The new heroes and heroines of North America: Remittances and local development in Mexico

Marianne Marchand

Introduction

In this chapter I wish to focus on the complexities of migration and how it is a highly gendered process and related to development, or – to speak in an outdated language of the 1970s – ‘maldevelopment or underdevelopment’. What I intend to present is the ways, often contradictory, in which migrants are being portrayed and the discrepancies with the everyday realities of migrants and their families.

As the topic is highly politicised, especially in the United States and Europe, and – in reality – not less so in Mexico, I want to define from the outset what

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1 This chapter has been written as part of the research project Apizaco y Huamantla: Estudio comparativo entre comunidades expulsoras de migrantes. Modelo para el análisis de las causas e implicaciones de los flujos migratorios para solucionar la falta de desarrollo sustentable social en la región Apizaco y Huamantla: A comparative study of migrant sending communities. A model for the analysis of the causes and implications of migrant flows in order to remedy the lack of socially sustainable development in the region, financed by el Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (CONACYT) and the state government of Tlaxcala.
the scope of this chapter will be. I am less interested in current debates on migrants in the US, which tend to focus on issues such as the attempt to construct a wall all along the southern border of the US, the portrayal of migrants as possible terrorists, and discussions around a ‘guest worker’ agreement. I have commented on these issues in other contexts. The main argument presented here is that the government of Mexico – in its role as a sending state – and the international community, have constructed a discourse about migrants and their potential role in (local) development which is problematic and contradictory.

Some of the information for this chapter has been taken from my ongoing research project about the implications of migration for one of the non-traditional sending regions of Mexico. The project focuses on the implications of migration for local or community level development and incorporates a gender perspective.

I focus here on a few key concepts or terms: migration-development nexus, transnational communities, and remittances. The chapter is divided into three parts: background, i.e. migration and (lack of) development; the state, and changing discourses on migrants, and related discourses by international organisations on remittances and development; and, finally, lived realities in local communities.

Migration and (lack of) development

Mexico is a country that for a long time has been sending migrants to the United States, a practice that can be traced back to the nineteenth century. The Mexican-US border reflects a very interesting but complex set of interrelationships. One defining moment in the construction of this border was the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) through which Mexico ceded half of its territory to the United States. From that moment onward Mexicans living in the ceded territories\(^2\) automatically became American subjects and in most cases US citizens. However, despite the Mexican-American war which preceded the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, no border controls were enforced until much later – in the 1920s. And very few statistics are available to provide reliable information about the extent of Mexican migration to the United States during this early period.

The US government’s relative neglect of its southern border changed with the Great Depression. As Joseph Nevins comments:

\(^2\) In particular, Mexicans living in what have since become the states of California, New Mexico and Texas. Arizona was mostly populated by American Indians.