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THE TRANSFORMATION OF RURAL AMERICA: NEW LATINO COMMUNITIES IN AGRICULTURAL REGIONS

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Introduction

This morning, I want to address the unprecedented transformation that many non-metropolitan and agricultural regions of the United States are undergoing. Researchers, who have been examining this process, have labeled it the “Latinization of rural America”. More important, I want to focus my talk on how we in this panel—labor organizers, representatives of agriculture and the meat processing industries, public servants, and researchers—can work together to prevent these new immigrants from becoming members of a rural underclass doomed to a life of poverty. I want to do this by briefly discussing areas in need of exploration that may assist the immigrants to help themselves to realize, what in the past, for a variety of reasons, have been elusive for many of them, the “American Dream”.

Rural Transformation and New Latino Communities

I would like to start with a little background about this rural transformation. According to U.S. census figures, there are nearly 30 million Latinos, or Latin American-origin residents, in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1997).¹ About 16.9 million of them were born in the country, while 13.1 million were born abroad (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1997). A disproportionate number of them reside in metropolitan areas across the country, and the vast majority of the immigrants among them work in urban-based service and retail industries (Hughes, 2000). However, a growing number of the Latino newcomers are also settling in non-metropolitan areas and work in agricultural industries. In general, for example, the non-metropolitan Latino population grew from 1.8 million to 2.4 million between 1980 and 1990, an increase of 30 % (Rochin & Marroquin, 1997). The immigrants among their ranks grew from 37.9 % to 39.1 % (Rochin & Marroquin, 1997).² Additionally, an estimated one million or so Mexicans live in metropolitan areas, where housing is available, but they work in traditional non-metropolitan industries, such as agriculture and food-processing plants (Rochin & Marroquin, 1997). Given the difficulty that the U.S. Census Bureau has in enumerating non-metropolitan populations and farmworkers, the numbers just mentioned may be significantly higher.

Since the 1980s, earlier in some cases, Latino immigrants—mainly from Mexico, Central America, and a number of Caribbean nations—have been embarking on journeys to rural destinations outside of the U.S. southwest. With each passing year, for

¹ Term “Latinos” refers to people whose origins are in Latin America. This population includes US citizens removed from Latin America over many generations, but who acknowledge and trace their rich heritage to Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and what is commonly referred to as South America.

² These percentages only include those Mexican-origin workers, between the ages of 16 to 64, employed in agriculture. Thus, it does not include immigrant children.

example, many immigrants—entire families in many instances—are settling in Kentucky, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Florida, and other states that had not experienced heavy Mexican immigration in the past.

In these states and many others, the number of Latinos is increasing in towns and cities found in and around agricultural regions. In Pennsylvania, where my colleague, Laura González, and I (García & González, 1995; García, 1997) have conducted research, Mexican enclaves are emerging in Southern Chester County that until two decades ago did not attract Mexican immigrants or migrants. They are not always visible to the public, or show up in censuses, but their growing presence is evident. For example, Mexican women can be seen shopping in local grocery stores, and Mexican children sit in the classrooms of the schools. Further evidence are the Mexican delicatessens, video and tape shops specializing in Mexican movies and music, and tortilla factories that have opened up for business along the roads leading to and from these Mexican enclaves. In addition, Mexican food products, including imported goods, can be found in local grocery stores.

There are various reasons behind rural-bound Latino immigration, depending on the region and agricultural industry. In the Midwest, for example, they are drawn to farming opportunities and agricultural work, available in counties with an aging and declining farming population. In the northeast and south, the restructuring of agricultural industries and the intensification of crop production, sparked by the globalization of food production, are also luring Latino immigrants. Additionally, the SAW Program, designed to control the flow of undocumented, or illegal, labor into the country, is allowing family members of farm laborers, who adjusted their immigration status, to settle in these and other agricultural regions.³

Suggestions for the Preventing a Rural Latino Underclass

Now, I would like to redirect my talk to the key topic of my presentation—the prevention of a rural underclass among new Latino communities in non-metropolitan and agricultural regions. The Latino immigrants in Pennsylvania, mentioned earlier, and in many other areas outside of the southwest are homesteaders, comprised of parents and children. They are true pioneers in new lands who have a strong work ethic and desire to succeed economically in America. Unlike some second, third, and in some instances fourth-generation farmworkers in the southwest, they have not been beaten down. They still have hopes of making it and work towards their dreams. These immigrants are not part of the growing poor found in many crop-producing regions, such as the San Joaquin Valley of California. Some of the farm laborers in this valley have overcome what often appear as insurmountable obstacles to develop their communities. Despite the economic odds, they have managed to mortgage homes, open businesses, and add revenues to the tax coffers. However, others are not as fortunate. They earn low wages, supplement their incomes with public assistance, and do not have the resources to improve their plight.

³ The objective of Special Agricultural Workers (SAW) Program, a major legalization program of Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, was to legalize the undocumented labor force employed in agriculture. It allowed illegal, or undocumented farm workers, to legalize their status in the country, if they met stipulated criteria. These newly legalized workers were permitted to sponsor the immigration of their immediate family.

Despite their hard work and aspirations for their children, Latino immigrants in Pennsylvania are beginning to exhibit signs of problems often associated with an underclass. Some of them are starting to draw on public aid and their children are not completing high school. The reasons behind the emergence and growth of a rural underclass—especially in agricultural areas in California—are currently being debated. In one camp, agricultural economists, such as Philip Martin and Edward Taylor (1997), argue that, to a certain extent, immigrants are responsible for their plight. They claim that the number of immigrants is too high in communities, and that the immigrants also lack the educational and occupational skills needed to succeed and, as such, fall back on public assistance programs. In another camp, anthropologists, such as Juan Vicente Palerm (1991; 1997; 1999), argue that not all of these immigrants are net drainers of resources. Some of them, he claims, mortgage homes, open businesses, and all of them through their work, remunerated at low wages with little benefits, have contributed to the prosperity of agricultural industries.

In these explanations, I argue, are possible solutions to preventing an underclass from spawning in newly created rural Latino communities. The answer is not in the creation of new social programs that in the past have kept people in poverty and, in the process, in the fringes of society. Instead, I believe that the key is in developing human and social capital already found in immigrant communities; if needed, using existing programs. It is also important to consider changes in the agricultural industry—changes that will enable farmworkers to earn a decent living that will help them develop the economies of their communities.

Let us take human capital for example. Anthropologists, such as Juan Vicente Palerm (1991) and Laura González (personal communication), have shown that an increasing number of recent immigrants are better educated and, in some cases, with professions, than their earlier counterparts. It is a major mistake to assume that all Latino immigrants, harvesting crops or cutting and packaging meat, are *campesinos* from the Mexican or Guatemalan countryside with little or no education. Given that they lack English language proficiency and licensing in the United States, dentists, accountants, and schoolteachers are working in agricultural fields, packing sheds, and meat processing plants.

I am sure that all of us agree that it is waste of valuable resources not to have these individuals practice their professions. Not only could they provide needed services to immigrants and non-immigrants alike in their new communities, they could also contribute to local economic development. These skilled individuals could serve as a basis for a Latino middle class that would add revenue to the region, instead of draining resources through prolonged social service use. They need to be identified, and Universities and other institutions of higher education in their areas need to develop fast track, but comprehensive, curricula to improve their English and get them licensed in this country. The short-term costs of such programs will be significantly less than the long-term expenses of social service use that may run into generations in some families.

Staying with the subject of human capital, I would like to stress that efforts must be made to keep immigrant and second-generation Latino children in rural areas from dropping out of school. For immigrants and the poor, a sound education is the path to economic upward mobility. At 55 percent, Latino children in general have one of the highest attrition rates in this country. There are many reasons for this drop out problem,

and all of them must be addressed in an orchestrated manner, especially the need to include parents in the education of their children. Immigrant parents must be socialized to the curricula of their children, the goals of local schools, and how they can be players in these processes. Again, here, there are benefits to the community as a whole. The short-term costs associated with the prevention of attrition are less than long-term ones associated with intervention.

In regards to social capital, it is a mistake to think that there is a dearth of it in Latino immigrant communities in rural America. It is there, and we need to learn how to recognize and use it. Juan Martinez, the coordinator of this panel and Farm Worker Coordinator of the Office of Outreach, USDA, and I are examining a social phenomenon that seldom gets much publicity and research attention. In many rural areas across the nation, in and out of the U.S. southwest, immigrant and American-born Latinos are becoming crop producers. Existing data from the 1997 agricultural census indicate that there is nearly 28 thousand "Hispanic" operated farms, an increase of nearly 32 percent from the previous agricultural census (US Agricultural Census, 1999). Latinos outnumber other immigrant groups, such as Cambodians and Ethiopians, who are also entering farming in large numbers over the last two decades.

How these new entrepreneurs made the challenging and very difficult transition from farmworker to farmer needs to be examined, and models that will help others to do the same must be developed. Available anecdotal information suggests that hard work, mentorship relationships with ex-farm employers, sharecropping experience, and guidance and assistance from county and federal agricultural extension programs are important factors. Similar information indicates that immigrants tap onto existing social capital in their networks. They draw on the resources of kin and friends, and in doing so, obtain money, information, services, and other forms of assistance. In this area, as with the development of human and social capital, is an opportunity to improve the plight of immigrants and farmworkers—one that is not costly and with the potential of contributing to the growth of Latino businesses and to the employment of others.

Now, I will turn my attention to the most difficult and perhaps polemical of the areas that need to be explored in order to prevent the emergence of an underclass among Latinos in rural America. Growers and other crop producers must reconsider what agricultural economist Richard Mines and his colleague Rafael Alarcón (1999) in a major conference on hired agricultural labor characterize as an out dated "low wage system" that favors solo men over families. The two researchers argue that "What is needed is higher wages and longer employment, better working conditions, access to home ownerships, access to education and employment for spouses." The old system, they further argue, "cannot meet the needs of the workers and may have outlived its ability to meet the needs of the industry groups."

Anthropologist Juan Vicente Palerm (1991), mentioned earlier, makes a similar observation. He, too argues, that the agricultural industry, particularly crop producers, must create what he calls a locally-based "professional farm labor force" in order to improve the plight of farmworkers and their families and the poor economic conditions of their communities.

Mines and Alarcón are well aware that implementing these labor practices is a challenge, especially given the rising competition from food producers around the world. In fact, they point out that "many low-wage countries such as Argentina, Mexico, Brazil

and China and high-wage countries such as Italy, France, Holland, Australia, and Israel” are in a position to out compete U.S. fruit, vegetable, and horticultural growers. However, they argue that the current system of low wage and high turnover agriculture will place these U.S. growers in economic peril in the future, if not altered. In its place, they suggest implementing an agricultural system “based on a settled labor force coupled with appropriate technology and labor management practices” that “would be compatible with a limited and controlled family-based immigration rather than a difficult-to control solo male migration”. In short, they recommend mechanizing production tasks, which will lead to displacement in some work positions; paying higher wages to the remaining workers; and developing labor-sharing management schemes across crops and areas to ensure gainful employment. They propose that the displaced farm laborers be transition into other occupations and lines of work.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to say that all indicators point toward an increase in Latino immigration to non-metropolitan and agricultural regions in the United States. We need to pay more attention to these newcomers, in particular we need to work together to prevent a rural underclass among them. These immigrants, as I have tried to stress this morning, are not lost cases, at least yet. They have a strong work ethic, aspire to improve their plight and better the opportunities of their children, and have a strong will to build stable families and communities. If their resource base is developed, particularly their human and social capital, and the current “high turnover, low wage system” in agricultural systems is replaced with one that favors families and children, these new immigrants will build economically viable communities. As is happening in southeastern Pennsylvania, they will open businesses with their savings; pay business, sales, and other taxes, contributing to municipal revenues; shop in local stores, keeping businesses afloat and open; and mortgage their homes and, in the process, revitalize neighborhoods. Thank you for listening.

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