

INTRODUCTION

Goodbye, my beloved country, now I am going away;
I go to the United States, where I intend to work.

...

I go sad and heavy-hearted to suffer and endure;
My mother Guadalupe, grant my safe return.

—*Lyrics from a Mexican song of farewell*

The Basilica of San Juan de los Lagos is the main attraction in San Juan, a small town situated in a shallow valley surrounded the rolling hills of the Los Altos region of Jalisco in western Mexico. Its pink sandstone façade greets millions of pilgrims every year who come to visit a small image of the Virgin Mary, known as the Virgin of San Juan. According to the legend, the Virgin cured a little girl who fell gravely ill in 1623, and since then, has been venerated for cases involving life-threatening danger.

In a special chamber of the Basilica, there are thousands of votive objects left by pilgrims to offer thanks to the Virgin. Among those objects, one finds many *retablos*, colorful paintings on sheets of tin. Each *retablo* tells the story of a miracle, a dangerous event from which the pilgrim was delivered by divine intervention.

One of these paintings shows a river running wild and two men drifting in it. There is a stone bridge in the distance but no one on it. One of the men is waving his hands desperately in a plea for help and the other is swimming toward him. A brief text describes the scene. It is May 28, 1929, and the river is the Rio Grande near El Paso, Texas. The drowning man is Domingo Segura, a Mexican migrant trying to enter the United States. His friend pulls him out of the water in a narrow escape from death. This painting is Domingo's demonstration of thanks to the Virgin, his favorite icon.

Another painting shows four men in a desert under a searing sun. There are snow-capped peaks in the distance. One man is sitting down, apparently

exhausted, and another next to him is standing with a blank stare fixed on the ground. Both are holding empty water jugs. On their left, two other men are looking at the sky, praying to an apparition of the Virgin. The text tells us that it is June 5, 1986, and the four men are migrants on their way to the United States. They run out of water in the middle of the desert, and although on the brink of dehydration, they manage to reach their final destination. One of the migrants, Braulio Barrientos, commissions the painting in gratitude to the Virgin.

Not all migrants are as lucky as Domingo or Braulio. About 500 migrants die every year by drowning, exposure to heat, or other causes while attempting to cross the border without documents. Yet, the Mexican-born population in the country stood at a staggering 12 million in 2011, about half of whom were thought to be undocumented. Who are these migrants? What brings them to the United States in such great numbers?

There is no single answer to these questions. Both Mexico and the United States are dynamic societies that have changed profoundly over time, as have the migrants moving between them. Consider the following figures. In the 1970s, about 72% of Mexicans crossing the border were men. By the early 1990s, the share of men had dropped to 64%. Although the migrant flow seemed destined to reach gender parity, the share of men quickly climbed back to 70% in the late 1990s.

The migrant stream changed in its geographic origins as well. In the 1970s, more than half of migrants came from just five states in central-western Mexico: Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, San Luis Potosí, and Zacatecas. In the mid-1990s, the share of migrants from these traditional migrant-sending regions dropped to less than a third. Migrants from interior urban areas, like Mexico City, or border cities, like Tijuana, began to join the persistent stream from rural communities in the central west.

Over time, the migrant flow became more diverse not only in its origins, but also in its destinations and settlement patterns in the United States. The once popular destinations of California, Texas, and Illinois began to give way to new places like Arizona, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. Mexican migrants also began to shift from a sojourner to a settler strategy. In a nationally representative survey of Mexico, the share of migrants who identified the United States as their primary place of residence doubled, from 20% in the 1970s to almost 40% in 1990.

THE QUESTION

This book is about Mexico-U.S. migration flows between 1965 and 2010. I seek to characterize and explain the diversity in the Mexican migrant stream, which, in this period, changed remarkably not only in its compo-

sition and origins in Mexico, but also in its destinations and settlement patterns in the United States.

Much has been written on this topic and in multiple disciplines. But, in the vast outpouring of texts, a few key ideas emerge. Most social scientists have tried to explain who migrates in one of three ways: by reference to individual desires to maximize income, to family strategies to diversify risks to income, and to social ties to migrants already in destination.

In the early 1970s, the first of these ideas was prominent. Economists viewed migration just as they did any other behavior: as a choice by rational actors seeking to maximize utility. Migration decisions, from this perspective, were nothing but an optimization problem. Some of the inspiration at the time came from the attention given in the field to “human capital,” that is, individual skills and knowledge. Migration was a way for individuals to obtain better return on their human capital. Individuals did that by evaluating their skills—or, more specifically, what those skills were worth in their own country as compared to another. Individuals also considered the potential costs of migrating, which could include anything from the psychological costs of family separation to the financial costs of completing the trip. Migrants were those individuals for whom the benefits exceeded the costs, or, those who were able to maximize their expected income by migrating. This simple model stripped migration to its bare essentials and predicted the direction of migration flows on a regional scale. Given the vast differences in wages between the two societies, for example, it was no surprise that many Mexicans chose to migrate to the United States.

By the early 1980s, sociologists and anthropologists had amassed considerable evidence questioning this individualistic model of migration. Case studies revealed how the family was the key unit in which migration decisions were discussed, contested, and finalized. These ideas began to find traction in economics. The inspiration for their mathematical formulation, however, came from an unlikely place: the risk diversification models in finance. The family, as a decision-making unit, was categorically different from the individual as it had multiple members. It could place its eggs in different baskets, so to speak. Similar to an investor buying different types of assets, a family could allocate its members in different sectors of the economy to diversify potential risks to its earnings. This strategy was critical to family survival in developing countries, such as Mexico, where the risks were abundant, but the formal market mechanisms to manage them were still insufficient. The risk diversification model began to catch on in the late 1980s, its empirical predictions confirmed in many empirical studies. But this model hardly replaced the existing income maximization paradigm, which has retained its strong foothold to this day.

Both economic models left out the social ties that connected migrants to those they left behind. Anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers had long written about “chain migration,” a process by which a migrant pulls

other migrants to his or her destination, and those migrants in turn pull other migrants, and so on. Sociologists began to delve into the potential mechanisms underlying this process. Some argued that social ties provide useful resources, like information about crossing a border or help in finding a job in destinations that made migration easier for others. Others suggested that social ties eventually become purveyors of norms that dictate migration as a rite of passage for young adults. These ideas culminated in the more general cumulative causation model that viewed past migration as the main catalyst for future moves. This model was inspired by economist Gunnar Myrdal's similar ideas on development, specifically, that development begets more development. In this model, past migration not only created an expanding web of social ties to migrants in destination, but it also shifted distributions of income, wealth, and skills in the place of origin. These changes, in turn, created additional pressures for migration.

Other explanations have also been put forth to explain migration flows on a grander scale. Some argued that migration resulted from a dual labor market structure in advanced capitalist societies, where natives filled the high-paying jobs in the capital-intensive sector and left low-paying, labor-intensive work to immigrants. Others saw migration as an inevitable consequence of a world system, where capitalism expanded from the more advanced "core" countries, like the United States, to developing "periphery" nations, causing disruptions in the latter. These disruptions typically undermined local institutions, like the agricultural sector, and created incentives for more migration.

One could ask which of these ideas is most applicable to the Mexico—U.S. migration; indeed, many studies have done just that by pitting different models against one another. But that is not my goal here. Instead, I view all explanations as equally plausible, and ask *when* and *for whom* each one might be most relevant.

THE ARGUMENT

Mexican migrants to the United States are a diverse population. But this diversity gets lost in scholarly work and in the popular press. All too often, our attention is grabbed by how many Mexicans enter the country each year, or by how well they fare along group-level characteristics like education from year to year. But, looking more closely, one can see quite a bit of variation in the migrant population: there are men and women, adults and children, those with no education and those with higher degrees, and those from tiny rural villages and those from bustling cities. How do we make sense of this diversity? First, we need to make it the focus of our inquiry.

As social scientists, we search for general patterns and trends. We often identify these patterns by taking a typical case and generalizing its attributes to the entire population. This strategy works well in the hard sciences, where the average case provides an accurate representation of its kind. If we take an iron rod, for example, and measure its ultimate strength—the load it can bear before breaking—we will know the strength of any other iron rod of similar specifications. But if we take a migrant, even the most typical migrant, and look at the conditions under which he or she decided to migrate, those conditions can be a lot different for other migrants in the population.

This inherent variability makes it difficult to arrive at universal explanations for migration behavior. Most social scientists today find it futile to search for such explanations, but many empirical studies still present just that. There are two root causes for this apparent disconnection. First, we rely on methods that are good at describing the average case but not at characterizing the variation across cases. I mean here the methods for analyzing large-scale survey data. Second, we evaluate competing theories based on their predictive power, or their ability to explain events (if only in retrospect). This reflects a specific epistemological orientation, one that is adapted from classical physics, and one that presumes simple cause-effect relationships that can be revealed in an experimental setting. This presumption rarely holds in the social sciences, where the cause-effect chains tend to be complex, and the data are only partial. Our choice of methods and epistemology together leads us to an analytic approach where we first characterize the average case, and then select among theories based on how well they can account for that case. We are pluralistic when it comes to embracing different theories but monistic when testing those theories with data.

Let us consider the seemingly simple question of who migrates. We often take large-scale survey data from a setting, compare migrants to non-migrants, and note the apparent differences. For example, an average migrant may be less educated than an average non-migrant or more likely to have family ties to other migrants. We then connect these patterns to theories of migration. Many studies have linked the former pattern to the income maximization thesis and the latter to the cumulative causation idea. The logic runs as follows. Individuals with low education have little access to lucrative jobs in their local labor market, and they enjoy a higher premium to migrating internationally than their more educated peers do. Individuals in an origin place with migrant family members in destination places often find it easier to migrate for work, or more appealing to do so in order to reunite with family members. When seeing an average migrant who is both less educated than typical non-migrants and more connected to former migrants in our data, then, we would claim that both wage differences and

social ties matter for migration behavior, and more importantly, that they matter for *all migrants* in the same way.

But one can imagine migrants with different characteristics and different motivations for moving to the United States. It is perfectly plausible that some individuals migrate mostly to earn more, while others migrate primarily to join their family or friends. It is possible that wage differences matter more for some groups of migrants, and social ties are more important to the mobility of others. When we look at an average migrant only, we dismiss such heterogeneity a priori.

This is the first, and central, thesis of the book: Mexicans may be on the move to the United States for a variety of reasons. The reasons underlying migration may depend on personal circumstances, as well as the larger economic, social, and political climates in both Mexico and the United States. Consider how the two countries changed over just a few decades. In 1965, the minimum hourly wage in Mexico stood at 32 cents (in 2010 U.S. dollars), and its ratio to average wage in the United States at 1 to 56. In 1990, the Mexican minimum wage had climbed to 67 cents, and its ratio to U.S. wage receded to 1 to 25. The wage increased in this period both in absolute and relative terms but not in a linear fashion. In the 1980s, the Mexican economy fluctuated extensively—and the wages with it—after the peso devaluations in 1976 and 1982. The inflation rate remained higher than 50% for most of the decade. The economy stabilized in the early 1990s but ended up plummeting to a crippling low with the peso devaluation in 1994.

In the same period, the United States also experienced major shifts, most significantly in its outlook on immigration. Its policy changed dramatically from actively recruiting short-term Mexican laborers in the 1960s to guarding its border with thermal imaging systems and aerial surveillance in the 1990s. This drastic shift occurred despite a prolonged growth in the U.S. economy, around 2% per year. Agriculture, a major sector for immigrant workers, contributed less to that growth over time, but that decline was more than offset by the drastic increases in the contributions from construction, another important line of work for immigrants. These changes surely affected who migrates from Mexico to the United States, and with what purpose.

This leads to the second thesis of this book: The different reasons underlying migration depend on individual interests, but these interests are shaped by the structural or cultural contexts these individuals inhabit, or seek to inhabit, by migrating. More generally, interests are inherent not just in individuals, but also in the context.

This is to say that different structural or cultural circumstances can mobilize different groups of migrants. These circumstances receive different degrees of emphasis from migration theories. While the income maximization thesis puts wage and employment differentials between the origin

and destination contexts at the forefront, the cumulative causation idea underscores how social structure and cultural understandings encourage migration.

This brings us to the third, and final, thesis of this book: Different theories may be more or less relevant to explain migration behavior to the extent that the conditions they deem essential to the process are at work in a given place or period or for a specific group of individuals. The income maximization hypothesis may be more likely to be confirmed when wage differentials are high, and the cumulative causation argument may be most plausible when there is a critical mass of migrants from a region to act as social or cultural facilitators for future flows. In other words, there may be regional variation in the usefulness of each explanation as well as a temporal order.

ANALYTICS

This book follows an analytic strategy to describe such heterogeneity at work. It also seeks new ways of connecting evidence to theory, recognizing the former as only partial and the latter as conditional. In what follows, I briefly sketch the decisions that make up the skeleton of the book's analytical approach.

The argument, in its most general form, is that individuals may reach the same outcome, migration in our case, through different pathways. These pathways may be specific to the context, and may reflect the mechanisms identified in different theories.

How do we identify these pathways empirically? The book relies on multiple sources of data and multiple types of analysis. It begins by characterizing the diversity in the Mexican migrant population with data from the Mexican Migration Project (MMP), a binational data collection effort that has surveyed more than 145,000 individuals in 143 communities in Mexico between 1982 and 2013 and followed up with some of the migrants in the United States. The data include retrospective life, family, and community histories, and thus, contain extensive information on individuals crossing the border from 1965 and 2010. The data come mainly from migrant-heavy regions of Mexico, and though not representative of the population at large, provide an accurate profile of Mexican migrants to the United States.

The analysis starts by focusing on migrants alone, that is, 19,243 individuals who have made at least one trip to the United States in the study period. I re-construct the characteristics of each migrant during his or her first U.S. trip, that is, before U.S. migration can change the socioeconomic

status of that migrant. I then search for different groups among migrants with cluster analysis. This computer-assisted method allows me to classify thousands of individuals across several dimensions, including personal, family, and community attributes.

I assume that individuals with similar configurations of attributes are likely to face similar opportunities or constraints. This assumption is often made implicitly, for example, when researchers study an outcome separately among men or women, high school or college graduates, people living in good or bad neighborhoods, and so on. The innovation here is this: I am not just looking at one attribute, like gender or education, to define a group, but I am also considering configurations of multiple attributes at the same time.

Once I identify different groups of migrants, I look at the contextual conditions that set apart each group from other migrant groups as well as from non-migrants. I use a wide array of macro-level indicators that capture the economic, demographic, social, and political circumstances in both Mexico and the United States over a period of nearly five decades. Using this historical information, I identify the specific conditions under which each migrant group proliferates. I then evaluate the emergent patterns—the apparent associations between attributes of migrants and their contexts—in light of different migration theories. My goal is to determine whether different theories are relevant for different groups of migrants, and if so, under what circumstances.

Finally, I look at the root of these observed associations with qualitative data from in-depth interviews conducted with 139 migrants, migrant-family members, and non-migrants in Mexico in 2011 and 2012. How do individuals and families think about migration? How do different individuals respond to different kinds of economic, social, or cultural stimuli related to migration? I analyze at close range the motivations migrants state for their decision to migrate (and the reasons non-migrants list for their decision not to). In so doing, I seek to uncover the mechanisms that give rise to the diversity in the migration process.

ROAD MAP

For ease of reading, I refrain from using citations or superscripts in the text; instead, I provide the references and extended descriptions at the end of the book. Throughout the book, I use “origin” as a shorthand to refer to the community or location a person is migrating from, and “destination” to refer to the place the migrant is headed to.

In chapter 1, I provide an overview of the migration field, and a brief review of Mexico-U.S. migration flows up to 1965, the year the analysis here begins. I then describe the data and methods that led me to discover four groups among first-time migrants from Mexico to the United States between 1965 and 2010. Each migrant group, I show, emerges in a specific time period. In the four chapters that follow, I take each migrant group in turn and describe the economic, social, and political circumstances related to its rise and fall. Because each group becomes prevalent in a particular era, by moving through the four groups in the four chapters, I also move through time and provide a roughly chronological account of the migration context between Mexico and the United States. In each chapter, I include individual stories of migrants, relying on their accounts to identify some general patterns about how individuals and families think about migration under different circumstances, and how they might be inspired or influenced by others around them.

I begin by orienting the reader to who the Mexican migrants are, and illuminating how their characteristics have changed, over the 45-year period from 1965 to 2010.