

Workers: Intercultural Conflict and Mass Media

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Many initiatives in the world, including the United Nations Global Compact, propose a series of principles so that companies worldwide may respect human rights. The role of workers should be carefully observed in companies, not just as part of the production process, but also as a strategic element to interact with a social group, to foster awareness of environmental issues and help understand the cultural values of others. In the best sense, the situation of workers is a human global challenge. We present the problems of local workers in transnational companies, and migrant workers. Taking the United States-Mexico border as a particular case, we describe some intercultural problems and, finally there is a reference to the role of mass media in the social construction of images that, regrettably, sometimes are more related to economic and political interests than with a social research, in the representation of migrants.

key words: Ethics, migration, labor, intercultural relations, corporate social responsibility

1. Ethics and workers: the principles of respect and responsibility

Ethics, as a branch of Philosophy, needs a constant review to be adapted and applied by human beings in a modern society. That is also the case with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) principles that, in general terms, consider that the expectations of the members of a corporation have to harmonize with those of the society and the environment in which they work. In order to achieve this, corporations have adopted formal policies, and after some initiatives in diverse international organizations, the United Nations Global Compact came to be considered “the largest corporate citizenship and sustain-

ability initiative in the world”¹⁾. Its ten principles are based on previous universal declarations and conventions, and most of them are related to human and labor rights. That is, workers are supposed to be considered as a key point in the relationship between corporations and society.

2. Global markets . . . global workers?

Globalization is always controversial. This great scale economic, technological, social and cultural process that created interdependence among different countries of the world, brings some advantages with the opening of markets, particularly to the transnational companies. However, the Global Compact considers issues that have emerged from the critics of globalization: the violation of human rights (especially considering societies’ and workers’) and degradation of environmental resources.

The concept of globalization is associated with the benefits of capitalism, economic liberalization, and technological progress; nevertheless, in the opinion of some critics, all these factors are applied in accordance with the interests of the most powerful. The supposed advances, such as in technology, are sometimes also a threat to the environment and the biological foundations of life itself²⁾. We see the same countries promoting free trade, imposing duties for certain products, according to their interests. And it is a paradox that the supporters of the free flow of capital and technology do not recognize another essential value in the production chain: the workers. The question posed by some researchers is: Why does the workforce not flow with the same freedom?³⁾.

3. Workers in the middle of the cultural conflict

Culture and communication are natural, inseparable processes. Some scholars say that communicative acts and culture itself imply a sense of control. According to our cultural context, conscious or un-

consciously, we seek to influence others.

Associated with this control, we see intercultural conflict and what is called cultural imperialism and dependence⁴⁾. Technology is a very important factor in the cultural domination, being, as Ernest Junger commented: “the real metaphysics of the 20th century”⁵⁾.

Intercultural relations associated with globalization have many critics. Human sciences like anthropology have exposed many voices on the defense of multiculturalism, as the right to identify multiple, ethnic, particular, not unified or global cultures.

Some cultural relative points of view lead us to think that we may conciliate both visions. Neither denying the influence of big companies, technology and mass media, together with the concepts of globalization, on the sectors that seem to be purer in their cultural tradition; nor obliterating the domestic knowledge, the identity, the life styles and values of these communities.

Under this perspective, workers of international companies are in the middle of an intense intercultural experience, being part of this global economic process and, at the same time, having their own cultural context that cannot be ignored, surrendered or changed radically. They are a key to approach “the other”, the environment, the cultural values and the society.

In the following, we consider the cases of the local workers who join transnational companies and, on the other hand, the great problem of migrant workers that are inserted into another geographical space and another culture.

4. Borders: between economy, history and culture

To refer to this intercultural experience where workers are fundamental, we will examine the case of the border between the United States of American and Mexico.

The extension of the border is around 3,300 kilometers⁶⁾. It is the only border between the so called developed and undeveloped worlds,

and the most frequently crossed international border (legally or illegally) on the planet⁷⁾.

Considering the notion of cultural imperialism mentioned before, there is evident control of the economic power over some life styles and ways of thinking. On the other hand, the developing country also has its mark in the culture: traditional music, food, festivals, customs and even the names of many places (cities as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Monterey, Santa Fe, San Antonio, etc.) that are closer to the Mexican and Hispanic tradition, than to the American patterns. There are some historical particularities that explain this cultural interaction. Up to the 19th century, Texas and great part of the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming and Utah were part of the Mexican territory. After the War of Intervention, with the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, in 1848, Mexico yielded more than the half of its territory, and 100,000 Mexicans, with their cultural roots, became American citizens.

In general terms, it is a space of interaction of different ideas, languages, religions and life styles, that is to say, of permanent intercultural meetings, though for 10 million persons who live in the frontier area, daily life has generated a permanent pattern of biculturalism or multiculturalism.

In essence, a great part of the border population is in a state of constant movement, with the same persons playing different functions in one and another side of the border (they reside in Mexico and are employed at the United States; they reside in the United States but they have family in Mexico; they reside in Mexico but they do shopping in the United States; they reside in the United States but travel in and eat Mexican food). This hybrid life is common in the border.

The dynamics of the border are complex and sometimes very distant to the perspectives of the central governments of both countries, when they negotiate migratory agreements, and far also for the negative images depicted by some mass media and in artistic expressions

like cinema, that repeatedly confront a theoretical developed side with a completely archaic undeveloped world on the other.

5. Workers in the border: life in the margins

Regardless of the negative image, the Mexican part of this border has been an important pole of attraction for foreign investment in recent decades. Mainly after the 90s, economic globalization attracted many investors to the free trade zones (FTZ), where they established *maquiladoras* or factory plants. This came with a worldwide phenomenon of the relocation of productive transnational activities. Capitals of rich countries have looked to the Mexican border, some Central American countries, as well as Southeast Asian countries, to establish factories of confectionary, accessories, machinery, electrical devices, furniture, automobile parts, chemical products, food, footwear, toys, etc.

For example, at the end of the 20th century it was estimated that 70 per cent of the television sets produced in the world were made by Mexican hands, in factory plants of Tijuana⁸⁾.

The aim of the investors is to reduce costs of production, to be located near the big markets and to get major profits. Mexico has offered an environment of labor flexibility, exemption of taxes and duties on imported goods and on exported products, repatriation of benefits without restriction, fiscal exemptions, subsidy of infrastructure, among other benefits.

On the other hand, it is supposed that the country has grown in the generation of employment, currency and technology. Certainly, it is calculated that a fourth part of the industrial workforce is employed at 4,079 plants established in the territory, mainly on the border. At the beginning, almost 80% of this labor force was female, hired legally or illegally at ages of 12, 14 or 16. In 1998, it was estimated that from the total number of workers in the *maquiladoras*, 60% were women, earning wages from between 20 to 50 dollars a week⁹⁾.

One of the major attractions for investor is to get a high performance workforce at a low cost. In 1988, an average worker in Mexico was earning 1.51 dollars for an hour of work; in the United States it was 17.2 dollars; in Taiwan 5.82. In Japan this figure was 23.66 dollars; 7.40 in Korea and 31.33 in Germany¹⁰⁾.

Besides these points of vulnerability for the workers, there are other serious factors: the companies have not fulfilled the obligation to return the toxic waste to the place of origin and, also, protection measures have been absent for the workers. In the Mexican case, it has been reported that most of the children who were born with physical malformations during the 90s, are children of employees of factory plants exposed to toxic substances, during their labor shifts¹¹⁾.

In similar conditions, observing banana or coffee companies installed in the Equatorial zone that exploit child labor at very low cost, or with the seamstress that hardly get 27 cents for making brand name shirts that are sold for 34 dollars in international markets, many wonder where is the social responsibility of the corporations in these cases?

6. Migrant worker and employer: Who is illegal? Who is immoral?

There are about 214 million international migrants worldwide, according to global organizations¹²⁾. The great majority of them have migrated looking for work.

Mexico has become the major source of migrants in the world. According to the World Bank, from 2000 to 2005, 2 million people went out from Mexico to look for work in the United States¹³⁾.

In the year 2005 it was calculated that there were 35.6 million immigrants (12.4 per cent of the total population) in the United States. A third of these were Latin-Americans, and among these, more than 70 per cent were Mexicans¹⁴⁾.

As with the border, migration can also be referred to from our par-

ticular historical circumstances. In 1848, as we saw, the border was mobilized and hundreds of thousands of Mexicans became migrants, even in their own land. Later, in the 20th century, world wars mobilized an important number of workers inside the American territory. To keep agricultural production in the south, Mexican workers were hired. From 1922 to 1964, the so called “Programa Bracero” (Laborer Program) employed more than 4 million Mexicans in a legal way (and many more illegally). In most recent decades, new laws have been approved in the United States that restrict the migration and limit the rights and services for the foreign residents.

Probably one of the most controversial actions for the control of migration in the United States in the last years, together with the reinforcement of the Border Patrol, is the construction of a Border Fence of 1,123 kilometers that many compare to the Wall of China, with clear differences regarding its cultural, historical and political meanings.

The government of Mexico, on the other side, has promised to generate better economic conditions and employments to avoid the workers’ massive exit from the country.

Nevertheless, the geographical circumstance locates Mexico as a bridge for the movement of migrants of Central and South America, as well as other countries in the world. The crossing of the Mexican territory and of the border, by illegal means is dangerous. There are abuses, and physically adverse situations. About 5,000 people have died in the last decade in this attempt to cross over.

Regardless of this, the number of migrants continues growing. The policies of the governments have been neither accurate nor honest: the problem is not the migrants, but the recognition of the existence of a real international labor market that both parts contribute to keep growing in an unfair, illegal and immoral way.

The U.S. Latino population tends to work hard at low cost in agriculture. According to the U.S. government this is the most danger-

ous work: it has to be done in any weather, handling pesticides and chemicals. Migrants suffer from depression and stress, away from their families, their language and cultural values. The cultural shock is strong. Added to this are social problems: lack of access to health and education services, discrimination and social rejection as a consequence of the stereotypical representation of migrants as illegal and criminal people.

As compensation, migrant workers send economic remittances that contribute to their families and the economy of their countries. The remittances sent by Mexicans overseas, every year, are worth about 20,000 million dollars¹⁵⁾. It is the second major income for the nation. In other countries, like Guatemala and El Salvador, remittances represent the most important national revenue.

In this way, the economy of the recipient country, as well as that of the origin of the migrant workers, benefit from this scheme. Paradoxically, what the hands of the migrant workers produce, often illegally, is sometimes inserted into the big markets. Agricultural products, for example, go on to big restaurants or international food companies sheltered by the umbrella of globalization and legal frameworks. There is a demand for workers that, though in unsuitable conditions, are getting paid inserted into productive sectors of the United States. The ethical problem here leads us to ask: who is acting in an illegal or immoral way, in these cases?

7. Migrations in the world: images in the mass media

The world has been nomadic during the majority of its history. With agriculture, some 10,000 years ago, we began to be sedentary. Conflict, natural conditions and ambitions of people for a better life have helped moved masses of people. From the 16th to the 19th century Europeans migrated and colonized America. The same happened in other continents. They were going for the Promised Land. From the same lands, in the 20th century many people have gone in search

of the American dream, the European dream and also what is now called the Japanese dream.

In Japan, thousands of people migrated to American lands at the beginning of the 20th century. Lately the *dekasegi* movement had the return of their descendants, in search of better living conditions. Many relatives of Japanese migrants that went to Brazil and Peru, are those who experience this return process and took the chance to carry out the 3K jobs (*kitanai*, *kitsui*, *kiken*: dirty, demeaning, dangerous) that Japanese workers did not want to accept any more.

Migrating is a natural and legal act, and a right described in the article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Many sectors, nevertheless, denigrate migrants.

The problem of underestimation of the workforce, by some companies and some governments, affects also their social circuit.

Sometimes, even the society they belong to tends to reject them. On one hand the cultural shock comes with incomprehension of their roots or identity, without accepting the assimilation of others. In another sense, the distorted idea that migration means illegality has spread throughout the world, sadly motivated by the mass media, a factor that — as we mentioned before — has a great influence in the globalization process.

Studies of images of migrants in the mass media in different countries coincide with the common misrepresentation of them as enemies, aliens or unwanted human beings. This is not an exclusive problem of the United States and Mexico border. It is a complex and present problem in many parts of the world.

A report of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCDE) notes that in the 21st century, countries like the United States, Spain and Korea have received a major number of migrants¹⁶⁾. In the case of Spain, some authors have studied the phenomenon of the migration and conclude that, unfortunately, the mass media have had a great responsibility in the reproduction of stereo-

types, dictated by some elites, to simplify the image of the migrants as illegal and delinquent¹⁷⁾.

8. Conclusion: in ethical matters, which is the border?

There are plenty of examples of mass media around the world referring to migrants as a big social problem. It seems more attractive to present them as the worst part in dramatic events, than to research for deeper explanations of the social meanings they bring to global society.

Although there are different positive views, sometimes they are not so globally known or considered in discussions about this matter. According to the Division of Population of the United Nations, 1.6 million immigrants are necessary in order to support the European Union levels of well-being. A study conducted by the financial group *La Caixa*, in Spain, recognized that many times migrant workers were more productive than nationals, and contributed to the growing of the country in 3.6% during the decade from 1995 to 2005. United Nations also estimates that, in the year 2030, the most important factor of progress will be the increase of productive population (migrants)¹⁸⁾.

In Japan, one of the most important economies of the world, it is estimated that for the year 2050 it would be necessary to increase the current population by about 30 per cent, and migrant workers may be the solution¹⁹⁾.

There must be different ways to think, to see and act in this respect. Incidentally, in Japan, there is an original artistic representation regarding the problems of migration created by the artist Yukinori Yanagi in his performance titled: *The World Flag Ant Farm* (1990–1991)²⁰⁾. In his work, he has intended to demonstrate that the migratory phenomenon is led principally by workers, and that these workers are altering the pure identities of the countries, even in opposition to the most conservative thinking across the world. He has presented a work with several flags of the world made with colored sand into

plastic boxes, connected by small tubes. He places some ants into each box, and they just make their own way to move along the boxes. After some time, we may see the flags of the countries blurred by the tireless pass of the ants.

As in this example, ethical principles may not have barriers for natural human processes so it is time for some companies to incorporate a real human vision into their actions and principles.

Notes

- 1) United Nations, Global Compact. At: <http://www.unglobalcompact.org/Languages/spanish/index.html> (Consulted September 20, 2010).
- 2) José Humberto Duque Z., “Interculturalidad y responsabilidad universal: ética planetaria, cuidado de la vida, bioética, desarrollo sostenible”, in: *Aspectos de la realidad del mundo actual e incidencia en nuestra vida cotidiana y misión educativa*, Capítulo General Compañía de María. At: http://www.companiademaria.net/es/redlaical/capitulo/doc_1_2.pdf. (Consulted: October 1st., 2010).
- 3) José Antonio Alonso, “Emigración y desarrollo: implicaciones económicas”, in: José Antonio Alonso (ed.), *Emigración, pobreza y desarrollo*, Catarata, Madrid, 2004, p. 16.
- 4) Michael H. Prosser, *The Cultural Dialogue, An Introduction to Intercultural Communication*, Stetar International, Washington, DC, 1985, pp. 8–9.
- 5) Cited by Jacques Ellul in: *The Technological Society*, Vintage Books, Alfred A. Knopf and Random House, New York, 1964, p. ix.
- 6) According to the International Boundary and Water Comission (Comisión Internacional del Límites y Aguas entre México y Estados Unidos): 3,326 kilometers.
- 7) Even though there are not precise official figures, some researchers estimate that there are about 250 millions of crosses every year. During an official visit to the White House, former Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo counted more than 300 millions every year. Washington, DC., October 11, 2005. At: <http://zedillo.presidencia.gob.mx/pages/disc/oct95/09oct95.html>. (Consulted: September 20, 2010).
- 8) Information from Federico Campbell, cited by Néstor García Canclini,

- “La globalización y la interculturalidad narradas por los antropólogos”. At: <http://www.crim.unam.mx/cultura/2003/ponencias-2/Wpon3.html>. (Consulted: September 29th, 2010).
- 9) Information from Dan La Botz, “Women and Children -Labor Base of Mexican, North American Economy”, in: *Mexican Labor News & Analysis*, Vol. 4, No. 4, March, 1999. At: <http://www.ueinternational.org/vol4no4.html>. (Consulted: September 20, 2010). Also from: “El fenómeno maquilador en México y Honduras”, Confederación Mundial del Trabajo, March, 2000, cited by Eduardo Tamayo G., “¿La precariedad es la única opción? Globalización y maquilas”; in ALAI (Agencia Latinoamericana de Información), *América Latina en Movimiento*, November 14, 2000. At: <http://alainet.org/active/1075&lang=es>. (Consulted: September 29, 2010).
- 10) Tamayo G. art.cit.
- 11) Idem.
- 12) United Nations, “Globalization and Interdependence”, statement by Hania Zlotnik, Director, Population Division, to the General Assembly, International Migration and Development, New York, October 27, 2010.
- 13) World Bank, “Indicadores del desarrollo mundial”, report cited in: *La Jornada*, Mexico, April 16, 2007.
- 14) Information published by EFE News Service, October 31st, 2006.
- 15) Distribution of remittances sent from USA in 2005, according to the Inter-American Development Bank.
- 16) International Migration Outlook, System of Permanent Observation of Migration (SOPEMI), 2008 Edition.
- 17) Miquel Rodrigo Alsina, “El periodismo ante el reto de la inmigración”, in Manuel Lario Bastida (coord.), *Medios de comunicación e inmigración*, Editorial Convivir sin Racismo-Programa CAM, Murcia, 2006, pp. 37–57.
- 18) Eduardo Stanley, “Los inmigrantes hacen crecer la economía”, New America Media, *La Insignia*, September 18, 2006. At: http://www.lainsignia.org/2006/septiembre/soc_002.htm (Consulted: September 29, 2010).
- 19) Information from United Nations Population Division, cited by José Vidal-Beneyto, in: “Migraciones y progreso”, *El País*, España, August 1st, 2008.
- 20) See details in Yukinori Yanagi’s virtual studio, at: www.yanagistudio.net

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