

# **Marginalizing the Mexican-Born Woman and Her Children: The Re- Convergence of Reproduction and Production•\***

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**Abstract:** It is argued in this paper that for a number of reasons, including semi-permanent or permanent settling out of men, the family reunification provisions of IRCA, women's greater waged-labor experience in Mexico due, among other things, to structural adjustment programs, and the demand for female labor in the lower echelons of the manufacturing and service sectors, proportionately more Mexican women have migrated to the United States in the last two and a half decades than previously. This had led to the re-convergence of processes of familial and social reproduction, thus eroding the subsidy to the core-capitalist economy that was provided when labor force age men presented themselves to labor independently from their dependent family members. Proposition 187 in California, the 1996 Welfare and 1996 Immigration Acts, as well as recent proposals for a guest worker program attempt to reinstate this subsidy by reinstating the division between processes of production and reproduction.

A number of authors have noted that separating the processes of production and reproduction subsidizes the core capitalist countries to which people from the more peripheral countries migrate (e. g. Burawoy, 1976; Meillassoux, 1991). There is no need

to supply medical care and educational facilities to the migrants' family members left behind, and thus no need for the destination countries to bear these costs. The worker presents himself, and it is usually a male worker, ready for employment with no strings attached that would impinge upon the "social wage."

The separation of the processes of production and reproduction among immigrant workers from Mexico, however, has been eroding, and thus also the subsidy to core capitalism to which this separation contributed. Despite the fact that more than half of the immigrants to the United States since the 1930s have been women (Houstoun, Kramer and Barrett, 1984), since the repatriations that took place during the Great Depression and until the last two decades males were exceptionally predominant among Mexican immigrants (Donato, 1993; Zahniser, 2000), especially the undocumented. Mexican women have been arriving in greater numbers, however for at least six reasons. First, on a transnational level, the once typical patterns of male recurrent migration, with multiple border crossings over a working career, has been replaced by a pattern of more permanent or semi-permanent, settlement. This is partially due to the maturation of migration networks, involving the establishment of "daughter communities" in the United States.(e.g. Massey, 1990; Massey et al, 1987). But it is also, and perhaps more importantly, because of tightening of the border through adding border patrol agents and utilizing military technology for detention purposes, efforts such as Operation Gatekeeper in California and Operation Hold-the-Line in Texas, and in 2006 the sending of the National Guard to the border, the border crossing both psychically and economically has been made more costly in terms of paying smugglers, and extremely dangerous (Dunn, 1996; Massey et al, 2003; Nevins, 2002; Zahniser, 2000). The mounting death toll along

the border as the undocumented move toward the Arizona desert, where formal vigilance once was less, have as a consequence longer and longer time periods spent in the United States, and a greater tendency toward permanent or semi-permanent<sup>1</sup> settlement (Massey et al, 2003). This longer period of settlement has in turn led to a desire for family reunification, especially on the part of wives, who may insist upon following their husbands in the migrant stream (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Mummert, 1994). Children born in Mexico and smuggled across the border, and children born in the United States to the undocumented workers lead to the re-convergence of the processes of familial and social reproduction.

Second, on the U.S. national level, provisions of immigration legislation, such as that of the 1986 Immigration Control and Reform Act (IRCA) that provided amnesty to at least 2.3 million of the Mexican undocumented (Bean et al, 1989), included family reunification provisions. Thus women's and children's migration was facilitated (Cornelius, 1989,1991).<sup>2</sup>, and the re-convergence of familial and social reproductive processes was guaranteed.

Third, and on a more social-psychological level, is a changing family dynamic in Mexico that includes a stress on companionate marriage among younger generations of women (Hirsch, 2000; 2003). As Hirsch (2003: 150) explains:

Young women . . . make migration and marital togetherness an explicit negotiation point during courtship. Before they marry they tell their boyfriends that if they are planning to go north they should save or borrow to pay the coyote for both of them, because '*no me voy a casar para estar sola*' (I am not getting married to be alone.

The following three explanations all have to do with labor market dynamics. Thus, fourth, is the phenomenon of the increasing involvement of women in formal sector waged manufacturing work and services since the initiation of the Border Industrialization Program in 1965 and the tourism development programs begun in the early 1970s (Arias, 1994; Mummert, 1994; Wilson, nd). More and more women on the Mexican side of the border thus have engaged in waged-labor and would not find such work “foreign” to their experience.

Fifth, and relatedly, a higher proportion of Mexican women have entered and been driven into, the labor force because of periodic economic crises in Mexico since 1982 (Cornelius, 1993: 342; González de la Rocha, 1991, 2001; Roberts et al, 1999: 241-243). Due to neo-liberal structural adjustment policies that cut urban and rural subsidies and privatized the economy, successive peso devaluations and high rates of inflation, women and children were increasingly forced into income-generating activities in the informal sector and wage labor in the formal sector, in an attempt to maintain the standard of living of the household. Wives and sisters (and daughters) thus came to expect to work and many, prior to migrating, had work experience.

Sixth, there has been a secular trend toward the “feminization” of the labor force in the United States, with new job opportunities opening for women (Cornelius, 1993: 343) since the 1980s, especially in low-paid services and manufacturing. Immigrant women increasingly found work in hotels, hospitals, and restaurants as service workers and filled the garment, electronics and food packaging plants in the manufacturing sector. Thus, there was an increasing demand for female labor.

The increased migration of Mexican women has led, I argue, to the re-convergence of the processes of reproduction/renewal/maintenance and production, historically separated when males migrated without their wives and children. But this re-convergence does not take place through return migration to the locale of origin, but rather through family reunification at the point of destination.. Meillassoux (1991), looking at wage labor migration in Africa, was the first to show how the separation of the processes of reproduction and production subsidized both capitalist employers and the capitalist system as a whole. Buroway (1976), a neo-Marxist scholar, was the first to show how the separation of the processes of reproduction/renewal (including family maintenance) at origin and of production at destination provided a subsidy to the destination country by the sending country. One case upon which Buroway focused was Mexican labor in the United States. It was in the country of origin where children were raised and educated and to where the male migrant returned in case of sickness, unemployment or retirement. His labor power was “free” to the destination society since his and later his wife’s and children’s social reproduction expenses had been paid elsewhere (see also, Wilson, 1999, 2000). In sum, if the locale of production is separated from the locale of reproduction, the place where workers return to when they cannot find employment, the locale of reproduction provides a subsidy to the locale of production. This was heightened, according to Meillassoux, if subsistence agriculture were practiced in the locale of reproduction, permitting not only the nonpayment of the social wage, but also a lowering of the actual wage during periods of employment in the capitalist economy.

It has been argued that labor importation not only saves the cost of rearing workers and supporting them in case of disability or old age, but because of their “juridical condition” as undocumented workers, they are unable to claim old age pensions and disability compensation, among other components of the social wage (Portes, 1978: 474-475). More than two decades ago Gómez-Quíñones (1981: 14) pointed out the subsidy to the core capitalist economy provided by undocumented workers: he estimated that each Mexican immigrant worker cost the Mexican economy at least \$40,000 to produce. This cost represents the value of his maintenance before he presents himself, in good health and at an age that his labor power can best be exploited, across the border. And initially, he presented himself without wife and children who would make claims on the medical and educational systems, whether the wife also supplied labor in the core or not.

As more and more Mexican women joined their husbands in the United States, or migrated as single women and came to marry Mexican men working in the United States, this subsidy began to be eroded. First, family reunification meant that in times of sickness and unemployment, undocumented men would not return to their source community. Second, it meant that education and medical care for children, often born in the United States though often, as well, with siblings born in Mexico, had to be provided in “host” society rather in the sending state. Although never openly admitting to the subsidy provided by the male immigrants—especially those engaged in recurrent migration—the United States government took rapid steps to combat its erosion through legislation concerning both immigration and welfare benefits. Notably, Hondagneu-

Sotelo (1995: 177) contends that California's Proposition 187 (a precursor to the Welfare and Immigration Acts of 1996) and the rhetoric surrounding it reflect:

a profound historical moment and a muted acknowledgement that there has been a transformation from a predominantly sojourner or temporary pattern of Mexican undocumented migration to a pattern that is reflected in the widespread establishment of Mexican immigrant families and permanent settler communities throughout California.

But the reaction was not limited to California, destination of most Mexican immigrants. The earliest reaction against the implications of family reunification, and a first slap at Mexican women, did indeed come with the conception and passage of California's Proposition 187 denying medical care, education, and other services to undocumented immigrants and those children of theirs who were also undocumented. Though declared unconstitutional, a number of the provisions of Proposition 187 were incorporated at the federal level in the Welfare Act of 1996 and the Immigration Act of the same year. Thus, their marginalization occurred.

Both the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act and the 1996 The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act are notable in denying immigrants--undocumented and documented--federally funded welfare benefits. Legal permanent residents were made ineligible for supplemental security income (SSI) or food stamps--although this latter exemption was restored for legal immigrants in 1998—until they had secured U.S. citizenship or worked in the United States for 10 years (40 qualifying quarters) while paying social security taxes. Other federally funded benefits were restricted to those with a five-year period of

residence (Fragomen, 1997: 448; Wilson, 2000: 201). Undocumented immigrants are excluded from welfare benefits except for emergency medical aid, short-term-in-kind disaster relief, in-kind community services and public health immunizations and treatment of communicable disease (Fragomen, 1997: 450)

The Immigration and Welfare Reform Acts deflected responsibility for the welfare of new legal immigrants from the government, whether state or federal, to sponsors of the immigrants. A potential immigrant's sponsor, whether relative—as in most cases—or employer, has to sign an affidavit of support showing that he/she earns 125 percent of the poverty line. If the immigrant applies for any federally funded benefit, the sponsor's income and resources are “deemed” to belong to the immigrant to cover his/her needs (Fragomen, 1997: 450; Gimpel and Edwards, 1999: 789-80, 214). States were authorized to bring their legislation into line with both acts. The costs of reproduction/renewal, including hospitalization for childbirth or illness and sustenance during periods of unemployment or underemployment were thus passed on *de jure* to the relatives of the legal immigrant as well as *de facto* to the undocumented immigrant. Although the national capitalist system as a whole can benefit from immigrant productivity, the costs immigrants might incur are again externalized from the system, not to the source community as in the case of recurrent and undocumented immigrants, but to the legal immigrant's sponsoring relative (Wilson, 2000: 201). Although some provisions of these acts have been recalled, the fact remains that their inspiration lay in the consequences of women's (and children's) migration often in the interests of family reunification.



The process of separating reproduction and production can be seen as the underlying rationale of a number of state initiatives in 2005, pointed out by Akers Chacón (2006: 220):

Maryland legislation passed in 2005 cuts off the thousands of children of legal as well as undocumented immigrants from health care benefits, and denies state-funded health care to immigrant pregnant women. Virginia has passed a measure denying the undocumented public benefits, including access to Medicaid, welfare, and local health services...Arizona set a new standard for the disregard of basic human rights in November 2005 with the passage of the notorious Proposition 200 [modeled on California's Proposition 187].

The law denies undocumented immigrants access to all state and local benefits, including public housing, food assistance, college tuition, and employment benefits.

The desire to cut the ties between reproduction/maintenance and production underlie much of the anti-immigrant rhetoric, as well as proposals for new immigration legislation, presented in the past few years. Throughout 2005 and 2006, the Bush administration pushed a contract- or guest-worker program. Although women might possibly be contracted, such temporary workers have usually been men—and there is no provision in the proposal for families, or couples, to be contracted together.. Such a program again fosters the divergence of the processes of social reproduction/renewal (to the place of origin) from the processes of laboring (at destination)—typical of the Bracero Program of 1942 to 1964.. The worker, raised and educated elsewhere, will be useful for short periods to be decided by the needs of specific businesses in the

destination countries. The worker will be returned if and when disabled, aged, or simply not needed, with no necessity for worrying about educational or medical needs of dependents, or even the worker—she/he will not be here long enough to avail him- or herself of the social benefits extended to citizens or qualifying permanent residents. An alternative conception, in the Senate, is that after six years of work, legal residency could be obtained, and five years later, citizenship. For eleven years, however, no social benefits could be sought, though family reunification would be possible after the six-year period. Process of reproduction would continue to take place in Mexico, rather than the United States, during this first period. If a guest worker program without possible citizenship, as originally envisioned by President Bush, were put into effect, the following would be the result: By separating the processes of social reproduction/renewal and maintenance/labor the United States would regain the subsidy from Mexico that it lost when the pattern of recurrent wage labor migration became eclipsed by permanent and semi-permanent settlement. It is moving toward that direction by marginalizing the Mexican women and her children from welfare, medical, and educational benefits, most probably in the attempt to discourage their coming, or to drive them “home.”

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## NOTES

1. Even though some immigrants may consider their residence in the United States to be permanent, they may eventually return to Mexico due to a number of contingencies, including the desire to spend their retirement years in their community of origin. One man I interviewed on a *rancho* in Jalisco, sold his house in the United States and took his wife and offspring back to the *rancho* after an altercation with an employer whose treatment of him he considered so unjust that he no longer wished to remain (Wilson, 1992). Thus seemingly permanent residents may actually be semi-permanent.

2. In a study of ten Mexican communities from Jalisco, Guanajuato, Michoacán and Nayarit, conducted in 1987-88 and 1990-91, Donato (1993: 765) found that:

Women from families in which an agricultural worker (SAW) received amnesty were more likely to migrate than women from other households. . . . Women from families in which a member received amnesty by documenting permanent residence in the United States since 1982 were more likely to migrate than women from families without this type of amnesty.

At least some Mexican women crossed in undocumented status to join their menfolk while the amnesty program was still under discussion, as my analysis of a Zacatecan community in Los Angeles in 1985-86 showed (Wilson, 1986).

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