“More United States immigrants claim Mexico as their homeland than any other national group. . . . What sets Mexico apart as the primary source of immigrants?”
An Historical (Inter)Dependency: Mexican Migration to the United States

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Longstanding incentives for migration have encouraged individuals to travel from Mexico to the United States in search of higher wages and economic survival. These incentives exist despite the stated goal of various officials to curb immigration to the United States. In fact, the migration of workers is a key facet in the historical relationship between the United States and Mexico. Several policies have contributed to the continued migration and have further entrenched a growing dependency between the two nations. This paper serves as an in-depth examination of the causes of this economic dependency and investigates what effect the latest of these policies, the North American Free Trade Agreement, has on the issue.
INTRODUCTION

More United States immigrants claim Mexico as their homeland than any other national group. As of March 2002, 30 percent of all immigrants residing in the United States and 57 percent of all Latin American immigrants, or 9.8 million people, hailed from Mexico.¹ What sets Mexico apart as the primary source of immigrants? Historical immigration trends, policies, and practices have been conducive to the flow of peoples into the United States since the late 19ᵗʰ century. Further, migrant networks supported by both American and Mexican policies have perpetuated immigration. Over time the flow of peoples also created a dependency within Mexico and the United States on migrant wages and labor. In terms of policy, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) further evinces the existing dependent relationship between the two nations.

Dependency theory locates the relationship between the developed and prosperous core and the underdeveloped and impoverished periphery; it involves the exchange of resources between the two, at times an exchange between a “superordinate” and “subordinate” unit.¹¹ According to Christopher Chase-Dunn, dependency is born out of three related features and behaviors in the interactions between the periphery and the core, namely, “exploitation, structural distortion, and suppression of autonomous policies.”³ That is, the core embarks on exploitative measures which include “decapitalization, unequal exchange, and subordination to external controls in a competitive system.”⁴ Furthermore, the core disfigures the economy of the periphery by relegating it to a “specialization in raw material production (low differentiation); outward-oriented infrastructure (low integration); [and] the creation of resource patterns which retard economic development” because of the influence on the periphery of multinational corporations controlled by the core.⁵ Finally, the core realizes its dependency by forming “a political situation which retards development by linking elites in the periphery to the interests of the core.”⁶

Mexican independence exposed the political unpreparedness of the nation after colonialism. Alexander Monto writes that members of the politically-inexperienced creole class assumed control of the Mexican government from Spain, although “seldom did a president serve even a year of his term,” as the country was rocked by instability and conflict. At the same time, the United States acquired land close to Mexico with the Louisiana Purchase, made claims on Texas, annexed the Oregon Territory, and attempted to purchase California.⁷ Monto continues, “many people in Mexico even favored a U.S. takeover of the whole country” because of economic stagnation and political volatility. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which gave the United States land “from Texas and Colorado west to California,” only served to produce “a persisting legacy of bitterness” over the lost territory.⁸ In the shadow of this bitterness and national underdevelopment rose President Benito Juarez, whose 1857 Reform embarked on a U.S.-
supported reconstruction of the economic and governmental infrastructure. Juarez’s successor, Porfirio Diaz, hastened Mexican advancement through increasing American economic, social, and political ties within the country, thus heightening Mexican dependency. Although Juarez’s programs offered some modernization in Mexico, it was not until Diaz’s implementation of the Porfiriato that Mexico modernized through the provision of “huge foreign concessions for mining, railroad, telephone, and electric development, often favoring U.S. companies.”

During Diaz’s government, “push” factors in Mexico and “pull” factors in the United States worked together to increase Mexican migration across the border. Diaz’s permission for hacienda expansions through the annexation of smaller neighboring communities displaced peasants. During the late 1890s, the American demand for labor in the southwestern portion of the country offered an employment opportunity to many Mexicans across the border primarily for “railroads (particularly construction and maintenance), agriculture, and general, unskilled manual labor.” The flow of migrants into the southwestern United States was so vital to the American economy that, by the turn of the century, “Mexico under Porfirio Diaz was certainly a U.S. economic satellite. Labor export soon became a major element of that economic dependency.”

The Mexican Revolution and the Cristiada, which occurred from 1910-1929, both contributed to increased migration, although there were still fluctuations owing to American foreign policy and the economy, especially during the Great Depression, which exposed the interrelatedness of Mexico and the United States. Specifically, Monto discerns that the period of the Mexican Revolution and the ensuing Cristiada “with the destruction of haciendas and crops, impressments and looting, and declining agricultural production” made migration desirable to many Mexicans. However, movement of people between Mexico and the United States was occurring free from any form of governmental regulation until 1917, when the passing of the Immigration Act in the United States “required that every immigrant who was over 16-years-old be literate in at least one language and pay an $8.00 tax upon entry.” With the passage of the Immigration Act and subsequent acts throughout the 20th century, Mexican migration became officially illegal. Sanderson writes that the presence of undocumented migration was regulated by border patrols, yet there were also efforts among “employers of Mexican migrants... to exempt their employees from the new rule.” The roots of latter-day labor dependency can be seen in such efforts and in the discontinuation of the Immigration Act during World War I in order to compensate for the absence of men in the United States. Accordingly, Sanderson writes that “the border remained essentially unpatrolled and the tradition of migration was already well established.”

During the early 1920s, the American economic recession led to resentment of migrants, which bred violence towards Mexican workers and temporarily halted migration. Economic prosperity diminished such acts of violence in the later 1920s; migration reestablished itself only to have the Great Depression render Mexican migrants unneeded, again causing migration rates to drop.

The American Great Depression, World War II, and the
post-war era coincided with the establishment of the \textit{ejido} land tenure system, which created the need for migration remittances. The communal \textit{ejido} system granted formerly \textit{hacienda} lands to groups of \textit{medieros}, or sharecroppers, to work.\textsuperscript{xxi} \textit{Ejidos} “created a demand for capital by giving poor \textit{campesinos} access to land but not the credit required to engage in production.”\textsuperscript{xxii} Monto concurs, specifically with respect to the purchasing of agricultural equipment as “single-share steel plows were often bought with migrant earnings.”\textsuperscript{xxiv} Massey notes, further, that Mexicans hailing from regions with an \textit{ejido} system, as opposed to those lacking the \textit{ejido} system were more likely to seek labor in the United States, namely to gain access to credit through remittances. Thus, Mexico’s labor and capital demands sought supply from the resuscitated post-World War II economy of the United States, which increased migratory flows and the ensuing transfer of capital in the form of remittances.

American and Mexican governments cooperated in legislating the placement of Mexican workers in the American economy by adopting the \textit{bracero} program in 1942, through which “more than a half-million Mexican workers were migrating per year.”\textsuperscript{xxv} It was structured so that “each laborer (only males) would work under a specific contract that guaranteed certain rights such as food and housing, medical care, specified pay, and a return home at the end of the [working period],” which was capped at 90 days and restricted primarily to agricultural labor.\textsuperscript{xxvi} Furthermore, the \textit{bracero} program required that the Mexican government assign laborer quotas to regions throughout the country, the largest of which were assigned “to the West-Central states of Mexico, where rural economic conditions were among the poorest and from which many of the previous migrants had come.”\textsuperscript{xxvii} This bilateral program advanced the “circular and recurrent flow [of laborers] which was mainly constituted by young rural men from western Mexico.”\textsuperscript{xxviii} For the Mexico \textit{ejido} system, however, the benefits of the \textit{bracero} program were approximately $200 million, which was transferred to Mexico from migrant labor from just 1942 to 1947.\textsuperscript{xxix} Outside the \textit{bracero} program, however, undocumented migration still occurred to such an extent that, as Demetrios Papademetriou points out, “the United States deported more than three million Mexicans between 1950 and 1955 without seriously impeding the ability of U.S. farmers to employ Mexican labor.”\textsuperscript{xxx}

A dependency can be seen in the presence of legalized and undocumented migration into the United States through the \textit{bracero} program.

Nonetheless, the discontinuation of the \textit{bracero} program in 1966 seemed to hint at a diminished need for Mexican labor in the United States. In actuality, it was the result of political pressure in the United States and increased illegal immigration. The laborer cap of the \textit{bracero} program was insufficient to meet the demand for Mexican labor.\textsuperscript{xxxi} Moreover, Monto claims that “some growers were said to prefer illegal migrants (also called “wetbacks”) as they would work for lower pay.”\textsuperscript{xxxii} Thus, American agricultural advocacy groups supported the discontinuation of the legalized worker program in favor of illegal migrant workers who would hold wages at very low levels. Although “the Mexican government continued to back the program as an outlet for surplus labor and a source of income,” the U.S.
yielded to internal pressures from “the press, the unions, and Congress” and eliminated the *bracero* program. Although the flow of migrant laborers continued beyond 1966, this mechanism of Mexican-American dependency was rendered illegal.

**THE SHIFT FROM INTERDEPENDENCY TO DEPENDENCY**

The end of the *bracero* program marked the beginning of the policy of economic liberalization which shifted Mexico towards the status of dependency, as it began to enact policies that favored foreign investment over economic sovereignty and development. Such programs increased unemployment, as foreign capital tended to push peasantry out of agriculture along with situating people in the raw material production, which Chase-Dunn refers to as the border’s *maquiladoras*. This economic liberalization widened the gap between the rich and the poor, tying richer elites closer to the interests of the United States than to the interests of peripheral Mexico. Legislation in the United States, NAFTA being the most recent and salient example, exacerbated such dependencies by fully opening Mexico up to foreign investment, industry, and economic control. Overall, NAFTA removed autonomy from the Mexican economy, yet the historical process found its momentum in post-*bracero* Mexico.

Before continuing to assess the migration of Mexican laborers as part of a dependent relationship between the United States and Mexico, it is important to enumerate the concept of migration networks, whose role became more prominent following the discontinuation of the *bracero* program. The World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University (UNU-WIDER) sought to define migrant networks as “a set of economic, social, political, and cultural ties or dependencies linking sending and receiving countries.” Broadly speaking, migrant networks are the means through which resources such as information flow. Migrant networks influence a potential migrant’s “length of stay and capacity to settle and integrate in countries of destination.” They serve as generators of “positive externalities” which include “the transfer of remittances, . . . business links or ideas, support for local charitable initiatives, or pressure for political and social reform.” Moreover, the theory put forth by UNU-WIDER indicates that migrant networks can “generate a self-perpetuating dynamic of continued migration flows, regardless of attempts to limit quotas.” They constitute social capital, making migration more secure in a variety of dimensions. As Douglas Massey writes, “Among people considering a trip to the United States, ties to current or former U.S. migrants represent a valuable social asset since these connections can be used to acquire information and assistance that reduce the cost and risks of entering the United States and raise the odds of getting a good U.S. job.”

Migration networks facilitate migration through the security they provide, and, as Zahniser identifies, they “lower the costs of migration, . . . reduce the risks associated with migration, . . . may provide the migrant with valuable job contacts, . . . [and] may make life in the United States more appealing to the migrant.” Migrant networks can take the form of a familial tradition, such as housing communities within the U.S. whose residents have the same regional Mexican background, one migrant helping another simply because they share a common hometown, or the presence of *coyotes* whose transportation assistance is contracted by migrants willing to cross the border. Observing the re-
suits of survey and population data, Massey writes that migrations increased “in response to variation in the quantity of social capital at a man’s disposal.” Specifically, the likelihood of illegal migration increases if one’s parents have migrated and doubles if a prospective migrant has two migrant siblings. Migration trends are, therefore, self-sustaining, as numerous scholars posit that the social capital created by migrant networks facilitates more migration. Papademetriou points out that there was a multiplier effect as some workers left their seasonal labor through the bracero program in order to establish permanent employment and residency. Looking back, then, the initial movements of people into the United States for economic survival established a myriad of migration networks comprising a self-propelling migration juggernaut.

Following the discontinuation of the bracero program, a forward-thinking Mexican government introduced maquiladoras, factories for assembling and processing manufactured goods, in the northern Mexico border region. Kathryn Kopinak writes that the Mexican government fully “intended to provide jobs lost through the U.S. cancellation of the bracero program” with the passing of the Border Industrialization Program, “which allowed U.S. components to be assembled in other countries and then re-exported back to the United States without being taxed on re-entry.” Although the immediate goal of the maquiladoras was to offset the lost labor opportunities offered by the bracero program, the Mexican government’s long-term goal was “to change the isolated northern border of Mexico into a dynamic growth pole for the whole northern border, and possibly the whole country.” A related view is proposed by Elizabeth Fussell, who writes that during the 1970s and early 1980s, the border economy, the locus of maquiladora industry, was actually “more closely tied with the U.S. economy than with the Mexican economy.” A sign of the growing dependency, any type of recession in the U.S. would significantly hurt Mexico. The establishment of maquiladoras was, therefore, in accordance with the government’s economic aim to give “priority to the industrial sector at the expense of the peasantry” in order to attract U.S. investment and commercial development in the border region.

The United States considered the maquiladoras to be part of the interdependency agreement since they were “a way of using cheap Mexican labor without having to negotiate with U.S. unions” or employ illegal immigrants. For Mexico, the policy goal was that foreign investment through the maquiladora, the “instrument necessary to increase the competitiveness of Mexican industry,” would globally integrate the Mexican economy. Following the 1982 currency crisis, when Mexico “was obliged to open its economy and engage in austerity measures,” the maquiladoras became more than a unique aspect of the northern border; rather, they became part of Mexico’s response to “a policy of structural adjustment and changes in production and policy.” Specifically, Mexico wanted “greater liberalization of the economy, . . . a major change in the functioning of the labor market,” and also to enact “a policy of openness to the outside [through] the encouragement of export substitution and the promotion of various forms of international subcontracting.” After 1982, the maquiladoras were promoted not only as a means of economic development along the border, but also as agricultural and industrial advancements.

Rather than meeting the economic needs of the United States and Mexico, the maquiladoras increased unemployment in Mexico. They “increased the distance between rich and poor, to the point . . . of putting Mexico in the runner-

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up spot in the hemisphere.” U.S. technology in maquiladoras, as well as in other industrializing programs in agriculture and manufacturing, affected migration, such that Bustamente writes, “When such foreign technology was utilized in a country like Mexico … a displacement of labor power was produced that could not be absorbed by other sectors and that ended up emigrating to the United States.”

After the 1982 industrial shift in Mexico, the “needs” of Mexico and the United States were met by undocumented migrations and remittances. Massey draws on his own statistical evidence to show that “an increase in the rate of U.S. employment growth tends to be followed by an increase in the likelihood of illegal migration.” He also points out the fallacy in assigning migration to the unemployment and poor wages resulting from industrialization and structural adjustment since “high levels of industrial development and wages” raise the likelihood of illegal migration to the United States. Migration to meet the needs in both developing and under-developing parts of the Mexican economy began with the ejidos, which, as discussed, “create[d] a need for capital by providing farm families with access to land but not the capital needed to begin or expand agricultural production.”

The structure of Mexican development strategies and the resulting unemployment gave rise to migration just as colonialism resulted in underdevelopment. The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986 continued the existing dependency between Mexico and the United States by permanently establishing the residency of over two million Mexican nationals. The U.S.’s immigration control legislation specifically “provided for the legalization of unauthorized immigrants who could show they had been resident in the United States since January 1, 1982, or had worked in U.S. agriculture.” The IRCA also permitted “amnesty recipients to sponsor the undocumented migration of their friends and relatives.” However, as Chavez and Whiteford write, the fault in the IRCA in controlling immigration rests in its belief that a unilateral policy can solve a bilateral issue. The legalization of undocumented migrants only propelled migration forward since, owing to newfound legalization, it created significantly more secure social capital. Migration became more viable and attractive in the long-run due to the effects of the legalization by the IRCA, and Massey determined that the probability of undocumented migration to the United States increased by 55 percent if a family member was among those legalized by the IRCA.

The benefits provided by remittances are another facet of Mexican dependency on the United States. Popularly termed “migradollars,” remittances are the U.S. wages sent back to Mexico from migrant workers which have “become critical resources for the sustenance of homes and families in rural and urban Mexico.” In fact, remittances from migration constitute a “survival strategy” for Mexican families facing the “restructuring pressures” brought about by economic policies such as those enacted in 1982 and the industrialization of the maquiladoras. As the opening of the economy made “employment more precarious, with a general reduction in wages,” minimum wages specifically experienced “an uninterrupted tendency to fall steadily”
by 1991, Mexicans accounted for 47.7 percent of the 1.13 million detained along the U.S.-Mexico border, a figure which does not even include those who made it across.

Over time, in light of industrialization and this economic stagnation, remittances made migration “a more attractive option than working in new industrial zones or in cities in the Mexican countryside.” The statistics regarding migration show that typical remittances were “2.4 times the official minimum wage, which is two-thirds of the average working income in Mexico,” meaning that migrants earn “as much money as one-third of the resident population” of Mexico. Since such remittances “are largely spent on current consumption,” however, the remittances become an indication of dependency. Despite this, even illegal migration is an economic form of survival.

With migration providing such benefits in the form of migradollars, it is no surprise that by 1991, Mexicans accounted for 47.7 percent of the 1.13 million detained along the U.S.-Mexico border, a figure which does not even include those who made it across. The ulterior motive of NAFTA, in conjunction with the agreement’s economic development benefits, was to prevent such migration. Such aims led Mexico’s President Salinas to declare, amidst the early 1990s hammering out of NAFTA, his desire to escape the labor dependency and its associated benefits: “We want to export goods, not people.” Similarly, President George H.W. Bush declared in 1991, “We share the concerns expressed by some in Congress and the private sector that a NAFTA not lead to increased immigration of foreign workers.” Although NAFTA is exclusively a trade agreement, migration was clearly an objective in its adoption.

Provisions within NAFTA express a plan to promote trade and international investment within Mexico and among its partners in order to effect sound and vibrant economic development. Monto summarized the primary provisions of NAFTA as removing all or most tariffs, opening government contracts “to firms of free-trade partners,” imposing “no new discriminatory measures on investment,” and eliminating “Mexico’s limits on foreign investment.” Such a policy promotes economic development through the liberalization and integration of the Mexican, American, and now Canadian economies, and thus fits within the pattern of development salient in the 1982 restructuring of the economy through promotion of industrialization and the maquiladoras. Overall, this promotion of economic growth and employment will then make each NAFTA country more competitive.

The prevailing view prior to and during the initial phases of NAFTA’s inception held that migration would be stifled and rendered less economically viable. Contrary to the observations of Massey, Schott and Hufbauer postulated that NAFTA would best control immigration by allowing “economic prosperity in Mexico to ameliorate the flow of immigrants over the next several decades.” However, Joyce Vialet averred that NAFTA might engender an initial increase in migrations in the short run owing to the agreement’s “potential for displacing Mexican agricultural workers.” Similarly, Hinojosa-Ojeda and Robinson wrote that “complete liberalization in Mexican agriculture will greatly increase the speed of out-migration from rural
areas. Cognizant of the effects of migrant networks, the long-standing roots of migration and migrant remittances, and the need for capital among Mexican people, Vialet predicted that “conditions for continued large-scale migration from Mexico are already in place.” That is, NAFTA will only serve to continue encouraging the migratory flow of Mexicans into the U.S.

NAFTA-era Mexico has verified that the agreement not only fails to alleviate, but also heightens economic pressures while further exposing the dependency on the United States. Liberalization of the economic system resulted in the purchase of 85 percent of Mexican banks by international banks with investors whose principal aim was found to be “in taking deposits and making high-interest-rate consumer loans [rather] than in developing Mexico’s internal economy.” Moreover, Mexico has experienced poor productivity, as Christian Stracke points out that “productivity has declined . . . whereas productivity in the United States—already a developed nation with presumably fewer opportunities for easy gains in this area—has risen by a third since 1990.” According to Stracke, central to this decline in productivity growth is the fact that “the labor force rose by over 230 percent, [while] GDP rose by just 220 percent,” although such statistics do not show the “brain drain” or the loss of educated and skilled laborers; currently, 20 percent of Mexican immigration to the U.S. are educated. Faux adds that the curtailing of farm subsidies within Mexico by $1.5 billion, while at the same time the U.S. increased its agricultural subsidies, has been doubly detrimental. Thus, the United States’ “comparative advantage” enabled U.S. agribusiness to blow thousands of Mexican farmers out of their own markets. As earlier, the locus of industry is in both northern Mexico’s maquiladoras along the Mexico-U.S. border, where the “low-value-added operations that depend on cheap labor” and in other regions in Mexico, which are enclaves of industry that polarize the economy and engender a hinterland of few or simply low-value-added jobs. Migration has continued accordingly in Mexico, motivated by such a poor economic outlook that a “half-million Mexicans come to the United States every year; roughly 60 percent of them are undocumented.”

Migration is thus integral to Mexico’s dependency today, as the exportation of labor comprises a cause, an effect, and a central mechanism of that dependency. It is the result of many factors: underdevelopment, capital restrictions in the ejido system, the lure of remittances, poor economic climates, unemployment, the pull of social capital, and the desire to establish a new life in the United States. The historical, political, and economic policies of both Mexico and the U.S. have prolonged the dependency on Mexican labor through the inertia of migration networks. NAFTA is no exception: owing to external influences such as agricultural subsidies, high population growth, and poor productivity growth, it might even be considered the most dependency-fostering policy in the history of migrational Mexico-U.S. economic policy.

ENDNOTES
i. Passel
ii. Chase-Dunn (212)
iii. Chase-Dunn (213)
iv. Chase-Dunn (213)
v. Chase-Dunn (214)
vi. Chase-Dunn (215)
vii. Monto (36-38)
viii. Monto (39)
ix. Monto (39)
x. Monto (26)
xi. Monto (27)
xii. Monto (27)
xiii. Monto (28)
xiv. Sanderson (292)
xv. Monto (9)
xvi. The Cristiada was a rebellion against the anti-Catholic Mexican government.
xvii. Monto (39)
xviii. Sanderson (292)
xix. Sanderson (292)
xx. Sanderson (293)
xxi. Sanderson (294)
xxii. Massey et al (954); Monto (40)
xxiii. Massey et al (954)
xxiv. Monto (48)
xxv. Papademetriou (44)
xxvi. Monto (56)
xxvii. Monto (56)
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