned his general equivalency diploma and a B.A. in social work from Oregon State University in Portland on a state scholarship. After graduating from college, he was recalled by his community (San Miguel Cuevas, where I interviewed him) to serve as secretary of the Committee of Communal Properties (Comité de Bienes Comunales).

7. *Political community* is defined here in its broadest sense as the individuals who claim membership to an indigenous community and enjoy rights and responsibilities by participating actively in the internal decision-making process and the election of local authorities.

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