

# Return Migration from the United States to Rural Areas of Campeche and Tabasco\*

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## ABSTRACT

The article presents the contemporary return situation of migrants originally from rural areas of Campeche and Tabasco who traveled to the United States. With data obtained from 60 returnees through interviews conducted in 2006 and 2007 in Campeche and from a survey in 2008 and 2009 in Tabasco, it was determined that most of the migrants were returning for the same reason, historically, as many other Mexicans: family ties. However, in this emerging migration region, the decision to return has also been recently determined by economic and structural reasons, similar to what has happened in other areas. Among these causes are restrictive migration policies and the economic crisis in the host society. Given this adverse scenario, traditional patterns of return will hardly be reestablished in the short term. Perhaps the changes will become permanent.

*Keywords:* 1. Mexico–U.S. migration, 2. return migration, 3. rural emigration, 4. Campeche, 5. Tabasco

## Migración de retorno desde Estados Unidos hacia zonas rurales de Campeche y Tabasco

### RESUMEN

El artículo presenta la situación del retorno contemporáneo de migrantes originarios de áreas rurales de Campeche y Tabasco que viajaron a Estados Unidos. Con datos obtenidos de 60 retornados, a través de entrevistas realizadas en 2006 y 2007 en Campeche y de una encuesta administrada en 2008 y 2009 en Tabasco, se determinó que la mayoría de los migrantes regresaban por la misma motivación que lo han hecho, históricamente, muchos otros mexicanos: los nexos familiares. Empero, en esta región de emigración emergente la decisión del retorno también ha sido determinada últimamente por razones coyunturales y estructurales, al igual que lo sucedido en otras zonas del país. Entre esas causas están las políticas migratorias restrictivas y la crisis económica en la sociedad de destino. Ante este panorama adverso, las pautas tradicionales del retorno difícilmente se restablecerán en el corto plazo, o quizás cambien en forma permanente.

*Palabras clave:* 1. migración México–Estados Unidos, 2. migración de retorno 3. emigración rural, 4. Campeche, 5. Tabasco

\* Text originally written in Spanish.

## *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

Historically, and in most cases, Mexicans have returned voluntarily for family reasons. However, there have also been other types of returns, such as those of a forced nature. For example, the global economic recession that lasted from 1929 to 1933 led to a massive, involuntary return of migrants to Mexico (Alanís, 2007; Carreras de Velasco, 1974)<sup>2</sup>. Without minimizing the importance this particular form of return deserves, the descriptive scope of this work is the first exercise to compare the major theories and typologies of return based on empirical evidence from Campeche and Tabasco. While still in progress, it is a pioneering study of a so-called “budding” migration area in Mexico and one that contributes to the discussion of an issue that has taken renewed importance in the field of migration studies. Its goal, equally modest, consisted of mining primary data on rural communities in Escárcega and Calakmul, municipalities in Campeche, and Balancán and Tenosique, municipalities in Tabasco, from a basic review of the literature.

At least until the late 1980s, a paradoxical conceptualization of return framed the Mexican experience: people emigrated with the set idea of being able to return (Espinoza, 1998). Depending on the circumstances prevailing during certain times, the paradox applied particularly to temporary and periodic returns. But what three decades ago was a circular Mexican migration flow has now turned into one that tends towards permanent immigration to the neighboring country (Lozano, 2000; Roberts, Frank, and Lozano, 2003; Alba, 2010; Aragonés, Ríos, and Sal-

<sup>1</sup> This work is based on results from the following projects: “Distribución e impacto de las remesas en la dinámica de familias campesinas del sur de Campeche” and “Efectos sociales y económicos derivados de fenómenos migratorios en la frontera Balancán/Tenosique-Petén.” Valuable comments from anonymous referees are gratefully acknowledged.

<sup>2</sup> According to Balderrama and Rodríguez (2006, cited in Fernández, 2013:22), back then, nearly two million Mexicans, or about 10 percent of the total population, would have been deported. If that figure is accurate, it would be similar to the removal of nearly 12 million unauthorized migrants today (Fernández, 2013).

gado, 2012). Previously, other emerging structural causes determined the decision to either return or not, including the crisis that erupted in Mexico in 1982, the enactment of immigration reform in the United States—*Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986* (IRCA) (U.S. Congress, 1986)—, further restrictions on unauthorized migration and border control from 1993 to 1994 (Lozano, 2000:329). These last measures progressively became more stringent after the attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. The deportations arising from these policies brought about, essentially, forced returns. The adverse global economic situation<sup>3</sup> in recent years is yet another phenomenon that has strongly influenced the decision to return. As noted by Fernández Guzmán (2013:24), it is plausible to think that the crisis exacerbated the xenophobic sentiment in the United States, which, in turn, contributed to the adoption of more rigid statewide anti-immigrant laws (Arizona makes a good example), and, therefore, the increase in detentions and deportations. In this sense, Massey, Pren, and Durand (2009) argue that Mexicans live nowadays in a state of marginalization because the whole context in the U.S. complicates the possibility of return, noting that “[it makes them] feel strange [to live] in a society that requires and needs them, but does not accept them, one that discriminates [against them] and represses them” (Massey, Pren, and Durand, 2009:102).

Although Mexican migration to the United States is a phenomenon that has lasted for over a century, there are relatively few studies on those who have returned (Fernández, 2011). Research on the circumstances that characterize the migratory path of those who migrate and return to the historical or traditional areas in the north and west of the country is recent. (Santibáñez, 2000; Reyes, 2001; Papail, 2005; López and Mojica, 2013). Inquiries about budding out-migration regions are practically nonexistent, but considering the paramount importance they have gained in

<sup>3</sup> The subprime mortgage crisis in the United States began in 2007. The effects emanating from the financial sector were felt by the rest of the world economy in early 2008.

terms of emigration to the U.S., it is crucial to examine what occurs in these regions. Concerning the case under study, there is evidence that southeastern Mexico (Quintana Roo, Chiapas, Yucatán, Campeche, Tabasco, and Veracruz) went from contributing less than two percent of the Mexican migrants heading to the United States at the beginning of the 1990s, to 13 percent 15 years later (Riosmena and Massey, 2012:11). Emigrants from this region constituted the majority of unauthorized Mexican migrants who headed to U.S. states that registered a recent substantial increase of incoming Mexican population in recent times. Based on data from the 2006 “Encuesta nacional de la dinámica demográfica” (Enadid) [National Survey of Demographic Dynamics] (Conapo, 2013), 35 percent of Riosmena and Massey’s (2012) sample<sup>4</sup> who came from southeastern Mexico had headed to the South (Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Tennessee, and Kentucky). Another 25.8 percent were moving from southeastern Mexico to the southeastern United States (Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, DC). The vast majority came to the target areas directly from Mexico, not as migrants who were already in the U.S. (Riosmena and Massey, 2012:26).

A recent book concerning events that took place in a town in Jalisco provides a basis with which to begin contrasting the experiences of “historic” areas *vis-a-vis* emerging regions. *Recession without Borders* presents the circumstances that have affected decreasing return migration to Tlacuitapa, Jalisco, paying particular attention to the effects of the global recession<sup>5</sup>. First, a consider-

<sup>4</sup> The data analyzed corresponds to a segment of 2 477 individuals over 15 years of age who had migrated between 2001 and the time of the interview, and who were members, in turn, of 2 071 dwellings. They were individuals who had returned to Mexico, either because they declared so themselves or because a person who lived in the household with them said so. The total survey sample was 41 926 households.

<sup>5</sup> Another recent article argues otherwise, and there seems to be no consensus in this regard. Based on data compiled by the Consejo Nacional de Población, Gustavo López argues that there has been, indeed, a considerable increase in return migration to Jalisco, Michoacán, and Guanajuato, states inside of the zone with the highest migration rates (López and Mojica, 2013).

able number of *Tlacuitapense* families resided in the United States as families, not just individual members of households, a situation that strongly influenced their decision to settle permanently in that country. Second, in recent times, many migrants had opted for United States citizenship, not just for legal residency. Third, migrants had large social networks that were already entrenched, and thus, they had well-established communities in the United States (Alarcón, Fitzgerald, and Muse-Orlinoff, 2011:5). The situation of migrants from Campeche and Tabasco was the opposite of that described for those from Tlacuitapa. Research participants made up the initial groups of returnees within the first big wave of emigrants. Unaccompanied individuals predominated over family groups. Almost all had been in the U.S. as non-authorized aliens, and the migrant communities and their networks were incipient. An uncertain economic outlook also weighed in, as some participants—particularly those from Tabasco—expressed when referring to the post-2007 turn of events.

*Demographic Trends in the Areas of Study:  
Concise Historical Framework*

Until relatively recently, periods of zero to moderate population growth characterized the population dynamics of Tabasco and Campeche.

To illustrate the Tabasco case: in 1940, the population of Tenosique was 3 545 people; in Balancán it was 1 703 (Falcón de Gyves, 1965, cited in Tudela, 1989), in spite of the fact that both have existed as municipalities since the 1880s. Between 1940 and 1950, some of the rural areas in these municipalities began experiencing significant changes due to what one author (Tudela, 1989) described as the chimera of the modernization of the tropics, and ambitious development plans (Uribe, 2009). The birth of Arroyo el Triunfo (Balancán), one of the four locations in which this research was conducted, occurred in 1958; other settlers arrived to Arroyo El Triunfo around 1973 from other municipalities (field data, February 2007), as part of the population movements that resulted from the huge

agro-productive “Balancán–Tenosique Plan” (Casco, 1980; Tudela, 1989). Both Buena Vista 23 (Balancán) and El Pedregal (Tenosique) emerged in 1967, as part of colonization policies led by the Mexican government. Buena Vista initial settlers came from Tabasco municipalities and people from the State of Mexico. It is worth noting that within the *Mexiquenses*, some individuals had who participated in the Bracero Program<sup>6</sup>. In San Francisco (Tenosique), current inhabitants arrived around 1972 from Chiapas. Some 20 settlers came to reoccupy what then were public lands; earlier settlers, from the state of Guerrero, could not endure the conditions of the region (hot weather, difficulty of access, water scarcity), and so they left (Vargas, 2012:21). The latest statistics on population at the municipal level indicate that by 2010, the total population in Tenosique added up to 58 960 people; the population in Balancán reached a total of 56 739 inhabitants in Balancán (Inegi, 2010b).

The situation in Campeche followed a somewhat different path, but was still within the overall plan of rural settlement processes as directed by state directives. In fact, the advent of many immigrants made possible the emergence of municipalities such as Escárcega and Calakmul. Colonization peaked in Calakmul upon the execution of some provisions for the establishment of *ejidos*, and to a lesser extent due to the “spontaneous” settlements (García and Pat, 2000:215; Haenn, 2005). Between 1970 and 1982, 40 *ejidos* arose (Klepeis and Turner, 2001), clearly exemplifying current migration processes to the agricultural frontier (Boege and Munguía, 1989). The municipality of Calakmul was created in 1997. The origins of the people who migrated to this municipality are quite heterogeneous. In southern Calakmul, is made up of *mestizos* and indigenous peoples from Tabasco, Chiapas, and Veracruz, among other states. Escárcega has a longer

<sup>6</sup> There is at least one other locality in Balancán that would have been populated by people from the north of the country: Apatzingán. Its inhabitants gave this name to their *ejido* (land farmed communally with support from the state) to recall their namesake birthplace in Michoacán, an entity of historical migration to the United States. This background may have been important for the remigration of their children and grandchildren to United States years later (field data, February 2007).

history as a focus of colonization, although its formal existence as a municipality dates from 1991. A presidential mandate from 1939 established the first *ejido* in present-day Escárcega, when the territory was under the municipal jurisdiction of Carmen. The largest number of settlers arrived between 1964 and 1980 (Cahuich, 2008). The origin of the inhabitants of the communities of Escárcega contrasts with the situation in Calakmul. The roots of the *Escarceño* settlers who arrived during the time of land distribution are found mainly in the western and northern states of Mexico. Indigenous peoples from Chiapas and Tabasco have arrived more recently. In Campeche, the latest census figures revealed the following data: Calakmul recorded a population of 26 882, and Escárcega tallied 54 184 inhabitants (Inegi, 2010b). A summary of the demographic evolution of the state can be found in Rojas and Ángeles (2010). Similar to what happened in Tabasco, in the short span of five decades, the residents of rural areas of Campeche participated in migration processes linked to, first, the expansion of the agricultural frontier (i.e. people migrating inside Mexico) and, subsequently, as a result of the closure of that same frontier (i.e. outmigration abroad).

*Contextualizing Emigration to the United States  
and Subsequent Return Flows*

In general, there is a lack of migration studies about Campeche and Tabasco. Available research has centered on rather localized or thematic approaches. Regarding Campeche, the examination of contemporary emigration processes is characterized by its limited (Boege and Munguía, 1989; Ramos, 2005) or anecdotal (Rosado, 2007; Blanco and Negro, 2004a, 2004b)<sup>7</sup> scope. Contemporary emigration to the United States from Campeche has been discussed in terms of specific relationships, such as the emigration and land-use change nexus (Radel and Schmook, 2008), or the linkage between adaptability of rural households and the effects of

<sup>7</sup> Miguel Szekely and Iván Restrepo's critical analysis on the advance of the agricultural frontier in the southwestern part of Campeche is a notable exception (Szekely and Restrepo, 1988).



remittances (Suárez, 2008), or the development/remittances connection (Santiago, 2009). The literature on Tabasco is mostly descriptive, regarding issues such as colonization (Chávez, 2010) or the migration flows of Central Americans heading to the United States through this territory (Santiago, 2010; Vautravers, 2008), or prior research on migration from the target area to the United States (Vautravers and Ochoa, 2009). The work of Vidal and colleagues stands out as an exception (Vidal *et al.*, 2002).

While it is difficult to pinpoint precise statistics on the number of Mexicans migrating to the neighboring country, the magnitude of the phenomenon is overwhelming, especially for the segment of people who travel unauthorized (Durand and Massey, 2003). In comparison to other states, Campeche and Tabasco are part of the budding region of migration to the United States<sup>8</sup>. A brief commentary on this way of characterizing the area is in order because, as it turns out, there are places that for a number of years have experienced intensive emigration to the United States. Specifically, Campeche and Tabasco supplement workers, under temporary contracts, for the the United States government's sponsored H2 programs (agricultural and others). For example, Serrano and Tuñón (2009) have showed that a high percentage of residents from Chiltepec, Paraíso, in Tabasco go periodically to the U.S. as temporary workers; that is, the practice is well established.

In the absence of studies on Escárcega, Balancán and Teno-sique, it would be misleading at this point to characterize the origin, momentum, and profile of the emigration phenomenon from those places; an initial outline regarding the situation in Calakmul is advanced here. In that municipality, international emigration began in the 1990s to then increase after 2002, a far as other researchers have asserted (Radel and Schmook, 2008; Santiago, 2009), and something this study confirmed. A combination of reasons triggered outmigration from Calakmul: the effects of hurricane Isidore on agriculture (in 2002), subsequent droughts (2003 and 2004) (Vallejo, Gurri, and Molina, 2011), a weak local

<sup>8</sup> Even though official statistics from Inegi suffer from under-reporting, the 1990, 2000, and 2010 censuses provide some elements to estimate migration abroad (Inegi, 1990, 2000, 2010a).



labor market, and the fluctuating prices of jalapeño chilies (field data, February 2007) (Radel and Schmook, 2008:891). This last crop seems to have played a key role in connection to the migration phenomenon. Producers capitalized on years of abundant jalapeño production. But, conversely, in times of meager crop yields, farmers were so indebted that they leaned on outmigrating to the United States as an alternative to meet their obligations (Radel and Schmook, 2008:902, 904).

Escárcega residents, meanwhile, were returning to Campeche in what seemed an emerging *initial* cycle of circular migration, more akin, until recently, to the experience of large sectors of Mexican emigration elsewhere; the fact that almost all respondents in this study had already made more than one trip to the United States was indicative of this trend. Several of the *Escarceños* interviewed for this work, all *mestizos*, came from families with a history of trips to the United States before arriving in Campeche as colonizers. The migration experience of the initial founders of communities in Escárcega influenced the germinal circularity of contemporary flows to the neighboring country<sup>9</sup>. *Escarceños* had already cemented the social networks that allowed some continuity to north-bound flows, but *Calakmulenses* had still not managed to consolidate their own structures to re-emigrate.

Based on the field data (February 2007), I offer my initial assessments for Tabasco. The first migrants from Balancán and Tenosique went to the United States in the mid-1990s. The phenomenon seems to have taken hold at the start of the century, if we consider that half of the respondents made their first trip between 2001 and 2007 (table 1). Consistent with trends found in other areas of the country, most of these Tabasco migrants had already established a family when they migrated. Only five out of 19 migrants who made a single trip were unmarried at the time they arrived in the United States. Finally, another finding supports the emerging profile of emigration from these communities: 20 among all 30 respondents had made only one trip abroad.

<sup>9</sup> In particular, *Michoacanos* who went to settle places like Altamira de Zináparo came from areas historically characterized by high rates of migration to the United States.

*Table 1.* Return Migrants, Calakmul and Escárcega, Campeche;  
Balancán and Tenosique, Tabasco

<i>Participant</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>h</i>	<i>i</i>
Carlos	CA	33	P	1	2003	2003	14 months	Na	Earned too little
Juan	CA	38	P	1	2004	2004	12 months	Na	“The work was too much”
Ignacio	CA	17	S	1	2004	2004	22 months	Na	The time was up
Pedro	CA	16	S	1	2004	2004	22 months	Na	He had to get married
Mario	CA	41	P	1	2004	2004	3 months	Na	Payrate was too low
Abelardo	CA	19	S	2	2003	2005	23 months	Na	Very intense cold
Darío	CA	24	S	2	2003	2005	18 months	Na	He returned to get married
Román	CA	37	P	1	2001	2001	8 months	Na	Wife was pregnant
Luis	CA	22	P	1	2005	2005	10 months	Na	Missed the family
Felipe	CA	27	*	1	2004	2004	35 months	Na	To reunite with the family
Fausto	CA	29	P	1	2004	2004	20 months	Na	He only wanted to go for one year
Regino	CA	24	P	1	2004	2004	34 months	Na	Got bored of working
Francisco	CA	43	P	1	2004	2004	7 months	Na	Satisfied his curiosity
Horacio	CA	30	P	1	2003	2003	32 months	Na	The family called
Sebastián	CA	38	P	1	2005	2005	19 months	Na	Wanted to see family and because he got bored
Nicasio	CA	20	P	1	2004	2004	28 months	Na	Got bored and tired of working
Jorge	CA	27	P	1	2004	2004	21 months	Na	To see the family
Luciano	CA	34	P	1	2004	2004	26 months	Na	Nd
Andrés	CA	41	P	1	2003	2003	17 months	Na	He no longer wanted to work in the United States
Nemesio	CA	24	P	1	2002	2002	58 months	Na	He got tired of working and wanted to see the family
Teodoro	CA	27	P	1	2006	2006	9 months	Na	Mother died
Manuel	CA	15	S	1	1998	1998	Eight years	Na	Missed the family
José	CA	34	P	1	2004	2004	18 months	Na	To see the family
Cecilio	CA	28	P	2	2000	2004	28 months	Na	People owed him money
Justo	ES	38	P	2	1995	2003	36 months	Na	Relatives missed him at home

(continues)

*(continued)*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>h</i>	<i>i</i>
David	ES	37	P	2	1998	2004	16 months	Na	Mother was ill
Ernesto	ES	32	P	4	1990	2001	12 months	Na	To take care of livestock
Germán	ES	32	P	2	2000	2006	3 months	Na	Mother was ill
Héctor	ES	34	P	1	1994	1994	6 months	Na	He was deported
Inocencio	ES	48	P	1	2006	2006	10 months	Na	He was deported
Paco	BL	32	P	1	2004	2004	7 months	Na	Earned too little
Nacho	BL	47	P	1	2001	2001	7 years	H2**	There was no work
Lucas	BL	18	S	2	1996	1999	10 years	Na	He was deported
Caín	BL	42	P	4	1996	2001	10 months	Na	Work slowed down ( <i>i.e.</i> was not enough to support himself)
Juana	BL	42	*	2	2003	2005	20 months	Na	Injured her finger in an accident
Víctor	BL	43	*	1	1998	1998	24 months	Na	He got sick
Pancho	BL	22	S	1	2005	2005	24 months	Na	He was deported
Patricio	BL	39	P	3	2000	2006	24 months	H2**	There was no work
Reginaldo	BL	20	S	2	2006	2007	12 months	H2	He lost his job
Rodrigo	BL	18	S	1	1999	1999	days	Na	He was deported
Fernando	BL	23	P	1	2001	2001	12 months	Na	Mother was ill
Vicente	BL	40	P	1	1996	1996	12 months	Na	To see the family
Isaías	BL	31	P	1	2001	2001	36 months	H2**	Had an accident
Josué	BL	16	S	1	2006	2006	34 months	Na	Father became ill; migrant became involved in an accident and was in debt
Oscar	BL	37	P	1	1998	1998	10 years	Na	The family called
Rogelio	BL	21	P	1	1996	1996	4 months	Na	The family called
Sergio	BL	29	P	1	2006	2006	24 months	Na	Missed the family
Gregorio	BL	25	S	1	2000	2000	Eight years	Na	He was deported
Rolando	BL	32	P	1	2007	2007	9 months	Na	The family called, and because his son got sick
Florentino	BL	26	P	1	2002	2002	6.5 years	Na	Returned to work in the land and to be with the family
Armando	BL	31	P	2	2006	2007	12 months	Na	The family called and because of the lack of work

*(continues)*

*(continued)*

<i>Participant</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>h</i>	<i>i</i>
Iván	BL	38	P	2	1999	2005	48 months	Na	To see the family
Miguel	BL	20	S	1	2001	2001	Eight years	Na	He was deported
Joaquín	BL	27	P	1	2003	2003	24 months	Na	To see his children
Lucio	BL	35	P	1	1999	1999	48 months	Na	Got bored and to see the family
Ángel	BL	39	P	1	2002	2002	42 months	Na	Got bored
Teresa	TN	49	P	2	2006	2008	12 months	Na	Granddaughter was ill
Zacarías	TN	52	P	1	2007	2007	24 months	Na	There was no work
Tomás	TN	25	S	2	1997	2000	7 years	Na	Got bored of working
Alejandro	TN	21	P	2	1996	1999	12 months	Na	Mother got sick

*Legend and notes:**Participant:* Name (pseudonym)*a.* Location (CA = Calakmul, ES = Escárcega, BL = Balancán, TN = Tenosique)*b.* Age at the time of last trip to the United States*c.* Marital status at the time of last trip (P: As couple = common law, married; S: Single)*d.* Number of trips to the United States*e.* Date of first trip*f.* Date of last trip*g.* Time spent on last trip*h.* Emigration status in the United States (Na: Not authorized; H2: Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program)*i.* Reason(s) for return

\* Participants separated from their spouse

\*\* After the expiration of the H2 visa, these migrants extended their stay in the United States, despite the fact that they were not authorized to do so.

Nd: No data.

*Source:* Own, based on interviews conducted in Calakmul and Escárcega (Gurri, 2005) and the database obtained from the Balancán and Tenosique surveys (Arriola, 2007).*Methodology*

The survey data was collected using an ethnographic approach, which provides, *inter alia*, the ability to reach a dense description (Geertz, 2001) encompassing the variety of personal migratory experiences. One of ethnography's strengths is that it enables to grasp the profound individual and collective motivations that drive people to return, something that other methods preclude. This approach could be criticized due to its limited explanatory potential to yield robust generalizations. In Campeche, semi-structured in-

interviews were conducted, while in Tabasco, an open-ended survey was carried out. These differences limited a full-fledged comparison of the data, but they did allow me to point out some characteristics that both cases share at a basic level regarding return migration.

I interviewed 24 returnees in Calakmul, and six in Escárcega<sup>10</sup>. In Tabasco, 26 informants came from Balancán and four from Tenosique<sup>11</sup>. Data for Campeche was collected in November 2006 and in March and May 2007; in November 2008 and February, March, and April 2009, I worked in Tabasco. Campeche migrants were selected from the data from a project previously conducted in the communities of interest (Gurri, Alayón, and Molina, 2004). In the case of Tabasco, I used a combination of census data of population and housing collected internally by the Ministry of Health in each *ejido* and knowledge of key participants; these people supplemented, broadened, or rectified the information contained in the census, specifying those who had emigrated from the community and those who had returned to it.

For interpretation purposes, and as much as the information allowed, recurring themes were identified, which, in turn, led to establishing patterns and outstanding categories. This first method of analysis to the study problem did not include establishing in-depth contrasts between the communities of both states because the research design corresponded to two independent studies. Finally, due to the small number of groups being studied and the non-synchronous nature of the two projects on which the work

<sup>10</sup> Interviewees came from the following communities in Calakmul: El Tesoro, Josefa Domínguez, Nuevo Veracruz, Santa Rosa, Ojo de Agua, Quiché de las Pailas, Frontera Sur, Cibal, Ley de Fomento Agropecuario, El Carmen II, and Cristóbal Colón. The rest were interviewed in Altamira de Zináparo and Chan Laguna, belonging to Escárcega.

<sup>11</sup> Four migrants from a Balancán *ejido* had been to the United States as part of the H2A program and had worked in the planting and cultivation of vegetables and fruits, and the planting and cutting of trees, among other rural occupations. Strictly speaking, these migrants probably should not be classified as returnees, except that three of them extended their stay on the U.S. beyond the allotted time and ended up being part of the population of unauthorized immigrants. The participation of Balancán migrants in the aforementioned program is a recent development.

was based, I did not contemplate making broad generalizations, whether they were of a theoretical or methodological nature.

### *Theoretical Considerations*

The general theoretical models that account for the reasons behind emigration have been discussed extensively by many other researchers. Suffices to mention, for example, the synthesis that Douglas Massey (2004) makes on the dominant paradigms, namely, that of classic economics, the new economics of labor migration (NELM), the world system model, and theories of social capital and cumulative causes. The transnational paradigm is notably absent in Massey's article, though. One example, among many, of the transnational theoretical framework applied specifically to Mexico is the work of Jeffrey Cohen, which focuses on Oaxaca (Cohen, 2001).

Although a *corpus* theoretical approach on the subject has been developing for a long time now, as evidenced by the excellent historical review by Eduardo Fernández (2011), the pivotal work of George Gmelch (1980) is a fundamental reference<sup>12</sup>. Right from the start Gmelch stated that any discussion on return migration is problematic due to the fact that the differences between permanent and temporary return can be fuzzy, especially when circumstances vary or people's decisions change. Thus, those who return to visit or stay for a while (albeit long and indeterminately) without any intention of staying at home cannot be described, *sensu stricto*, as return migrants. In the words of this author, most migrants simply do not have definite plans (Gmelch, 1980:138), and, therefore, their intentions are not always strong and durable. Even asking the migrant themselves about the reason behind their homecoming can result in a hazy answer. Such a reaction exposes the real motivation, though implicitly, without considering

<sup>12</sup> In the work referred to Fernández (2011) reviewed research findings that do not match the results presented here; other modalities of return do apply to other contexts, namely: the "ethnic" return, the business return, or the return of qualified professionals, to name a few.

the high variability of factors influencing the decision. Another problem is how to generalize and coherently organize the range of responses that a migrant can offer (Gmelch, 1980:140).

Gmelch stated that the main reasons for returning were not economic, but rather emotional and having to do with kin, including the strength of family ties, the existence of a moral commitment to sick or elderly relatives, and attachment to one's homeland (Gmelch, 1980:139). Subsequent research in several locations in Mexico (Papail and Arroyo, 2004:115; Pries, 2004:16; Márquez, Ordaz, and Li, 2012), other countries (Guarnizo, 1997), and the results of work in Campeche and Tabasco all confirm that Gmelch's assertion is still accurate. It is worth to point out that Gmelch's model does not explain forced returns due to economic or political reasons, both of which are important today in the case of Mexicans who have gone to the United States.

The truth is that it is essential to examine both universal considerations about return, as well as those that are particular to the Mexican experience. Thus, the explanation of a specific class of return will have its own particular rationale (*i.e.* cause). Issues as diverse as the person's historical background, the particular situation in which return takes place, opportunities (for example, investing) all influence decisions on whether to leave or to return. Time, as illustrated, plays an important role and is directly linked to the myth of return: although the initial idea of returning remains latent, as the years go on, it becomes harder to materialize. Due to all of the above, Jean-Pierre Cassarino, who extensively reviewed the literature, concluded that most studies point to three central, general aspects of return migration: *a)* the context in which the migrant is re-inserted into his/her country, *b)* the duration and type of the migration experienced abroad, and *c)* factors and conditions (favorable or not) that prompted a return either to the host country or to the homeland (Cassarino, 2008:100).

Taking as a starting point the *specific* cause that motivated a return, it is possible to identify two broad categories. For illustrative purposes, I call these "return originated due to a conjuncture" and "return motivated by primary causes." Within the first



group are those cases in which the specific set of circumstances being experienced at a given moment forces a return, situations associated to such as work or health problems, the death or illness of a relative, or deportation (Gaillard, 1994, cited in Ballesteros, 2006:41). Note that in many cases, this return is involuntary.

Primary causes include a much broader spectrum. A brief review of the literature shows how different the range of reasons can be, according to the emphasis that each author gives to those causes. The most frequently mentioned aspects and, therefore, the most crucial, are the amount of time the migrant has spent outside of his/her country (the longer someone remains outside, the less likely that person is to return) (Black, 1993; Lindstrom, 1996; Cassarino, 2008), age (the younger the migrant is, the more trips he/she makes between the place of origin and the place of destination) (Massey *et al.*, 1991; Pries, 2004; Rivera, 2011), and economic conditions, both in the place of origin and in the destination. However, scholars have not reached a consensus on the latter point (Massey and Espinosa, 1997, cited in Espinoza, 1998:43; Papademetriou and Terrazas, 2009:13). Even analysts who have conducted massive quantitative studies on return migration concede that there are extra-economic reasons for returning, such as family relationships, thereby making migration a social and economic phenomenon (Lindstrom, 1996:371–372).

Other motives and determinant factors mentioned in the literature include human capital availability (Espinosa, 1998; Constant and Massey, 2002), having a wife and children either in the place of origin or in the host society (Massey *et al.*, 1991; Black, 1993; Constant and Massey, 2002)<sup>13</sup>, level of education, ownership of property in the host country (Constant and Massey, 2002), physical capital (Espinosa, 1998; Cassarino, 2008), social origin (Rivera, 2011), gender differences (men are more inclined

<sup>13</sup> Men who are over 30 years old and married have historically been more inclined to return. In a study based on data obtained from the Mexican Migration Project (MMP) in 30 communities, between 1982 and 1993, Belinda Reyes (2001) established that 40 percent of male heads of household returned to Mexico before other family members.

to return than women) (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994, cited in Ballesteros, 2006:186; Striffler, 2007:684), marital status (Massey *et al.*, 1991), socio-economic achievements such as savings, buying land or other tangible property (Constant and Massey, 2002), legal status (authorized, unauthorized), future projects,<sup>14</sup> and willingness to return or not (Cassarino, 2008). This last proposition, akin to the assumptions related to the social networks paradigm, is particularly novel and useful when considering the reason behind deciding to return or not. Being willing to return requires two conditions: first, returning voluntarily, and second, being ready to do so. However Cassarino acknowledges that not all cases of return involve migrants who return of their own accord or are ready to do so (Cassarino, 2008:102). Beyond these subjective aspects, Cassarino recognizes that the existence of objective conditions do not always make returning a voluntary and free choice. The time available for subsequent mobilizations, accumulated resources (tangible and intangible), personal experience, and being informed and aware of the conditions that exist at the place the person is returning to make up the main “external” factors that shape the ability of being prepared (Cassarino, 2008:102, 2004).

Regardless of the general motivation or the specifics surrounding a decision to return, for Jorge Durand, there is a strategy at the heart of every return; this strategy, although flexible, leads to goals, purposes, and deadlines (Durand, 2004:111). Some goals and purposes are material (tangible) while others are not. This author offers as evidence the story of a boy who migrated to collect money and to study. He went to the United States several times, and eventually managed to graduate as an agronomist. He later returned to that country to be able to buy his own land in Mexico. He had documents and a good job, but at one point decided to return because he had already accomplished his goal.

<sup>14</sup> This factor intersects with Jean Papail and Jesús Arroyo’s propositions. They argue that, in addition to a long stay abroad, counting on having a return project sets up the conditions that favor the return (Papail and Arroyo, 2004). It also echoes the ideas of Jorge Durand (2004) regarding the existence of a strategy (see this same section, below).

He said, “Fortunately or unfortunately, I decided to come [home] because my time had run out” (Durand, 1996:247, cited in Durand, 2004:111). The above case is no exception; in Calakmul, two migrants expressed the same idea: the time to return had come. We must also consider the weight that a migrant gives to each point of his/her strategy to return. Why a person bestows more importance to one factor over another may be motivated and reinforced by other complementary causes, so that the decision is based on more than one reason, either a primary or a circumstantial one. As discussed below, a considerable segment of Campeche and Tabasco participants returned for one main cause: the family. Thus, they replicated the generalized pattern found in the literature on return migration. Another group decided to return based on a multi-causal matrix in which there were factors linked to the world financial crisis (low income, lack of employment) and other diverse reasons (deadlines, restrictive policies, illnesses or accidents, among others).

### *Typifying Return Migrants*

Despite the difficulties involved in classifying return migrants, as mentioned in the previous section, some proposals have been set forth. Some classifications are characterized as rigid, while others have a more dynamic outlook. For example, Francesco P. Cerase proposed a typology that had three types of return migrants, according to the number of years they had been away from home, and in which the migrant’s decision was not based solely on personal experiences but also on existing social and institutional factors in the country of origin (Cerase 1974, cited in Cassarino, 2004). From this position, going back is a matter of structural context (Cassarino, 2004:257). On the basis of the situation of Mexicans who migrate to the United States, Jorge Durand (2006) proposed a complex model which covers six types of migrants. One kind refers to the voluntary return of the migrant who is well-established abroad: it is the situation of those who have long remained outside their country, perhaps even acquired a new na-

tionality. Retired migrants are in this group. Another sort considers the return of the temporary migrant: the most illustrative case is that of temporary workers. A third is called trans-generational return: in the Latin American context, contemporary examples include Brazilians and Peruvians with Japanese backgrounds who head to Japan, or Argentines of Hispanic descent who go to Spain. There is also the forced return type, that is, those who are involuntarily expelled (deported)<sup>15</sup>. The next to last type is the official scheduled return, which occurs in cases like that of Guatemalans who took refuge in Mexico and who went back to their homeland shortly before the end of the domestic armed conflict that ravaged their country from 1993 to 1999. Finally, Durand (2006:170–174) speaks of the return of the “losers”<sup>16</sup>, those who return voluntarily because they have not achieved their goals.

According to Durand (2006) the most thoroughgoing explanation behind all kinds of returns is found in an adaptation of the law of diminishing returns proposed by Anne Robert Jacques Turgot (1727–1781), a French economist associated with the physiocrat school (philosophy). Durand argues that there comes a certain time when the migrant cannot further increase his/her income. Therefore, it is not possible to gain social mobility, and the migrant ultimately concludes that is not worth trying to stay in the host country. The central idea is that there is an ending to all, whether the reasons are social, economic, political, or cultural. Return is, after all, a migratory process in the opposite direction, because once again, decisions must be made, taking into account “economic, social, familial, and personal costs and benefits.” (Durand, 2004:115). Even age is an important element in diminishing returns, since we all grow old. Despite its wide appeal, the Durand model has

<sup>15</sup> The term return migration is used as an euphemism for the removal of unauthorized migrants in the official discourse of certain European countries (Cassarino, 2008: 97–98).

<sup>16</sup> Terms such as “failure” or “loser” carry a negative connotation and do not explain convincingly why people return: is it appropriate to label migrants who did not succeed in their business as “failed ones”? Perhaps their lack of success was due to conditions beyond their control or unsurmountable. Other authors have used this word as well (Pries, 2004).

limitations; several of the archetypes in his classification fit well, but not all returning migrants fit in it. Nor does it explain satisfactorily, for example, the reason young people return permanently. It cannot account for intangible reasons that determine a permanent return either.

*Comparing Theory and Data:  
Rural Communities in Campeche and Tabasco*<sup>17</sup>

The following contrasting exercise between the findings in Campeche and Tabasco is done against the existing analytical apparatus, namely, the literature presented in the previous two sections. As far as the data permits, preliminary conceptualizations and analyses, or alternative explanations to the typology proposed by some of the authors already mentioned, are formulated and discussed. However, the phenomenon of return can be explained from various paradigms, depending on the reason(s) and circumstance(s) particular to each individual. In general, what most migrants expressed is basically consistent with the tenets of social networking and cumulative causation models, as suggested by Cassarino (2004, 2008). The first part of the analysis takes into account the *most important* reason referred to in the decision to return. However, the multiple causes expressed by several migrants raised an issue that questions the rigidity proper to the main typologies in use, an issue partially addressed in the second part of this section.

The return of those who did not achieve their goals is explained within the framework of neoclassical theory. They are Durand's (2006) "failures" (Carlos, Mario, and Paco)<sup>18</sup>: they returned because they earned too little, *i.e.*, they did not meet their expectations. A group that resembles the previous one includes those who returned because they were unemployed or in a precarious work situation. In Campeche, nobody openly stated that jobless-

<sup>17</sup> Table 1 supports the discussion of this section.

<sup>18</sup> To protect the identity of participants, they are identified by a pseudonym.

ness was the reason for their return, while in Tabasco, it was explicitly asserted (Nacho, Calín, Patricio, Lupe, and Zacarías). A tentative explanation may be that the effects of the financial crisis in the United States were much more noticeable at the time I spoke with Tabasqueños (2009, 2010), unlike the moment I interviewed Campechanos (2007, 2008). Deportees also fit within this schema (Héctor, Inocencio, Lucas, Pancho, Rodrigo, Gregorio, Miguel). Taking the criteria of unrealized goals to the extreme, it could be argued that migrants who were injured or ill (Joanna, Víctor, Isaías) made up this group, too. They had to compulsorily go back, not forcibly, *per se*.

The cases of Ignacio and Fausto exemplify the principles the NETM model advocates, because they said their deadline to go back was up. These precepts assert that migration is (ideally) temporary, that it is shaped by well-defined goals and that family bonds play a central part in the migration process (Stark and Bloom, 1985). The existence of a family bond is part of the main expectation that induces a migrant to return (Sana and Massey, 2005). In this paradigm, remittances are important because they make the return trip, or investing in the place of origin<sup>19</sup>, possible. The theory of social networks provides the most satisfactory explanation behind the reason to return among a large number of participants (Luis, Felipe, Horacio, Jorge, Manuel, José, Justo, Vicente, Oscar, Roger, Sergio Rolando, Iván, and Joaquín). Family is part of the social capital that a migrant has prior to, during, and after migration<sup>20</sup>. Consider the following ethnographic notes in light of the precepts posed by social networking models and the cumulative causation paradigm:

<sup>19</sup> The study by Jean Papail (2005) analyzes a specific connection between remittances and return migration.

<sup>20</sup> A subset within this group contains those who returned due to the illness of a family member (Román, Teodoro, David, Germán, Fernando, Teresa, and Alejandro).

At the time I met Manuel he was visiting relatives in *ejido* El Carmen, while he was staying at another *ejido*, Niños Héroes. He left for the United States at age 15 and returned in November 2006 with money, gifts, and a dual rear wheel pickup truck, the latter being the most conspicuous symbol of his great economic achievements as a migrant. When referring to his return, he enunciated a sentence about his experience that was intriguing and striking: “What you bring back with you from over there is [of] worth to your life.” It is no wonder he is trilingual (Chol, Spanish, English), and wants to go back, yet it is noteworthy that he denies the possibility of starting a family in the United States (field notes, Calakmul, March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2007).

This migrant returned because he said he missed his family. He had previously sent large sums of money for medical care of an aunt and also helped relatives when droughts hit the region three or four years earlier. The family relationship weighed heavily on his decision to return. A considerable part of his income and savings was allocated to local investment. He had bought a plot of land, planted grass on it, and, shortly after his arrival in Campeche, he acquired 17 head of cattle. All of the above required a substantial investment. What did he mean by, “What you bring back from there is of worth to your life”? First and foremost, you have to come back alive (*i.e.*, the worth of living). Second, the material goods that returnees manage to bring to their place of origin are tantamount to the material measure with which they are valued by those who remained behind (tangible worth, a breadth of someone’s success).

This work faced the challenge of theoretically fitting instances of return migrants who did not *strictly* meet the guidelines of the major paradigms and models. One of the groups identified as atypical includes individuals who returned for very specific personal reasons that did not compel them to return; in other words they did it on a voluntary basis. This is the case of individuals who claimed there was a most strong reason to return at home, namely: marriage (Pedro, Darío), caring for cattle (Ernesto), or because of



debt (Cecilio). I also found cases in which a personal motivation was accompanied by a structural reason. Several migrants stated that they were bored of working or living in the United States (Regino, Nicasio, Nemesio, Ángel, and Tomás). Hypothetically, boredom could be synonymous with reaching one's limit. Perhaps it is a subtle way of showing that, according to that person, the migratory experience has come to an end. Likewise, migrants invoked other individual reasons, none of which seemed urgent, such as the inability to adapt to the climate conditions, or because the migrant satisfied his/her curiosity to know what the United States was like (Abelardo, Francisco, Andrés).

Another "dissimilar" group included cases in which unexpected and involuntary *changes* and situations beyond the control of the migrant influenced their (future) plans regarding the migratory experience, and, therefore, induced an eventual decision to return. This problem is well illustrated by those H2 migrants who decided to stay in the U.S. after the expiration of their visas (Nacho, Patricio, and Isaías). Nacho, for example, returned due to lack of work, and because he got sick. Similarly, Isaías had an accident within three months of being hired, and his recovery took a year and a half. Then he got a job, without authorization to do so, until he made the decision to return. While "composite" responses on the reasons to return could echo the paradigm of cumulative causation in yet other cases (Sebastián, Nemesio, Josué, Rolando, Florentino, Armando, Tomás), this complex amalgam of many reasons continues to present a theoretical and analytical challenge. In the context of Mexico's recent history, there is an additional element to consider: the insecurity and violence that involves undertaking the journey up north. Migrating for the first time or re-migrating has become dangerous and consequently, more expensive. Making the decision to leave was equal to or more important than being determined to return. Evidence obtained via testimony and informal conversations would reveal the ordeal that traveling to the United States entailed (field data, February 2007). The lack of security on travel routes and the involvement of organized crime groups that monitor, and

sometimes control, the crossing of the United States-Mexico border became an everyday part of the migration experience (see Infante *et al.*, 2012; Slack and Whiteford, 2010). These circumstances significantly affected the regular emigration flows; mobilization became a complicated issue.

What elements, unknown to the researcher, make one factor weigh more than another? What are the tensions at play between, for example, a personal factor and another of a cyclical or structural nature to make the decision to return? These questions, and others, are unsolved enigmas. In short, to attempt a holistic explanation of multi-causal, empirical cases of return, on the bases of a single model, is an exiguous endeavor.

Changes in the migrants' life, purpose, family situation, and either in the host society or place of origin, underline and influence their decision to return.

### *Concluding Remarks*

I Results from this initial reading of return migration to rural communities in Campeche and Tabasco indicate that *the major aspects governing* such “reverse” flows turned out to be rather complicated. First, the outlook of reintegration into Mexico appeared bleak for returnees, mainly because of daunting economic prospects. Secondly, time spent abroad, to mention another element, had apparently not played a major role in the return decision among migrants who left these localities. When considering the main *specific cause* linked to the return, research results reaffirmed the weight of family ties among most migrants from Campeche and Tabasco. To reiterate, these migrants were “typical” within the Mexican experience of voluntary returns. Yet one has to be aware that multifactorial or multi-causal return gains increased leverage, and may vary, according to prevailing historical circumstances in a continuously shifting landscape. At times, decisions are affected more by matters of a family-personal-emotional order, while, in other cases, structural conditions prevail. Tougher anti-migrant laws and a negative economic climate in the United

States seemed to gain greater importance in the decision to return or not in recent times. Deportees were beginning to be an important part within the return migrants in Campeche and Tabasco.

Reverse migration due to economic reasons has had a significant impact in the history of Mexican returns, albeit temporary. In that sense, the current economic downturn has affected the multi-causal cycle of return migration. After 2008, returning-home became a less viable option. To sum up, in considering their decision to return, Tabasco and Campeche migrants merged in both personal reasons and non-family causes in the context of complex and difficult circumstances. Migrants who were classified here as “dissimilar” exemplify best this convoluted situation because they did not fit easily within the dominant explanatory models. Finally, much remains to be done. For instance, research is needed concerning the potential circularity of flows in these localities, and their relationship to the process of permanent return. From the standpoint of the transnational paradigm, circular migration is part and parcel of the comings and goings that characterize “transnational” subjects. Yet, scant circular mobility in these rural settings prevents tentative predictions on any possible future outcomes. In this sense return migration of women and the social and economic impact of forced return are, to mention two additional examples, also fertile lines of study in this broad subject.

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