Exiles and Transnationals: 19th Century Irish and Contemporary Mexican Immigration to the United States

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When confronted with current discussions of immigration reform in the United States, one may easily experience a sense of déjà vu. Rancor behind contemporary concerns over immigrant issues conjures memories of past xenophobias and nativisms. Interesting parallels emerge, revealing as much about the attitudes of those who consider themselves natives as to the experience of the emigrants. One such analogy can be drawn between Irish immigration to the United States in the nineteenth century and the complex tapestry of legal and undocumented Mexican immigrants who have migrated to the United States in recent years. Between 1845 and 1855, 1.5 million people fled famine, starvation and death in Ireland for succor in the United States, representing the first mass immigration to the U.S.[1] As the country of origin for the largest contemporary percentage of legal and undocumented immigrants to the United States, Mexico provides a striking counterpart to the Irish experience.[2] Taken together, these two phenomena bookend the immigrant experience in the United States, and, as such, seem worthy of comparison.

Even a casual perusal reveals similarities between these two migratory events: both migrations were precipitated by hardship in the countries of origin; both groups saw the prospect for an improved quality of life in the United States; both groups faced language and cultural barriers; both groups experienced discrimination and exploitation; and both were predominantly Catholic. While research into the comparison between the Irish and Mexican emigrations confirms these and other synonymies, it also reveals sharp differences that are quite revealing with respect to global intercourse within the two timeframes. Isolating the similarities between these two phenomena motivates intriguing anecdotal discourse. Isolating differences, on the other hand, unveils societal changes that many find disturbing. By far the greatest variance between nineteenth-century Irish and current Mexican immigration to the United States is in the respective levels of assimilation of their diasporas. This research explores the Irish and Mexican immigrant experience in the United States, how they are similar and in what ways they differ. The importance of remaining mindful of the past when considering the present will be discussed, as will the equal gravity of adapting expectations and policies to modern times.

"Emigrants" leave their native land and become "immigrants" upon arrival in their host country.[3] The nineteenth century Irish emigrants were to become permanent immigrants, considering themselves exiles with no hope of returning to Ireland.[4] Contemporary Mexican emigrants to the United States can more accurately be described as transnational, for they tend to "remain substantially engaged (economically, politically and culturally) in their newly adopted lands and in their communities of origin, moving back and forth in ways seldom seen in previous eras of large-scale immigration."[5] Immigration is frequently identified metaphorically with water movements in a curious linguistic construct, paralleling the movement of peoples with that of a wave, tide or flood. Water in movement, however, typically recedes; perhaps this pervasive imagery is indicative of underlying native sentiments that immigrants do not belong and should not remain. While tidal ebb and flow might well be applied to the fluid movement of today's Mexican trans-

nationals, it was not applicable to nineteenth century emigrant Irish; they came to stay.

Irish emigration to the United States in the nineteenth century represented the first discretionary mass transatlantic movement of peoples and as such was an important phenomenon that had far-reaching impacts on the burgeoning nation. Living conditions for the indigenous population in Ireland were harsh: English usurpation of the land and control of the export economy reduced almost all Irish - artisans, farmers and laborers alike - to lifestyles of abject poverty.[6] Emigrants in the early part of the century were mostly Protestants with marketable skills who could afford to pay for their voyage and were able to contribute to the economy of their adoptive land.[7] This trend changed as the century progressed, however, with many comparatively underprivileged Irish people turning to emigration as a way out of their untenable living conditions. By the mid-1830s poor Catholic emigrants began to comprise more than half of the exodus.[8] The potato blight and resultant famine that struck Ireland between 1845 and 1855 turned emigration from that country into a veritable evacuation of sickly, starving paupers, who came to view themselves as exiles from their homeland rather than voluntary emigrants.

Like the Irish of a century and a half ago, Mexican emigrants to the United States today flee poverty and deprivation. An economic crisis in the mid-1990s involving a stock market crash that devalued the peso and resulted in wide-spread unemployment, known locally as *la crisis*, left many Mexican nationals with a choice similar to, but perhaps less desperate than, that of the earlier Irish: emigration or extreme poverty.[9] Mexico's physical and social infrastructures are ill-equipped to offer aid to impoverished peasants. Implementation of the North America Free Trade Agreement in 1994, while promising to improve the lives of Mexican laborers, has actually had a deleterious effect. Current news reports claim that, "19 million more Mexicans now live in poverty than before the pact was signed."[10] Furthermore, the trade agreement has negatively impacted Mexico's agricultural class, with big agribusiness forcing more than "2 million Mexican farmers…off their land," between 1993 and 2002.[11] *Maquiladoras,* foreign controlled manufacturing plants, have exploited Mexican workers with harsh conditions, low wages, and government-supported restrictions on labor organization.[12] Unlike the Irish exiles, however, Mexican emigrants are often transnationals, moving back and forth across a border that remains porous in spite of efforts by vigilantes and the United States government to secure it.

In addition to internal "push" factors encouraging Irish and Mexican immigration, external "pull" dynamics lured emigrants to a perceived better life in the United States. The nineteenth century Industrial Revolution in the United States presented a need for unskilled laborers on the railroads, canals, docks and in mining and textile industries. The Irish fleeing starvation for work and sustenance in the United States were deemed, "…necessary to the development of the vast country."[13] Many Irish emigrated with romantic concepts of a prosperous life that may best be described as mythical, expecting streets paved in gold and an easy life requiring little adaptation to their new surroundings.[14] Chain migration, in the form of family members sent to the New World with a mandate to remit earnings home to fund transportation for kinsmen, contributed to the siren song of immigration to the comparatively affluent United States.[15] Between the years of 1850 – 1855 Irish immigrants in America sent home almost six million dollars annually, which in today's economy would be more than $137 million per year.[16]

Similarly, today's Mexican immigrants are desirous of a comfortable lifestyle

perceived as attainable in the United States but not in their home country. While the per capita gross domestic product in the States is estimated at $41,600 for 2005, Mexico's is just one quarter of this amount, or roughly $10,000.[17] The percentage of the U.S. population subsisting below the poverty level is estimated at 12% (2004), while in Mexico it is 40% (2003).[18] Mexico's apparently robust unemployment rate of 3.6% (compared to the U.S. rate of 5.1%) is clearly a misleading indicator if we factor in Mexico's estimated 25% *under*employment.[19] These statistics are indicative of a significantly higher standard of living for people living in the United States than for people living in Mexico, contributing to the motivation behind Mexican emigration. As with the Irish, kinship ties further the pull on Mexicans who desire to join family members who have already made the move north.[20] Remittances to Mexico from immigrants in the United States amounted to more than $20 billion (2005), contributing to almost 3% of that country's gross domestic profit.[21]

Chain migration is a phenomenon associated with Mexican immigration today as much as it was with the Irish of the nineteenth century; Catholic and mutualistic emphasis on familial unity over individualistic aspiration encouraged chain migration then as it does now.[22] Furthermore, it has been theorized that international migration as a whole is predicated on the pull of a segmented labor market within the host country.[23] This argument claims that, "…international migration stems from a relatively permanent demand for unskilled labor that is built into the economic structure of developed nations."[24] Both Irish exiles and transnational Mexicans have answered that demand in the United States.

It is a widely held misconception that famine Irish immigrants to the United States enjoyed the benefit of a common language with the inhabitants of their host country. Between 1845 and 1855, Ireland lost a million people to death and another 1.8 million to emigration to North America, most of them to the United States.[25] The poorest among these exiles were Gaelic speakers from the southern and western provinces that represented from one fourth to one third of the exodus, or approximately half a million people with Gaelic as their primary language.[26] Port officials made note of entire shiploads of Irish emigrants unable to speak English; priests in Dublin considering a mission to the States were encouraged to learn Gaelic to facilitate their ministry among the Irish immigrants.[27] To assert that the Irish assimilated into North American society with greater ease than other immigrants by virtue of a common language is to perpetuate an erroneous myth.[28]

Spanish-speaking Mexican immigrants to the United States today face the same language barrier that their Irish counterparts did in the nineteenth century. While it may well be argued that the Irish surely had some exposure to the *lingua franca* of their adoptive country through contact with the English in Ireland, the ubiquity of the English language in today's globalized environments ensures the applicability of that same argument to Mexican immigrants. Accommodation of Spanish speakers in the government and media could perhaps be regarded as more repressive and exploitive than benevolent. Nonetheless, the poorest emigrant paupers and peasants of each country were, and are, the least likely to speak any English and at the same time the most in need of that tool upon arrival. Earlier immigrants assisted the newly arrived Irish navigate through their adopted country in much the same way as established Mexican nationals in the United States help their compatriots. The Catholic Church established immigrant aid societies for both the Irish of the 19th century and the Mexicans of today.[29]

It is well documented that the labor of Irish immigrants in the nineteenth century

was instrumental to the development of industry in the United States. The majority of famine emigrants lacked skills for employment and had lost faith in the land to provide subsistence; therefore they gravitated to urban areas and sought menial wage labor. Desperate to provide for themselves and their families both in the United States and Ireland, Irish workers were willing to undercut prevailing wages.[30] The influx of immigrants created an overabundance of unskilled laborers that increased job competition.[31] Adding to the competition for jobs was the practice by employers of advertising abroad for foreign laborers, claiming that "hundreds of workers were needed in certain industries…when no such vacancies actually existed."[32] The intent behind the deception was to force native workers in the United States to accept lower wages.[33]

Racism contributed to the employment contest as Irish men and women competed with freed Blacks for work previously dominated by the latter.[34] In the south, Irish immigrants were often employed for work considered too dangerous to risk the loss of capital invested in a slave. The preference was explained by a representative of a southern stevedoring business: "The niggers are worth too much to be risked here; if the Paddies are knocked overboard, or get their backs broke, nobody loses anything."[35] Irish and Blacks competed "for the dirty, backbreaking, poorly paid jobs that white native Americans and emigrants from elsewhere generally disdained to perform."[36] This observation correlates directly with similar claims about the necessity of Mexican migrant labor today.

The argument that immigrants have a history of working at jobs Americans refuse is an oversimplification of a complex socio-economical construct. In developed countries, earned wages contribute to a worker's sense of identity through implications of merit and prestige.[37] Employers invest in education and training for workers in positions of high status and responsibility; much like the nineteenth-century African slave, these upper-tier employees represent human capital to the employer.[38] Unskilled labor, however, can be increased or reduced as demand dictates, thereby representing less of an investment. Attempting to use higher wages to attract workers to low-status positions involving tedious or difficult tasks is often economically unfeasible for employers. The prestige component of wage labor dictates that if the remuneration for those on the bottom rung of the employment hierarchy is raised, so it must be for all the others.[39] Furthermore, "When certain sectors of the opportunity structure are culturally coded as 'immigrant jobs,' they become stigmatized, and native workers tend to shun them almost regardless of wage dynamics."[40] It is far easier and cost effective to utilize laborers with no social attachment to their wages. For employers, Mexican transnational workers fit this rubric conveniently, regarding wages as a means to comfort and security and having little cultural investment in a society in which they do not consider themselves members, thereby making palatable low-prestige labor at a reduced wage.[41]

In an interesting transmutation, social memory may be short and many times becomes idealized with mythologies and wishful interpretations. Patriotic fealty can inspire manipulations that are appealing but nonetheless erroneous. The claim that the United States is a "melting pot" of happily assimilated immigrants does not hold up to historical analysis. The famine Irish, in all areas of the United States, from New York to Sacramento

> were disproportionately concentrated in the lowest-paid, least skilled, and most dangerous and insecure employment; with few exceptions, they also displayed the highest rates of transience, residential density and segregation, inadequate housing and

> sanitation, commitments to prison and charity institutions, and excess mortality.[42]

In fact, the emigrant Irish during the famine survived, on average, a mere six years once they reached American soil.[43] Irish treatment at the hands of those who considered themselves native was harsh; the immigrants were ridiculed on the streets, in print and on the stage.[44] "No Irish Need Apply" was a common posting among businesses seeking laborers, and little sympathy was proffered for the plight of the unemployed.[45] An Irish laborer eloquently and angrily penned his frustration, decrying that there was "no love for him – no protection of life – [he] can be shot down, run through, kicked, cuffed, spat on – and no redress but a response of 'served the damn son of an Irish bitch right, damn him.'"[46] Anti-Catholic, and by extension Anti-Irish, sentiments found voice in the nativist movement of the short-lived, but nonetheless virulent, Know-Nothing party.

Anti-Mexican sentiment in the United States today parallels that held against the Irish in the past. Political activities of the Minuteman militia are reminiscent of Know-Nothing machinations.[47] Much as with the Irish, willingness to exploit Mexican laborers does not translate into their acceptance within American society. Mexican transnationals compose the bulk of migrant farm work today, engaging in tedious and often dangerous physical labor. Yet the current state of their available health care is in limbo, languishing in a report conducted in 2003 but held from the public "in clearance" by the Bush administration.[48] The overwhelming approval in 1994 of California's proposition 187 to deny public education, social assistance, and health care services to undocumented immigrants speaks to an undercurrent of hostility toward the Mexican transnational "other."[49] President Bush's Secure Fence Act of 2006, while touted as an implement of national security in the wake of the terrorism events of September 11, 2001, also embodies a thinly-veiled element of xenophobia reminiscent of the antebellum environment. Furthermore, it is doubtful that the expensive supplemental surveillance will prevent the compelling push and pull factors from exercising their seduction on transnationals unwilling or unable to migrate "legally." Discussion of implementing a guest worker program in the United States conjures up images of the poorly administered Bracero program of 1942 through 1964, during which time "more than 4.5 million Mexican nationals were legally contracted for work in the United States."[50] That such a plan is under consideration accentuates the segmented nature of today's labor market and is tantamount to an admission of racial and class bias in filling the jobs at the bottom rungs of the employment hierarchy.

The face of immigration in the United States has changed. Between 1820 and the onset of the American Civil War, immigrants were largely of Western European stock, dominated by the Irish early on, and later by Germans.[51] Today, almost fifty-two percent are from Latin America.[52] Transatlantic emigration represented a commitment, both socially and financially, that facilitated assimilation; the United States/Mexico common border, conversely, facilitates transnationalism. For the Irish, emigration was a last resort, a decision made under extreme duress; many who would not have otherwise left Ireland believed that to remain would be fatal.[53] The devastation of famine coupled with a socio-economic environment hostile to native Irishmen counter-indicated any thought of returning home. A sense that they were exiles escaping conditions beyond their control stimulated their desire to assimilate into their adoptive society, as evidenced by one Irishman who advised his fellow immigrants to, "get rid as soon as possible of National peculiarities and set…down to adopt the ways and customs of the people."[54] Assimilation was further

encouraged by newspaper editors who advised the Irish immigrants to emulate their new Yankee compatriots.[55] Contrast that with today's Mexican immigrant: improvements in transportation and communication have enabled transnationalism; government forms, media, education, and services are all offered in Spanish; Mexican foods, dress and customs have become incorporated into American culture as much as Americanisms have been adopted by Mexicans. Mexican transnationals in the United States today simply do not have the desperate need to assimilate that Irish exiles experienced in antebellum America.

Globalization has changed immigration. In Mexico, NAFTA has polarized the economic classes while the ubiquity of consumer information has created "structures of desire and consumption fantasies that local economies cannot fill."[56] To realize these desires and fantasies while maximizing economic potential, Mexican transnationals work across the border while retaining their familial and cultural allegiance to their home-country. Under such circumstances, is cultural assimilation a logical, or even relevant, expectation? In the United States, the impact of globalization is creating unease and distress as the increasingly large and nomadic Mexican transnational community exerts a disorienting effect on the "native" populace and is perceived as potentially menacing, thereby fueling a rise in xenophobia.[57]

Ironically, an increase in *Irish* illegal immigration in the 1980s spawned the Irish Immigration Reform Movement, resulting in The Northern Ireland Visas for Peace and Reconciliation, which President Bill Clinton signed into effect in October of 1998.[58] The act allows for annual temporary visas of 4000 Irish nonimmigrant guest workers from disadvantaged areas of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.[59] Perhaps implementation of this Irish guest worker program bodes well for a similar Mexican plan that will mitigate the shame of the Bracero debacle.

In exploring the similarities between nineteenth century Irish exiles and today's Mexican transnational, differences emerge that point to a necessary change in immigration attitude and approach. Traditional immigration theory espouses an anticipation of acculturation that is hegemonically oppressive in its expectation of a minority group to adopt the "cultural patterns of the host society."[60] Today's globalized environment seems to dictate a need to accommodate the immigrant as well as the native; it is absurd to exploit transnational labor and consumerism while protesting its fluid immigrant status. To counter xenophobia, we must remain mindful that immigration influxes in the past, as with the Irish, have contributed in countless ways to the richness of American society.

Note: my analysis has been supplemented with study-abroad travel to Ireland and Mexico. I spent the summer of 2006 taking Irish history and literature classes in Galway, Ireland. I have been to the famine museum in County Roscommon, walked a replica of a coffin ship, and talked with Irishmen who spoke of famine immigration like "going to the moon," so complete and horrifying was the break with their mother country. I studied Mexican history and Spanish in Morelos, Mexico during January of 2007 to advance my language skills and conduct further research. I interviewed a taxi driver in Cuernavaca who emigrated to Los Angeles for three months in 1985. He earned just enough money to return home and purchase his cab so he could provide for his family, exemplifying the actions of many Mexican laborers in the United States. Thus, active research in Ireland and Mexico complements and validates this comparative discussion of Irish exiles and Mexican transnationals.

Notes

[1] Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 291.

[2] Jeffery Passel, "Mexican Immigration to the US: The Latest Estimates." Migration Information Source. Available at http://wwwmigrationinformation.org Accessed 28 Nov. 2006.

[3] Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, "Right Moves? Immigration, Globalization, Utopia, and Dystopia." In *The New Immigration: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, eds. Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco et al. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 9.

[4] Miller, 3.

[5] Suárez-Orozco, 9.

[6] Miller, 35.

[7] Ibid., 194.

[8] Ibid., 198.

[9] Ruben Martinez, *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail* (New York: Picador, 2001), 10.

[10]David Sirota, "Supply-and-Demand Solutions," *San Francisco Chronicle* (San Francisco), 9 Apr. 2006. Available at http://www.sfgate.com Accessed 23 Nov. 2006.

[11] Harold Meyerson, "NAFTA and Nativism," *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.) 8 Feb. 2006. Available from http://www.washingtonpost.com Accessed 23 Nov. 2006.

[12] Mariell Buquet, "Local art show s effects of NAFTA," *The Daily Targum* (New Brunswick), 17 Feb 2005. Available from http://www.dailytargum.com Accessed 23 Nov. 2006

[13] Dale T. Knobel, *Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), 78.

[14] Miller, 268.

[15] Ibid., 271.

[16] Ibid., 293 and Lawrence K Officer and Samuel H. Williamson, "Exchange rate between the United States dollar and the British pound, 1791-2004." Economic History Services, EH.Net, 2004. Available at http://eh.net Accessed 19 Nov. 2006 and "Computing 'Real Value' Over Time With a Conversion Between U.K. Pounds and U.S. Dollars, 1830-2005," MeasuringWorth.Com. Available at http://measuringworth.com Accessed 19 Nov. 2006.

[17] CIA *The World Factbook*. Last updated 14 Nov. 2006. Available at http://www.cia.gov Accessed 22 Nov. 2006

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Nancy Forner, "The Immigrant Family: Cultural Legacies and Cultural Changes." In *The New Immigration: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, eds. Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco et al. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 159.

[21] Inter-American Development Bank "Remittances 2005: Promoting Financial Democracy." (Washington, D.C.: Multilateral Investment Fund, 2006), 11.

[22] Miller, 270 and Devra Weber, "Historical Perspectives on Transnational Mexican Workers in California." In *Border Crossings: Mexican and Mexican-American Workers*, ed. John Mason Hart (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1998), 219.

[23] Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand and Nolan J. Malone, "Principles of Operation: Theories of International Migration." In *The New Immigration: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, eds. Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco et al. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 26.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid, 280.

[26] Ibid., 297.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 40.

[29] *Catholic Encyclopedia*, "Emigrant Aid Societies." Available at http://www.newadvent.com Accessed 17 Nov. 2006. and

[30] Ignatiev, 109.

[31] Miller, 315.

[32] U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Temporary Migration to the United States: Nonimmigrant Admissions Under U.S. Immigration Law" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services, 2006), 47.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ignatiev, 98 and Miller, 318.

[35] Ignatiev, 109.
[36] Miller, 318.
[37] Massey, Durand and Malone, 26.
[38] Ibid, 27.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Suárez-Orozco, 10.
[41] Ibid., 27-28.
[42] Miller, 315.
[43] Ibid., 319.
[44] Knobel, 21.
[45] Miller, 323.
[46] M. J. Adams, letter in *Cork Examiner*, 10 Aug. 1860. Qtd. in Miller, 323.
[47] Chris Simcox, "Summary of Minuteman PAC's election activities: Efforts instrumental in handful of crucial races." Available at http://wwwrenewamerica.us Accessed 25 Nov. 2006.
[48] Michael Doyle, "Migrant health care study in bureaucratic limbo." *McClatchy Newspapers* (Washington, D.C.) 24 Nov. 2006. Available from http://www.realcities.com Accessed 24 Nov. 2006.
[49] Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the "Illegal Alien" and the Making of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary*. (New York: Routeledge, 2002), 3.
[50] "Opportunity or Exploitation: The Bracero Program." *America on the Move.* Available from http://americanhistory.si.edu Accessed 22 Nov. 2006.
[51] Knobel, 13.
[52] U.S. Census Bureau, "Nativity, Citizenship, Year of Entry, and Region of Birth: 2000." Available from http://factfinder.com Accessed 14 Oct. 2006.
[53] Miller, 280.
[54] J. Fitzgerald, qtd. in Miller, 325.
[55] Miller, 268,
[56] Suárez-Orozco, 4.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Emerald Isle Immigration Center, "Irish Immigration Reform Movement: Statement on The Passage of HR 4293." *Legislation Update* (New York) Available at http://www.eiic.org Accessed 21 Nov. 2006.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Richard Alba and Victor Nee, "Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration." In *The New Immigration: An Interdisciplinary Reader*, eds. Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco et al. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 37.

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