

FROM MARKET MEMBERSHIP TO
TRANSNATIONAL CITIZENSHIP?:
THE CHANGING POLITICIZATION OF
TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL SPACES

Luin Goldring
Sociology Department
York University

Working Paper No. 23
Chicano/Latino Research Center

December 1998

Chicano/Latino Research Center
1156 High Street
Merrill College
University of California
Santa Cruz, CA. 95064

Do not cite or quote without permission.

Goldring, Luin. 1998. *l'Ordinaire Latino-Americain*, No. 173-174 (Juillet-Déc.): 167-172.

**“From market membership to transnational citizenship?:
the changing politization of transnational social spaces.”¹**

The issue of whether Mexicans abroad will be able to vote at the federal level--whether for the year 2000 or later--has sparked heated debates in favor and against, in Mexico and in the United States. This article takes a look at cross-border citizenship practices at the subnational level, focusing on the Mexico-oriented practices of Mexicans organized in home-town clubs in Los Angeles who are from the province of Zacatecas. My argument is that practices that represent claims of belonging and membership, such as participation in home-town associations and their “community” projects, are a form of everyday or substantive citizenship that contribute to the renegotiation of relations between Mexicans abroad and the Mexican state. Transmigrant groups, like many others in Mexican civil society, are attempting to alter their relationship to the state. In this case the shift is from membership based on economic contributions (remittances, investment, home-town projects) and political lobbying in the U.S., to a conception of membership that includes political rights in Mexico--and thus is not limited to citizens who habitually reside within the national territory. In the absence of a good term for this kind of state-em/migrant society relationship, I will make do with transnational or extraterritorialized citizenship.

Why am I raising the issue of im/migrant involvement in subnational political affairs? In part to throw light on an area of citizenship practice that is often neglected in the focus on national politics and international relations, and in part because recent events in Zacatecas force one to take note and consider the implications.

Ricardo Monreal, the new governor of Zacatecas, which is one of the classic “sending” states of Mexico, recently defeated the PRI candidate after defecting from that party and running instead under the PRD banner. He received support from many sectors, including Mexicans in the U.S. During two campaign visits to the U.S. he met with Zacatecanos in Los Angeles, including members of the newly formed *Frente Cívico Zacatecano*, an organization linked to Monreal’s campaign coalition in Mexico. Several leaders of home-town clubs I spoke with in Los Angeles said that although they were not returning to Mexico to vote, they could mobilize votes for Monreal by contacting their relatives and friends in Zacatecas. And Monreal certainly acted as though their support played an important role in his campaign and subsequent victory. The transnationalization of this gubernatorial election was also evident earlier in the controversy that followed when the president of the *Federación de Clubes Zacatecanos del Sur de California* was quoted in Zacatecas newspapers as supporting Monreal **before** he left the PRI (and thus before the ruling party announced its candidate--who turned out not to be Monreal), and then quickly rescinded his statement.

The playing out of key scenes of Mexican political drama on U.S. territory did not begin with Monreal. Historians can remind us of the Flores Magón brothers and their U.S.-based struggle against Porfirio Díaz during the early part of this century. However, contemporary analysts need look back no further than the elections of 1988 to remember that Cuahutémoc Cárdenas² campaigned in the U.S. The far-reaching political crisis sparked by those contested

election results, together with the NAFTA negotiations and the deepening economic crisis in Mexico, contributed to the Mexican state's interest in developing a new relationship with Mexicans in the U.S.

This relationship is embodied in various outreach programs aimed at strengthening the affective ties of all Mexicans and people of Mexican origin--rich and poor, educated and not--to their *patria*. The *Programa para Comunidades Mexicanas en el Exterior* (PCME) is one of the key instruments for carrying out this *rapprochement*. Between 1993 and 1995 the PCME ran a matching funds program at the federal level that matched each dollar raised by a home-town club with one from the federal government and a dollar from the provincial government, giving it the name of the "2 for 1" program. When the federal program ended in 1995, it continued to operate in Zacatecas. A second instrument is the official expansion of the Mexican nation beyond the container of the borders, a vision spelled out in President Zedillo's 1995 national plan. This statement was linked to constitutional modifications allowing for the non-loss of nationality by Mexicans who become citizens of another country, and their foreign born children. The stated purpose of these and related initiatives is to foster or maintain Mexican cultural identity and social and cultural ties to Mexico. Developing a pro-Mexico (and pro-NAFTA) lobby in the U.S., similar to "the pro-Israel lobby," was also part of the agenda. One might argue that it also included maintaining the flow of remittances.

State programs like the "2 for 1" astutely built on well established patterns of "bottom-up" transnational practices and organization. Members of the nearly 40 home-town clubs affiliated with the *Federación de Clubes Zacatecanos del Sur de California* have been working on "community projects" in their localities of origin for years if not decades. The older clubs began working independently, often to make improvements to their church or cemetery, to install a potable water system, or make a playing field. In 1993, the clubs began to work with the federal "2 for 1 program."³ Projects funded through the program include: bridges, street and road paving, drinking water, drainage, electrification, buildings for clinics, medical equipment, ambulances, sports fields, rodeo rings (*lienzo charro*), plazas, community halls, cemetery improvements, classrooms, scholarships, and allowances for seniors and handicapped persons. Recent projects also include two dams for agricultural irrigation, one near Chacuiloca and the other near El Remolino; 10 computers for a classroom in El Cargadero; a *tortilleria* in Jomulquillo; toilets for a school in Víboras; a library in Lobatos; and a chapel in García de la Cadena.⁴

What kinds of sums are involved? Unfortunately, systematic time-series data on municipal budgets are unavailable, making it difficult to provide an analysis of "2 for 1" expenditures as a percentage of municipal budgets. But reporting nominal figures for the program's expenditures gives one the idea that the sums are not insignificant. In 1993, the first year of the "2 for 1," total expenditures (including the community and government shares) for Zacatecas came to approximately 2 million then-current pesos, distributed among 7 projects. The following year, the figure rose to 3.7 or 4.8 million pesos--depending on the source--for 30 projects. In 1995 the clubs contributed \$600,000 dollars to 56 projects in 34 localities, an amount that was leveraged to a total of \$1.8 million dollars through the "2 for 1" (the peso figure was 3.9 million). In 1996 the total investment rose to 7 million pesos for 61 projects.

In 1997 the nominal "2 for 1" expenditures for Zacatecas rose even more, to 16.8 million pesos for 87 projects. However, in 1998 virtually no projects were carried out because of the political transition from one governor to the next.

A number of questions can be raised about this kind of involvement in home-town affairs. Among the ones that interest me are: (1) What are the implications for state-society relations? In this case, are hegemonic patterns of corporatist clientelism reproduced, or are transmigrants able to renegotiate their relationship to political authorities? (2) To what extent do transmigrants translate the status they gain based on their economic contributions to enhanced political voice and/or representation in Mexico? Analysts have characterized the PCME as an instrument of cooptation and control that aims to turn transmigrant organizations into another corporatist group that the Mexican state can manipulate through clientelist relations.⁵ I suggest an alternative interpretation based on recent events in Zacatecas, one that gives greater weight to conjunctural processes and to small steps towards increased autonomy which may also involve a few steps back-or side-ways. Re-examining home-town club activities and their relationship to provincial and municipal authorities, the state's neoliberal decentralization policies, and Monreal's election offers us different vantage points for developing this view.

Many home-town club members recognize that their projects involve doing things the government *should* have been doing, but that without their initiative, the projects would not be implemented, or else would take much longer. Seen through the lens of different dimensions of citizenship, we can argue that through their participation in home-town projects, club and Federation leaders have worked to expand the *social citizenship* "benefits" available in their communities of origin (e.g. basic services, infrastructure, health and education). They have taken up where the state left off, becoming creators of social citizenship benefits through practices that at the same time represent claims of membership and belonging in their communities of origin, and at the same time, in the nation. And they have usually engaged in these practices without exercising formal political citizenship (unless they returned to vote and had valid electoral identifications).

How does the state respond to these claims to membership? For years, the federal government basically ignored those who left the territory--except in early repatriation efforts, and ad-hoc protection and immigration policies. Now the federal government has become interested in them, even declaring em/migrants to be a part of the Mexican nation. Through programs like the PCME and legal changes ensuring the non-loss of nationality, but with resistance to extending this to permitting double citizenship, the state appears to be redefining the relationship of Mexicans abroad to their nation of origin. They can participate economically, lobby for Mexico from the U.S., and maintain a vibrant Mexican culture, but they cannot participate directly in political processes in Mexico. They can be cultural and dues-paying or market members of the nation, but not full--albeit transnational--citizens.

The Federation of Zacatecas Clubs has been considered an exemplar of corporatist and

semi-clientelist relations because it has generally allowed the governor of the day to establish the parameters of the "2 for 1." However, even within this organization there has been a certain disagreement among those who went along with the provincial government and a group that argued for greater autonomy. For example, in the last few years, the issue of whether clubs would deposit their contributions in an account controlled by their representatives in their locality of origin versus in the provincial treasury had become a sore point between two factions that I call the *dissident* and *status quo* groups. Another area of friction developed over the dissident group's demands for a more transparent process of allocating funds to the "2 for 1," including a statement of how much would be available from the provincial budget *in advance*, rather than having the governor's liaison allocate funds to projects in what some considered to be an overly ad-hoc manner.

Another area of contention arose over the provincial government's insistence on having the clubs conform to a federally mandated decentralization policy (*Nuevo Federalismo*). This meant that clubs had to submit their projects to new municipal planning councils for approval, and that municipal presidents were responsible for paying out of their (somewhat larger) budgets what used to be the federal contribution of the "2 for 1." However, the double-edged sword of neoliberalism⁶ meant that the decentralization program forced clubs into greater contact and more complicated negotiations with municipal authorities, who in turn also had to take club interests more seriously in order to leverage their budgets. As long as their projects got built, most clubs weren't too bothered by this after an initial negative reaction. However, the dissident group saw this as another example of government control. They added this issue to their list of changes necessary to increase the Federation's autonomy.

Tension between the two groups in the Federation escalated and became articulated in the competition over control of the executive council (*mesa directiva*). It happened that the dissident faction was out of power when the gubernatorial race took place in Zacatecas, although they had been in power during previous years. Eager for a change of government in Zacatecas (one that would support their agenda), dissidents jumped at the opportunity to support Monreal and founded the Frente Cívico Zacatecano. They criticized the Federation's president for retracting his support for Monreal when he was not proclaimed the PRI candidate, and cited this as a further example of how the Federation was being manipulated by the provincial government.

During his campaign, Monreal spoke in support of the vote for Mexicans abroad in federal elections. He also said he would work to change the provincial constitution in order to have at least two representatives of Zacatecanos in the U.S. in the legislature. This would be an extremely significant change, since it would offer sub-national political citizenship rights to Zacatecanos in the U.S. Although Monreal has not made clear how this proposal would be operationalized, it holds the possibility of increasing the voice and representation of a sector of the population that is currently disenfranchised. It would help push market-membership towards more substantive citizenship.

Since winning office, Monreal has repeated these promises in public fora several times. Although it is too early to tell whether he will deliver on the promise of provincial representation, it may be difficult for him to forget about it. What has Monreal *actually* done so far for Zacatecanos in the U.S.? During his first few months in office, he:

- Announced a one million dollar budget for the "2 for 1," to be disbursed on a first-come, first-served basis among clubs affiliated with each of the U.S.-based Zacatecan Federations;
- Named one of the "dissident" leaders to a cabinet-level position as his representative to Zacatecanos in the U.S.;
- Said that clubs can deposit their funds in locally controlled accounts, not the treasury;
- Stated that clubs no longer have to conform to the New Federalism guidelines.

These migrant-oriented initiatives look like a *quid-pro-quo* for the Frente Cívico and related supporters. But Monreal is a consummate politician; he is making a point of working with both the Frente Cívico and the Federation of Zacatecan Clubs. As part of an agreement negotiated by Monreal and the Frente, the Federation will continue to administer the "2 for 1" and "remain" non-partisan, while the Frente will become a political organization, backing candidates on either side of the border. Individuals can work with either or both organizations. As part of its political activity, the Frente is supporting the vote for Mexicans abroad in the year 2000, and may be forming new alliances with other transmigrant groups and binational NGOs working on this issue.

It would appear that the L.A.-based Zacatecan organizations have gained concessions that will allow them to operate somewhat more independently of the Mexican state. However, note my language. These have been concessions granted in a highly personalistic manner by a governor. It is too early to tell how the relationship between this governor and his *paisanos* in the U.S. will develop, but it is worth reflecting on these recent events in an effort to draw conclusions and think ahead.

I have suggested that the tradition of working on home-town "community" projects by Zacatecanos in the U.S. represents a way of claiming membership in Mexican localities of origin, and engaging in transnational substantive citizenship at the subnational level. These practices were seized upon by the state (at federal and provincial levels) in an effort to regulate and restructure membership in the nation. The provincial and federal governments encouraged membership based on em/migrants' willingness to provide financial support in the form of remittances and investment. (The federal government also emphasized political/lobbying support.) The "2 for 1" operated along tried-and-true corporatist forms of organization and semi-clientelist relations with the state in order to achieve goals that were of interest to clubs and elements within the federal and provincial governments. At the same time, neither level of government offered political citizenship rights to the em/migrants.

However, the corporatist organization and semi-clientelist relationship that developed between the Federation of Zacatecan Clubs and the provincial government is exactly what gave

the Federation, and then the Frente, the possibility of becoming players in this last gubernatorial election.⁷ This, in turn, may create the opportunity to shift the terms of the relationship towards more effective substantive extraterritorialized or transnational citizenship. Monreal's somewhat special circumstances gave the dissident faction a cause to work towards, and a way of breaking away from the Federation without risking becoming irrelevant. In a sense, transmigrants may be turning the tables on the state, using their market membership to expand their rights in the direction of fuller citizenship. The broader context in which these negotiations between Zacatecos in the U.S. and political authorities in Mexico are taking place are also very important. It is unlikely that they would be taking place without the growing array of democratization struggles that are taking place at many levels in Mexico.

Whether Zacatecos and other Mexicans become transnational citizens at the provincial and federal level in Mexico will depend on the kinds of alliances they are able to forge on both sides of the border, and on whether they work towards democratization and transparency within their organizations as well as outside of them. Non-state actors, particularly Latino and immigrant rights groups and NGOs working on democratization and the vote for the year 2000, can make a difference by taking transmigrant organizations more seriously, and working with them to expand citizenship rights--wherever people happen to be living in an increasingly transnationalized world. As part of this process they need to recognize and build on the citizenship dimension of the "community" projects that these groups have been working on.

The increasingly *political* involvement of transmigrants in their home provinces and municipalities has been an overlooked area, one that deserves greater attention from academics and activists on both sides of the border. It is time to analyze carefully the circumstances that enhance or limit such participation, and to consider the implications for involvement in other arenas, particularly in the U.S. This last issue is one I have not dealt with explicitly in this short essay, but the potential consolidation of the Frente Cívico into a political organization suggests that at least in some cases, home-country oriented activity does not necessarily preclude a focus on politics in other national context(s) of transnationalized social spaces.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Jesus Martínez, Nancy Foner, and Peter Vandergeest for comments. Of course, any errors or problems are my responsibility.
2. Cuahutémoc Cárdenas was the 1988 presidential candidate for the opposition PRD, a party that was formed by a dissident faction that split off from the PRI, the official party. He is the son of Lázaro Cárdenas, a former president with a legendary following. Among the elder Cárdenas' achievements, two stand out: the nationalization of the petroleum industry, and the highest number of hectares distributed under land reform.
3. The "2 for 1" began as part of the *Programa para Comunidades Mexicanas en el Exterior*, which is housed in the *Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores*. Leaders of the Zacatecas Federation

say that the federal "2 for 1" developed out of a proposal they made to Luis Donaldo Colosio when he was secretary of Social Development. The Federal "2 for 1" existed from 1993 to 1995. After that, the program had continued in Zacatecas due to pressure from the Zacatecas Federation and strong gubernatorial support.

4. The people in leadership positions in board of directors of the Zacatecas Federation tend to be male, documented (green-card or naturalized), and business owners or professionals. Participation takes time, and hourly workers do not always have the kind of flexibility necessary for this participation. Although attending meetings also takes time, many of clubs affiliated with the Federation are led by wage workers, and a couple have or have had women in positions of authority. The economic and legal status of those who contribute funds to projects (through fundraising dances and raffles, or collections) includes poorer im/migrants and the undocumented.

5. The following works offer useful background--from several perspectives--on the Mexican state and its relations with Mexicans in the United States: Guarnizo, Luis Eduardo. "The Rise of Transnational Social Formations: Mexican and Dominican State Responses to Transnational Migration." *Political Power and Social Theory* 12:45-94 (1998). González Gutiérrez, Carlos. "The Mexican Diaspora in California: The Limits and Possibilities of the Mexican Government." Pp. 221-235. In *The California-Mexico Connection*. Abraham Lowenthal and Katrina Burgess (eds.). Stanford: Stanford University Press (1993). Goldring, Luin. "The Mexican State and Transmigrant Organizations: Reconfiguring the nation, citizenship and state-society relations?" Presented at the XX International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association. Guadalajara, Mexico. (April 17-19, 1997). Goldring, Luin. "The Power of Status in Transnational Social Spaces." *Comparative Urban and Community Research* 6:165-195 (1998). Smith, Robert C. "Transnational Localities: Community, Technology and the Politics of Membership within the Context of Mexico and U.S. Migration." *Comparative Urban and Community Research* 6:196-238 (1998). Zabin, Carol and Luis Escala Rabadán. "Mexican Hometown Associations and Mexican Immigrant Political Empowerment in Los Angeles." The Aspen Institute Working Paper Series. Washington, D.C.: Aspen Institute (1998). Moctezuma, Miguel. *Redes Sociales, Comunidades y Familias de Migrantes. Sain Alto, Zac. en Oakland, Ca.* Ph.D Dissertation (Draft). Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (1998).

6. I use this phrase to convey the tension between down-loading financial responsibilities and opportunities for greater local control.

7. This is not to say that autonomous *oppositional* transmigrant organizations, like some of the Oaxacan indigenous groups, would not be able to be taken seriously by the provincial government. There may be different strategies for gaining voice, depending on regional context, alliances, etc.