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Immigrant Life on the Margins: Descent into Disappointment

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More often than not, the brooms migrants imagined using to sweep up dollars turn into the brooms that they toil with in the rest rooms of restaurants or kitchens of the middle class. Reality swiftly eclipses their visions. Even those who had been well-informed by their relatives about life in the United States still did not anticipate how they would have to realign both their expectations and their strategies after arrival. During their early days and months, migrants' eyes are opened. They learn that the rules of life are different in the United States from what they were at home. As innocents and greenhorns, they often learn these lessons through victimization. But once having paid their dues, they also learn to play the new games to their advantage. Among the lessons migrants learn in the days following their arrival, three play crucial roles in realigning expectations with reality: (1) learning how difficult it is to produce and safeguard surplus income, (2) understanding that the drive to produce a surplus commodifies most relationships, and (3) realizing that opportunities for producing that surplus lie primarily within one's community and not outside it. To tap these opportunities, migrants must recognize and utilize their community's resources for their own benefit. Intracommunity strategies become the immigrant's primary avenue to socioeconomic mobility because they are largely excluded from mainstream America, its economy and opportunities. They live segregated from the mainstream by structural forces beyond their control, forces that limit their opportunities for success. Most stagnate within this restricted sphere but some advance, learning to exploit resources found mainly within their immigrant communities.

From Subsistence to Surplus

The majority of my interviewees arrived in the United States mired in debt from their trips but with great expectations of returning home in a few years with a nest egg—several thousand dollars—in their pockets. Yet nearly everyone told me that within days of arrival they wished they had never come and wanted to go home. Most felt like Don José, who was ready to leave the United States after only a month. Their debts, their pride, and the burden of providing for their families keep them from turning back. In their first months, they

swallow their disillusionment and despair because they face the daunting task ahead of finding ways to meet their obligations. In order to understand these people's despair, one must comprehend the magnitude and complexity of immigrants' financial obligations relative to their capacity to generate income. Second, it is critical to recognize that the immigrants underestimated the difficulty of meeting their obligations owing to a simple miscalculation and to the fact that most would not listen to seasoned immigrants who sent home bleak information about prospects in the United States. The miscalculation involves estimating earnings in U.S. dollars but failing to account for the costs of living in the United States.

The first task immigrants face following arrival is to find employment and to work as long and as hard as they possibly can. Work becomes life's fulcrum in the United States, qualitatively different from its function in migrant's home countries. Gilberto had known long days as a peasant in El Salvador, but he found that work there was much different from work in the United States. "There you're not obligated to work," he said. "You work out of *cariño* [love]. Sometimes you work hard but you work with more cariño because it's your own. Yes, I mean you work with more *voluntad* [willingness]. Because you work for yourself, you are happy with the work you're going to do. But here, no." "Why do you work here?" I asked him, and he responded, "Because if you don't work you won't have a place to stay, even though you don't live comfortably anyway. Sometimes you don't even earn enough to pay the rent."

When Gilberto says he feels "obligated" to work in the United States whereas at home he willingly went off to work, he articulates the dilemma facing all of my informants. Though they earn salaries that classify them among the working poor (typically four to seven dollars per hour), their incomes must stretch much further than mere survival. They are obligated to produce a surplus from their meager salaries in order to (1) repay their travel loans, INS bonds, and any other debts they incur as they start their lives in the United States, (2) remit monies homeward to sustain their families left behind and finance investments there, and (3) save a nest egg to return home with. Additionally, immigrants hope to have some savings on hand in case of an emergency or the loss of their job. Undocumented immigrants qualify for no government public cash assistance, and in only a few states do they even qualify for Medicaid to pay for emergency medical treatment. They have little if any institutional safety net (the church, soup kitchens, and a few other charities are the only sources of aid I have found) to fall back upon if they cannot meet their own needs, let alone meet the needs of their dependents and creditors.

It is difficult to convey how pressures build on immigrants, driving them to assume the nonstop work lives that they are famous for. Cándido's early experiences are illustrative. He crossed the Mexican-U.S. border in the back of a pickup truck that was detected by immigration officials who gave chase. The driver stopped the vehicle and ordered his human cargo to jump out; there was screaming and shooting as people ran for their lives into the surrounding desert. As the migrants ran, the INS officers shouted at them to stop or they would be shot, but Cándido kept running. "Me, I didn't even turn around to look at him," he said. "I said to myself, 'I owe all this money and how am I ever going to pay it off if they deport me, if they catch me?' So, I ran by myself into an area covered with vegetation and I escaped. But the rest were captured and put in the *corralón*."

Even when the pressures to repay their travel debt become less acute, their void is filled by responsibilities to families at home. When Tina was languishing in the detention center, for instance, she was beset by guilt for not being able to send money back to her family. Her sister was caring for Tina's young son and would send her letters begging for

help: "Things are worse now than when you left. Just to buy milk is so expensive. If you don't send me money how will I be able to buy a tin of milk" Her sister thought that she was working; Tina had not had the heart to tell her the bad news that she had fallen into the hands of the INS. But she had no job and no income except a few dollars that she received from friends who had been released. She would send off five or ten dollars to her sister, who responded by writing, "Little sister. I am thankful for what you send me." And this partial fulfillment of her obligations eased Tina's anguish.

"You Spend What You Earn"

Immigrants communicated their pressures primarily through their actions, through their workaholic lives, not through words. The workaholism is a product of their need to generate more wealth than that required for their own sustenance. It is also the product of U.S. economic realities—the realities of a postindustrial economy that produces more minimally paid than well-paid jobs. As such, people face the task of stretching their meager salaries past self-sustenance—which many native workers cannot achieve at these wage levels—and achieving a surplus to cover debts and family obligations. For many this alone is not disillusioning, since they faced dire economic challenges in their homelands, albeit just to sustain their families. What causes them to despair so immediately upon arrival is the jolt they receive in realizing that *"lo que se gana se gasta"* (you earn [in dollars] and you spend [in dollars]).

Virtually none of my informants, however highly educated, avoided misestimating to some degree the facility of generating surplus income. The miscalculation works this way: A would-be migrant hears he can earn five dollars per hour in the United States. He then translates this five-dollar-an-hour salary into its worth back home where a worker earns five dollars a day. He also subconsciously estimates that his cost of living in the United States will be similar to that at home. Relying on these calculations, a migrant can reasonably assume that he will achieve his goal of a nest egg in a few years. Alfredo's experience illustrates this type of planning, characteristic of what migration scholars label "target earners."

Alfredo, a schoolteacher with a university education in Peru, heard through his friends Berta and Manuel that he could earn $6 per hour on Long Island. "When they told me, 'We're earning $6 per hour. Imagine. Here we generally work twelve hours, fourteen hours, and $6 per hour.' 'Six dollars per hour,' I would say, 'in eight hours that's $48. I will make this in eight hours. I will make more than $60, $70, $80 per day. I'll work seven days a week; I don't care about Sunday, holidays, or anything like that. I will be making at least $400 or $500 per week. After a few weeks, I will have $2,000 or $2,500.'" This estimate, because it does not measure expenses in the host country's terms, dooms the new immigrant to disillusionment upon arrival. Immigrants often refer to this new realization with the saying "You spend what you earn." Migrants from urban, educated backgrounds like Alfredo's are deceived roughly as often as peasants. I found that peasants were quite savvy about avoiding migration to cities in their home countries because they understood that this would make them completely dependent on a wage economy with little hope of betterment and with no subsistence agriculture to fall back on. However, they were not necessarily able to apply the same analysis when contemplating the economics of migrating to the United States. "I thought that housing was going to be cheaper and that finding work wasn't going to be so hard," Jesús, a Salvadoran peasant and a key informant, told me when I asked him what he had expected. "But no, here it's papers, permits, and so on. And you find a little bit of work in landscaping but it's only for six

months and you have to save up some money to wait until the summer comes [so you can work again]." He too miscalculated the economics and found himself shocked and dismayed by the reality.

The exigencies of earning dollars descend swiftly on newly arrived migrants as they learn the true cost of living in the United States. The stress increases as they also learn that their income must stretch further than subsistence and cover expenses that they did not incur in their homelands and often did not anticipate incurring. Suddenly, as Tina—the spunky woman from Nicaragua—explained to me, you realize that "here you earn in dollars and you buy things in dollars. You have to spend a lot here. Rent is a serious matter here. . . . You can't be without work. Not anyone will tell you to take what you need for yourself; it's easier to find someone who won't tell you that. If you don't work you don't eat. If you're sick or not sick you always have to work. If you get sick it's really hard. It's expensive to have a child here. It's fifty dollars for a [medical] visit, the least would be forty dollars. And if work is slow or if you don't earn enough then you have to find a way to survive. Just for my daughter's care I have to take fifty dollars out of my pocket. Rent is fixed and you have to buy food. When I look around there's always something I need." Tina finds rent payments most irksome because she never paid rent in Nicaragua and she never imagined it would consume a third or more of her income.

When migrants learn that "you spend what you earn," they must face the task of reestimating the time they will need to stay to meet their obligations and, perhaps, their goals. Already feeling dehumanized after their journeys, many migrants are driven to new depths of despair by this realization. Like Don José, they feel deceived and depressed, desirous of returning home. But they cannot return because this would be humiliating (they would be seen as failures at home) and, more important, because they are heavily in debt. It is the fear of humiliation, the burden of their travel debt, and their responsibility to family left behind that figure most prominently among the conditions driving them to stay. Once they make it through the first critical months of adjustments, they are likely to become permanent, albeit undocumented and unintentional, settlers.

"People Change Here"

When I asked individuals about their first impressions of how their lives in the United States differed from their lives at home, I frequently received the response "People change here. They don't act like people do in my country. Here, they're more competitive, egotistical." They offer several reasons for this change, one they confront almost immediately upon arrival. Travelers arrive in the United States exhausted, expecting to find rejuvenation in the sight of familiar faces and a sense of home in friends' and relatives' embraces. Frequently they encounter cold shoulders and individualism instead. They find that the mutuality of immigrant life is shared deprivation more than shared provisioning. When Altagracia was reunited with her family in "Gold Coast," she anticipated hungrily the warmth of her religious, evangelical relatives. In El Salvador, they had often requested assistance from her and now she felt certain she could count on their generosity in return. "'Now it is my turn to receive,'" she told me she was thinking when she saw them. "'Now that I need them they are going to support me.'" But this is not what happened—just the opposite. Altagracia was told by her relatives to leave. "'You have to go elsewhere because, you know, you've got to find work. Food and housing are expensive,' they would say to me bit by bit. I got to see the real world as it is. . . . 'Who' I thought, 'could help me?' They didn't help me. Instead, I got help from people whom I had never even known. I received many favors from them.

The law of recompensation exists because although those whom I helped didn't come and help me, there were other people who had such faith in me—so much faith that I was very happy. But this made me think: Why would these people feel so sure of me if they don't even know who I am? . . . I realized that these were good people and I had arrived at the feeling that now there were not good people left. But these people gave me a lot. I, personally, had lost my belief in people, in all people."

Altagracia's experience illustrates both the fiction and the fact of social relations. Much to her surprise, her relatives did not fulfill her expectations for proper treatment of guests or for kinship obligations to reciprocate past favors. She is deeply disillusioned with them, but she is heartened by other unnamed individuals who did come to her aid. Altagracia's story demonstrates that cooperation and mutual assistance *do* occur, but they occur outside home country norms and cannot be assumed.

Regardless of whether they received help in the first, impressionable stage of their lives in the United States, many individuals recall this epoch as formative of their bitter views toward compatriots here. They encounter what they term "egoism" in relatives and neighbors that would have been unimaginable back home. Sister Maria and Roberto Morán employ similar language to contrast the concern and cooperation characteristic of peasant lives in El Salvador with the social disregard and individualism they witness in the United States. "Here things are not like over there," Maria explained. "Over there you eat even if it's only beans with bread. Here you don't. Here whoever has [money] eats and whoever doesn't, can't. You don't know about any groups who will help you or anything. You don't know anything. It's worse living here. Because here everyone lives for himself."

I then asked her why she thinks this happens here and not in El Salvador, and she responded, "Because over there if you don't have anything then you go next door and say, 'Señora So-and-so, don't you have some beans you could give me so I can eat them with tortillas?' But here no. They tell you to go work. This happens even within the same family. I've seen it. They don't help each other because they all work and have their own money and if they give you something they expect you to pay for it. . . . My cousin told me one day, '[Maria], we are not going to be able to help you any more because I had better have some [money] left over for me.' She couldn't [help me anymore] because the expenses were very high and only her husband worked. So she told me, 'Find a way to make your own life.'" Roberto responded to my question about differences between people's behavior in El Salvador and in the United States by voicing an ultimatum. "Here if you don't have work you can't survive. You don't have [money] to pay the rent, to eat. You could die of hunger. Over there, no. If I don't work one week it's the same. I have food to eat. And I don't pay to live. And even without money I am okay but I can't live like that here."

Roberto is a diminutive man in his mid-twenties who worked as a peasant with a rural cooperative sponsored by the Catholic Church in the La Paz Department of El Salvador. He joined their efforts out of his own desire to alleviate human suffering but was forced to flee the country when his organization was targeted as subversive by the government. He describes this action as class repression by the elites against the peasantry; but he has a more difficult time comprehending how it can be that people of his own social class have stopped supporting each other just because they now live in the United States.

Don José has spent much time analyzing the genesis of this apparent change of heart. When he himself arrived in the United States, he could not find a job and became a burden on his brother. Though not rejected by his brother, he felt humiliated by his new status

since in El Salvador he had always served as a generous father figure to his siblings. "I don't want to be a burden on anyone," he insisted. "There were eleven of us children in my family and I helped every one of them. . . . I was like a father to [my brother] before. I can't tell you all the things I have done for him; I was just like his father. . . . But [in California] when others were paying rent and food for me I felt bad with each day that came and went. I got sick two times from being without work and thinking that they were supporting me. That's horrible. In El Salvador I know that because people are self-supporting—their own house, their own things, and so on—[then they can help each other out and that's] magnificent! But here everything is money; everything has to be bought. . . . I didn't feel well at all, at all. I felt humiliated, *apenado*. So I said it was better for me to leave and I did."

Unlike some other informants, Don José blames immigrants' retreat from reciprocity on their induction into an economy where everything must be paid for with money. He feels that this is not a change in their temperament, but a change in their own material conditions. A peasant who produced most of his family's needs and who enjoyed few luxuries requiring payment in hard currency, he argues, was freer to help out neighbors in times of need. But monetary demands are different in the United States—particularly the ever-pressing necessity of paying rent, which averages $300 per month for Salvadorans and $425 for South Americans, according to my survey. People react to this reality by scaling back on assistance to others even though they wish to help. During a long conversation, Don José emphatically insisted that "brotherhood among Hispanics has always existed, in El Salvador and in all the countries of the world . . . brotherhood exists. The problem is that [Gold Coast], because it is a city of millionaires, has extremely high rent. So, of course, Hispanics see themselves as obligated not to offer shelter or housing free to anyone who has just arrived and who is unemployed and can't pay rent. [The leaseholder] wants to get people who can pay, who can help pay the rent. So perhaps they deny help to their Hispanic brothers but it is not because they don't want to, but because of circumstances beyond their control. They can't let people in for free when they have to pay more than a thousand dollars for an apartment and they need to have four or five people there who can help them pay the rent. If they let in people for free, who is going to help them make the rent? But if they have a lot of people in the apartment, the building manager will throw them out. So they see themselves obliged, perhaps bothering their conscience, not to help their brothers out. But it is not they are not willing; no, we have the desire because we have the tradition of serving others. I have helped a lot of people . . . in whatever country I'm in I want to help others. But sometimes you can't, you want to but you can't and sometimes someone who can doesn't want to. But we Hispanics, we're like this: we always help each other. But here, there aren't circumstances for doing it. The conditions put us in a position that we can't help others. If you don't have a fixed income—for instance, all the landscapers, all the construction workers who work seasonally don't have work in the winter. They are only able to make it through the winter because of the little savings they have from the working season. But if they start to donate their money to help others, they will have no way to feed themselves. For this reason they have to turn a cold shoulder to their Salvadoran or other Hispanic brothers. Many times they don't colaborate, but it is because of this—they can't help because their circumstances don't allow them."

Don José argues here that reciprocal relations often cannot be sustained given people's pressures to make ends meet. But he bases his argument on the transition mi-

grants undergo from highly self-sufficient peasants to dependent wage earners. Does his reasoning work as well for migrants of urban backgrounds? Informants who had lived in metropolitan areas expressed dismay at how people "change" in the United States too, but they couched their complaints in terms of "competition" and "jealousy," not in the language Don José employs. Juanita's discussion of her uncle's behavior offers a sample. "Here it's competitive, completely competitive," she insisted. "I swear.... It's like people are happy when you have problems. I note all of this. I don't know if I'm the only one. I'm going to tell you one story from my own family. I bought myself a small car. I bought it for $350 and I walked to where it was. But I didn't have any papers and since I didn't have papers I called my uncle who has papers and insurance. I asked him to help me, I said, 'Uncle, I bought myself a car.' I called him by phone. 'Oh, good,' he said. 'Now you are going to have to find someone who can get insurance for you.' He didn't want to come and help me. So since I didn't have any way to insure the car I had to give it back."

The universality of my informants' dissatisfaction with their compatriots' demeanor in the United States leads me to conclude, in contrast to Don José, that class background, and even the commodification of social relations resulting from these individuals' greater incorporation into modernity, are insufficient to explain the suspension of home country social rules among them. Both urban and peasant immigrants were innocent of neither the globalization of capitalism nor their dependency on wage income. To a greater or lesser extent, they had been integrated into the world system prior to migration and this had not completely undermined so-called precapitalist social relations based on kinship and mutual trust. Rather, the critical difference to their experience in the United States that so radically affects the quality of their relationships is their mandate to produce a surplus above and beyond that needed to provide for their own needs. It is their transnational obligations that strain their alacrity to engage in mutual assistance with compatriots as they did at home. As I have illustrated above, newly arrived immigrants are burdened with debt and remittance responsibilities which require that they generate more income than that required to meet their own needs. As I shall document later on, they frequently must wring this surplus out of their own deprivation, forgoing everything but an ascetic existence. The fact that most immigrants retain ties to family and friends in their homelands signifies that they are beholden to social networks in two very different countries. Whereas in their premigratory lives, their social networks comprised local and regional ties, now they are stretched to fulfill transnational obligations as well, creating two competing sets of relationships.

Jesús's predicament illustrates this span. About two years after he arrived, Jesús received a letter from his compadre, René Maldonaldo, asking him to finance his own journey. Jesús borrowed money from several friends to send to René. He began the process of repaying the loans while he was working the busy summer season as a landscaper. In September, Jesús's wife called. It was an emergency; his daughter had fallen from a tree and hit her head. She urgently needed medical treatment and there was no money. Could he send some immediately? Jesús was able to assemble the funds only by suspending payment on his debts and hurriedly borrowing more money from other friends. When the end of the landscaping season came, Jesús still owed money to many of his creditors. They became irritated with him because, also unemployed, they needed the money for daily expenses. With no income of his own (undocumented workers do not qualify for unemployment insurance), Jesús could not repay them and his friendships soured as a

consequence. The next time he needed to borrow money he encountered few sympathetic ears.

Because immigrants are asked to provide mutual assistance to disparate groups of people in different countries, they may not engage in reciprocal relations in the same way that they did in their homelands. More precisely, while people are called upon and do assist one another quite frequently, they are not always in a position to do so because of demands from home. There is a trade-off; they are simultaneously pulled into and away from relationships with fellow migrants. Other poor communities do not experience this divided attention; they are freer to focus on local relationships alone. This is amply evidenced within the social network literature on poor communities in Latin America (e.g., Lomnitz 1977; Roberts 1973; Brown 1977), in El Salvador (Nieves 1979), and in the United States (e.g., Stack 1974; Horowitz 1983). These authors illustrate how people, women in particular, develop and maintain reciprocal bonds, knitting nuclear and extended families together into networks that exchange many items needed for survival. Items exchanged vary from tangible resources such as money and physical amenities like televisions and clothing to less tangible resources such as child care, emotional support, and information about jobs. The circular exchange of such items functions to distribute wealth quite evenly within the cluster of participating households. Families who acquire resources that they do not wish to share are ostracized by the others. If they choose to withhold distribution of this extra income, they must cut off their networks and they may move out of the community at large. In her research among poor, rural-to-urban migrants in Mexico City, Lomnitz (1977) found that the Latin custom of *compadrazgo*, or fictive kinship, transcended its traditional religious use to include members of these social networks. Normally, compadrazgo links couples through the baptism of their children. A couple chooses another couple to be godparents to their child, and the two couples now are linked as compadres as in the relation between Jesús and René. In Lomnitz's community, "compadre" became a term used among males linked by the networks and not limited to godparent ties. Women could also choose close friends to be "comadres." In this manner compadrazgo was adapted by the migrants to their new urban environments and the exigencies placed on individuals and social groups.

People Do Help Each Other

Compadrazgo has not been extended to friendships and networks among my informants on Long Island. That is, I did not hear friends using the terms "compadre" or "comadre" in casual bantering. I was told that where it is practiced, it has preserved its religious, baptismal function. This does not mean, however, that mutual assistance is nonexistent among these migrants. On the contrary, people help each other frequently. Cooperation *does* occur within households although it does not necessarily involve income sharing or continuous exchange networks. While informants may feel disillusioned with people who do not participate, there is little of the ostracism that Lomnitz observed in her community (1977). Rather, there is an understanding that those who can participate will, and those who do not participate either cannot or are not close associates. For example, within all the housing arrangements, cooking is almost invariably performed by individuals or in small groups of friends or kin. These same groupings buy food together and store it in their rooms or in designated areas of the kitchen. Many individuals write their names with Magic Markers on items stored in collective areas such as the refrigerator and cabinets. These are formal separations of goods. Informally, food is often exchanged among individuals who are not

part of the cooking group. For instance, one group may finish cooking and sit down to eat while the next group prepares its food. Ultimately the second group may share some of its food with the first, or the first may leave food for the second. This tends to occur more frequently on Sundays when there is more time to cook and relax. Single men eat out much of the week and cook only on Sundays, when they will often prepare a favorite dish to be shared by everyone. This informal food sharing helps strengthen and solidify social ties to nonrelatives. Some groups, however, never share anything and are most likely to separate. I have noted this most often in households where groups of different nationalities coreside or where there are personality conflicts.

Assistance among coethnics is not limited to people from the same household. Margarita Flores, a Salvadoran mother in her early thirties, for instance, helped out a friend who was injured on the job and could not work for several months. The two met in the United States at a previous job and had been friends for some time before the accident. Margarita's friend later told me that she was able to make ends meet during her recuperation only because her women friends paid her rent and expenses. She considered their help to be a loan, though she did not know if she could repay them even when her disability lawsuit was settled. Margarita, who had been trained as a schoolteacher in El Salvador, also assisted a boarder in her apartment who is illiterate in Spanish. She helped him write letters to his wife and joked to me about her labors, saying, "I guess I had better start charging him for all the time it takes!"

Assistance also flows among neighboring households. When Amalia Sandoval gave birth to a son with heart trouble, her friends who live in the same building donated baby clothes and brought her food. Since she could no longer work at her hotel job, she began to sew clothes for a living. The friends not only ordered clothes from her but also helped to widen her clientele. In another example, Ana Fernández and her common-law husband Jorge Ayala share their telephone with the residents of the apartment next door. Ana and Jorge are a teenage Salvadoran couple with two small children who share their cramped quarters with Jorge's brother and uncle. But the apartment next door holds ten single men who often drop by Ana's house to converse, to use the phone, and so on. Cooperation even exists among people who deny that it does. For instance, as we have seen, Juanita was angry with her uncle when he failed to help her get insurance for her car; she held him up as an example of the competitive lifestyle that so dismayed her in the United States. Yet the same uncle had loaned her the money to come to the United States. He had also taught her how to put advertisements in the *Pennysaver* (a local free paper) to get housecleaning jobs. He made Juanita's transition to life in the United States quite smooth.

While there is ample evidence of mutual assistance among my informants, they feel that this help does not approach the degree of mutual support that they enjoyed in their home countries. There is a good reason for this disparity: at home differences in resources among interconnected households were leveled through continual exchange that strengthened social bonds. That is, the price paid for long-term reciprocity and its insurance against individual disaster was homogeneous social status. Immigrants cannot afford this price. If they followed the rules of balanced or generalized reciprocity as ordained in their home countries, their principal goal of producing a surplus would be defeated; the surplus they produced would have to be redistributed throughout their kinship networks.

As Lomnitz, Stack, and others skillfully illustrate, the centripetal force generated by exchange networks pulls people inward and impedes their escape. Individuals who attempt to extricate themselves from the net-

work are ostracized, particularly if they try to hold onto wealth rather than redistribute it. Migrants undergo two forces simultaneously: centripetal obligations toward relations in the host country and centrifugal obligations toward those in the home country. Since migrants share the compulsion to produce surplus income, they understand that they are unlikely to be completely severed from their friends in the United States if they send home remittances instead of circulating this wealth through their networks here. But the price they pay is that there will not always be someone to help them in times of need. Thus, shortly after arriving in the United States, many people were disappointed by their relatives' behavior. The kind of hospitality and common courtesy they expected was suspended here; they saw people less as a community to rely on than as individuals to compete against for success in the immigrant game. These early experiences served as a solid introduction to the realities they would face daily.

Capitalizing on Greenhorns

There is one more early lesson that immigrants learn as they revise their idealized notions of life in the United States. They learn that their "friends" are capable not only of turning a cold shoulder to them, but also of using them to their own advantage. Many individuals told me that they came to the United States prepared to be exploited by Americans and they often were, but they did not come prepared to be taken advantage of by their own coethnic peers. They told me stories in which they figured as naive newcomers who fell easy prey to older migrants with greater expertise. Typically, this fall from innocence occurred during a time of particular vulnerability: the pursuit of the first job. (Li [1977] has documented this phenomenon among Chinese in Chicago, and Grasmuck and Pessar [1991:185] among Dominicans in New York.) Jaime's example is a good case in point. A baseball jacket manufacturer from Lima, Peru, he arrived on Long Island in 1988 to a royal welcome. His sponsor, a Peruvian immigrant from his Lima barrio, took him in, gave him food, and provided a room for him. The next day, however, the tides turned. Jaime was put to work in his sponsor's construction business laboring fourteen hours per day, six days per week. For his efforts, he was paid $250 but docked $50 each week for the lunches that the sponsor's wife packed for him daily. In addition, he had to pay the sponsor back $200 per month in rent. Jaime remembers these first six months bitterly: "I had to separate me from myself. If I hadn't I would have cried. I had to leave behind my personality—like taking my clothes off and putting new ones on." Jaime says that he was willing to work hard, but not to be exploited, not to lose his dignity. In one short week he descended from boss to laborer, from man to mouse. As soon as he found another opportunity, he left his sponsor and now exclaims proudly, "*Yo bailo con mi propio pañuelo*" (I'm dancing to my own tune now). Determined never to be so humiliated again, particularly at the hands of a compatriot, Jaime in three short years has found a steady, union job working in a nursing home and serves as a manager for an office-cleaning firm at night. He even employs some of his own relatives now. He recently bought a house in Gold Coast and has sublet it to many fellow Peruvians, turning a profit by charging them more in rent than he pays for the mortgage.

Marco, a Peruvian sociologist, found his first job in construction. He was hired by a fellow Peruvian who held contracts in New York City. But after several weeks on the job, Marco had not been paid; when he complained to his boss, he was summarily dismissed. Roberto had a similar experience. A Salvadoran peasant and volunteer church worker, Roberto is in his twenties but has a

boyish face that exudes innocence. The first job he found was painting houses and doing odd jobs for fourteen hours per day. His boss, a Salvadoran acquaintance of the man who had sponsored Roberto's emigration, refused to pay him after two weeks. Aware that he was being taken advantage of and feeling the pressure to repay his debts, Roberto quit and started a job landscaping. He has kept that job, with no raise, ever since.

First job experiences of many informants mirror the kind of frustration Jaime expresses above. Jaime's and Marco's anguish was exacerbated by their drop in status from owner and organizer to worker. Marco's treatment put him inside a world that he had previously observed as an outsider. An academic and union organizer in his native Peru, Marco only truly experienced blue-collar life once he became a worker in the United States. "I just recently began to understand why it was that workers in my country found it difficult to go to a meeting, a conference, or to read a book," he confessed one day. "Now, somehow I understand their reasons. Why? Because when you do physical work, especially when it's heavy, the person who is not used to this gets tired. He's not going to be ready to study. Being tired makes you go to bed; it's the tiredness. You don't feel pushed to study, especially complex things. I feel this. This is one of my biggest worries—that I am losing my willingness to study, the will to analyze. I am losing my desire to write. . . . When I am doing these jobs I feel strange. It's not that the things are difficult, they are just strange. They aren't undignified." Few Salvadorans feel this same drop in status; most were peasants or workers in their home country who assumed blue-collar jobs such as landscaping and factory work in the United States. But they too feel exploited and disillusioned. What piques their resentment is their exploitation at the hands of peers.

In the rigid class hierarchies of their homelands, migrants were accustomed to patron-client relationships, to being taken advantage of by people of superior class status. Thus, when they arrive in the United States, they accord Americans a similar class deference. When Americans exploit them, they recognize it but do not resent it with the same vehemence as when their compatriot equals take advantage of them. Immigrants are angered when they are exploited by gringos, but they are *embittered* when their own people exploit them. This gives them a strong resolve to learn the ropes as quickly as possible so that they will never be made to feel so vulnerable and humiliated again. "The people who come here change," Sonia insisted. "Before they come here they're naive, fools as we say, but they change once they come to this country. When they come here they become big shots, as if they were children of the wealthy and, maybe, they're really the children of poor folk."

When the innocence of neophyte immigrants is exploited by more experienced coethnics, the newcomers are introduced to the opportunity structure they will face and learn to use to their own ends. They learn that in the land of marvels the pathways to success are fewer than they anticipated; they learn the hard way that one of the best avenues available is utilizing resources within their own community to their advantage. Capitalizing on greenhorns is, quite literally, generating capital by paying them less than the value of their labors. There are many forms of expropriating wealth from within the immigrant community. But immigrants' critical and disillusioning initiation into the dog-eat-dog world they vividly describe occurs too early for them to comprehend why their friends and family behave so differently here.

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Mahler:

1. Discuss why immigrants stay in the United States as long as they do when their goal is to make enough money for a nest egg and return to their country of origin. Discuss the additional constraints that immigrants have with their already meager salaries that they earn in the United States.
2. Discuss the conflicting forces that impede or generate exchange networks.