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Author

Serrano, Javier

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The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies
University of California, San Diego

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**The Imagined Return:
Hope and Imagination among International Migrants
from Rural Mexico**

Javier Serrano

Visiting Fellow, Center for Comparative Immigration
Studies

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Javier Serrano

Visiting Fellow, Center for Comparative Immigration Studies

laforma48@yahoo.com.ar

Abstract

Migrants from rural Mexico usually move abroad with the idea to return once they have improved their economic situation. Although they do not always go back, Mexican migrants often plan their return before leaving. In any case, the imagined return persists for a long time in their minds. This paper analyzes the ways in which rural migrants from southern Veracruz and western Mexico imagine a better future, a future only made possible by migration. Therefore, these powerful images of a more prosperous tomorrow inspire migrants to move abroad. As an alternative to different perspectives that treat migration basically or exclusively as a demographic or economic phenomenon, I suggest that massive migration is motivated essentially by hope. And it always involves optimistic ideas about the future. From this perspective migrants are conceived with a more human face. Hope and imagination are rooted in migrants' hometowns.

The imagined return in rural Mexico

Imagine for a moment a person in some place at the southern U.S. border. He or she is preparing to cross for the first time to this great country. Whether it is through the desert or through the river, alone or accompanied, guided by a "coyote" or not, this person knows that he or she will face serious dangers. Perhaps someone might think that the planned border crossing is a reckless act, but I maintain that this is a deliberated act that should be observed with respect, in that it requires courage and spirit. Renato Rosaldo (1989), the distinguished anthropologist, has written that when crossing international borders migrants also pass across lines of culture and ethnicity. I say that, to cross international borders, migrants also defy limits imposed by fear and uncertainty. At the southern U.S. border, migrants know that their lives are at risk. Crossing borders requires nerve and determination.

So the question is: How do migrants get the strength that they need to cross this imaginary line, the border, a line that has claimed so many lives? Where do they find the fortitude needed to deal with extreme dangers that may even cost them their lives?

In the vast academic literature on labor migration we find a wide range of explanations for why people migrate. From these perspectives the migrant is usually conceived as an economic agent, as a demographic entity, or as a political subject. However, after having practiced ethnography of migration for some years, I think that, overall, these explanations are incomplete, because in the literature we find few answers to our questions posed above.

Indeed, based on a deductive process that ultimately rests firmly on empirical observations, my conclusion is that migrants obtain the strength needed to cross the border,

through the desert or the river, from *hope*: in essence migrants get their strength from hope. In other words, the audacity of migrants to confront dangers or even death arises out of hope. Migrants face an uncertain future with an active and optimistic attitude, and this is an important issue.

My own perspective about labor migration considers hope as the core of the explanation for why people migrate in the face of such extreme danger. But what is hope and how can we define it? First, we can say that we recognize hope when we see it. This is because we have a concept of hope; we have a prior notion about it; so we can identify it. Dictionaries define hope essentially as a state of mind, where wishes are presented as possible. It is an optimistic state of mind¹. Hope implies a wish with the expectation of fulfilling the desire. (Dictionaries give this definition and, of course, they try to summarize and offer concrete notions that, at any given time, can be vague or ambiguous in common use).

Nevertheless, dictionary definitions omit a key aspect of hope. Hope is a state of mind that is always accompanied by *ideas*. These ideas are future oriented; these ideas anticipate the tomorrow and prefigure it. They visualize the future as possible, and promote its achievement. These ideas fuel the hopeful states of mind and at the same time are fed by the hopefulness. These ideas, giving rise to hope and inseparable from it, are the true object of our discussion in this paper. In colloquial terms I call them "dreams"; when I use the academic language, I call them "imagination." In a strict sense, I refer exclusively to those optimistic ideas that point to the future, keeping in mind that these ideas are also determined by the past. This is because imagination is composed of meanings of social construction, which are rooted in the past. And the past is also a product of imagination. Human beings live only in the present moment, but

¹ *Hope springs eternal in the human breast*. Line of Alexander Pope, 18th century English poet.

imagination allows us to travel to the past or to the future. We believe that the imagined happened or can happen.

Humans have the ability to imagine a future and a past that do not exist, or exist only as a representation. This is really a fascinating problem and I am immersed in it. But we have here a serious obstacle in terms of analysis. The argument that hope has a central role in migration may be obvious. Paradoxically, it is only obvious once presented to us, not before. In fact, there is an omission in this regard in the migration literature as if it were something that has no significance, or that does not deserve to be considered (there are other reasons for this glaring omission, as we can see immediately). In any case, it is of utmost importance to highlight it. Gilbert Durand, a French author who wrote important books on these issues², has pointed out convincingly that the imagination has been underestimated in favor of logical reason among Western thinkers from classical times (Greeks). From this point of view, imagination is associated indiscriminately (because there are several kinds of imagination) with fantasy, the fable of reality or an escape from it.

Indeed, imagination has a creative power that is in its essence, but it does not necessarily postulate impossible realities or unattainable futures. Human beings imagine all the time because this is what humans essentially do. We use imagination in everyday life to live, and we do it in many ways. In fact, the imagination occupies a central place in our lives, but we do not pay attention to it. We experience the imagination with indifference or naturalness, without paying attention to what we are doing.

² Especially *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* (Durand, 1984) and *L'imagination symbolique* (Durand, 1964).

Fortunately, a well-known thinker and writer helps us at this point. I am referring to the German philosopher Ernst Bloch. He has a magnificent book, a book of great beauty and depth, entitled simply *The Principle of Hope* (Bloch, 1995). For Bloch, hope does not refer to utopianism; it does not refer to utopias such as those of Thomas More, for example, or Plato in *The Republic*, utopias that outline ideal societies. For Bloch, hope involves a utopian trend that is inherent in human beings. It represents an extraordinary power that allows us to imagine the future and so direct our actions towards, in his own words, "what does not exist yet: which is what belongs to us."

In any case, I think that we can study systematically both the contents of imagination and the imagination's activity. This is necessary in regard to different social phenomena, and this is indispensable for a deep understanding of contemporary migratory processes. At this point, my proposal is especially in debt to Bloch, and to Benedict Anderson's (1991) celebrated ideas about "imagined communities." In addition, my argument is partially in debt to the anthropologist of the cultural dimensions of globalization, Arjun Appadurai. He suggests that the imagination has a new significance in the present. He writes in *Modernity at Large* that "The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact –this is important, for Appadurai (1996) imagination is a social fact and it is related with agency-, and is the key component of the new global order". In his perspective, migration and mass media have a crucial role in the conformation of personal identities in our time. Imagination also involves cognitive aspects, which have been researched by another group of authors.

Do not believe that my argument emerges from nothing, or that is merely a rational conjecture. Rather, I can say that my argument has a strong empirical basis. As is well known,

anthropologists - I am one of them - while using different theories, which is inevitable, generate the best of their knowledge from empirical specific problems. For this reason anthropologists or ethnographers – I use here the terms synonymously – are always talking about people, relationships between people, and specific situations in particular places. The best of anthropology emerges from an inductive (passion) tendency, which is also laudable I think.

In this case, during my field ethnographic research in the *Cuenca baja of Papaloapan* River in southern Veracruz, and in *la Sierra de Tapalpa* in Jalisco, western Mexico, it became clear to me that hope plays a central role in migration. It was overall an empirical finding. Once I discovered the importance of hope and its associated ideas, it began to guide my empirical inquiries as part of a process of objectification. Hope and imagination became the most important subject of my theoretical study and attention. I started to direct my ethnographic observations systematically to them. The entire theoretic structure began with this empirical finding and, in a strict sense, it stems from the need to explain that discovery. In fact, my argument is an attempt to channel in theoretical terms the empirical phenomenon that I observed consistently in the field.

The migrants from the towns of Tapalpa and Papaloapa move to different places in United States, including California and South Carolina. International migration is a process that has recently started in Veracruz, while in Tapalpa it started in the nineteenth century.

Let me now outline for you some of the most important findings of my research. To do this, I briefly present an empirical case that both illustrates and helps us to think, in the way of anthropologists, about the crucial problem in this paper.

Case study: The provisional poverty of Anastasio

The case focuses on the story of Anastasio. I would like to draw attention to some key aspects of his story. He was or is an emigrant from La Cuenca baja del Papaloapan in Veracruz. He ventured – not without hazards, (not without) hard work and risks – to South Carolina. The son of a fisherman, Anastasio was born in utmost poverty (not all migrants are as poor as him). His misfortunes started at an early age. He became an orphan when he was very young. He was raised by his uncle and aunt, also very poor, and he started to work very early, helping local fishermen in their work. As he said: “we always found a fish to eat in the middle of this poverty (entre tanta pobreza, nunca faltaba un pescado que comer)”. At eleven he was not able to read or write. He was illiterate. He never had the opportunity to go to school and indeed the Mexican state did little or nothing for him during his childhood (and even after, according to him). But here there is an event in the Anastasio’s story that I want to emphasize.

By the time he reached eleven, Anastasio had developed a strong desire to learn to read. His determination was so strong that he got a reading primer. With this book and the help of an old man in the village, he finally learned the rudiments of reading. This was a very important event in his life. At 17, Anastasio still proudly keeps and shows that book. But his dreams do not end there. He wanted to read for another reason: he wanted to take a correspondence course about fixing boats engines. At that time, local fishermen began to use engines in their *pangas* o *cayucos*, the small boats used to fish. Anastasio saw this as an opportunity. As he said: “My mind was working continuously to figure out how to move ahead (la cabeza me trabajaba para salir adelante)”. At 14, Anastasio could read and had completed the course. But he was never able to fix engines for reasons that unfortunately we cannot discuss here.

The next point that I would like to highlight in Anastasio's story refers to his migratory experience. In early 1990s, the villagers of la Cuenca baja del Papaloapan began to emigrate to United States with H2 visas for temporary workers. They came to South Carolina to plant pine trees, which is hard work in cold weather (south Veracruz is very hot). Within a few years, emigrating from Bajo Papaloapan to the U.S., and to South Carolina in particular, had already become part of the "dream of the community", if you allow me this expression³. At the time Anastasio was a fisherman and still extremely poor. He had formed a family, and he wanted to give his children a better future. He knew that as a fisherman he would never be able to prosper or improve. On the other hand, migration offered a promising alternative. So, he ventured to the fields of South Carolina to plant pines. With the money that he saved, he managed to build a house in his hometown. The new brick house replaced the modest *yagua* - yaguas are built with palm trees- in which he and his family was living. For the first time in his house there were beds (before they slept in "petates" made with vegetal fibers), as well as a TV and other appliances. Getting all these things was his original dream, and he knew that it was possible because several neighbors in the hometown had already achieved similar things. While he was in United States, he expanded his horizons and decided to buy a vehicle to drive back to Veracruz. "My mind," Anastasio said, "is always working (mi cabeza siempre está trabajando)"

The two moments that I have stressed in Anastasio's story are crucial moments of hope and faith in a better future; both reveal the activity of imagination focused on a tomorrow that is significantly better than the current life conditions. I think that this story has great wisdom for us.

³ Kandel and Massey (2002) have postulated a theory of "culture of migration" to describe communities in which migration is a normal part of the life course. Currently many authors used this perspective in different places of the world (Horváth, 2008; Connell, 2008; Ali, 2007; Cohen, 2004). I am not totally agree with this particular conceptualization of culture, but "dream of the community" is essentially an evocative expression for the same phenomenon; in other article we have proposed more precise terms for this when write that migration become a part of "habitual horizon of expectations" (Serrano and Tuñón, 2008).

And this is: Anastasio always considered the poverty in his life as provisional or temporary, as something that can be revoked or reversed. He never considered it as a permanent or unchangeable feature. From this point of view, the future is always open: this is the deep essence in migratory experience! Ese es el “chiste” de los migrantes!

If Anastasio partially fulfilled his dreams, it was because of hope and imagination. Both guided his yearnings toward specific purposes. His specific case is not an exception among migrants from La cuenca del Papaloapan in south Veracruz or La sierra de Tapalpa in Jalisco. Rather, his story illustrates very well the moments of hope and imagination that are common and decisive in migratory experiences from rural Mexico. There are many other interesting situations in Anastasio’s life, but that is another story.

We can now summarize the main findings of my research. I will accentuate four points that are closely interlinked, but should be separated in terms of analysis.

Research findings

1. The dreams of migrants are reasonable dreams, meaning that they are not extravagant or oriented toward fantasy or the absurd. They do not imply fables, deliriums or unattainable goals. Rather, they postulate achievable goals, ends that others in the same community have often reached. The migrant’s dreams are oriented toward affordable targets, while they do not follow perfectly the Aristotelian logic. Even if they are not always entirely coherent or without contradictions, dreams respond to structures of meanings and logical processes according to specific social and cultural contexts.

What are these imaginations? First, the family house and everything that "should be in it" (appliances). Social norms and values limit and define part of the content of migrants' dreams. For this reason, migrants always establish concrete plans to ensure family growth, survival and reproduction in social and material terms. Only once all this has been attained, the dreams might include a car, a little store or a small business, or the purchase of land. Anastasio's case is a good illustration of this. (If you think carefully, remittances sent by migrants can be understood in the same vein.)

2. The second point is directly linked to the previous sentences. The migrants' dreams are extraordinarily similar, strangely consistent. To me, this represents a huge and surprising discovery: that people have the same dreams. The contents of their imagination are very similar. In essence, we dream the same dreams. This captivating problem requires deep scrutiny that I cannot offer in this paper.

The dream of a house

I would like to introduce a crucial issue here. The dreams are similar because they have the same social basis. They can be personal – they are – but a significant part of them is constructed by social meanings. I agree here with the philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1986) and with Clifford Geertz (1973), the great anthropologist. Both argue that particular imaginations are always inserted in structures of meanings that precede them. They are always inserted in previous symbolic systems⁴. This is the point.

⁴ Mannheim (1936) was the first to indicate that utopias, like ideologies, are, at their core, deviations from reality. Even though each one deviates in a slightly different way, in doing so it places in a similar place conceptually. This

A house, for example, is a frequent dream among migrants (and not only among migrants, of course). It first exists as a mental representation reflecting, or as a result of a previous social symbol; it first exists in their minds as a symbolic image, and then it may exist as a material thing. And this symbol is necessarily linked with others in specific cultural contexts.

This is not a simple question, and it has an important corollary. Think about this: houses are recent in human history; they were not always present in the human experience. In a strict sense, the need for a house only exists within a social system. And think about another issue: the dreamed house never is just any house; it never is indistinct. The imagined house is always a specific house that tells us *who the dreamer is* in his or her society. Or better, it shows us who he or she aspires to be in the hometown. The dreamed house will be bigger and more ostentatious than some, and smaller and more modest than others in the hometown. From this point of view, imagination is a comment about social position in social space. Thus, migration, that is first a movement in physical space involves or promises movement in social space. You can understand now that the desire for a house implies relative deprivation and, in some occasions, it includes a process of pecuniary emulation. I can conclude this point from my empirical research. In fact, I observed systematically several signs of relative deprivation in my fieldwork in rural Mexico.

In the other hand, migrants dream of futures better and essentially different than their present conditions of life, because they are dissatisfied with these conditions. Dissatisfaction is the other side of hope. Dissatisfaction does not have an absolute base as a relative base. It

was the point of departure for Ricoeur (1989) when he proposed to call the conjunction of these phenomenon a social and cultural imagination. Both have creative power in social processes and although they operate in different directions, both emerge on top of structures of meanings. Some relate to past ideas to distort the present with the goal of maintaining the status quo; others are ideas oriented toward the future with the goal of transforming it. Like Geertz (1973), Ricoeur puts the emphasis on the constructive process of social reality.

emerges from the contrast with the conditions of others in the same social group of reference in the hometown.

For example, if you are living in a modest yagua of palm, and most of your neighbors have modern brick houses, is possible that you feel a strong necessity to replace your old yagua for a new brick house. In fact, this was a common situation in the Bajo Papaloapan in the 1990s when the people began to migrate. I use the concept of relative deprivation exactly in this sense⁵. And I am sure that this new house will exist first as an image in a person's mind and then, perhaps, as a reality in their neighborhood.

So, imagination is, putting it in Durkheim's terms (and as Appadurai has also said), a social fact. It is also a social and total phenomenon, as I like to refer to it using a legendary expression of Marcel Mauss⁶. These last ideas are complex and intricate, maybe also intriguing. I only can present them here briefly in an incomplete or short way, but is important to do it.

3. The third point that I would like to make is this: the migrants' dreams, these imaginations that anticipate an imminent venture, do not focus on the isolated individual - although they include inclinations and personal preferences-. They focus predominantly on the family group (even when the family still has not been formed). We need another example here. Tonio was or is an international migrant from La sierra de Tapalpa. He came to US for a common reason: he wanted to build a house in his hometown to live there with his wife and children too (exactly like Anastasio), but at that time he had no wife or children. Tonio did not even have a girlfriend! However, all that existed in his

⁵ The concept of relative deprivation was first coined by Sam Stouffer and his associates in *The American Soldier* (1949). It refers to the subjective feeling of unjustly disadvantage over others perceived as having similar attributes and deserving similar rewards (in a specific reference group).

⁶ In his famous *Essai sur le don* (Mauss, 1925).

mind. This is curious but not strange in the Mexican cultural context. I have observed this on several occasions in rural Mexico. In this cultural context, egoism usually exists, individual exists but only as a part of a group, only immerse in specific sets of social relations (the most important frequently is the family group).

4. The last point is: the original dreams of migrants consist basically of imaginations of return. This is a great paradox! Indeed, migrants frequently visualize their realized dreams in their hometown of origin. The title of this paper corresponds to this phenomenon; I entitled it “imagined return”. We need another aside here.

I maintain that two seemingly oppositional myths sustain Mexican migration to United States. One of them leads migrants to the north and it promises prosperity and material achievements: it is the American Dream. The other myth points to the south: it is the myth of The Return to Paradise, which is based on the profound desire to return to one’s hometown. This is an enormous paradox, I think. Rural Mexicans emigrate abroad, but their dreams, their aspirations, their imagined lives, at least in the beginning, are consistently focused on the hometown. For them, the host country is only the vehicle that offers the possibility for fulfilling their initial goals. So the migrant’s dreams essentially are dreams of return.

I have to insist upon the necessity of thinking about this phenomenon. Migrants usually move abroad with the idea to return once they have improved their general situation, in economic but also in other terms (prestige, power, in social terms). Although migrants do not always go back, the imagined return persists for a long time in their minds and it has specific consequences. First, the powerful images of a more prosperous tomorrow motivate migrants to move abroad.

On the other hand, the imagined return remains such a powerful idea for them; it always inspires them to want to return to their hometowns.

In fact, migrants often plan their return before leaving. This is a systematical empirical observation. So, with relative deprivation, maybe involved in process of pecuniary emulation, migrants from rural Mexico remain immersed in their original systems of economy, prestige, and power (that are closely linked, as Max Weber [1978] established in his *Economy and Society*, to determine the social position). The migrants' paradox, leaving home in order to return, is what I refer to in other paper as the "Mexican Dream."

Finally, during my ethnographic fieldwork in Veracruz and Jalisco, I felt a deep necessity to do something about the habitual face of migrants presented in the social sciences. In the literature migrants are regularly portrayed as an *homo economicus*, meaning, an economic entity escaping from poverty and seeking – perhaps unjustified, maybe illegally - the benefits and opportunities offered by the host country, in this case USA. In contrast, I think that it is necessary or even urgent that we portray migrants as human beings. There are several powerful reasons for this, but I only mention one of them here. The first problem for international migrants, not only in the USA, is that they are foreigners in strange lands, aliens in a new country. My point is that they are first human beings and then foreigners; so the concept of foreign should be subordinated to the concept of human rights (Marmora, 1997). We need to claim again and again this other primordial face of migrants. In my work I began to present them as dreamers seeking a better future, and this is in the essence of the human condition.

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