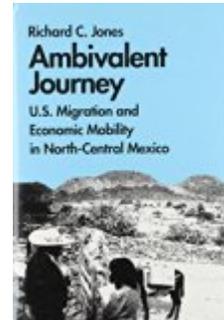


Richard C. Jones. *Ambivalent Journey: U.S. Migration and Economic Mobility in North-Central Mexico.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995. xiii + 164 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8165-1473-1.



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The problem to which the author, a geographer at the University of Texas-San Antonio, addresses this work is clearly stated. Is migration (and reliance on migrant earnings) a benefit or a detriment to areas of origin? In the specific case investigated here, what has been the impact of U.S. migration on families and communities in North-Central Mexico? Jones bases his analysis primarily on a survey administered in the first six months of 1988 to over one thousand families in three selected municipios in central Zacatecas and two in northern Coahuila. Both areas are known for their high U.S. migration rates, but most previous studies of Mexican migration have focused on the southern part of the migrant "hearth," Jalisco and Michoacan.

Jones offers a very good review of the literature in stating the problem. In the 1970s a "structuralist perspective" (drawn from dependency theory) dominated accounts of the effects of migration on sending areas. It emphasized negative consequences, including dependence on unreliable external sources of income, disinvestment and abandonment of traditional occupations, se-

lective out-migration of skilled labor, spending on consumption rather than investment, increased social and economic inequalities, and family and village disintegration.

Since the mid-1980s, however, most studies have followed a "functionalist perspective" and emphasized the positive impact of migration and its facilitation of economic growth and modernization. As Jones notes, functionalist analysis "directly counter the external dependency arguments of the structural school, contending that international migration actually frees migrants from dependency on traditional, 'dead-end' jobs at the origin" (p. 8). But it does not necessarily argue that local economic development results; the benefits may be retained by individuals or families. He sensibly notes that much of the disagreement between the structuralist and functionalist perspectives is due to differences in the scale of analysis (family, town or village, region), stage of migration (early, intermediate, advanced), and geographic region (hearth, non-hearth). The problem can be restated as, "Under what conditions does

migration benefit the sending society, and under what conditions does it do harm?" (p. 16).

Zacatecas and Coahuila are sufficiently distinguished from one another to allow fruitful comparative analysis. Jones has chosen three municipios in Zacatecas to illustrate the range of migrant contexts in that region of generally limited economic potential: Luis Moya, in which commercial agriculture is of importance, and migration is comparatively low; Villanueva, an area of subsistence agriculture, high social inequality, and high migration; and Jerez, with elements of both commercial and subsistence agriculture as well as urban trade and manufacturing, and high migration. In the more dynamic and modern border region of Coahuila, two municipios were chosen: Morelos, which has a diversified economy, proximity to the border, and high migration, and San Juan de Sabinas, an area of heavy industry and mining. Some attention is paid to the historical and cultural differences between the states, but primary attention is given to economic factors.

In both areas, migrants tend to be male and younger and more educated than non-migrants. In Zacatecas, migrants generally come from an agricultural background and are married with young children. Well over half of all families participate in migration at some point (54 to 79 per cent), but very few to points in Mexico. Within the Zacatecan study municipios, Jerez, with the most diversified local economy, had the highest rate of migration, not due to economic stagnation, but rather to "migrant schemes for reinvestment back home -- in commercial agriculture in the rural part of the municipio and in family businesses in the city of Jerez" (p. 61). In Coahuila migrants were more likely to be from urban backgrounds and to be less compelled by economic necessity or strategy. Migration overall in Zacatecas involved fewer families (but still encompassed 40 per cent). Where Zacatecans tend to go to Chicago or California for economic reasons, Coahuilans' kinship

ties to Texas drive a different pattern of migration.

The heart of Jones' analysis is the impact of migrant earnings on household economic behavior in the sending areas. The effects are much different in Zacatecas and Coahuila, and lend some support to both functionalist and structuralist arguments. Migrant earnings are much less important to Coahuilans than to Zacatecans. Coahuilan households tend to use remittances to fund consumption rather than investment. Migration has only a slight effect on Coahuilan income and possessions.

For Zacatecan families, the effect of migration is much more important. After the first two years there is a clear economic benefit to families. Migrant families earn more and own more. Migrant earnings are not wasted in consumption; they are invested in human capital, such as home improvements and medical care, and in sustaining and improving rural livelihoods through the purchase of such items as tractors, land, insecticides, fertilizers, and seed. Migrant earnings are also evident in family businesses such as markets, restaurants, pharmacies, and studios. Although migration benefits families economically, migrant earnings are not evident in community projects or even churches. While migrant earnings have reduced income inequalities between rural and urban areas (as migration within Zacatecas draws predominantly from rural areas), it has increased differences between families. And as migration has proved to be a more important strategy of economic improvement than education (educated Zacatecans are confined to the same jobs as uneducated migrants in the U.S.), Jones notes that, "These results provide indirect quantitative evidence for an oft-stated claim: that U.S. migration negates the value of education and the U.S. migration may serve as a disincentive for the pursuit of education in Mexican towns with a high incidence of U.S. migration" (p. 87).

The thrust of Jones' argument, however, is to buttress an optimistic assessment regarding the effect of migration on Zacatecas. He provocatively discounts structuralist fears that the social impact of migrant earnings is to heighten inequality. Jones suggests that "not an elite but a broad-based middle class is forming in the region." He admits that the social distance between migrants and non-migrants is increasing, but puts more emphasis on the narrowing of rural-urban differences. A "new migrant class" is forming in Zacatecas, he argues, which "derives its strength from wage-labor earnings rather than from land, commerce, social class, and political patronage, which supported (and still support) the traditional elite. The replacement of a narrow social elite by a broad-based economic group, breaking the subservience of the peasant classes in rural Mexico, is a trend that would seem to bode well for the region. In other words, migration is an alternative economic mobility ladder in central Zacatecas" (pp. 95-96).

The most important use of migrant earnings in Zacatecas is investment in commercial agriculture. In a separate chapter, Jones shifts his focus from family decisions to the community. There he shows the use of migrant earnings in the development of peach orchards (knowledge gained from migration is as crucial as capital in this case), broccoli grown for agribusiness, and grapes for wine. Commercial agriculture has a larger multiplier effect on the local economy than migrant earnings, but it is migration which has provided the means by which Zacatecans can hope to break long-term economic subservience to the periphery, and to lessen the need for migration itself.

Yet these generally optimistic conclusions about the impact of migration on Zacatecas, or in Coahuila's case, relatively neutral observations, are undercut by brief case studies of household heads which are given as illustrations. All are written in the present tense, although they are based on interviews from 1988, and all use pseudonyms. For Zacatecan Jesus Avila, 31, with a wife

aged 29 and three children between the ages of 7 and 11, "U.S. migration has become a way of life... living in the United States one year and returning to Mexico the next. His earnings barely sustained his growing family." Avila used his earnings to buy peach seedlings, but at the time of the interviews migration earnings were still needed to sustain the peach operations. Jesus stated, "I sustain myself with money which I save from the U.S.... If I [were to] stay more than three years in my house, I [would be] rattling about, and my children running around without shoes.... [but] it is very difficult to leave my children alone and not see them for almost a year" (p. 100).

Luis Lopez, 33, has used migrant earnings to make additions to his house in Villanueva; in 1988 he was hoping to settle permanently in California. His wife, 31, preferred Villanueva, but was willing to join him. Despite his evident economic gains from migration, Luis told the interviewer, "It is very sad to go [to the United States], and in my heart I could not go except for the necessity which obliges one to do such things.... My children respect me because they know that they should; but I have lost control of my family... My family has begun to distance itself from me" (p. 102). Luis and his wife have seven children under the age of 13.

Jose Ramirez, 35, a secondary school teacher, went to the U.S. only once, 16 years ago, for a month. His family income is now well below average (he has a wife age 37 and four children between the ages of 4 and 12). Jones writes: "Jose has a very negative view of the United States. He notes that a large proportion of the migrants do not succeed economically in the United States. Furthermore, they often abandon their families or return with various vices regarding dress, language, and customs. In the schools, he sees many students who do not want to study because they are thinking of going to the United States and do not see the value of study.... Among his neighbors who have gone, he sees a certain superiority com-

plex -- they feel that because they have dollars, they are better than other people" (p. 103).

Among the Coahuilans, as well, ambivalence to migration is evident. Encarnacion Allende, 39, a U.S. citizen, is a groundskeeper at a San Antonio (Texas) golf course. He commutes back to Coahuila every two to eight weeks to be with his wife, 35, and his three children, 2 to 12. His wife had been with him in the U.S., but she "was not happy in the United States, and she returned to Morelos for good with her two children. She commented that during these six months in the United States, she felt estranged, rejected, and alone, and that 'everyone lives in his or her own world, enclosed in their homes.'" Wanting her children to be raised in Mexico, "Maria feels that the ability to provide well for his family has made her husband more responsible than he was before he went to the United States. He is committed to his family and to his community, and devotes all his time to them when he is in town. Maria comments that her family feels a certain distancing on the part of other families in the community who do not have U.S. workers. But the family is prospering economically and socially" (pp. 105-106).

David Villesca is 32. His wife is also 32, and they have six children, 3 to 14. He has no papers; as a result, his migration experience is more difficult than Encarnacion Allende's. His "extended absences have caused suffering for his family. His wife feels that this affects the children, who have lost respect for their father. But it also affects her; she feels alone and unprotected in Morelos. She does not acknowledge her loneliness to her neighbors, for fear of being taken advantage of by them. David is now attempting to establish residency in the United States, in order to get amnesty; thus he must stay there continuously until his status is determined" (p. 107). She likely would join him if he gained amnesty.

Pedro Gomez, 49, spent many years going back and forth between Coahuila and the U.S. But since getting married in 1983 (at the time of the

interview his wife was 21 and their three children aged 1 to 6), he has not returned to the U.S., despite low earnings in Mexico. Why? "He does not want to leave his young family alone." Although he knows the advantages of U.S. earnings, "he also recalls the difficulties of life in the United States -- the arduous crossings and apprehensions and the long searches for work; the threats to his life from bandits, coyotes, local workers at the destination, and other migrants; and the loneliness of life without his family" (p. 108). Similarly, Tomas Villasenor, 48, who has four children aged 8 to 19 with his wife Maricarmen, 42, has never been to the U.S. Although their income was low (and they had no television set), both husband and wife "see many disadvantages from U.S. migration, principal among them the effect of the father's absence on the children. The wife 'is left alone to battle with the problems.' Without the cementing effect of family unity, the children go astray. They get involved with the wrong group of people. They lack discipline and order in their lives, which the father provides" (p. 109).

I have given more attention to these individual case studies (there are only eight, all in one chapter, totaling 12 pages of text) than perhaps I should, because I think they are crucial to sustaining the "Ambivalent Journey" of the title and Jones' expressed desire to reveal "to my audience something about the lives, hopes, and tribulations of this shadow population who harvest our vegetables, build our homes, serve our meals, sew our clothing, landscape our lawns, and care for our children" (p. xi). This is a study of migrant sending areas, and I do not fault the work for not including discussion of migrants' lives in the U.S. I do think, however, that outside of the single chapter devoted to case studies of household heads, Jones unnecessarily restricts his analysis to economic effects. He notes in the first chapter that "development is the critical concern of the literature on impacts of emigration on local sending areas. Because the goal of this book is to clarify and

elaborate on that literature, my approach is economic rather than political ... or cultural ..." (p. 2).

Jones has produced a valuable work by relating his data to functionalist and structuralist perspectives and to differences in the scale of analysis, stage of migration, and geographic region. His analysis support the notion that migrants make conscious, rational, family-centered choices from the alternatives that are present. He offers a provocative argument about the social impact of migration on Zacatecas. But the economic effects are too easily abstracted from the political and cultural. I would like to know more about the policies of the governor of Zacatecas, who is striving to promote linkages between migrant communities in California and their areas of origins in Zacatecas (p. 61). I would like to know more about the effects of migration and migrants on particular social and political institutions within the studied municipios. And I surely would like to know more about the individuals and families introduced all too briefly in the case studies -- and what has happened to them since 1988.

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