Organizing the Mexican Diaspora: Can it Strengthen North American Integration?

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In this seminar concerned with furthering the integration of North America especially with regard to immigration and security, the question posed by this paper is whether and to what extent an unusual tri-national organization (Consejo Consultivo del Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior- [CC-IME]) created by the Mexican government to serve its own foreign policy agenda of organizing its own diaspora in the United States and Canada can contribute to building institutions that can advance this integration process which appear to be most vitally needed for the three countries.

What Does Integration Mean? Integration for Whom?

"Furthering integration" means that the North American region composed of Canada, the United States and Mexico will continue to move to become more like the European Union with the free flow of capital, goods and people across national borders, with a common currency and executive, legislative and judicial governing institutions. The barriers to this process are many and substantial. The asymmetry among the three countries in size of population, age, wealth, military power and economic development are great. National identities remain primarily bound by the three nation-states and not towards the region as a whole. The events of 9/11 have caused the United States to militarize its borders, especially the US Mexico border, slowing the illegal flow of migrants from Mexico to the United States. Hostile attitudes and repressive laws directed towards Mexican migrants have increased in the United States and Canada as the recession caused by the 2008 financial crisis has taken its toll and as the Mexican diaspora has increasingly spread from the Southwest to all parts of the United States and Canada. Other barriers to "further integration" with the North from the Mexican point of view include the fear by Mexico that it will be overwhelmed and colonialized once again by the United States and Canada and that "further integration" with the North will jeopardize its integration with its southern neighbors.

In this hostile environment, "furthering integration" may realistically at most mean 1) protecting Mexican migrants in the United States and Canada; 2) helping to integrate Mexican migrants into the societies, polities and economies of the United States and Canada, including access to education, health care and citizenship and encouraging political and civic participation; 3) building and strengthening cross-border economic, social and political relationships and networks wherever possible; 4) building the capacity to lobby in all three countries; 5) educating and building awareness among the peoples of all three countries about the countries of the region.

Methodology

The information for this presentation is derived from nine years of research using political science and anthropological methodologies such as participant observation, participatory research, open ended interviews with CC-IME advisors in all three cohorts and with IME staff, attendance and participation at meetings as well as access to internal documents and decision-making. One of us, Laura Gonzalez, was an elected member of the first cohort. She has attended meetings of all three cohorts. Jane Bayes has attended meetings of the third cohort. We use both the emic and the etic points of view. We have engaged in conversations with CC-IME advisors and staff in a multitude of venues, in official meetings, and interviews, but also in their homes, over meals, on buses and at receptions.

Mexico's Efforts at Organizing its Diaspora

In the 1980s, many groups concerned with issues of integration were in existence in the United States including the Mutualistas, el Congreso Mexicanista, the GI Forum, the Alianza Hispano-Americano, La Liga Protectora Latina, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) as well as hometown associations or Clubes de Oriundos. From the end of the Bracero Program in 1964, the attitude of the Mexican government towards Mexican emigrants in the United States was largely one of avoidance. This changed in the 1990s as the increased flows of emigrants and remittances across the US/Mexico border, along with a recognition that Mexican politics was taking place in the United States as well as in Mexico, caused the Mexican government to respond to demands for help and

recognition from relatively well established and wealthy Mexican migrant groups in the United States. Some Mexican states with large numbers of migrants like Guanajuato and Zacatecas recognized the importance of immigrant remittances and established programs like "Dos por Uno" that double every dollar that a migrant sends back home with state, local and sometimes federal money to be used in a local Mexican project. Another impetus was the recognition by Mexico that its exponentially growing diaspora in the United States is a potential economic and perhaps political resource for Mexico if political alliances and ties are maintained. In the early 1990s, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) strengthened and expanded Mexican consular offices in the United States and created the *Programa para las Comunidades Mexicanas en el Exterior* (PCME) within the Ministry of Foreign Relations (SRE). PCME is a forerunner of the Consejo Consultivo del Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior (CC-IME).

PCME worked directly with consulates and hometown associations to encourage Mexican migrants to maintain their ties with their Mexican communities of origin and initiated a variety of programs directed at K-12 education, sports, health, culture, business, and tourism, activities that continue to be central to CC-IME today.

Perhaps the most interesting and novel idea pursued by the Mexican government in the 1990s to retain the allegiance and support of the Mexican diaspora during this period was to create a dual nationality status for migrants. The Nationality Act of 1998 distinguished between nationality and citizenship and allowed Mexican-born citizens to keep their status as Mexican nationals when they became the citizen of another country, such as the United States. It stated that a Mexican born citizen who chose to become a citizen of another country would lose his/her political rights but could maintain her/his Mexican nationality thereby having dual nationality. Mexican nationality carried with it the rights to certain social benefits and the right to own property in Mexico. Furthermore, it was another way to retain the ties of Mexican migrants to Mexico. Not only could Mexican born citizens retain their Mexican nationality when they became citizens of another country, but their foreign born children could be Mexican nationals as well (Verhovek, 1998).

The Creation of the Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior (IME) and the Consejo Consultivo del Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior (CC-IME)

The election of Vicente Fox in 2000 brought a dramatic change in Mexican state policy towards its emigrants. The first evidence of this new approach began when Fox created the Oficina Presidencial para Mexicanos en el Extranjero (OPME). This office provided emigrants and their descendants with privileged access to the President and encouraged them to participate in the transformation of Mexico, albeit in very neo-liberal ways. The priority issues for the OPME were remittances, the promotion of business centers, the distribution of Mexican products in the United States and the encouragement of investment, especially in regions with large numbers of emigrants (IME *Reporte* 2004,7). In 2003, President Fox created a new structure and a new policy. This bureaucratic reorganization combined the PCME of the 1990s with the OPME of 2000 to create a new governmental hierarchy. This was the birth of the Consejo Consultivo del Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior or CC-IME.

The composition of the Consejo Consultivo del Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior

The CC-IME is a remarkable and unique transnational organization of community leaders of Mexican origin or descent, organized by the IME in the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores or Ministry of Foreign Relations and charged with providing the Mexican government with advice and suggestions concerning Mexico's policies towards its diaspora. In the United States, the 46 (now 55) Mexican Consulates in the United States and Canada were charged with forming an elected body of around 120 advisors from the diaspora in North America to compose the CC-IME. Drawing on their lists of contacts in the Mexican and Mexican American communities in the United States, the Mexican consulates solicited nominations and self-nominations to be on the CC-IME. The positions on the CC-IME were proportioned according to the relative size of the diasporic population in the area. (Los Angeles had 11 spots. Dallas had 4, for example). In each consulate's jurisdiction, candidates were elected (or sometimes appointed) by those who attended the meetings held by the consulates. The advisors created six commissions on distinct issues: political, legal, health, education,

culture, and the border. In addition, twelve major Mexican American organizations were asked to send representatives. This process identified well known community leaders from all parts of the United States active in a variety of different fields to come together to advise the Mexican government. To be eligible for election, a candidate had to be of Mexican origin or Mexican descent and speak Spanish fluently. The stated purpose of this council was to advise the Mexican government about the needs of Mexicans living abroad. The IME, in turn, was to solicit and listen to advice from the CC-IME, to make policies, coordinate Mexican governmental agencies charged with emigrant affairs and implement the policies once decisions had been made. The IME had the support of President Fox in that Fox gave a radio address to Mexicans living abroad every week and gave this effort priority with regard to funding and attention. Members of the CC-IME were elected for three year terms and were invited to travel with all expenses paid twice a year to Mexico or other places in the United States to advise Mexican governmental officials. Not only did the advisors meet with their commissions on the national level, but they also had state or regional meetings where they met all the leaders in their own states or region and learned about the work and issues that the other commissions were addressing.

What are some of the organizational consequences of CC-IME?

The activities of CC-IME and its predecessors, PCME, and OPME, have kept the Mexican government in contact with its diaspora, but they have also served to stimulate the independent organization of the Mexican diaspora in the United States and Canada. By having advisors chosen (often elected) locally, the 300 plus advisors of all three cohorts since 2003 all are leaders in their local communities with specific interests, institutional affiliations and experience in dealing with migrant problems. They are all connected together by a common CC-IME experience, developed friendships and a readily available list of email addresses. For three years, IME brings these migrant leaders together from all parts of the United States and Canada at least two times a year (two times in Mexico, two times in the US or Canada) to discuss issues and problems and possible solutions. They network with one another, communicate constantly by email and telephone, strategize and inform one another about migrant issues in all parts of the United States and Canada. From

the beginning, tensions have existed with regard to their exact role *vis a vis* the Mexican government. Many advisors assume an independent agency with regard to rules, agenda setting and procedures while the Mexican government officials that fund, staff and organize the meetings perceive advisors to be advisors and not decision-makers (Gonzalez 2010).

The bulk of the work that CC-IME advisors perform takes place within the context of the substantive and regional Commissions. The Mexican state through IME, its consulates and CC-IME establishes the framework and support for these activities but the initiative and the accomplishments of these Commissions are the product of CC-IME advisors. Some of the commissions are focused more on events and activities in Mexico (the Business and Development and the Political Commissions). Others sponsor activities directed primarily at diasporian communities in the United States (the Health, Education, Legal, Border, Media and Regional Commissions). For some of the advisors, the exposure to the deliberative processes and decision-making that takes place in the commissions is extremely educational. Those who are primarily oriented towards the United States learn much about issue areas and conditions in Mexico as well as other parts of the United States and Canada. They not only learn how to contribute to CC-IME's commission policy work, but they gain skills and contacts that they take back with them to their own communities. In this sense, CC-IME is an organization that is building institutional infrastructure among the diaspora in the United States and Canada, an infrastructure that is not necessarily identifiable as one cohesive disciplined and unified organization but one which recruits leaders and potential leaders from the diverse communities that the Mexican diaspora represents in the United States and Canada, gives them opportunities to develop knowledge, skills, contacts and ways to "make a difference" while serving for three years as an advisor. They are then in a position to return to their own communities to continue to organize them in ways that are appropriate to the locality (See Bayes and Gonzalez 2010).

Organizational Structures and the Role of CC-IME

Within the United States and Canada are myriads of community non-governmental organizations that are committed to working for immigrant rights and/or migrant welfare. For example, the website for one umbrella group, Reform

Immigration 4 America, lists 816 groups as affiliates in 44 states – including Puerto Rico. Most are in California (132), New York (55), Washington DC (50), Florida (47), Illinois (45), and Texas (42) are in the next tier; North Carolina (39 and Pennsylvania(32) and New Jersey (31) are next; Colorado (27, Georgia (26), Massachusetts (24), Michigan (24) , Arizona (21) Maryland (20). These are not all immigrant organizations, but they are all organizations concerned about immigrant affairs and immigrant welfare (Reform Immigration for America website). Many CC-IME advisors are members of groups such as these as well as a variety of groups related to their own occupations and interests in the United States. Many also participate in groups or organizations related to their Mexican state or place of origin. CC-IME advisors because of their extensive local and national connections are often able to facilitate, expand and leverage existing programs. The Health Initiative of the Americas is a prime example of this kind of integrative process. Some CC-IME advisors start new initiatives using their own groups or organizations. Examples of these are AMADA 2007-2009, the Mexican American Coalition founded in 2009 and the Red de Mujeres founded in 2011.

The Health Initiative of the Americas: Leveraging Existing Programs

The Health Initiative of the Americas is associated with the School of Public Health at the University of California, Berkeley. A member of the first cohort of CC-IME 2003-2005 is employed by UC Berkeley and was able to bring together the Berkeley School of Public Health with local, state and national government agencies, community based organizations and volunteers to enhance and expand three health programs that had begun under the Programa para las Comunidades Mexicanas en el Exterior (PCME). One of these is the Bi-national Health Week. A second is the Ventanas de Salud which provides a place in the Mexican consulates for immigrants to go to get health advice. A third is the Binational Policy Forum which holds an annual conference of representatives from federal, state and community organizations to examine and promote immigrant health issues as a policy priority in the United States, Mexico, Canada and South and Central American countries (see hia.berkeley.edu). Using the resources of the University of California, local foundations and Mexican consulates, these programs were enhanced and expanded first

locally in California and then, CC-IME advisors from other parts of the United States and Canada and other Mexican consulates served as "godfathers" and "godmothers" to institute the programs throughout all three nations (Castañeda. 2012; Health Initiative for the Americas website).

American Mexican Anti-discrimination Alliance (AMADA) – Initiating a New Organization

The AMADA is a very interesting example of CC-IME members using their own initiative, resources and connections to create a new organization separate from the Mexican government. Founded in 2008, the organization grew out of discussions in the CC-IME Media Commission as a means of preventing hate, defamation, xenophobia, bigotry and discrimination against individuals of Mexican ancestry. Although the organization lasted only two years due to lack of funds, one of its important activities involved a two days training session of its members sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, the Jewish Anti-Defamation League, the Mexican Embassy and IME. One of AMADA's members was able to arrange this training which involved learning how to lobby in Washington and how to mobilize as an interest group in United States politics. All of this was paid for by the American Jewish Federation (González 2012).

The Mexican American Coalition (MXA C)- A Communications Network

This organization was created formally in 2009 by a group of CC-IME advisors from all three cohorts who were concerned about informing, organizing and advocating to advance the interest of the Mexican American community such as building support for immigration reform, monitoring respect for migrant rights and promoting the economic and social contributions of migrants in the United States. It was also intended to be an outlet to express the opinions of the Mexican American leaders and to serve as a tool to educate the community. Another goal was to unify the diverse voices of the Mexican diaspora in the United States and Canada. A major first task was to help launch the Reform Immigration for America Campaign (RIFA) in Washington DC in June 2010. Some of the actions involved in this effort included the organization of "house parties" to connect hundreds of Mexican leaders into an informative

session to learn about the immigration reform bill introduced in Congress by Congressman Luis Gutiérrez (D - IL). During the most active months around the possible introduction of the immigration reform bill, the Mexican American Coalition was responsible for the translation into English and Spanish of dozens of press release documents, informative flyers, letters and public service announcements. This was the beginning of the MX-Coalition which drew on the institutional resources and community organizing knowledge of groups like the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (ICIRR) and the technical and administrative skills of one of CC-IME's younger members to organize a major immigration reform march in Washington DC in March of 2010. The electronic network that resulted from this effort includes all the members of the three CC-IME cohorts from around the country, plus a host of Spanish newspapers, radio stations, immigration organizations and other community leaders which continues to function creating a loose organization or network of 634 well placed and well-connected leaders that can be used for a multitude of issues. This organization was incorporated in Florida in 2010 and continues to function with 14 national representatives from different regions in the United States and Canada who meet either in person or on line as needed. Certain members specialize in particular topics depending on the information they receive. All members post news from the press in their respective regions. One member sends everything related to Immigration Reform for America. Several send news, information and reports gleaned from the White House, think tanks, universities, hometown associations, new books and other government networks, news from Mexico from senators working on the Mexican immigration law, political action alerts, lobbying efforts, legal information, notices of webinars, workshops and other training that can help immigrants. A volunteer group of seven CC-IME members manage the flow of information on this electronic network (Colin 2012).

Red de Mujers Migrantes: A Nacent Mexican Government Encouraged Initiative

After several meetings of CC-IME advisors with members of the Instituto de la Mujer in Mexico, in 2010 at a CC-IME meeting in Mexico City, IME's staff suggested that CC-IME members form a women's network. A group of 21 women met and formed a Red de Mujers Migrantes, elected officers and made

some plans for communication and a future meeting. The IME and the SRE are willing to host a space on the website, Redes Mexico. Meetings are planned for the coming year. The purpose of this group is to improve the well-being of migrant women and their families. This includes working on issues such as: domestic violence, self-esteem, staying in school, scholarships, college opportunities, internships, birth control, HIV, bank accounts, financial information, health, mammograms, cancer, diabetes, mental health, nutrition, how to read the labels of food products, legal issues, immigration law, criminal justice.

The Importance of Institutionalization for Furthering Integration

A major problem that most of the organizational efforts started by CC-IME advisors face is the problem of sustained funding and continuity in leadership. One of the reasons that the Health Initiative of the Americas programs have been so successful is that they have been linked with existing institutions in the US and Canada as well as with the Mexican consulates. The Health Initiative in the Americas project has been successful largely because of its ties with the University of California, Berkeley and because of the support it receives from the Mexican consulates. The Mexican American Coalition was most successful when it was linked with the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights. AMADA was most effective when it joined with the American Jewish Committee and other organizations. These are situations where CC-IME advisors with their contacts have acted as bridges or catalysts to further leverage existing programs or create new ones. Where this sort of linking together of existing institutions with CC-IME initiatives does not exist, the CC-IME initiatives tend to be short-lived.

What kinds of institutions are needed to further integrate North America?

The question of whether Mexico, the United States and Canada should increase the cooperative relationship they began by signing the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 is anything but settled. In 2005, US President George Bush, Mexican President Vicente Fox and Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin met in Texas where they agreed to create a Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP) among the three countries. While this partnership established in

2006 was not at the level of a treaty, the three countries did agree to work on a ministerial level to try to implement smart border security measures, to develop a common approach to emergencies and disasters including health epidemics, to make improvements in aviation and maritime security, to promote sectoral collaboration in energy, transportation, financial services, technology, and other areas to facilitate business and reduce the costs of trade(Joint Statement 2006). In addition, the SPP created "working groups" in each country, with a mandate of overseeing "harmonization," or "integration," in over 300 policy areas. The SPP created a North American Competitiveness Council composed of top corporate executives of global firms to provide advice. A major priority in 2008 concerned harmonizing regulatory policies among the three countries (Government of Canada 2009). Perhaps because the tone of these integrative activities was neo-liberal in nature seeking to reduce regulations, and promote free trade rather than addressing other problems such as the environment or labor, the SPP did not last beyond 2008 when Barack Obama came into the presidency.

What the SPP experience demonstrates when compared to that of CC-IME as an tri-national institution is that the activities of CC-IME, while extremely novel and innovative with regard to having a governmental ministry organize its diaspora to engage in community organizing, cannot compare to the power of having all three governments employing a variety of ministries in the integration enterprise from the top down to address a host of issues. Yet, the political obstacles to top down integration are so great at this point and so likely to lead to further painful economic dislocations, the CC-IME model of grassroots democratic tri-lateral involvement may represent the most positive kind of North American integration possible.

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