

U.S.–MEX: IMMIGRATION

Echaveste: A Mexico in the United States?

Imagine what Lou Dobbs or Samuel Huntington would say if they read Dr. Rafael Fernández de Castro's statement that "there really is a Mexico inside the United States." Certainly, the sheer number of Mexicans and U.S. citizens of Mexican ancestry living within the United States is enough to raise eyebrows: over 30 million people, about 10 percent of the U.S. population. But numbers alone do not cause fear or raise the specter of a country within a country. For example, there are over 34 million U.S. residents who claim Irish ancestry — nine times the population of Ireland. Yet no one today argues that Ireland or the Irish have taken over American society.

Immigrants have been shaping the "American" identity from the beginning of this country's founding, and nativists spewing virulent anti-immigrant rhetoric have always sought to limit that impact. Why are today's immigrants viewed as particularly difficult to integrate? What is it about the Mexican experience in the U.S. that creates such concern for so many?

Innovations in communications and travel coupled with the harshness of anti-immigrant/anti-Hispanic federal, state and local policies may provide an answer. It is not the total number of Mexicans or those of Mexican ancestry that causes concern. Rather, it is the number of undocumented immigrants (about 12–13 million), especially Hispanics (more than 10 million) and specifically Mexicans (some 7 million), with minimal human rights living today in the U.S. Without legal status and its concomitant rights, these new immigrants are finding that integrating into American society has become a lengthier and more difficult process than ever before.

As pointed out in Dr. Fernández de Castro's article, Mexicans without legal status are turning to their country's representatives in the U.S. for help in conducting their lives as human beings. They refuse to stand still in the face of efforts to dehumanize them or to accept their treatment as disposable workers who have no rights because they are not supposed to be in the U.S. in the first place. They are seeking help with social services; asking their government to protect their children by ensuring that those children belong to at least one country, as Mexican citizens, in the event that the U.S. deports the whole family; and they are organizing to protect themselves from deportations and Mexico-bashing. Newscasts and pictures, telephone lines and the Internet cross borders, providing evidence of the struggles to survive in the U.S. and creating a sense of outrage back home.

Therein lies the quandary. For Mexico, if it ignores the pleas for help from its citizens who find themselves "strangers

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in a strange land," it abandons its citizens to another country's mercy. But if the Mexican government begins to provide social services; helps immigrants navigate U.S. systems to obtain education, health or other services; or assists in the fight against deportations and discriminatory policies, it may inadvertently weaken or destroy the emerging ties between Mexicans living in the United States and the broader U.S. society. For the United States, if it continues to treat those without legal status as second-class human beings, it will sow the seeds for non-integration and make the statement "a Mexico within the United States" a reality. By making life miserable, not just for undocumented Mexicans but for all immigrants, governmental policies are stopping the process of immigrant integration, a process that has been perhaps unique in the world and may well be the key to U.S. success over the last decades.

In short, had Germany, Ireland, Italy or any of the myriad other countries whose citizens have migrated to the U.S. over the years been able to maintain strong connections to those who left their borders and had they been able to fight to protect their citizens from the hatred that greeted them upon their arrival in the U.S., perhaps the process of distilling all of those cultures and peoples into the American identity might not have succeeded quite as well as it has. Dr. Fernández de Castro wonders, "what could happen with this community if they truly integrate into the U.S. mainstream and become successful." Unfortunately, a more robust defense by Mexico of its migrant citizens coupled with the rejection and dehumanization of Mexicans living in the U.S. by all levels of American government may mean that this time these immigrants will not "truly integrate into the U.S. mainstream." In such case, both countries will lose.

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