

## **Spheres of Influence and Area Studies: The Hidalgo-Clearwater Connection**

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**Prepared for delivery at the 2003 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association,  
Dallas, Texas, March 27-29, 2003.**

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# Spheres of Influence and Area Studies: The Hidalgo-Clearwater Connection

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In recent years, discussions about the compression of time and space afforded by technological advances have increased exponentially mirroring the complexity and speed with which global communities are coming into contact with each other through migratory processes. The accommodations and negotiations that these contacts entail are transforming the social, cultural, and economic landscapes of many parts of the globe.

Through an analysis of two communities—one in Florida (Clearwater), and one in Hidalgo, Mexico (Ixmiquilpan)—this paper analyzes the impact of migration in both home and host communities. The migration patterns of these two communities are viewed as a systemic whole that creates responses and processes that cannot be understood in isolation from each other, nor outside of the current context of globalization and social, cultural, and economic integration. Our approach entails a non-linear means to conceptualize migration that does not assume a unidirectional (both in time and place) process but one that takes into account the varied interstices of the movement of people both in the material and socio-cultural sense. We refer to this approach as the “spheres of influence.”

Located in the Mezquital Valley, a semi-arid region northwest of Mexico City, Ixmiquilpan, with a population of approximately 100,000 people, is home to Mexico’s fifth largest indigenous group, the Hñahñu (Otomí). Over the past ten years, over one-tenth of Ixmiquilpan’s residents, the vast majority of them Hñahñu, have migrated to Clearwater, a tourist city located on Florida’s gulf coast. While undocumented migration from Mexico has been a dominant feature of many U.S. cities for generations, particularly in the Southwest, the migratory pattern linking Ixmiquilpan and Clearwater is striking in several respects: First, large-scale out-migration from Hidalgo to the U.S. dates to the early 1990s, with the largest contingent of migrants heading to nontraditional destinations such as Clearwater, Las Vegas, Atlanta, and Long Island (New York). By 2000 Hidalgo emerges as the state with the second highest rate of growth (after Veracruz) of out-migration from Mexico to the U.S. (Granados Alcantar 2001),

Second, the Hñahñu have played a pivotal role in supporting and defending migrant workers' rights in the United States and Mexico. The *Consejo Supremo Hñahñu* (Hñahñu Supreme Council), for example, provides services that range from supplying identification for migrants returning to Mexico, to providing legal documentation for migrants seeking dual citizenship, and contacting appropriate government agencies in the event of imprisonment or death. Indeed, the Consejo's leadership role among Hñahñu migrants led to the creation of the Office in Support of the Hidalgo Community in the State and Abroad (*Coordinación General de Apoyo al Hidalguense en el Estado y El Extranjero*), an office that reports directly to the state government and the first institution of its kind in Mexico. At the same time, the Hñahñu culture, centered on family and collective responsibility, has been at the forefront of channeling migrant remittances into community development projects such as roads, water systems, municipal buildings, and churches.

Economic conditions in Clearwater have enabled migrants to play a vital role in the city's transformation. The exodus of downtown dwellers in the 1970s vacating one-third of the business and residential spaces, the explosive growth of the hotel and related tourist industries in the mid-1980s, and the need for a low-wage, reliable and flexible labor force all created a favorable environment for Mexican migrants. Mexican migrants are injecting new economic and cultural life into Clearwater and Ixmiquilpan. With over 40 Mexican-owned businesses, migrants are becoming a significant force in revitalizing neighborhoods in deteriorating areas in downtown Clearwater (Gomez 2001). Migrants not only contribute to the local economy as workers in the economy's expanding service sector and as small business owners but are also crafting a space for dialogue with city, school, and social service agencies. In Ixmiquilpan, migrants contribute to regional economic development through the construction of homes, roads, schools, county buildings, and small businesses. Many of these constructions, replicas of designs found in the United States, have contributed to an unprecedented transformation of Hidalgo's physical, social, and cultural environment.

The nature and extent of the migratory process between Ixmiquilpan and Clearwater has also led to the development of strong linkages that transcend national borders. For example, since 2000, representatives from the Hidalgo state government, including the Office in Support of the Hidalgo Community, have visited Clearwater on a regular basis to address immigration issues with city officials, the police department, immigrant organizations, and social service and faith based groups. Clearwater city officials have also traveled to Mexico to meet with their counterparts in Hidalgo. Numerous civic and ethnic organizations, in place before mass out-migration from Hidalgo, have become transnational in character. The *Consejo Supremo Hñahñu*, for example, maintains a base of support and communication linking the Hñahñu communities in Ixmiquilpan and Clearwater.

Dismissed by some scholars and members of the Mexican elite as having been 'invented' by the federal government's *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (National Indigenous Institute) the Hñahñu illustrate a powerful instance of reappropriation of cultural symbols (Denning 1986) and social and cultural space. Their history, rich with struggles for cultural and social advancement and a mercantilist tradition that dates back to the colonial times, serves as the context for the ways in which migrants from Ixmiquilpan negotiate their social and economic environment in the United States and Mexico.

In Hidalgo, several Hñahñu hold key political positions in state and local governments enabling them to advance economic, cultural, and social agendas. In Clearwater, their ethnic identity and pride guides the Hñahñu in their interactions with city officials. The *Consejo Mexicano de la Bahía de Tampa* (The Mexican Council of Tampa Bay), a civic organization founded by the city's Hñahñu population, is at the forefront of issues related to civic participation, education, health care, and immigrant rights. In November 2002, the Consejo hosted representatives from the Mexican Consulate in Orlando to provide Consular identification cards. The Consejo also coordinates the athletic leagues with the Parks and Recreation Department and provides significant support to the Police Department's Hispanic outreach program.

Recognizing the importance of engaging migrants civically as their economic and demographic importance grows, the city of Clearwater has implemented an impressive array of programs to address migrant issues and concerns. In 1999, the city created the Hispanic Task Force with representatives from city offices, social service agencies, and Mexican organizations, including the Mexican Council of Tampa Bay. The task force spearheaded efforts with the Clearwater Police Department to develop a unique program, *Joining Hands: Operation Apoyo Hispano*, that encompasses the appointment of a Hispanic Outreach Officer, training a civilian force of bilingual interpreters, the recruitment of bilingual officers, community education and crime prevention programs in Spanish, and basic Spanish classes for officers (Weiss and Davis 2002). The city's Neighborhood Services Program produces a quarterly bilingual newsletter, and its bilingual staff supports neighborhood groups to undertake a variety of social and cultural activities. In November 2002, the city, in conjunction with the YWCA, inaugurated a Hispanic Outreach Center, *Centro de Apoyo Latino*, to bring Hispanic residents in contact with city services. The Center, located near the police department, houses a bilingual child care center, office space for the Hispanic Outreach Officer, victim advocacy and interpreter programs, and space for a representative of the Mexican Consulate.

In Clearwater, migrant entrepreneurs are opening businesses such as groceries, bakeries, restaurants, music stores, and money wiring establishments that not only cater to the migrant community but also serve as sources of employment for recent immigrants. In addition to economic integration, the integration of the Hñahñu into Clearwater's social and cultural fabric allows migrants to be viewed as members of the community with legitimate claims to social and economic services.

Residents of Ixmiquilpan, and in particular the Hñahñu community, understand that in addition to the important role of remittances—estimated to range from \$2 to 4 million dollars per month from Clearwater to Ixmiquilpan—in promoting economic development in Mexico, they need to generate local employment opportunities. As a consequence, numerous rural development programs, originating from the Hñahñu communities themselves, have emerged including eco-tourism, indigenous handicrafts (textiles and woodcarvings), and the manufacture of lotions, shampoos, and sponges derived from the maguey and salvia cacti plants. Significantly, women, many of them with spouses, sons, and other relatives in the U.S., are at the forefront of these economic development activities. In El Alberto, for example, over 200 Hñahñu women form part of a cooperative (“*Mujeres Reunidas*” or “Women Joined Together”) producing sponges from maguey fiber that are sold to European markets through The Body Shop, Inc. Female cooperatives are also prevalent in traditional handicrafts and in the manufacture of products related to the maguey plant.

Our Clearwater-Ixmiquilpan research underscores the fact that migrants are agents of change in economic, cultural, and civic life in both sending and receiving communities. These changes are a result of migrants' understanding of civil society and their perceptions of their role in it. Key to this understanding is the opportunity migrants identify and seize upon to become active citizens in their own cultural terms in the communities that host them (Golte and Admans 1990). In the present case study, the community of origin, Ixmiquilpan, rooted in an indigenous culture, shapes migrants' understandings of their rights and obligations as members of a transnational community. A history of strong community organizing around issues of ethnic

identity and social and economic justice at the community and regional levels has had social and political impacts on local governments. In Clearwater, this effect spills over into the international arena through organizing that mirrors that of Ixmiquilpan. Indeed, the cultural and social capital accumulated in Ixmiquilpan before migration becomes key to resolving and negotiating a range of issues present in Clearwater, thus allowing for the creation of a community that fosters new ways of understanding transnational connections at the economic, social, and cultural levels.

Several scholars have argued that the transnational movements of peoples represent a new phenomenon, both in scope and nature (Suárez-Orozco 1998). In response to these claims, Sidney Mintz (1998) has argued that transnational movements of peoples are not new. By the end of the nineteenth century, for example, some 100 million people were living far from their places of birth. One hundred years later, a 1992 International Labor Organization report indicated that there were 100 million people living, once again, outside their countries of origin because of war, poverty, and widespread unemployment (Kearney 1995). The increasing complexity and speed with which different global communities are coming into contact with each other and the accommodations and negotiations that these contacts entail have been addressed by Saskia Sassen (1999). Sassen's research has focused not only on people's involvement in these processes but also on how different systems of thought, behavior and social interactions-and their contradictions-are forced to coexist in many instances for the first time.

The uniqueness of these contacts requires a focus on 'transnational communities.' These communities demonstrate how the specificities of the local are connected to global forces as new cultural and economic arrangements emerge across international borders. Numerous studies have addressed these arrangements from a top-down perspective by examining, for example, the roles nation-states play in directing and controlling migrant remittances.<sup>1</sup> Other studies (Portes 1999 and Roberts et al. 1999) have focused on the types of communities migrants come from in an effort to analyze the differences between rural and urban sending communities and the strength of their relationships once they have settled in their host communities. Roberts et al. (1999) and Guarnizo and Smith (1998), for example, cite research from Guadalajara, Mexico, indicating that urban migrants tend to act in more individualistic patterns that ignore their communities at both ends of the migration stream, thus discouraging the formation of transnational ties.

Yet the Hñahñu from Ixmiquilpan exhibit high levels of ethnic cohesiveness and solidarity both in Hidalgo and in Clearwater. They maintain their traditional social and kinship ties and use these ties to help relatives and neighbors migrating to the U.S., find employment for them once in the U.S., and generally serve as a social, cultural, and economic support network. These ties and the transactions that emerge from these relationships are fundamentally transnational in nature (Glick-Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1992) as well as informed by the social and cultural capital acquired in their home communities.

Several other migrant ethnic groups demonstrate similar patterns of engagement. The Kanjobal Mayan community, for example, in Los Angeles, California, uses their religious heritage and ritual customs to solidify ties among those who have settled in the U.S. as well as

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<sup>1</sup> See Goldring 2002, Levitt 2001, Mahler 1999, Smith and Guarnizo 1999, Guarnizo 1998, Basch, Schiller and Szanton Blanc, eds. 1994, and Kearney 1995 for examples of this body of research.

those who have remained in Mexico (Popkin 1999). Otavalans in the United States and Europe use their culturally transmitted sense of entrepreneurship allowing them to achieve greater economic success than their more educated, mestizo counterparts from Ecuador (Kyle 1999). However, our research suggests that the Hñahñu's sense of identity and solidarity cannot be reduced to a reactive ethnicity utilized to protect them from hostile environments encountered in their host communities, as is the case for Mayan migrants in Los Angeles (Popkin 1999) or Salvadorans in Los Angeles and the Virginia-Maryland area (Landolt et al. 1999). According to the Hñahñu, their sense of identity is the result of centuries of struggles---political, cultural, and economic---against conquering forces beginning with the Toltecs, then the Aztecs, Spaniards and the Mexican government. Their understanding of themselves as members of an ethnic minority with a history of struggle but also with a sense of entrepreneurial flexibility and opportunity is what informs their dealings in both their host communities and their communities of origin.

Our Clearwater-Ixmiquilpan research focuses then on the migrants themselves as agents of change in both their communities of origin and destination. Based on this research, we see this agency as the result of two interrelated factors: 1) migrants' understandings and perceptions of the roles (and obligations) they have played and continue to play in their home communities; and 2) the opportunities migrants identify and seize upon to become active citizens--in their own terms--in the communities that host them. Our research stresses the fact that migrants' civic experiences, their sense of belonging, their perceptions of their economic and social opportunities, and the understandings of their rights and obligations as members of an ethnic community--that cultural, social, and economic capital that migrants bring with them--are shaped by their experiences in their communities of origin. Once engaged in a migratory process, migrants bring this capital with them and while rebuilding their lives in a new locale, they call on those understandings to create a context that makes cultural sense to them (Golte and Adams 1990).

In this context, an effort to include both ends of the migratory process becomes paramount to understanding the migratory process as a locale where multiple cultural spaces meet and transcend artificial geographical and cultural boundaries. Such a model requires going beyond considerations of the home and host communities as two opposite ends of the migratory process. Home and host communities need to be understood as elements of a systemic whole that serve as the context where transnational migrants transform themselves, the communities they live in, and the cultural worlds they partake. This 'praxis' creates fluid cultural and social realities---"spheres of influence"-- that do not recognize cultural, social, or geographical boundaries.

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