

Exploring the Ethics of National Loyalty:

The New *Compromiso* - Mexican Students Abroad in the U.S.

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When she hung up the phone, Maria immediately burst into tears and reached for the wall, looking for something to hold onto before she sank to the floor. I stood there, an 11-year-old, not knowing what to do, not knowing what to say, not even knowing what had happened. I was paralyzed. This was the first time I had seen *mi nana* Maria, who spent more time with me than my mother, cry. Moments later, when my older sister tried to console her, I discovered what had occurred. Miguel, Maria's 19-year-old son, had died crossing the U.S.-Mexico border through the Sonoran Desert. American authorities had recovered his body, and the Mexican consulate had called with the terrible news.

At the time, I did not fully understand the complexity surrounding our situation. Though separated by class and circumstance, I too felt her loss. Little did I know I would soon also be an *emigrante*. I migrated to the U.S., as Miguel did, but in a different form and for different reasons. I entered the U.S. legally with a nonimmigrant visa escaping the violent turmoil caused by *La Guerra Contra el Narco* — the so-called Drug War, and in search of a better education than the one I could receive in Mexico. Ten years have passed, and today my understanding of the issue is broader and deeper. Nonetheless, as with any other Mexican immigrant, my country has never left my thoughts. A sense of national loyalty has grown in me as a form of *compromiso* — an individually held obligation — a commitment to make things better in Mexico.

When someone complains about undocumented workers, I remember Maria's son and think to myself, *the workers are not at fault. Perhaps Mexico, as a nation, should shoulder the blame.* We need a new *compromiso* so we can break apart from what previous generations have done for our country.

Throughout Mexico's history, we have had many episodes of failure and loss; some have caused deep wounds within our society from which we have not been able to recover fully.

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The Spanish conquest of the Aztec empire in 1521, *La Conquista*, marked the beginning of Mexicans' constant defeat. After 300 years of Spanish rule, through a long war of rebellion Mexico came into existence as an independent republic in 1821, a war inspired in part by the revolution of English colonies in North America.

Shortly after independence, Mexico faced another long political crisis. In 1848, through imperial warfare and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, (Griswold, del Castillo, PBS) the United States acquired more than half of Mexico's territory and about one percent of its population (Delano, 2011). Mexicans who lived in the territory that now belonged to the U.S. were given the option of moving south to Mexico or keeping their property and becoming nominal American citizens. Former *Mexicanos* became American "citizens," whose full rights in civil society would be a long time coming (Limón, 1998). Although this population did not actually migrate to the United States, they might be considered the first generation of Mexican immigrants in the country as a consequence of the new territorial division.

The American victory generated political and economic turmoil within the young Mexican nation, and the massive loss of territory had long-lasting dislocating effects. Mexico's destabilization and the economic expansion of the newly acquired U.S. territories made Mexico economically dependent on the United States and led to a continuous diaspora that has pushed millions to leave their homeland, for over a century now. Following its defeat by the U.S., Mexico experienced a "failed" revolutionary war, which established an oligarchic regime that benefited from the exploitation of the Mexican masses for over 70 years.

This legacy has imbued Mexicans with a sense of conformism and pessimism. As a society we have become pessimists, which has paralyzed our nation's progress. We have failed the voluntary exiles by allowing a governmental system that permits political parties to live off

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the public funds, allowed legislators to act in their own interests, and allowed unimaginable violence to occur in broad daylight.

This pessimism prevents Mexicans from taking ownership of Mexico. For too long, Mexico has been rented out to its citizens. It has belonged to its conquerors, to its religious leaders, to its liberals and conservatives, to its dictators, to its presidents, to its political parties, and to its elites. Mexico has never belonged to its citizens.

However, Mexico does not belong to its powerful men or corrupt politicians. It belongs to the people, to its ordinary citizens — now and always. In *The English Patient*, in a letter to Almásy, the English patient and protagonist of the novel, his lover Katherine writes, “We are the real countries, not the boundaries drawn on maps with the names of powerful men.”

Those of us who have lived outside of Mexico often walk nostalgic miles away from home. We know what it means to love a country so much that you feel a constant pull to go to save it from itself. Solutions are out there: the introduction of trial by jury, governmental accountability, a fight against monopolies, and rethinking the infamous “Drug War.”

There are many valuable things Mexico could copy from developed nations. They only need to be applied. There is so much to do. So many things to change. So many places where optimism can be dared: the optimism of will against the pessimism of conformism. Mexico has room for those of us who wish to embrace the new *compromiso* of making a change. Room for the optimism of those who know things are dreadful in Mexico, yet believe things can improve.

The majority of Mexicans who emigrate to the United States do so unwillingly. Even we who have the means to do so legally and join affluent communities — in Houston, San Diego, San Antonio, or Miami — are pushed elsewhere to search for better futures. It is not easy to leave behind the streets of our childhoods, first loves, family, innocence, and, of course, soccer.

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But, it is easy to understand why most make this difficult choice.

The geographical area that comprises Mexico and the U.S is cut in half by a fence. When you stand by it and look north, you will see the United States, a fully developed nation where the average household income is approximately \$50,075 a year. Most teenagers are in school and the majority of adults are high school graduates (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012).

Despite the current quarrels about how incompetent the U.S health care system is, the population is rather healthy, and Americans have a high life expectancy compared to global standards (United Nations, 2012). Citizens take government services, such as electricity, sewage systems, a vast road network, and a functioning criminal justice system for granted. The majority of people carry out their daily lives without fear of theft, kidnap, murder, or expropriation without just compensation.

U.S. citizens sometimes forget that their government, even with its inefficiency and occasional cases of corruption, is their most loyal ally. They can vote to replace their public officials if they do not fulfill their responsibilities without fear of being scammed in electoral fraud. Democracy is second nature to them.

Life across the fence, in Mexico, is absolutely different. Mexicans do not earn anywhere near as much as their northern neighbors. The average household income there is about a fifth of what their American counterparts make (Fox News Latino, 2011). Most adults do not finish basic education, many teenagers are not in school, and there are high rates of infant mortality (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012). Poor public health conditions mean that, unsurprisingly, Mexican citizens live far shorter lives. Infrastructure is decaying and the state of law and order in Mexico is in even worse condition. It disintegrates daily. In contrast to their northern neighbors, democracy is a new concept for Mexicans.

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In the year 2000, after more than 70 years, *La Dictadura Perfecta* ended. Mexico was finally able to free itself from the Institutional Revolutionary Party's (PRI) oppressive chains; however, only six years later, Mexico suffered another political crisis. This time electoral fraud (Weisbrot, 2012) snatched away democracy from the hands of Mexicans. The twelve years of National Action Party (PAN), consisted of bad governmental leadership, cases of extreme corruption, and yet another failed "war." The Drug War has cost the lives of over 130,000 Mexicans over the past six years (Mendez, 2012). Inevitably this circumstance made it possible for PRI to win the 2012 presidential election with ease, instilling fear in millions of going back to the old regime.

Talking to diverse immigrants about their experiences, lifestyles, and economic situations has given me a profound indignation regarding what is happening on the Mexican side of the border. What made these men and women so desperate to try to cross again and again even if they undergo painful, degrading, and often fatal experiences? How could the Mexican government and millions of Mexican citizens remain so passive and continue to see this process and its consequences as a "natural phenomenon," as a "rite of passage," as a "necessary evil?"

Not all Mexican nationals live through hardship before making their way into the U.S. Some of us arrive by other means without the necessity of walking through a desert for days or swimming through infectious water. In fact, those of us currently here are neither the first Mexican nationals to study abroad nor the first to develop a sense of *compromiso* to Mexico. However, previously, studying in the U.S. was something exclusively for *le crème de la crème* of Mexico's society. Only the sons of prominent politicians and businessmen went on to acquire graduate degrees at prestigious universities such as Harvard. These select few American-educated *Mexicanos* developed their own sense of *compromiso* to Mexico while studying abroad.

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Most returned to Mexico and touted to fellow Mexicans their expertise gained in the U.S., which brought them political power, wealth, and a sense of immunity. Just like the Chicago Boys in Chile they also attempted vast economic growth for the nation at the expense of the millions.

Despite not being the first American-educated *Mexicanos*, we have something in our favor that those who came before us did not. We are the first large generation of Mexicans to be educated abroad simultaneously; it gives our group economic and cultural diversity. We have walked different paths of life, which makes our new *compromiso* aware that change will not come solely from governmental reforms. Instead improvements will come from carrying out small actions that will produce large changes.

Currently, around 18,000 of us (CNN – Mexico) are granted student visas yearly. The U.S Department of State estimates the number of student visas will expand to one hundred thousand yearly by 2020 (CNN – Mexico). Meaning two things: first U.S. Latinos, most of whom are of Mexican descent, will continue changing American demographics culturally, politically, and economically over the following years. Second, year after year, more middle- and upper-class Mexican citizens will be exposed to countless opportunities a developed nation has to offer. While here in the U.S., many foreign students begin exploring the idea of remaining abroad. It is a seductive thought to stay here and integrate into American society and the American economy.

Particularly for Mexican students, it is much easier to turn a blind eye to the issues sabotaging our nation than to come home and face them. I myself began speculating what it would be like to simply stay here. Opportunities to remain abroad have been presented to me over the years, but I have always believed in leaving my education at Mexico's disposal as the

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best way to fulfill the obligation I have to better my nation. This speculation turned into an ethical question: What is my *compromiso* with Mexico's future?

It is making a new *compromiso* to enforce democracy by holding political parties accountable for breaking electoral laws, to modernize our rotten institutions by dismantling them and building new ones based upon those in successful nations, to practice philanthropy through the establishment of transparent non-profit organizations. Using my degree to help Mexico by engaging in public policy work to raise the overall quality of life in the country. All of us Mexican students in the U.S can use our different fields of study to do the same.

What responsibility do individuals have toward their country of origin after being exposed to experiences and opportunities that provide them with an advantage over their fellow citizens?

Currently, the U.S. is home to many Mexicans who possess the ability to make a difference; unfortunately, many do not wish to return. After much deliberation, it became clear to me that we have a strong ethical responsibility to our home nations. My *compromiso* is with Mexico, a nation that urgently needs to be governed by people who are conscious of their rights and willing to contribute in defending them. People ready to carry out small actions that produce large changes and prepared to sacrifice their personal gain by empowering others. Individuals who think that good is just as contagious as evil and are ready to prove it. People like Roberto Hernández and Layda Negrete, who upon completing their law degrees in UC Berkley returned to produce *Presunto Culpable* (Hernandez and Smith, 2008) a documentary that dramatically challenges the Mexican criminal justice system.

In a country where over half of the population lives in poverty (Rey Málle, 2013), being part of the middle class and educated abroad is indisputably a privilege. Privileged citizens have



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the ethical obligation of giving back to the country that has allowed them to be in such positions. What is experience, knowledge, and talent for, if it is not used to make Mexico a more just place? What point is there to socio-economic mobility if you must step on someone else's back to achieve it? What good is education if not used to help others obtain it? What is the purpose of being a citizen of a country if you do not assume the collective responsibility of making life more worthy within it?

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Recently, I had the opportunity of speaking with one of my father's friends, Julio, a *Diputado*, a member of the Mexican legislature. We held a profound conversation, one of those that takes place after dinner, over whisky and cigars. As the conversation progressed, I realized he was someone who had been touched by the collective pessimism that corrodes ideals and the sense of social justice.

After a while, as he shook the ashes off his cigar, Julio said, "You will never change anything. What makes you think for an instance that a single person can produce so much change within a country? You have to remember we are talking about a country with a society that has functioned, or malfunctioned, in such way for decades. You are dreaming of the impossible."

Somewhere in the middle of these illustrative points I left off listening and began thinking; *Am I dreaming of the impossible?*

It reminded me of a book I read years ago. "One can't believe impossible things." Alice tells the queen, in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*. "I dare you say you haven't had much practice," said the queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

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I confess I am guilty of this too. I believe in “impossible” things. I have envisioned a Mexico where democracy is more than just a theoretical concept, where people can roam the streets without violent disruptions; a place in which the most vulnerable are cared for by the establishment of non-governmental organizations to pursue, environmental preservation, human rights, and poverty alleviation; a Mexico that brings economic opportunity to all, and a time when our exodus comes to an end so we can finally claim ownership of our Nation. Believing is necessary for acting. It is necessary for achieving. If we stop dreaming we become small.

Ordinary people can, in fact, achieve enormous changes. American muckraker journalist, Ida Tarbell, who against the advice of many, including her father, confronted Standard Oil’s monopoly by leading a progressive journalism movement to dismantle it (Weinberg, 2008). Rosa Parks, who on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1955, refused to obey the bus driver’s order to give up her seat in the colored section to a white passenger, inaugurated the Civil Rights Movement. This small action was the beginning of massive changes, which yielded equality before the law to millions across the country (Ringgold, 1999). Political activist, Jody Williams, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997 for her campaign work toward banning and clearing anti-personnel landmines, began her work in 1992 with two non-governmental organizations and a staff of one. She oversaw her campaign’s growth to over 1,300 organizations in 95 countries (Williams, Goose, and Wareham, 2008). These are just a few examples of people of conscience who fought with their hearts against their struggles.

Those of us who have been introduced to fresh and new ideas abroad must prove our new *compromiso* by returning and moving Mexico forward, following the footsteps of those who have done so previously in their own communities. My new *compromiso* differs from the one made by former president Carlos Salinas de Gortari and the technocrats who also walked the

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halls of American universities. The new *compromiso* no longer seeks wealth, political power, and personal gain as the *compromiso* of previous generations did.

Instead, it must lead the country through a new “Progressive Era”, pushing for reforms to eradicate corruption, exposing and undercutting political machines and drug lords. In this new *compromiso* everyone has something to gain.

As long as there are individuals who are *comprometidos*, engaged, and preoccupied we will be able to achieve significant progress. These changes will not happen overnight, but the spirit of optimism will continue spreading. Agents of change will echo the aspirations of the people.

Mexican citizens have the civic obligation to live in permanent indignation. In order to build a better nation we must confront our exasperation and re-examine deeply rooted pessimism. Good governments and good countries are built upon good citizens. Good citizens are those who constantly criticize, demand, denounce, and propose.

It is necessary for us to lead a fight against the conformism of millions — a conformism rooted in mantras such as; “At least there’s social peace. At least extreme poverty has somewhat been reduced. At least during this term, they [public servants] only bought themselves Jeeps and not Hummers with public funds.” This *por lo menos* logic provides a safeguard for mediocrity and justifies it. It serves as an apology for the status quo that benefits a handful and harms so many. There is no reason why millions of Mexicans should tolerate this state of affairs.

While there are reasons to close our eyes, there are more reasons to keep them open. For every reason that we have lost faith in Mexico, there is another reason to recover it: Diego Rivera who never lost faith in a progressive Mexico, which he idealized in his murals; Jose Clemente Orozco whose paintings never stopped criticizing and denouncing the government; Carlos

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Fuentes, who, through his novels painted an accurate portrait of inequality and moral corruption in modern Mexico; Alfonso Cuarón, whose movies bring joy to millions who watch them; Alondra de la Parra, who makes the palace of *Bellas Artes* in Mexico City vibrate as she conducts the orchestra, or Lorena Ochoa, who exalts Mexico's name whenever she plays golf.

Sitting on a park bench watching monarch butterflies make their way into Michoacán every winter; the beauty of drinking tequila by the sunset over the beaches in Punta Mita, Acapulco, or Cozumel; the smell of bougainvilleas, gannets, or poinsettias along the roads that take us home. Each and every one of us abroad has a list of things that remind us of our Mexico, a list that serves as the motor for our wish to excel.

But, beyond these worldly figures, their accomplishments, and the natural beauty of Mexico, I reflect on all the others who also move Mexico— its ordinary citizens. Mexican men and women who wake up at dawn to cook breakfast, iron their clothes, and run behind the inefficient public transportation to reach a place where they can work and barely be paid for doing so. Men and women who hardly sleep at night because they carry such a heavy burden.

I want to ask each Mexican student abroad to pause and consider for a minute: What would you do if you had to provide for your family on approximately 300 dollars a month? What if it took you more than two hours and three different forms of public transport to come back home? How would you feel if you raised your voice and told your story over a hundred times yet silence still prevailed? If your mother, or sister, were raped near a police station? And after the crime had been reported, you were told she was probably asking for it and no crime had been committed. What if your wife became pregnant, then fired from her job, and you could no longer make ends meet? For the majority of our fellow citizens, these are not hypotheticals. These

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questions are not a “what if” scenario; they depict reality. These are events that occur daily and cause millions to flee our homeland.

It is easy to “forget” those hardships, once you have crossed the border. I know it, we all know it. We try to forget by ignoring it, by not even mentioning it. Yet, you never actually forget. There are constant reminders of the Inferno burning a few miles south.

The janitor cleaning restrooms whom you encounter in between classes, the gardener sweating under the great Texas heat as you make your way from building to building wearing a hoodie because the A/C is so powerful inside, the busboys cleaning tables across town. They all greet you in Spanish with a smile on their faces because no matter your social class, we are all *paisanos* here, searching for better lives. They are the living reminders that something is wrong. That something is rotten within our system and needs an urgent overhaul. It is to them, our fellow exiles, to whom we have a responsibility.

“I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo in J.R.R Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* “So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.” It is the moment to decide what do to with our time. It is time for us to stop lamenting our past and begin thinking about our future. We need to embrace a new *compromiso* before our country sinks further into the abyss. We have a civic duty that needs to be carried out so we can spare thousands of lives like Miguel’s and millions of tears like Maria’s. Maria taught me to walk, talk, and count from one through ten, but the most valuable thing she ever taught me, she did without even knowing.

The day I saw Maria cry, I knew something needed to be done. That moment has inspired me to pursue this new *compromiso* not just for Miguel and Maria, but, for every Mexican citizen

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in Mexico or in the U.S. We must all do this, because we do not deserve a nation from which we feel an urge to escape, but rather a nation to which we seek to return and help transform.

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