

The Migration Industry in Comparative Perspective: Courier Services in Mexico and El Salvador

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Migration Industry

- Matrix of entrepreneurs and businesses which, motivated by the pursuit of financial gain, supply services that facilitate and sustain international migration and its related behaviors, including employment, mobility, settlement, communication and resource transfers.

Migration Industry

- Part of the social organization of migration.
- Plays a role in the causation of migration.
- MI entrepreneurs: interested in the continuation of migration (Castles 2004).
- Contours depend on stage of migration cycle, mig/border policies, labor demand, size of immigrant population.
- Mix of formal/informal, legal/illegal activity.

Purpose of paper

- Inductive comparison of the migration industry by analyzing the social organization of a distinct set of migration entrepreneurs: couriers who specialize in the transport of family remittances and parcels between the US and Mexico (*camioneteros*) and between the US and El Salvador (*viajeros*).

Methods

- Fieldwork in both sending and receiving countries.
- Extended study of sites and cases.
- Interviews and observations with:
 - 7 *camioneta* operations in Georgia and Guanajuato and Zacatecas.
 - 8 *viajeros* or *encomenderos* in Eastern ES and Boston.
 - Competitors (banks, wire transfer outlets, migrant bus lines and box shipping companies).
 - Customers.

Camioneteros

- Informal transportation operations, providing three interconnected services:
 - transfer of remittances in cash, shipment of parcels, and transport of passengers.
- Weekly travel between US and Mexico.
- Permits in US but not in Mexico.
- Business is a break with prior history of wage labor.
- Heavily invested in remittance transfer—additional services help keep customers.

Viajeros

- Informal courier service, providing three *not necessarily* connected options:
 - remittance, letter and *encargo* services.
- Monthly travel between ES and the US.
- Permits in ES but not in US.
- Traveling is an extension of prior history of entrepreneurship.
- Heavily invested in the *mercado de la nostalgia* (ethnic foods).

Similarities

- One-stop, multiple services operation
- Both rely on binational family, friend and paisano social networks
- Strategize with colleagues and allies
- Distribute to several towns in region
- Service paid by clients in the US
- Combination of formality and informality
- Competition and risks threaten remittance part of business

Differences

- Mexican *camioneteros* but Salvadoran *viajeras*.
- Traveling extension of women's role in trade.
- *Viajeras/os* are not always migrants.
- Center of gravity of *viajera/o* activity is the ES (traveling extension of other businesses).
- Center of gravity of *camionetero* activity is the US (more dependent on remittances).
- Different sources of competition & restriction.
- Salvadoran state step up regulation of *viajeras/os* (permits, bonds, customs controls)

Does trend toward formalization mean demise of informal services?

- Decline in number of couriers in each site.
- Profits are strong incentive to remain in business: \$400 per trip in ES and \$1000 in Mexico.
- *Viajeras/os* likely to survive as ethnic traders and couriers for *encomiendas*.
- *Camioneteros* likely to continue serving remote localities of rural Mexico.
- Successful *camioneteros* become bus lines.