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Source: *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 86, No. 2, Rethinking History and the Nation-State: Mexico and the United States as a Case Study: A Special Issue (Sep., 1999), pp. 545-567

Published by: [Organization of American Historians](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2567045>

Accessed: 04/01/2014 12:49

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# Fostering Identities: Mexico's Relations with Its Diaspora

Carlos González Gutiérrez

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## Introduction

According to the United States Census Bureau, approximately 19 million people in the United States identify themselves as of Mexican origin. Most of them are American citizens whose ancestors came from the neighboring country to the south. More than one-third (7.01 million in 1997) are first-generation immigrants who were born in Mexico. Persons of Mexican origin who live permanently in the United States can be considered members of a modern diaspora, in that they constitute "a minority ethnic group of migrant origin which maintains sentimental or material links with its land of origin."<sup>1</sup>

At least since the 1970s, the government of Mexico has tried to cultivate and expand long-term relations with the Mexican diaspora in the United States. In 1990, these efforts materialized in the creation of the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad, an office established in the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs to coordinate efforts by different government agencies to tighten ties with people of Mexican ancestry living abroad. Its principal mandates are to raise awareness among Mexicans around the world that the "Mexican Nation extends beyond the territory contained by its borders" and to implement international cooperation projects offered by Mexico for the benefit of its diaspora, 98.5 percent of it in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> According to a study sponsored by the governments of Mexico and the United States, in 1996 the Mexican-born population living in the United States was 7–7.3 million, of whom 4.7–4.9 million were legal residents and the rest undocumented or illegal. Of the legal residents, barely 500,000 were naturalized as American citizens. See Binational Study on Migration, *Migration between Mexico and the United States: Binational Study* (Mexico City, 1997), 7. U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, *March 1997, Current Population Survey*, "Country of Origin and Year of Entry into the U.S. of the Foreign Born, by Citizenship Status: March 1997" (Washington, 1997) [[http://www.bls.census.gov/cps/pub/1997/for\\_born.htm](http://www.bls.census.gov/cps/pub/1997/for_born.htm)]. In this essay, *first-generation* refers to people born abroad who emigrate to the United States. *Second-generation* and similar terms refer to descendants of those immigrants who were born in the United States. Milton Esman, "Diasporas and International Relations," in *Modern Diasporas and International Relations*, ed. Gabriel Scheffer (London, 1986), 333.

<sup>2</sup> For a historical review, see María Rosa García Acevedo, "Return to Aztlán: Mexico's Policies toward

Nowadays, Mexico's cooperation with the populations of Mexican origin who live north of the border consists of a wide range of projects administered through the network of forty-two consulates in the United States. Many support and promote formal education for people in the diaspora. Every summer, for example, the Mexican government sends approximately 250 Mexican teachers to help in United States schools that have a deficit of bilingual teachers; donates almost three hundred thousand books in Spanish to elementary schools and public libraries across the country; offers training courses in the United States for hundreds of bilingual teachers; supports (with materials and technical assistance) literacy programs for approximately five thousand adult immigrants in the United States who do not know how to read and write in Spanish or who wish to finish their elementary education; and sponsors campaigns to promote the enrollment of repatriated children in Mexican schools.

Some projects support community organization. The Mexican government, through the consular network, sponsors visits by Mexican American delegations to Mexico; arranges meetings between leaders of immigrant clubs and organizations and authorities in their states and regions of origin, both in Mexico and in the United States; organizes soccer tournaments at local, regional, and national levels in the United States in order to help establish the identity of communities and leaders; and sets up youth encounters in Mexico for Mexican American young people who were born in the United States. To foster good health, the government produces materials and conducts preventive health campaigns; promotes exchanges of health professionals between communities of origin in Mexico and receiving regions in the United States; and offers training for health professionals on idiosyncratic questions that affect immigrants' use of the health care services within their reach. To promote culture, the consuls organize activities to foster pride in the "Mexicanness" (*mexicanidad*) of the communities they serve, such as folklore and popular art exhibitions, information campaigns concerning Mexican civic holidays and celebrations, and art contests for children.<sup>3</sup>

There are several reasons for the Mexican government's desire to cultivate a close, long-term relationship with people of Mexican ancestry who live in the United States. They constitute an extraordinary market for exports of Mexican products and are an important source of foreign currency through the remittances that migratory workers send to their families. In addition the Mexican government needs to strengthen its communication with Mexican American communities in order to defend the human rights of its nationals abroad better. The government recognizes Mexican

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Chicanas/os," in *Chicanos/Chicanas at the Crossroads*, ed. David R. Maciel and Isidro Ortiz (Tucson, 1997), 130–41. Presidencia de la República, *Plan nacional de desarrollo, 1995–2000* (Mexico City, 1995); Instituto Federal Electoral, *Informe final que presenta la Comisión de Especialistas que estudia las modalidades del voto de los mexicanos residentes en el extranjero* (Final report presented by the Commission of Specialists studying a system of voting for Mexicans living abroad) (Mexico City, 1998). For the official brochure of the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad, see Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, *Programa para las Comunidades Mexicanas en el Extranjero/Program for Mexican Communities Abroad* (Mexico City, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, *Programa para las Comunidades Mexicanas en el Extranjero: Informe de actividades 1998 y proyectos 1999* (Program for Mexican Communities Abroad: Report on activities in 1998 and projects for 1999) (Mexico City, 1999).



One of approximately 250 Mexican teachers brought to the United States by the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad instructs Mexican American children in the cultures and traditions of Mexico. She is wearing a shirt given to her by the children.

*Courtesy Program for Mexican Communities Abroad.*

Americans as an ethnic group whose influence on the American decision-making process is growing (on both domestic and foreign policy issues). Although Mexican American leaders and organizations do not yet have the economic or political presence of other ethnic minorities, for the Mexican government it is clear that they are willing to take full advantage of the community's dimensions and the natural inclination of the American political system to encourage political participation along ethnic lines. The diversification of contacts between the civil societies of the two countries, the proliferation of interest groups trying to influence policy in both countries, the pressure of Mexican public opinion (a natural consequence of the growth of migratory flows and a greater monitoring by the national media of the consulates' performance), the internationalization of competition between Mexican political parties, and the need to face binational social problems at both ends of the migratory circuits constitute additional reasons for the government's actions toward the communities abroad.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this point, see Carlos González Gutiérrez, "Decentralized Diplomacy: The Role of Consular Offices in Mexico's Relations with Its Diaspora," in *Bridging the Border: Transforming Mexico-U.S. Relations*, ed. Rodolfo O. de la Garza and Jesús Velasco (Lanham, 1997), 49–57.

The explosive growth of Mexican emigration since the beginning of the seventies (of the 6.2 million Mexican immigrants living in the United States in 1994, 59 percent had arrived during the previous fifteen years), as well as the regularization of the immigration status of more than 2 million Mexicans under the Simpson-Rodino Act of 1986, has greatly facilitated Mexico's efforts to reinforce ties with Mexicans in the United States.<sup>5</sup> The fast growth of the portion of the diaspora formed by Mexican immigrants (in comparison with that formed by Americans of Mexican ancestry) has fostered *acercamiento* (increasing closeness), since first-generation immigrants (the majority of whom underwent their socialization in Mexico) are predisposed to look to their country of origin for support and guidance in their daily lives.

But what is going to happen in the long term? Even if the migratory flows from Mexico are maintained at the same level of intensity, the part of the diaspora formed by Americans of Mexican ancestry will tend to increase, since the children of today's immigrants will be Americans by birth, second-generation Mexican Americans who will experience childhood and socialization in their parents' adoptive country. For them, the commitment or sense of belonging to Mexico will necessarily be different from, not to say significantly weaker than, that of the preceding generation. One indicator of this process is a poll of 757 children of Mexican immigrants in the San Diego area. To the question, "How do you identify yourself?," 47.5 percent of the young people born in Mexico considered themselves "Hispanics," "Chicanos," or "Latinos," while 36.2 percent called themselves "Mexicans." In contrast, among young people of Mexican origin born in the United States, 49.1 percent chose a pan-ethnic category and barely 8.1 percent identified themselves as Mexican.<sup>6</sup>

Will the Mexican diaspora vanish as the "sentimental and material links" that tie first-generation immigrants to their country of origin disappear? Is there a possibility of keeping the diasporic feeling alive beyond the first generation? The purpose of this essay is to answer this question, from the perspective of the Mexican government. What can Mexico, specifically its government, do to keep alive an identity as diaspora in the descendants of Mexican immigrants?

## An Unconscious Diaspora

Every diaspora is a transnational collectivity whose members maintain a real or symbolic affinity to their country of origin. Diasporas are imagined communities whose identity and composition are in permanent evolution, constantly reinvented by ethnic elites, the rank and file, or outsiders.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Alene H. Gelbard and Marion Carter, "Characteristics of the Mexican-Origin Population in the United States," in Instituto Nacional de Migración, *The Contribution of the Mexican Immigrants to the Society of the United States of America* (Mexico City, 1997), 39. The Simpson-Rodino Act broke the "illusion of impermanence." The regularization of the migratory status of more than 2 million Mexicans helped the homeland, the host land, and the diaspora to recognize that many Mexican immigrants would live permanently in the United States. See Carlos González Gutiérrez, "The Mexican Diaspora in California: The Limits and Possibilities of the Mexican Government," in *The California-Mexico Connection*, ed. Abraham Lowenthal and Katrina Burgess (Stanford, 1993), 225.

<sup>6</sup>Rubén G. Rumbaut, "The Crucible Within: Ethnic Identity, Self-Esteem, and Segmented Assimilation among Children of Immigrants," *International Migration Review*, 28 (Winter 1994), 748–94.

<sup>7</sup>Yossi Shain, "Marketing the Democratic Creed Abroad: U.S. Diasporic Politics in the Era of Multiculturalism," *Diaspora*, 3 (Spring 1994), 86.

From the perspective of the homeland's government, the maintenance of a diasporic identity is tied to the state's ability to promote among emigrants and their descendants a sense of belonging that, although it does not suppose residence in national territory, is nevertheless focused around the country or culture of origin. According to Robert Smith, since nation-states are territorial by definition, it is precisely this lack of territoriality (the fact that relations between the state and the diaspora take place in a transnational space outside the state's sovereign territory) that makes it of interest to ask how lasting the ties are. It is not that the state loses its boundaries or that its territory fades, but rather that it seeks "to selectively incorporate others who are outside of its territory in the national political community for specific purposes and with specific limits."<sup>8</sup>

Mexico is not exceptional in the effort to promote diasporic identity, even though its diaspora shows important differences when compared with such classical or traditional diasporas as the Greek, the Armenian, or the Jewish. In those cases, the diaspora's birth preceded by centuries the consolidation of the nation-state system during the nineteenth century. The beginning of the diaspora was marked by the traumatic experience of a people who had to flee the promised land or the land of origin. Their identity as a diaspora arose in response to the coercion with which they were persecuted, and it was defined by a collective memory of that foundational uprooting. In the Jewish and Armenian diasporas, the communities are concerned with staying in touch despite their scattering around the world, recognizing each other as members of a nation dispersed through many states. Both those diasporas use significant resources to influence and stay in touch with what happens in the homeland. Over time, both have developed ideologies to justify their continued orientation toward the land of origin. It is illustrative to cite an Armenian author: "I am Armenian-American, but my Armenian identity has nothing to do with any real experience in Armenia. Until I visited Armenia in 1994, at the age of fifty, no member of my family had been there since 1598, when my ancestors left it."<sup>9</sup>

In the Mexican diaspora, there has been no traumatic foundational uprooting. The loss of more than half of Mexico's territory during the nineteenth century is essential to explain the geographical location, the cultural distinctiveness, and the very origin of the Mexican American communities in the United States. But the vast majority of Mexican Americans are not, and do not consider themselves, descendants of those first Mexican Americans who became part of another country as a result of the Texas war of independence (1836), the United States–Mexico war (1847–1848), or the Treaty of Mesilla (1853), but rather the product of a labor migration that has taken place over the century, particularly the last thirty years.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Robert Smith, "De-territorialized Nation Building: Transnational Migrants and the Re-imagining of Political Community by Sending States," occasional paper no. 47, delivered at the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, New York University, 1993 (in the possession of Carlos González Gutiérrez); Robert Smith, "Reflexiones sobre migración, el estado y la construcción, durabilidad y novedad de la vida transnacional" (Reflections on migration, the state, and the construction, persistence, and newness of transnational life), in *Fronteras fragmentadas* (Shattered frontiers), ed. Gail Mummert (Morelia, 1999), 32.

<sup>9</sup> Khachig Tololyan, "Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment," *Diaspora*, 5 (Spring 1996), 5–18, esp. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Juan Gómez Quiñonez, *Chicano Politics: Reality and Promise, 1940–1990* (Albuquerque, 1990), 5.

The political mobilization of Mexicans as a minority has not arisen from their recognition of themselves as members of a diaspora. For most United States citizens of Mexican origin, there was no foundational uprooting, no forced expulsion from the promised land, nor did an awareness of a "scattered people" precede the formation of the nation-state that we know today as Mexico. Consequently, the ideological work done inside the community to maintain a supposed diasporic identity is practically nonexistent.<sup>11</sup>

The American political system has done much more to influence the political mobilization of Mexican Americans than any awareness of being part of a diaspora. The main precedent is the civil rights legislation of the mid-1960s, which gave African Americans the status of a protected minority, a status later extended to other minorities.<sup>12</sup>

Pan-ethnic identities such as "Hispanic" or "Latino" that encompass both Mexican immigrants and immigrants from other Spanish-speaking countries, although originally a product of outside definitions for purposes of discrimination, are increasingly seen by the immigrants themselves and their descendants as a useful, advantageous resource. In the United States (as in any country that recognizes ethnic groups as valid contending parties in the political arena), the organization of political participation along ethnic lines tends to occur along those ethnic divisions that are "officially" recognized as legitimate bases of participation. To the extent that ethnicity is situational and strategic, when there are politically and socially defined categories that emphasize one affiliation (for example, "Hispanic," a pan-ethnic category) and when members of the group so identified perceive economic or political rewards (for example, affirmative action programs) associated with the adoption of that affiliation (instead of categories referring to national origin such as "Mexican," or "Chicano"), it is highly probable that there will be mobilization on the basis of the rewarded identity.<sup>13</sup>

Because ethnicity is an important basis available for group organization, successful ethnic mobilization tends to occur increasingly in relation to wide instead of narrow, subnational identities. "In a sort of social selection process, the boundaries around smaller affiliations dissolve in favor of larger affiliations, thereby accounting for the concurrent decline and growth of ethnicity." In other words, the system tends to amalgamate groups that are culturally or linguistically different into large-scale ethnic

<sup>11</sup> There were approximately 80,000 Mexicans in the ceded territories. See Nicolás Kanellos, *The Hispanic Almanac* (Detroit, 1994), 82. At that time Mexico was a budding republic, and the identity of the communities in the annexed territories was being formed. In less than forty years, residents were, successively, subjects of Spain, citizens of the new Mexican republic, and foreigners in their own land. The majority were descendants of Spanish Mexican settlers from inside Mexico, a country from which they were now separated by a poorly patrolled border.

<sup>12</sup> In 1975 the United States Congress amended the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to recognize people of Asian and Hispanic origin as linguistic minorities that have been victims of systematic racial discrimination and therefore subject to the same protection that the law grants to blacks. Thanks to this amendment, state legislatures have designed electoral districts that virtually assure election of Mexican American candidates. See Peter Skerry, *Mexican-Americans: The Ambivalent Minority* (New York, 1993), 330.

<sup>13</sup> Gregory Jusdanis, "Culture, Culture Everywhere: The Swell of Globalization Theory," *Diaspora*, 5 (Spring 1996), 149; Joane Nagel, "The Political Construction of Ethnicity," in *Majority and Minority: The Dynamics of Race and Ethnicity in American Life*, ed. Norman R. Yetman (Boston, 1991), 78.

categories such as "Latinos" or "Hispanics," at the expense of narrower definitions, such as "Mexicans."<sup>14</sup>

Until very recently Mexico did not cultivate the consciousness of a "dispersed people" among its emigrants. After the 1847 war, Mexican nationalism, based largely on the trauma of losing half the country's territory, was defensive and anti-American. Thus, despite the massive exodus to the country to the north, Mexico's national culture was not very sensitive to the situation of the emigrants. Some Mexican authors have said that in Mexico, "for decades, as a country and as a government, we forgot our emigrants, with the shameful attitude of a mother who abandoned her children and does not want to know about them." That attitude caused resentment against Mexico in the children and grandchildren of the immigrants, who felt they were victims not only of discrimination by Anglo-Saxon society in the United States but also of the disdain of their parents' compatriots. Instead of promoting the image of the emigrant who goes abroad to make good for his family and homeland, a Mexican national culture dominated by collective guilt feelings made assimilation or multiculturalism synonyms for disloyalty and treason.<sup>15</sup>

The term *pocho* symbolizes the disdain felt for emigrants. According to the Larousse dictionary, the Spanish word *pocho* is an adjective meaning "too ripe, spoiled," and in Mexico "it applies to Hispanic Americans who imitate Americans." In Mexico, from the thirties until at least the sixties, *pocho* became synonymous with "Mexican American," even though it is a disrespectful concept that attributes to people of Mexican origin the wish to forget their roots in order to assimilate themselves into American society, accusing them of an attitude of superiority to their country of origin. In the immigrant communities in the United States, *pocho* is a noun used to name the Mexican American who, upon becoming American, forgets his society of origin.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the clearest evidence of the foregoing is in Mexican cinematography. According to David R. Maciel, since the forties most Mexican movies have represented the experience of emigration to the United States negatively. In the films Mexican American characters have lost their identity in the attempt to assimilate into American society; the only hope of recovery for them is to return to the motherland. The possibility of staying productively in the United States without simultaneously losing the culture of origin is practically inconceivable.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Nagel, "Political Construction of Ethnicity," 77. This does not mean that ethnic categories are by definition mutually exclusive. For some people, to be "Hispanic" is a legitimate and useful way to conceive of themselves as "American."

<sup>15</sup> Josefina Zoraida Vázquez and Lorenzo Meyer, *México frente a Estados Unidos: Un ensayo histórico* (Mexico face to face with the United States: A historical essay) (Mexico City, 1982), 2; Roger Díaz de Cossío, Graciela Orozco, and Esther González, *Los Mexicanos en Estados Unidos* (Mexicans in the United States) (Mexico City, 1997), 287. Some authors also emphasize a class problem. The political and intellectual elite of Mexico's large cities fed with class prejudices their criticisms of emigrants, especially when they were perceived as rural workers with low levels of education and income. See Gómez Quiñonez, *Chicano Politics*, 202–4; and José Antonio Burciaga, *Drink Cultura: Chicanismo* (Santa Barbara, 1993), 50.

<sup>16</sup> García Pelayo and Ramón Gross, *Pequeño Larousse Ilustrado 1994* (The small Larousse illustrated dictionary, 1994) (Mexico City, 1993), 817; Richard Rodríguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodríguez* (1982; New York, 1988), 29.

<sup>17</sup> David R. Maciel, *El bandolero, el pocho y la raza: Imágenes cinematográficas del chicano* (The highwayman, the "pocho," and the race: Film images of the Chicano) (Mexico City, 1994), 47–75.

Today the Mexican government is trying to remedy the disdainful attitude it had traditionally adopted toward emigrants and their descendants. At the end of 1996, the Mexican Congress approved an amendment to the constitution so that voluntary acquisition of another nationality no longer caused automatic loss of Mexican nationality. With the amendment, the legislators tried to make explicit the right of individuals of Mexican origin to belong to the Mexican nation, in the understanding that feeling part of the Mexican nation does not go counter to the genuine desire of the majority of them to contribute to the prosperity of the countries where they live. Although the legislators sought to strengthen the ties that join emigrants to their country of origin, they also tried to facilitate the integration of Mexican immigrants into the societies that shelter them. The legislators hoped to help eliminate discriminatory practices against migrants and their families.

However, in Mexico the change in attitudes will necessarily have to be gradual and prolonged. One indicator of how deeply rooted in the national temperament is the lack of sensitivity to the problems of emigrants is a poll of residents of the metropolitan area of Mexico City taken in September 1997. To the question "What is your opinion of Mexicans who go to work in the United States?" 47 percent of those polled answered, "bad" or "very bad."<sup>18</sup>

For all the reasons mentioned, it is difficult to find a diasporic awareness in the political activity of Mexican American leaders, at least if this is signaled by the priority that Mexican American leaders give the interests of Mexico in their efforts to influence political decision making in the United States. Unquestionably, there are common interests between homeland and diaspora, such as the repudiation of Mexico bashing by American conservative politicians or the rejection of extreme measures of migratory control that directly or indirectly encourage xenophobic or discriminatory attitudes toward people of Mexican origin, regardless of their nationality or migratory status. But in contrast to Cuban Americans' attitudes with respect to Fidel Castro's regime in Cuba or with Jewish Americans' feelings about the security of Israel, Mexican Americans' emotional attitudes toward their homeland play a secondary role in their efforts to influence United States policy toward Mexico: they come after rational calculations based on the interests of different organized groups in their own communities.

<sup>18</sup> Of those questioned, 27% responded "good" or "very good," 23% "neither good nor bad," 3% "don't know" or "did not answer." If the poll had been taken in states with a tradition of high emigration (such as Zacatecas, Jalisco, or Michoacan), the results would have been different. In the same poll, to the question "What is it that you dislike most about the United States?," the most popular answer was "discrimination/racism" with 51%, followed by "you dislike nothing" (10%), "its government wants to dominate other countries" (10%), "drugs/crime" (4%), "they think they are better/superior" (4%). See "Visión de hoy; 1847: La guerra con Estados Unidos" (Today's opinion; 1847: The war with the United States), *Enfoque* (Mexico City), Sept. 14, 1997, p. 14. It is interesting to contrast the answers to the two questions. Perhaps the relatively negative opinion of Mexicans who seek work in the United States does not prevent Mexicans "inside Mexico" from repudiating discriminatory acts that Mexicans "outside" are victims of. In other words, the lack of understanding of migration does not necessarily create indifference to the fate of immigrants in the United States, which would explain the attention that the mass media and Mexican public opinion give, for example, to news of human rights violations against migratory workers or to cases of Mexican prisoners sentenced to death in the United States. Repudiation of discrimination against people of Mexican origin in the United States may be a source of national unity in Mexico. See González Gutiérrez, "Decentralized Diplomacy," 55.

Judging from public opinion polls, Mexican Americans have an ambivalent position on a broader trade opening toward Mexico and decisively oppose higher levels of undocumented immigration into the United States. For example, in the Mexican government's efforts to lobby Mexican American leaders during the negotiations that resulted in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), class loyalties and strategic considerations weighed much more than interethnic solidarity. When some key Mexican American organizations and Hispanic congressmen defined their positions, they conditioned their support for the agreement on the satisfaction of domestic demands, more connected with group privileges and/or rights than with trade policy toward Mexico.<sup>19</sup>

### Marginality and Sense of Community

Despite the prejudices expressed in the term *pochismo* and the lack of a homeland culture that extols the migratory adventure, despite the fluidity of ethnic divisions in American society that encourages pan-ethnic identities at the expense of those based on national origin, and despite the fact that most Mexican Americans know they are the product of a labor migration more than of a foundational uprooting, it can be argued that Mexican communities constitute a modern diaspora, at least an incipient one. Even in the absence of a full diasporic awareness, factors that have little to do with governmental policies cultivate a sense of community in the Mexican-origin population in the United States. The discrimination against immigrants and their descendants, their geographic concentration in the Southwest of the United States, the proximity to Mexico, and the consolidation of family networks on which migration rests (a consolidation that practically guarantees a continuous resupply of Mexican immigrants) have maintained in the communities a culture and identity different from those of the majority in the United States.

The assimilationist paradigm that presupposes the merging of the different national identities of the immigrants into a new American nationality does not correspond to the experience of Mexican immigrants (or of non-European immigrants in general). The myth of the melting pot, which in the United States has dangled a universal promise of vertical social mobility based on individual merit in a classless society, cannot easily explain the marginality of Mexican communities. Over time

<sup>19</sup>Rodolfo de la Garza and Louis Desipio, "Interests Not Passions: Mexican American Attitudes toward Mexico and Issues Shaping U.S.-Mexico Relations," *International Migration Review*, 32 (Summer 1998), 406–13. Even the foreign policy initiatives involving Mexico that Mexican American leaders have adopted relate to struggles for power in the American political system. After all, involvement in international affairs is a way of surpassing the strictly local sphere and acquiring more status as an ethnic pressure group nationally. As in other diasporas, Mexican American leaders and organizations have used political causes in their country of origin to mobilize support in the community and gain power in the American system. The clearest example is that of Afro-Americans who, having no single country of origin, have identified the entire African continent as their ancestral land, successfully encouraging the participation of black communities in the struggle to end apartheid in South Africa. See Yossi Shain, "Ethnic Diasporas and U.S. Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly*, 109 (Winter 1994–1995), 813; and Patricia Hamm, "Mexican-American Interests in U.S.-Mexico Relations: The Case of NAFTA," 1997, working paper no. 4, Center for Research on Latinos in a Global Society, University of California, Irvine (in the possession of González Gutiérrez), 25.

they remain at the bottom of the United States social pyramid in their levels of education and income.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to the children of poor immigrants who came to the United States from the south and east of Europe at the beginning of the century (and who faced a fortunate combination of factors such as an expanding economy and a scarcity of labor due to the world war), the children of Mexican immigrants today face an economy of internationalized services in which unionized work in manufacturing industries is scarce and in which vertical mobility is denied to those who do not have adequate training. Studies show that, after statistically isolating variables that have to do with individual antecedents, with the passage of time first-generation Mexican immigrants do not significantly reduce the gap that separates their income from the national average, in contrast to what happens with Cuban or Asian immigrants.<sup>21</sup>

With the passage of generations, the balance is mixed. The percentage of Mexican-origin children living in poverty decreases over generations, and gradually a larger number of Mexican Americans reach high-income positions than in the generation of immigrants. But, the levels of education of third-generation Mexican Americans not only do not rise above, but are slightly below, those of the second generation, while the number of Mexican American children living in homes headed by a single parent increases generation after generation.<sup>22</sup>

Inside the Mexican diaspora, the assimilation process is segmented. For a growing but minority number of Mexican Americans who have access to educational opportunities, at the end of the third generation the poverty of the first generation has given way to a middle-class status in which ethnicity becomes almost symbolic, where cultural and linguistic traits are irrelevant for daily life, and where access to political and economic power are affected by variables unrelated to ethnic origin.<sup>23</sup>

But for most descendants of Mexican immigrants, the simple passage of generations does not guarantee the middle-class status that their immigrant ancestors were not able to reach. For many Mexican Americans, the lack of educational opportunities will cause the third generation to participate in American society much as the black underclass does, feeling alienated from Anglo-Saxon society and condemned to the same low remuneration and social prestige as their immigrant ancestors. Far from disappearing, the ethnicity of such Mexicans of origin becomes an essential

<sup>20</sup> Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism Reconsidered* (New York, 1992), 16. In 1994, the percentage of adults over twenty-five who had completed high school was 81% for the American population, 47% for Mexican-origin individuals, and 29% for Mexican immigrants. In 1993 the percentage of individuals living in poverty was 15% for the American population, 32% for Mexican-origin individuals, and 36% for Mexican immigrants. See Gelbard and Carter, "Characteristics of the Mexican-Origin Population in the United States," 46.

<sup>21</sup> For a comparative analysis of this evidence, see Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait* (Berkeley, 1990), 82–83.

<sup>22</sup> Gelbard and Carter, "Characteristics of the Mexican-Origin Population in the United States," 61. In 1990, 44% of first-generation Mexican-origin children lived in poverty, compared to 32% of the second and 28% of the third generations. However, in that year, 39% of third-generation Mexican-origin children lived in single-parent homes, compared with 19% of the first generation and 23% of second. See *ibid.*, 42–43.

<sup>23</sup> Alejandro Portes, "Introduction: Immigration and Its Aftermath," *International Migration Review*, 28 (Winter 1994), 635.

element in explaining their way of life, as well as a source of resistance and ethnic solidarity to combat marginality and scant expectations of upward mobility.<sup>24</sup>

What are the consequences of socioeconomic marginality for the formation of identity by Mexican-origin individuals? How much does the concentration of Mexicans in positions with the lowest income and social prestige affect their ability to recognize or encourage relations with their country of origin? How much do their positions contribute to their becoming aware that they are part of the Mexican diaspora?

Survey and ethnographic research among adolescent children of immigrants allows interesting comparisons of the sense of belonging and identity formation among Mexican-origin young people and their counterparts of other national groups. In a poll taken in 1992 among public school students in southern California and southern Florida, of 5,263 children of Cuban, Nicaraguan, Haitian, Vietnamese, and Mexican immigrants, the young people whose parents came from Mexico had on average the lowest results in the standardized mathematics and reading tests, as well as the lowest percentage of parents with university education. Perhaps as a logical consequence, of the five national groups, Mexicans had the highest percentage of young people who did not aspire to a college education.<sup>25</sup>

In another poll done in 1992, of 5,127 children of immigrants (of whom 757 were Mexicans) divided into equal parts by gender and place of birth—the United States or abroad—and registered in the eighth and ninth grades in San Diego, California, and Miami, Florida, schools, Mexican-origin adolescents born in the United States had (in comparison with young people of Cuban, Nicaraguan, Colombian, Haitian, Jamaican, West Indian, Philippine, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian origin) the lowest proportion of identification with the ethnic category of “American”: barely 4 percent, compared with 50 percent of the Nicaraguans, 28.5 percent of the Cubans, and 33.3 percent of the Cambodians. Nor did they identify themselves as “Mexicans” (only 8.1 percent did so). Rather, they chose pan-ethnic or compound identities: 38.8 percent said they were “Mexican American,” 24.6 percent “Chicano,” 20.6 percent “Hispanic or Latin,” and 3.5 percent “Other.” This survey found a statistically significant association between the category “Chicano” and Mexican American high school youth with flattened aspirations and low educational attainment: The lower the aspirations, the greater the probabilities of their identifying

<sup>24</sup> Rumbaut, “Crucible Within,” 754. The options presented to a new immigrant will vary depending on such factors as his geographical location, differentiation in the group he belongs to, and the contact with social networks. To illustrate this point, the typical Cuban immigrant is often compared with the typical Mexican immigrant. While the first joins “an immigrant enclave economy,” in which he benefits from factors such as governmental policies that assist him in establishing himself, a critical mass of exiled Cuban businessmen, high expectations regarding possibilities of self-employment, and high levels of ethnic concentration in the south of Florida, the latter is part of a labor migration, not very differentiated internally, with scant resources for facing the adjustment process, with expectations of manual labor, and with high levels of concentration in zones of extreme poverty. See Portes and Rumbaut, *Immigrant America*, 83–93; and Patricia Fernández-Kelly and Richard Schauffler, “Divided Fates: Immigrant Children in a Restructured U.S. Economy,” *International Migration Review*, 28 (Winter 1994), 666.

<sup>25</sup> Of the Mexicans, 39% did not aspire to study beyond high school, in comparison with 23% of Vietnamese, 21% of Nicaraguans, 18% of Cubans, and 16% of Haitians. See Fernández-Kelly and Schauffler, “Divided Fates,” 679.

themselves as Chicanos. This would indicate that a Chicano self-definition is an adversarial reaction to the acculturation process, frequent among adolescents who attend inner-city schools where the majority of the students consider themselves members of a racial-ethnic minority and are less inclined to identify themselves with national-origin ancestral loyalties.<sup>26</sup>

Young people of Mexican origin, in particular first-generation ones (like Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians), achieved the highest scores in the questions directed at measuring their commitment and sense of obligation toward the family (the opposite of individualist values). Mexican young people, for example, were less inclined to feel ashamed because of their parents. In contrast, on the scales that sought to measure self-esteem, Mexicans (again like immigrants from the Indochinese peninsula) obtained the worst scores. When asked if they had ever felt themselves victims of discrimination, 65 percent of the Mexican-origin young people said they had (a percentage surpassed only by the Vietnamese and Laotians, with 67 percent and 72 percent respectively), which corresponds to their low propensity to identify themselves as "Americans."<sup>27</sup>

It would not be accurate to assume that the children of Mexican immigrants are immune to the acculturation or assimilation process that descendants of immigrants of other nationalities go through. The fact that a high proportion of them prefer to be identified as "Hispanic" or "Mexican American" instead of "American" does not mean that they consider themselves strangers in their own country, let alone that they confuse loyalty to the country they are a part of (the United States) with loyalty to their parents' country of origin (Mexico). Precisely because their sense of belonging to the United States passes through their ethnicity, the most probable situation is that for the majority of them, saying that they are "Hispanic," "Latin," "Mexican American," or even "Chicano" is a legitimate way of saying they are "American."

However, it is important to keep in mind the efforts of the second and third generations to qualify their identity as Americans, since they delimit the framework within which Mexico can aspire to encourage a diasporic identity among its emigrants. On the one hand, we must recognize that when they develop forms of identity as ethnic-cultural minorities in the United States, the Mexican and Mexican American communities there do not necessarily develop a diasporic identity with respect to Mexico: It is possible to be Chicano while remaining indifferent to the prosperity of the homeland. On the other hand, nothing prevents immigrants (and particularly their descendants) from simultaneously wearing both hats: one can be part of an ethnic minority and at the same time cultivate (in a symbolic or a real way) relations with the ancestral country of origin as essential to one's own identity.

<sup>26</sup> Rumbaut, "Crucible Within," 764. Among children of Mexican immigrants born abroad now living in the United States, 41.2% identify themselves as "Hispanic or Latin," 36.2% as "Mexican," 16.3% as "Mexican-American," 3.7% as "Chicano," and 2.7% as "Other." *Ibid.*, 782.

<sup>27</sup> Low self-esteem is associated with birth in the United States. Children of immigrants born abroad but now living in the United States have higher levels of self-esteem. Likewise, a statistically significant association was found between having been placed in a classroom for students with limited English proficiency and having low levels of self-esteem. See *ibid.*, 768–75, 783–84.

Therefore, from the perspective of the homeland, the pertinent question is: How may the Mexican government guarantee in the second and subsequent generations (who were not born in Mexico and do not expect ever to live there) the awareness of being part, not simply of an ethnocultural minority, but of the Mexican diaspora in the United States?

### The Role of the Mexican State

The fact that approximately 19 million persons of Mexican origin live in the United States does not threaten the survival of either the two nation-states or their respective sovereignties. The process of forming identity in these communities is not a battle between two nation-states for the loyalties of a shared population. No important sector of the Mexican American community gives shelter to separatist purposes, and to judge from opinion polls, the desire of the immigrants and their descendants to become an integral part of American society cannot be questioned.<sup>28</sup>

We start from the assumption that the purpose of analyzing the actions that the Mexican state can undertake to contribute to the survival of the diaspora is not to erode the loyalty naturally felt by the children and grandchildren of the immigrants toward the United States nor to stop the assimilation of immigrants and their descendants. Rather, the purpose is to find the most effective resources and strategy to cultivate in Americans of Mexican ancestry the desire to remain close to their cultural roots, to the values and traditions that provide identity to those who feel they are (actually or symbolically) natives of Mexico.

The process of forming identity is so complex that it is valid to wonder if the state (any state) can significantly influence it.<sup>29</sup> Just as it is almost impossible for the government of a country that receives immigrants to impose an official language by decree and require foreign communities to forget their mother tongue, so it might seem presumptuous for the state of origin to pretend to influence how its *hijos ausentes* (absent children) form their identity as Mexicans abroad.

In its efforts to foster the identity of immigrants and their descendants in the United States, the Mexican government must distinguish worthwhile struggles from those whose possible impact is null or insignificant. It would not be worthwhile, for example, to oppose the construction of pan-ethnic identities in the United States. For political reasons specified above, it is in the interest of Mexican American leaders to establish closer ties with Hispanic organizations and leaders of non-Mexican ori-

<sup>28</sup> Milton Esman, "The Political Fallout of International Migration," *Diaspora*, 2 (Spring 1992), 21–22; de la Garza and Despio, "Interests Not Passions," 401–22.

<sup>29</sup> Maud Mandel, "One Nation Indivisible: Contemporary Western European Immigration Policies and the Politics of Multiculturalism," *Diaspora*, 4 (Spring 1995), 94. It is unclear how the American social fabric will evolve. According to 1990 census data, the proportion of Hispanics married to non-Hispanics was 25% for Cubans, 28% for Mexicans, 35% for Puerto Ricans, and 44% for other Hispanics (these figures omit marriages between Hispanics of different national groups). Seemingly, the number of interracial marriages continues to increase, which will gradually dissolve the "pure" identities based on national origins and will encourage the appearance of "mixed" identities that will undercut the validity and significance of current schemes of ethnic differentiation. See Rumbaut, "Crucible Within," 751.

gin. Far from obstructing this natural and inevitable process, Mexico must encourage open, plural rapprochement with non-Mexican Hispanic leaders. It thereby recognizes that the framework within which Mexican-origin leaders develop politically in the United States (a country characterized by an extraordinary diversity in ethnicity, class, and national origin) requires them to adopt a flexible, nonrestrictive definition of national loyalties.

Likewise, in building a diasporic identity, it would not be very useful to expect the members of the Mexican diaspora to manifest their identity in accordance with patterns of behavior established from the homeland, as if there was a single, exclusive way to live one's Mexicanness. The temptation to see every independent manifestation of identity by Mexican Americans as a "deviation" from "genuine" Mexican culture, as if it were spurious or impure, must be eradicated. In order to promote the idea that the Mexican nation extends beyond the political borders of Mexico, it is important to accept as legitimate the influences that Mexicans "from abroad" may exercise on Mexicans "inside," recognizing their right to live out their sense of belonging to the Mexican nation as they choose. Just as Mexico may have pretensions to influence the identity formation of Mexican communities abroad, so those communities naturally and in a less coordinated fashion influence the constant transformation of Mexican national identity, as shown by the patterns of life imported from the United States into the high-emigration regions in Mexico.

The task of cultivating a diasporic identity among immigrants and their descendants in the United States takes a long time. Therefore, it is convenient to distinguish the tasks of rapprochement that must be developed in the short term, which could be classified as "government policies," from those whose maturation can take decades or even entire generations, which could be considered "state policies."

Government policies are the tasks of promotion or lobbying that the Mexican government carries out to make its points of view known among Mexican American communities and leaders in the United States. They are initiatives marked by the particular occasions and times that evoked them. The Mexican government must start by recognizing that Mexican American groups will act in accordance with their own strategic and interest considerations; it is not likely that purely emotional or nonrational attachments to their country of origin can by themselves affect the position of Mexican American organizations and leaders on issues of interest to Mexico. Given the nature of United States–Mexican relations, shaped by geographical proximity and an agenda in which it is difficult to distinguish between internal and external arenas (on issues such as immigration, trade, employment, and environmental protection), it is hard to expect relations between Mexico and its diaspora to develop in any other way.

This essay has to do with Mexico's ties with its diaspora through the other type of policies, the "state policies." Mexico's efforts to promote a diasporic identity among its communities of emigrants necessarily involve the establishment of long-term goals, since the objective is to influence how the diaspora perceives itself, after the passage of a generation. The rest of this article will analyze some of the spheres of action where Mexico's resources might have the greatest multiplier

effects, with the understanding that not everything that is promoted will unleash the symbolic affinities that constitute the diasporic identity among individuals of Mexican origin.

### Fostering Identities

In contrast to government policies, where the target of rapprochement is the Mexican American elites (since they have penetrated the circles of economic and political power in American society), in the policies of state, the objective is to influence the way first-generation immigrants and their children (the majority of whom are United States-born) assimilate into American society. The idea is not to obstruct or stop their assimilation, because this is not possible; the purpose is rather to foster in Mexican Americans a pluralistic sense of belonging to the Mexican nation, without failing to recognize that the majority are Americans by choice.

In pursuing its objectives, Mexico can take advantage of resources that the countries of origin of previous immigrants did not have. Apart from the technological revolution in communications, today there is a greater latitude and tolerance in the host societies for the homelands' efforts to promote the maintenance of cultural identity among their emigrants. Since the second half of the sixties, in the United States a pluralist paradigm has been used to explain interethnic relations, so that for a newly arrived immigrant, the response to the anti-immigrant climate is no longer necessarily reduced to the recipe of "becoming American" as quickly as possible.<sup>30</sup>

The living patterns of immigrants have also changed qualitatively. Authors of the "transnationalist" school have pointed out that a fundamental difference between immigrants today and those of the past is the growing facility with which they can be involved simultaneously in the political and social life of both their communities of origin and their communities of destination. The work of such scholars highlights the transnational social spaces created by the family and friendship networks on which migration rests and underlines the many identities of migrants as they interact in the context of two or more national environments.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, immigrants create social fields of action that cross through national boundaries. Transnational circuits of immigration are formed as a result of the circulation of property, people, and information between expelling communities in regions of Mexico or Haiti, for example, and regions in the United States that receive immigrants. The organization of international sports events involving natives of a single community who live in different countries, the annual pilgrimage of the *hijos ausentes* to the community of origin for a national holiday, and the fund raising by *paisanos* (countrymen) who live abroad for local infrastructure work in the community of origin are only a few examples of transnational activities. Transnationalist authors find in them evidence that the immigrants' daily life is not contained within

<sup>30</sup> Smith, "Reflexiones sobre migración," 23–24.

<sup>31</sup> Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation States* (Amsterdam, 1994), 4–10.



The Mexican consulate sponsors a rodeo for people originally from the Mexican state of Zacatecas, providing them with a sense of community during their residence in the United States.

*Courtesy Program for Mexican Communities Abroad.*

the geographical space where they live, but that they feel a sense of belonging both to their place of origin and to their place of destination.<sup>32</sup>

Getting closer to these transnational circles is an effective way of using the natural mechanisms of organization among countrymen to strengthen their identity as members of the Mexican diaspora. Through the network of Mexican consulates and cultural institutes in the United States, Mexico can tighten ties with the leaders of first-generation immigrant organizations, the majority of them clubs that group together immigrants from the same community of origin.<sup>33</sup> The consuls offer orga-

<sup>32</sup> Luin Goldring, "Blurring Boundaries: Constructing Transnational Community in the Process of Mexico-U.S. Migration," *Research in Community Sociology*, 6 (1996), 74.

<sup>33</sup> The work of the Mexican consulates with the migratory transnational circuits is not exclusively with the formal leaders of Mexican clubs, although those are the main interlocutors. It also involves contact with leaders who might exercise influence over their *paisanos* for other reasons, such as their earlier arrival in the United States; recognition of their families' ancestry in the community of origin; their closeness to the parish priest or the spiritual leaders of the community; their control over sports leagues or organizations; or their prosperity and self-employment possibilities. Especially for owners of small businesses directed to an ethnic clientele, relations with the consuls become intense due to the social function of the self-employed in accommodating other members of the community. See Luis Eduardo Guarnizo, "De migrantes asalariados a empresarios transnacionales: La economía étnica mexicana en Los Angeles y la transnacionalización de la migración" (From wage-earning migrants to transnational entrepreneurs: The Mexican ethnic economy in Los Angeles and the transnationalization of migration), *Revista de Ciencias Sociales* (Rio Piedras), 2 (Jan. 1997), 188–89.

nized Mexican immigrants two valuable assets. On the one hand, the consulate helps keep them in touch with the state and municipal authorities of their regions of origin, which facilitates a wide range of transnational initiatives, from the promotion of productive investment to the construction of local infrastructure in their communities of origin. On the other hand, the consulate can organize events that foster solidarity among emigrants from the same community by supporting them in their sports competitions, helping them to negotiate with local authorities, or assisting them with institutional resources when a member of the community faces legal or administrative problems (from processing travel documents to go to Mexico to offering advice on the legal status of an imprisoned relative).<sup>34</sup> Simply by recognizing migrants as valid spokesmen and backing their autonomous efforts at organization, the consuls bring the immigrant community closer to Mexican American leadership, with whom they also have contact and continuous dialogue. In many United States cities, without the aid of the consul, it would be hard for the Hispanic leaders to identify the immigrant leaders with the deepest roots in the community, as well as for the latter to approach the leaders.

In one way or another, immigrants obtain proof of what they value most: the official recognition by their country of origin of their right to belong to their communities and to the country. The consuls represent only the last link in a chain that involves, on the one hand, the federal government agencies that contribute resources in order to sponsor Mexico's international cooperation with its diaspora and, on the other, the authorities of their states and cities of origin, some of which invest state and city funds to develop their own strategy for closer relations.<sup>35</sup>

One might think that the scope of work with immigrant clubs is limited for two reasons: first, because only a minority of emigrants participate in them; second, because the clubs can create the false impression that there is a diasporic consciousness in the community, when actually it does not surpass the limits of the immigrant generation, a group that in any case is naturally connected to its homeland. With regard to the first observation, the experience of Mexicans in the United States is not different from that of other diasporas. Not even in the traditional diasporas most jealously protected by their own members do all the members feel the same identification with the diasporic cause. The most committed militants are always a minority, which does not prevent them from speaking in the name of the entire community to the dominant groups of society. Even in communities such as those of Orthodox Jews, Canadian Mennonites, or Mixtecs from the Mexican state of Oaxaca, the minority position of the activists identified with the concept of the diaspora does not keep them from attracting attention or generating economic support from a numerous sec-

<sup>34</sup> Carlos González Gutiérrez, "La organización de los inmigrantes mexicanos en Los Angeles: La lealtad de los oriundos," (The organization of Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles: The loyalty of the native-born), *Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior* (Mexico City) (no. 46, Jan.–March 1995).

<sup>35</sup> The states that have offices for Mexicans abroad are: Guanajuato, Mexico State, Jalisco, Michoacan, Morelos, Oaxaca, Puebla, San Luis Potosí, and Zacatecas. Other states sponsor projects to strengthen ties (particularly in the area of education, by sending teachers from their states to do professional practice). Among them are Baja California, Coahuila, Durango, Hidalgo, Guerrero, Nayarit, Nuevo Leon, Tamaulipas, and Veracruz. See Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, *Programa para las Comunidades Mexicanas en el Extranjero*.

tor of their ethnic community. In the long run they may have considerable mutually reinforcing impacts, first, on the way the community perceives itself and, second, on the way the host society perceives it. "Knowing how to handle this mirror game is one of the most important skills of the diasporic leadership."<sup>36</sup>

The second observation is more difficult to refute categorically. In the study of transnational migratory circuits, a fundamental question is whether the identities generated by belonging to those circuits will disappear with the immigrant generation. Are the identities temporary phenomena or deeper transformations that will affect the descendants of today's immigrants? It is undeniable that immigrants feel more solid identity links with the country of origin than do their children and grandchildren born in the United States. However, it is still premature to know if the ties with immigrant organizations and clubs will have a significant effect on the following generation. Clubs of Mexican countrymen have always existed, but they have boomed since the Simpson-Rodino Act of 1986, when more than 2 million Mexicans regularized their migratory status, released from the shackles of the clandestine life to which they were sentenced by their undocumented situation. Furthermore, the systematic effort by Mexico to cultivate ties with this segment of the organized community dates barely from the beginning of the nineties.

The answer to the question about the durability of the ties created between Mexico and its diaspora through work with the clubs depends largely on expectations about the results of such policies. If it is expected that Mexico will cultivate among second-generation Mexican Americans the same connection with the homeland that exists in their parents' generation (measured, for example, by their mastery of the Spanish language), success is not very likely.

But if the goal is simply to open up a space of legitimacy for *mexicanidad* in the next generation, then Mexico's policies of rapprochement with "Rodinos" (as those who normalized their immigration status under Simpson-Rodino are known) have greater probability of making a long-term impact on the coming generations.

In contrast to the present immigrants, who are not accustomed to efforts by Mexico's government to contribute to the well-being of its nationals in the United States, their children will be witnesses and even participants in the homeland's efforts to stay close to the diaspora. What will be the effect on a child of knowing that the governor of his father's state of origin invited his father to visit Mexico to discuss projects of mutual interest, as the representative of his community-of-origin club (*club de paisanos*)? What will be the impact on an adolescent born in the United States of participating in a beauty contest representing her parents' club and being crowned by the Mexican consul of the area? What is the influence on one's life of being invited as a young person to go to Mexico to a youth encounter with other Mexican American young people, thanks to the sponsorship of the *paisanos* club and the government of Mexico?

Even though we may not be able to answer these questions fully, due to lack of historical distance, it is not in Mexico's interest to waste the opportunities that arise today.

<sup>36</sup> Tololyan, "Rethinking Diaspora(s)," 19.



Mexican American children brought to Mexico by the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad bid a tearful farewell to their Mexican friends and mentors.  
*Courtesy Program for Mexican Communities Abroad.*

Today the relative weight of first-generation immigrants within the diaspora is unusually high. The challenge is to use the natural proximity these immigrants feel toward the country where they were born to create connections with the generations to come. The ultimate objective must be to promote self-esteem among individuals of Mexican origin: to lead them to perceive Mexicanness as a source of strength and not of weakness.

The construction of identities by children of Mexican immigrants is a product of the historical period in which it happens, and to that extent it surpasses specific efforts to establish rapprochement between homeland and diaspora. From the viewpoint of the country of origin, what could do more to raise the self-esteem of adolescent Mexican Americans than Mexico's prosperity and harmonious development? It is natural to expect that the children of Mexican immigrants will strive to maintain a distance from their parents' country if their image of it is that of an underdeveloped country beset by problems. But if in their eyes Mexico is a united country, proud of its identity as a nation and on a solid path of development, young Mexican Americans will try to associate themselves with the picture of success that Mexico as homeland represents.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> "I am convinced that Mexico's success will benefit Hispanics in the United States too, and I know for sure that the stronger you get in economic and political terms here in the us, the better Mexico's image will be," said President Ernesto Zedillo at the National Council of La Raza annual meeting, in Chicago, July 23, 1997. See

However, it is not necessary to leave everything to destiny and the macrostructural conditions that determine interethnic relations in the United States or to the rate of economic development in both countries. If we start by recognizing that for immigrants, collective identity is an important resource as they face assimilation, it is not irrelevant to wonder what can be done positively to influence the definition of such identities. "A stigmatized identity can turn assimilation into an injurious transition unless immigrants resort to shared repertoires based on national origin, immigrant status or religious conviction. Some identities protect immigrants; others weaken them by transforming them into disadvantaged ethnic minorities."<sup>38</sup>

Mexico can play an important role by joining forces with Mexican American leaders to fight prejudices and stereotypes in the United States media's portrayal of Mexican American communities. The public and systematic celebration of the diaspora in the United States media and with non-Latino United States leaders (portraying its members as hardworking people who proudly contribute to the well-being of both countries) is one of the most important contributions that Mexico can offer its communities. The goal is to polish the image of the communities of Mexican origin in the consciousness of the American people. Given the deep links between Mexico's image in the United States and the public perception of the communities of Mexican origin, it is clearly in Mexico's national interest to do so.

Working with the immigrant generation through the migratory transnational circuits encourages self-esteem not only among Mexicans who emigrated but among their descendants as well. Everything that Mexico does to strengthen in the immigrants and their families the feeling of belonging to a single diasporic community will tend to provide them with better tools for achieving assimilation. In effect, what their homeland can offer Mexican emigrants is social capital. "Social capital is distinct from human capital in that it does not presuppose formal education or skills acquired through organized instruction. Instead it originates from shared feelings of social belonging, trust and reciprocity."<sup>39</sup>

Simultaneously, the identity battles should be fought in other arenas, not only in the immigrant clubs. Since it is the socializing institution par excellence, the American school is a fundamental space where Mexico's aid not only encourages Mexican-origin students to keep in touch with their roots but can also increase Mexican American students' ability to take advantage of the educational opportunities that are offered to them in the United States. There is very clear evidence that exactly as happens with the schools that serve Turks in Germany or Algerians in France, the

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Ernesto Zedillo, "Admiramos lo que las comunidades hispanas han logrado para hacer valer principios" (We admire what Hispanic communities have achieved to make principles count), *El Nacional* (Mexico City), special supplement, Aug. 4, 1997, p. v. The same can be said inversely: the more prosperous and powerful Mexican communities in the United States are, the greater the prestige that their country of origin will ascribe to them. And, since the American political system imposes on ethnic groups a moral obligation to promote a democratic creed in their respective homelands (at the risk of losing internal legitimacy if they refrain from doing so), the growing competition between political parties in Mexico will contribute to tightening ties with the Mexican American elite. See Shain, "Ethnic Diasporas and U.S. Foreign Policy," 813.

<sup>38</sup> Fernández-Kelly and Schauffler, "Divided Fates," 663.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 669.

American educational system has serious problems in raising the scholastic levels of immigrant and Mexican-origin students.<sup>40</sup>

Mexico cannot ignore the fact that its diaspora is overrepresented in the base of the American social pyramid. It would be a mistake to assume that the economic marginality and discriminatory attitudes suffered by Mexican communities in the United States serve the interests of their country of origin, in that they keep members of the Mexican diaspora alienated from the American mainstream. As mentioned previously, ethnic identity is not synonymous with diasporic awareness, and much less when it is nurtured by feelings of isolation and marginality. As it is for the United States, it is beneficial for Mexico to have Mexicans prosper in their adoptive country, without abandoning observance of their culture and traditions of origin.

Mexico's international cooperation initiatives toward Mexicans abroad need to have a strong social content, given the economic marginality of the diaspora. The whole strategy of *acercamiento* gains its legitimacy from a series of social policies in the areas of education, health, sports, community organization, and cultural promotion that are carried out by the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad through the network of forty-two consulates and twenty-three cultural institutes. Through projects that aim to increase the ability of American schools to serve bilingual or monolingual Spanish-speaking students (such as, for example, temporary stays by Mexican teachers at schools with a deficit of bilingual teachers, the broadcasting of satellite long-distance high school programs, the donation of textbooks in Spanish, or the training of American teachers in idiosyncratic matters that influence immigrant students), the Mexican government can have a positive influence on the identity of the second and subsequent generations.

Just as in the work with organizations and clubs of first-generation immigrants, through projects that promote the education of Mexican-origin children, Mexico sends the most important message it can transmit to its diaspora, a message of belonging and of plurality: regardless of the natural loyalty that most Mexican and Mexican American youths feel toward the country where they were born or that their parents adopted, it is legitimate to feel simultaneously part of the Mexican nation. Mexico is concerned for and expresses solidarity with Mexicans living abroad. Through the school, the key carriers of these messages are bilingual teachers and the parents.

To encourage a sense of belonging to the Mexican nation among emigrants and their descendants, it is essential to consider what type of membership is offered to them. The amendment of the Constitution that permits the voluntary acquisition of another citizenship without loss of Mexican nationality is the point of departure for a debate that has barely begun in Mexico. The growth and consolidation of such government programs as the Paisano Program, created in 1989 to combat the extortion, abuse of authority, and burdensome administrative procedures that Mexicans living abroad frequently experienced when they returned temporarily, give concrete content to the sense of belonging that the Mexican government promotes abroad. But there are many other initiatives that are only beginning to be discussed regularly

<sup>40</sup> Esman, "Political Fallout of International Migration," 21–22.

in Mexico. How should study of the problems of Mexican Americans be included in Mexican schools? What type of preferential treatment can be given to foreign, Mexican-origin investors? How should Mexicans living abroad be formally incorporated into Mexican electoral processes?

Whether the diasporic feeling survives does not depend exclusively on the Mexican government. Maintenance of community organizations that favor intergenerational solidarity between immigrant Mexicans and Mexican Americans or that nurture a diasporic ideology cannot be a task of the Mexican government; it is the responsibility of the communities and, in particular, of Mexican American leaders. Because a major concern of Mexican American leaders in their relationship with Mexico is to maintain their independence and protect themselves from accusations of disloyalty to the United States, a *sine qua non* for the success of these efforts is to respect that distance and not to pretend to supply from Mexico what can only come from the emigrant community itself.

## Conclusion

This article reviews factors that obstruct consolidation of a diasporic identity among Mexican communities in the United States: lack of foundational uprooting or of an ideology related to the condition of a "scattered people"; the structure of opportunities for ethnic minorities in that country, which favors the appearance of pan-ethnic identities; disdain toward the emigrants in Mexico; and bilateral relations that encourage Mexican American organizations to act on the basis of rational considerations rather than emotional motivations.

But, thanks to the technological revolution, to the tolerance in the United States for the principle of ethnic diversity, to the consolidation of transnational migratory circuits that give immigrants a sense of belonging simultaneously to two communities, and to the institutional resources that the Mexican government has today, it is feasible for the homeland to develop a strategy for tightening ties that promotes a diasporic identity among Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States, directed to raising self-esteem based on their Mexicanness. In its efforts to create a collective identity that strengthens immigrants, and indirectly the generations to come, Mexico must prioritize the work with the United States media, with transnational migratory circuits, and with American schools.

In fostering the identity of immigrants and their descendants in the United States the Mexican government must distinguish and concentrate on those struggles where it has a significant role to play. For Mexico, the ultimate objective of tightening ties should not be to stop the acculturation of Mexican Americans, nor to aspire to create a situation where, as happens with other countries, considerations concerning the homeland are preferred to the strategic, rational, self-interested calculations of diaspora members. In the long term, the ultimate aim should be only to win a space of legitimacy that places relations between Mexico and its diaspora on a different platform, where the efforts of the Mexican state to improve the living standards of the communities abroad or to generate support among its diaspora for development

of the homeland are perceived as a logical consequence of the feeling of belonging to the Mexican nation felt by those who are Mexican by heritage.

The analysis above assumes that the concept of the Mexican nation is not exclusive. Because the process of forming identity in American youngsters who are descendants of Mexican immigrants is complex and multifaceted, it is far from being a zero-sum game according to which the ties that these young people may have with their parents' country of origin undercut ties to their country of birth.

There are no valid reasons to assume that efforts to cultivate a diasporic identity in emigrant communities must create rivalry between the state of origin and the receiving state.<sup>41</sup> In the case of Mexico, policies to tighten ties should be seen as an effort at international cooperation that contributes to raising the living standard of Mexicans in the United States (and indirectly that of American society in general) and to easing the adaptation of immigrants and their children to American society. While Mexican Americans are a point of union between two societies, the closer they are to Mexico, the greater will be the probability that they will be a voice of moderation that softens the prejudices against American society in Mexican society.

As do many other countries with significant emigrant populations (such as Canada, the Philippines, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Italy, Ireland, and El Salvador), Mexico no longer seeks exclusivity of its nationality as a way to establish sovereignty over people of Mexican origin. Like many other countries, Mexico now recognizes that to expect indivisible loyalty through unitary citizenship from its emigrant population is not in its best interest.<sup>42</sup>

The 1997 reform of the nationality law in Mexico showed a willingness to break with deep-rooted cultural and historical traditions, and to adapt to the realities of a changing world. This policy shift was not free of costs. By fostering ties with the Mexican communities abroad, the *acercamiento* policies have changed the concept of membership to the Mexican nation for Mexicans on *both* sides of the border. In its efforts to cultivate a sense of belonging for its emigrant population, the government has opened a sort of Pandora's box, since those same immigrants whose organization it supports are increasingly willing and able to articulate their interests and mobilize support independent of both governments. Their demands will make Mexico's political system even more plural and fluid, because there is no consensus in Mexico about the precise terms of the membership that should be offered to the people of Mexican descent. But it is not possible to turn the clock back. Although not many people in Mexico are aware of this, in the coming years the influence that Mexicans "from outside" will exercise on the identity of Mexicans "inside" will be as important as, or more important than, the influence exercised the other way around.

<sup>41</sup> Charles King, "Conceptualizing Diaspora Politics: Nationalism, Transnationalism, and Post-Communism," paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, Aug. 1997 (in the possession of González Gutiérrez), 6.

<sup>42</sup> T. Alexander Aleinikoff, *Between Principles and Politics: The Direction of U.S. Citizenship Policies* (Washington, 1998), 25.