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FROM ALIENS TO NEIGHBORS: THE INCORPORATION OF LATINO FAMILIES INTO THE RURAL MIDWEST

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A. Latinos' Historical Presence in Rural America:

Latinos have been part of rural America for more than four centuries. They have been ranchers and farmers. They built the nation's railroads, worked in mines, and have founded some of the country's oldest municipalities such as Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Tucson, Arizona. Their labor has been fundamental to the prosperity of American agriculture and to the abundance of affordable food we put in our tables daily (Garcia et al 2000). Yet, self-serving racial, ethnic and citizenship hierarchies imposed by dominant groups have constantly conspired to reduce the Latino (often meaning "Mexican") presence to marginalized social and economic spaces. Narratives about rural America, whether in history books or popular magazines, typically begin and end with the arrival and settlement of Germans, Russians, and other European-origin populations while the contributions of Latinos remain invisible too often. Academic researchers and pollsters contribute to this invisibility when their methodologies fail to capture significant numbers as well as meaningful responses from culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

When members of the dominant culture acknowledge the increased Latino presence in rural and agricultural spaces, there is a strong tendency to portray this population as impermanent, shifty, transient, migrant or "illegal" (from field-notes, various years). Even pre-existing Latino settlers undergo a process of redefinition that either blends their ethnic heritage away into a melting pot of strong Anglo-Saxon hues and flavors, or into an equally homogenized newcomer population as "they are part of the same people after all."

Seldom, are we able to visualize Latinos, especially newcomers, as bona-fide new "neighbors," active community participants in the making, or rightful claimants of an equal voice and seat at every table. "Community" is often defined as "us," while "them" is what the community has to "cope with." These deeply ingrained perceptions can be highly determining of the mode of incorporation new waves of Latino immigrants will experience as they make their way into the country's heartland. To a large extent, those perceptions will determine whether the newly arrived immigrant population and, most importantly, the second generation will experience socio-economic mobility and contribute to their communities' progress or whether they will experience downward assimilation and opt out of community integration altogether. Institutionalized prejudices can interact with other factors such as poor working

conditions, low wages, and exclusionary local and federal government policies to reproduce pre-existing ethnic hierarchies and solidify conflictive socio-cultural dynamics that are detrimental to all. In this article I explore some of the forces that conspire to prevent a positive integration of Latinos in local communities and perpetuate their invisibility. I conclude by highlighting a few initiatives that may keep rural communities from sliding down the slippery slope of social segmentation and economic stagnation. First, let me outline some of the changes and challenges posed by the economic restructuring and changing demographics of rural communities in Nebraska and similar states.

B. Demographic Changes, Economic Revitalization, and Culture Clashes:

The Nebraska Example

The Latinos presence in Nebraska dates back to the beginning of the last century when Mexicans and Mexican-American workers were recruited to work on the railroad, the sugar beet industry and, to a much lesser extent, meatpacking plants. Immigrant-dependent employers looked to Mexican labor as immigration restrictions barring Asians and Europeans from coming into the U.S. and the economic mobility of previous generations of Europeans depleted their labor force (Grajeda 1976). Today, new and larger waves of Latino populations of diverse nationalities, while still overwhelmingly Mexican in origin, have made their way to rural communities in the Great Plains. Not unlike their U.S. counterparts, many of these Latino newcomers have been displaced from agricultural and rural communities in their home countries. Once again, their labor is in high demand here in the heartland. This time, Latinos are actively sought by large meatpacking plants which have been wooed, welcomed, or simply tolerated by agricultural states and rural communities eager to halt their economic decline.

With the release of every population estimate and projection by the U.S. census we are reminded of the precarious condition faced by rural counties in this and neighboring states. In Nebraska, only three counties (all non-rural) experienced in-migration during the last decade and 83 out of 93 counties lost population. Analysts concur that “international migration” and higher fertility rates among newcomers have prevented key Midwestern states and rural communities from registering net or significant losses in population and labor force (Gouveia and Saenz forthcoming). The latest census estimates reveal that Nebraska’s Latino population experienced a 108 percent increase in less than ten years while the non-Hispanic White population increased by a mere two percent during the same time period. Localities where meatpacking plants are located experienced some of the highest population gains. Stories appearing in local newspapers or government publications about the revitalization of non-metropolitan counties tend to highlight the presence of value-added industries as major contributors to this process. Yet, we all know that only human labor creates value and the largest proportion of the labor that is adding value to Nebraska’s agroindustrial sector speaks Spanish and originates south of the border.

The arrival of Latinos during the past decade to states like Nebraska has been massive, rapid and, when compared to previous eras of high immigration, palpable. As the core of rural economies shifts from agriculture to industry, Latino workers arriving today move to the heart of town rather than to migrant workers’ barracks hidden deep inside the beet fields. The arrival of large numbers of newcomers in these rural towns, whether of domestic or national origin, is likely to be viewed with varying degrees of mistrust by pre-existing residents. Oldtimers often perceive all in-migrants as posing a potential threat to their economic and socio-cultural standing and privileges. When the two

populations vary in socio-demographic and cultural factors such as age, education, language, ethnicity and per capita income, the potential for distrust, prejudice and xenophobia¹ increase significantly.

Yet, in rural communities of the Great Plains, it is the presence, or potential presence, of meatpacking plants that has served to draw new battle lines among community groups. Behind these new alignments, however, there are sure to lie deeper cultural and class cleavages which fuel anti-immigrant and anti-Latino sentiments along with opposition to the industry itself. It is not always possible, for example, to discern whether particular forms of community activism are born out of bigotry or legitimate opposition to the industry's corporate practices. Below, I explore further how these differences between oldtimers and newcomers evolve as both groups become entangled in a web of historical prejudices and powerful forces of change.

C. Constructing Differences while coping with change:

1) The ghosts from the past:

The construction of differences begins long before culturally diverse populations encounter each other in today's rural localities. Historically-shared stereotypes about "Mexicans" are called upon from faded memories of previous encounters as well as more recent and distorted media images as soon as the rumor spreads that a new plant is opening in town. The worst of demonizing images lump Latinos into a homogenous mass of "knife wielding, unruly, overly-fertile, law-violating and economically irresponsible" individuals. Mexican and other Latino-origin workers and their families are summarily condemned, by a smaller or larger segment of the community, to a subordinate class of culturally inferior populations. All of this occurs well before newly arrived workers have a chance to introduce themselves as primarily rural folks most of whom come looking for a safe place to raise their families. While more reasonable voices may prevail in the public sphere, the relentless background noise coming from muffled voices of exclusion continues to shape the interaction of Latinos and non-Latinos. The often intangible and even ephemeral character of this force makes it difficult to measure it, let alone confront it.

2) Economic Restructuring and the Meatpacking Industry's Corporate Practices.

In the aftermath of rural crises and the profound restructuring of their economies, older rural residents are experiencing a deep sense of anxiety over their future.² For agricultural and rural communities, where large meatpacking plants are located, economic restructuring has virtually meant their rapid conversion from agro-rural spaces to satellite hubs for large food transnationals. Perhaps no other factor is contributing more to social segmentation and mistrust than this increased dependency on globalized and immigrant-dependent firms that have elusive ties to local communities as well as questionable environmental records. Well-known profit-maximizing strategies based on increased global mobility, vertical integration, and devalued wages and employment standards are sure to generate resentment and a deep sense of anxiety among community members and small producers (Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.n.d., Clayton and Dejka 2000). Recent news about the proposed purchase of IBP by a major New York investment group has, predictably, refueled these fears in communities such as Lexington, where another globalized industry had left town a decade ago. Again, the concern is raised about their over-reliance on foot-loose industries—and by implication, foot-loose workers (Knapple Olson and Epstein 2000).

From the point of view of Latino immigrant workers, employment in meatpacking is a mixed blessing. The abundance of jobs in this sector provides immigrants with an opportunity to work and, when combined with other family earnings from various economic activities, to accumulate enough savings to purchase a home or invest in a small business (Gonzalez 2000). However, for the majority of workers, who have a high number of dependents and who must rely solely on meatpacking employment, economic mobility and, therefore, long-term settlement and family integration is an elusive goal. Line speeds in excess of what any of us would consider an acceptable pace of work, continue to increase and account for the industry's record-setting injury rates. Higher-than-average employee turnover rates are fueled by these chain-speeds and, combined with low wage and poor benefit structures, so is general population turnover and poverty.

Old and forgotten prejudices are rekindled among those who feel most threatened by what appears as an inverted version of the much-lauded "new economy." A term commonly associated with high-tech labor as well as decentralized and environmentally friendly firms. The difficulty community groups face when attempting to make sense of such a complex set of forces and distant agents impinging upon their future leads them to adopt highly simplistic explanations for their befallen fate. Ideological rhetoric is, by definition, impervious to evidence showing, for example, that the quandary these communities find themselves in today has very little to do with the arrival of new immigrants. Immigrant workers did not contribute to the rural and farm crises that precipitated a search for a new economic base; and they did not participate in the decisions that led powerful community leaders and state-level politicians to recruit meatpacking plants. For sure, immigrants have not contributed to a fast-aging rural population or to birthrates that fall well below replenishment levels which in turn have undermined these communities tax base, and eroded their labor force. And, while Latino immigrants' presence in meatpacking may be contributing to native populations' growing distaste for meatpacking jobs, it was the strategic decisions made by corporate managers to devalue wages and working conditions that originally fed this distaste. To be fair, a significant number of oldtimers recognize these facts. More confident than their opponents in their communities' abilities to adapt to change, they view immigrants as an economic and cultural asset and packers, at the very worst, as something of a necessary and hopefully temporary evil.

3) Strategies of Resistance as Policies of Exclusion: A dangerous boomerang

I have argued that the presence of large packers in these small towns has served to reinforce social and cultural cleavages, not only between natives and immigrants, but among natives as well. Fractures also tend to appear between the younger and older generations of Latino settlers. Sensing yet another cultural backlash, older generations of Latinos resent being "dragged down" into the mix of groups whose ethnic and racial markers (whether it is color, language, or surname) makes them prime targets for discriminatory treatment. Eager to defend the social and economic gains achieved despite great odds, Latino oldtimers occasionally succumb to defensive strategies based on ethnic distancing and exclusion. Alignments begin to appear along the largely arbitrary distinctions between "immigrants and non-immigrants." Fearful of losing their perennially questioned status as "true Americans," Latino oldtimers may, for example, add their voices to popular but baseless outcries about how "these people don't want to learn our language" (Reist 1999).

Concerns over what all these changes will mean for the cultural compromises achieved in the past are no doubt legitimate. There is also no denying that integration of newcomers into local societies entails substantial adjustments, not just on the part of immigrants but on the part of the native population as well. Moreover, there is no question that, in an era of political devolution and corporate power over social agendas and distribution policies, communities receiving large numbers of new immigrants bear a large share of the costs associated with sudden population growth and the unique needs of a young, immigrant population. It is important to point out at this point, however, that estimates of costs to communities have so far failed to take into account the high percentage of those costs that are likely to be absorbed by Latino immigrant families themselves (Fix and Zimmermann 2000; Gouveia 1999).

Even more important is the fact that, however legitimate community concerns may be, strategies of resistance targeting new immigrant and ethnic populations are sorely misguided. They are bound to generate self-destructive, long-term, community-wide socio-economic outcomes. Like a sinister boomerang, they will return to strike repeated blows at the entire community for years to come. A few policy areas illustrate this well.

a) English-Only.

Ordinances making English the official language of particular localities such as Marshalltown, Iowa, spring from “moral panics” among selected segments of older residents who are prone to accept the myth that immigrants refuse to learn English and thus are “not becoming American.” Research continuously contradicts this myth that immigrants are not learning English.³ The ordinances also are legally unenforceable as they violate numerous federal guidelines against discrimination. Yet, their psychological impact on oldtimers and newcomers is no less damaging. These policies of exclusion serve only to congeal differences among population groups and thus promote ethnocentric and xenophobic attitudes (Omaha World Herald 2000). They are a community’s worst long-term investment as the possibility of combining precious talents, including increasingly valuable bilingual skills, and to fortify common efforts toward community progress are dashed. The more predictable return is perennial and corrosive intra-community conflict.

b) Welfare Legislation.

Policies of exclusion have also gained acceptance at the federal level. One prominent example is the overhaul of the welfare system which increasingly discriminates between citizens and non-citizens. Excluding new Latino immigrants from critical safety nets during the early and costly stages of their arrival, combined with the fact that Latino immigrants are over-represented in low-wage jobs, can prove to be highly detrimental to the successful integration of Latino families into their local communities. Like English-Only ordinances, federal policies designed to bar a specific population group from benefits afforded to all others send powerful messages to the general population about who should be included among those that are deserving or non-deserving of equal treatment. It is no wonder then, that one of the major consequences of new welfare policy

guidelines has been to discourage parents with citizen children from requesting health and other services to which they are entitled (Fix and Zimmermann 2000).

c) Immigration Policy and The Militarization of the Interior Borders.

Perhaps no other policy area is more susceptible to recurrent swells of nativist fears than immigration. A recent example is the highly restrictive 1996 immigration law that eliminated due process rights granted to immigrants in previous legislation. Most relevant to rural areas is the so-called "Interior Enforcement Policy" (IEP), based on interpretations of the 1996 law. IEP's far-reaching impact on local communities cannot be overstated.⁴ Its main objective is to "create a seamless web of enforcement extending from the border, and beyond, to the worksite. Thus INS now seeks to invade, via the deployment of new and larger armies of special agents, every public and private space where undocumented immigrants may be suspected to exist, from the highways to private homes and places of work. The tactical decisions behind this approach are consonant with an end of the cold war tendency for increased militarization of our domestic borders.

Nebraska became the test case for IEP's new approach to workforce enforcement. INS designed a program appropriately given a military term "Operation Vanguard." Initially called "Operation Prime Beef," this program is aimed solely at meatpacking plants where a high percentage of new Latino arrivals work. Meatpacking plants' labor force often averages anywhere between 74 percent and 90 percent Latinos. After cross-referencing all employment records with Social Security data and other databases, the INS issued a list of packers and the number of their employees with "discrepancies" in their documents. Later it marched into the plants seeking to interview the workers flagged by the computer, many of whom proved to be legal residents and U.S. citizens. Regardless of how it was conceived in theory, in practice the action left little doubt in the public's mind that Latinos were the "illegals" the INS was after.

Fears about the increased presence of immigrants in local communities, conveyed largely via local law enforcement and congressional representatives⁵, led to the predictable call for increased surveillance and removal of large numbers of this population. At the end, this expensive operation yielded only 33 arrests.

The real impact of Vanguard has been more subtle, less tangible, and much more long term than the absence of apprehended immigrants from meatpacking plants is likely to be. This impact has to do with strengthening the ongoing process of criminalizing the entire immigrant population. It starts with labeling immigrants as a problem and ends with indiscriminate removal or similar exclusionary actions (Ong Hing 1999). INS and local law enforcement representatives alike, contributed to this process when repeatedly misrepresenting and overstating the relationship between immigrants and crime, and appealing to community outrage about the costs of immigration. One INS official, for example, noted how "in small meatpacking communities with large numbers of undocumented workers, crime is up, as are demands for public services, bilingual education and other programs. Communities are crying for a 'get tough attitude' on undocumented workers" (Ruggles 1998).

How Vanguard was supposed to address “the problem” of bilingual education or increased demand for public services is not clear. It also did not seem to matter to local law enforcement officers who gave numerous media interviews to support Vanguard that data on legal status of apprehended law violators is not systematically recorded by their offices. Therefore, they really have no way of knowing if the people who simply appear to look “foreign” to them are citizens, residents or undocumented (Gouveia field notes, June 2000). In addition, data gathered by these same local offices have shown that crime has actually tended to decrease in meatpacking communities during recent years. Most importantly, when those making a claim about the link between undocumented immigrants and crime are pressed for evidence, they readily admit that it is not legal status but age, which constitutes the main predictor of criminal behavior (Thompson. 1999).

As opposition against Vanguard mounted, enthusiasm for continuing the operation has continued to wane among INS officials at various levels, and the program is at a virtual standstill. A recent report by the Governor’s Task-Force, representing a broad coalition of community advocates, industry representatives, researchers and legal analysts, was highly critical of Vanguard and practically sealed the fate of the operation, at least in its current form (INS Task Force 2000, Reed 2000)

However, the death of Vanguard has gone hand in hand with the concentration of resources on another component of INS’ Interior Enforcement Policy, the deployment of agents to locations relatively deep in the heartland. Their role is to support local law enforcement agents in their own fight against undocumented and “criminal aliens.” These “Quick Response Teams’ (QRTs), as they are called, have contributed to state patrols’ increase in the number of arrests made during traffic stops and have assisted other law enforcement agencies during neighborhood searches that have yielded a number of undocumented immigrants. The most problematic aspect of this particular component of the IEP is its imperviousness to public scrutiny and the absence of adequate safeguards for the civil and human rights of immigrants and minorities in general. Given the geographical dispersion and isolation of this enforcement action often far beyond the public’s scrutiny, the possibilities for violations of civil rights are numerous.

The routinization of surveillance and policing activities in the heart of our communities, whereby Latino immigrants are viewed as the prime target, has the effect of hollowing out the system of democratic rights we all value. In combination with all the other factors described above this can, over time, produce cumulative effects that make it all but impossible to achieve cultural compromises and the integration of new immigrants into rural communities.

D. The Road back to Community Integration: The search for Common Ground

Latinos are here to stay. Research consistently shows that entrenched poverty and social inequality become major obstacles to economic development and the advancement of civil society in our communities. Thus, actions that contribute or inhibit the enfranchisement of Latino populations can “fuel or impede the nation’s future prosperity” (National Council of La Raza 2000). Or, as a friend likes to say, these can be the “best of times or the worst of times.”

Thus, establishing common ground must be the first step toward community integration. Behind constructed differences, Latino and non-Latino populations share some common interests and experiences that remain

to be explored. To mention a few, newcomers, like old rural settlers in the Midwest, tend to come from agricultural communities with strong rural values which both are eager to preserve. They both have experienced, or have been close to events, such as being forced to leave their land, the contamination of their environment, and difficulties finding a market or decent price for their crops. Thus, newcomers are natural allies in the struggle to save the small family farms and design sustainable economic development policies. Neither group benefits from low-wage and unstable employment structures which prevail in these communities. Both would like to see their reliance on industries such as meatpacking decrease in importance.

To transform common interests into common strategies for economic development and civic participation, it is important to actively engage newcomers in community planning meetings and other key decision-making bodies. Together, oldtimers and newcomers must forge a common vision and engineer the future of their communities. United, they must support those policies and best practices that benefit the community as a whole rather than those aimed at elevating one group at the cost of the other—which in resource-scarce rural communities usually means everyone goes down. The following are a few examples of actions both groups ought to pursue as a united bloc:

1. Demand more responsibility from employers to offer better wages and safer working conditions as well as improved training and benefits for workers, especially health insurance.
2. Demand government support for improved educational opportunities, protection against discrimination in work and communities, the right of workers to organize, equitable distribution of state resources and the establishment and enforcement of environmental standards.
3. Incorporate the array of talents and skills into new rural development initiatives that go under-utilized under industrial-based models and their penchant for deskilling. Latinos bring with them talents and skills that can enhance the development of small businesses, tourist enterprises, and sustainable agro-food models of local development.
4. Support policies of inclusion rather than exclusion. This ranges from support for immigrants' rights to permanent residence, to the right to learn English while protecting native languages and cultures.



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¹ Sociologists generally define prejudice as negative attitudes held toward individuals belonging to a particular race or ethnic group simply because he or she is a member of that group. Xenophobia refers to similar attitudes aimed at foreign-born or immigrant communities.

² See various years of the Nebraska Rural Poll conducted by the University of Nebraska, Lincoln

³ Learning English takes time and it is a costly endeavor. Unfortunately, most Americans, who are third generation and above, have very little understanding of this process as they exhibit extremely high rates of monolingualism. Certain conditions and incentives must be present in order for individuals to be able and willing to invest in this second-language acquisition. Latino families work longer hours than any other population group, and they do so in jobs that offer few opportunities or even rewards for learning English. Additionally, Latino immigrants today are better equipped, than earlier waves of non-English speaking European immigrants, to resist dominant groups' definition of assimilation as a process equivalent with total obliteration of ethnic identity and native languages. Nonetheless, for many immigrant families, efforts to preserve native languages is a losing battle. Research on language loss demonstrates this begins to occur with the so-called "1.5 generation," (individuals who arrived in the U.S. before the age of 10), shows (Portes and Rumbaut 1999).

⁴ A more elaborate discussion of this policy, Operation Vanguard, and the context of resistance to globalist trends in which they occur will appear on an article titled "From the Border to the Interior: INS and Meatpackers in Pursuit of Latino Workers." (In preparation with Arunas Juska).

⁵ My conclusion is based on numerous conversations with law enforcement agents and congressional representative staff as well as newspaper stories on the subject.