

Remittances as Rents in a Guatemalan Town

Debt, Asylum, the U.S. Job Market, and Vulnerability to Human Trafficking

by
David Stoll

Exporting labor to the United States has become the principal industry of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Central Americans have been moving to the United States in large numbers since the 1980s, but how they gain entry has shifted thanks to the interplay between the migration industry and border enforcement. Many Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans are paying smugglers to deliver them to U.S. border agents so they can apply for asylum. The Trump administration's harsh reactions have energized asylum advocates, who argue that applicants are fleeing dislocation by neoliberal capitalism. Migrant households in the Ixil Maya municipio of Nebaj, Guatemala, express an optimistic interpretation of this situation that they call their American Dream. Their wish for high wages in the United States can be seen as the latest in a series of "hope machines" that interpret disadvantageous relations of exchange as the path to a better future. Such hopes are based on the irrefutable buying power of the dollar, but migrant remittances to their families conceal the extraction of rents. U.S. asylum advocates understandably stress that the most important challenge facing irregular immigrants is their legal status. However, with or without legal status, the underlying issue for migrants will continue to be their position in the U.S. job market, because this generates household indebtedness that increases vulnerability to human trafficking.

La exportación de mano de obra a los Estados Unidos se ha convertido en la principal industria de Guatemala, El Salvador y Honduras. Los centroamericanos se han estado mudando a los Estados Unidos en grandes cantidades desde la década de 1980, pero la forma en la que obtienen la entrada ha cambiado gracias a la interacción entre la industria de la migración y la industria de la deportación. Muchos guatemaltecos, hondureños y salvadoreños pagan a coyotes para que los entreguen a agentes fronterizos de Estados Unidos, pudiendo así puedan solicitar asilo. Las duras reacciones de la administración Trump han energizado a los defensores del asilo, quienes argumentan que los solicitantes están huyendo de la dislocación causada por el capitalismo neoliberal. Los migrantes en el municipio ixil maya de Nebaj, Guatemala, tienen una interpretación optimista de esta situación, la cual llaman su Sueño americano. Su deseo de salarios altos en Los Estados Unidos puede ser visto como la última en una serie de "máquinas de esperanza" que interpretan las desventajosas relaciones de intercambio como el camino hacia un futuro mejor. Dichas esperanzas se basan en el irrefutable poder adquisitivo del dólar, pero las remesas de los migrantes a sus familias ocultan la extracción de rentas. Los defensores del asilo en Estados Unidos enfatizan, comprensiblemente, que el desafío más importante que enfrentan los inmigrantes irregulares es su estatus legal. Sin embargo, con o sin estatus

David Stoll teaches anthropology at Middlebury College in Vermont. He is the author of *El Norte or Bust! How Migration Fever and Microcredit Produced a Financial Crash in a Latin American Town* (2012).

legal, el problema subyacente para los migrantes seguirá siendo su posición en el mercado laboral estadounidense, ya que esto genera el endeudamiento de los hogares e incrementa su vulnerabilidad a la trata de personas.

Keywords: *Migrants, Remittances, Border enforcement, Asylum advocacy, Human trafficking, Guatemala*

In the first eight months of fiscal year 2019, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security arrested 1.8 percent of the population of Honduras, 1.3 percent of the population of Guatemala, and .9 percent of the population of El Salvador. Of the 607,774 persons from these countries taken into custody at the U.S.-Mexican border for all of 2019, 81 percent were either family units or minors (Nowrasteh, 2019). According to asylum advocates, many were refugees fleeing from murderous street gangs, corrupt police, domestic violence, climate change, and neoliberal capitalism. Migrants themselves tell of harrowing experiences, but their most common theme is economic—that they have no hope of a livelihood except in the United States. If they are fleeing neoliberal capitalism, then they are fleeing from its periphery to its core, and their remittances have become crucial to sustaining the neoliberal model. In 2018, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras received a total of US\$19.5 billion in remittances, mainly from the United States. From all their other exports combined—agricultural, extractive, and manufacturing—they received a total of US\$20.1 billion (Dialogue, 2019; Workman, 2019). Exporting labor to the United States has become Central America's principal industry.

In this state of dependency, migration scholars argue, the U.S.-Mexican border has become a “state of exception” in which the two governments routinely violate the rights of undocumented border crossers and residents (De Leon, 2015: 27–28; Diaz-Barriga and Dorsey, 2015). Thus, for example, border hardening diverts migrants to dangerous terrain where some 400 die each year (Romero and Dickerson, 2019). Yet if this is a state of exception, migrants hope that it will be their corridor to higher wages and social entitlements. In the Guatemalan town where I interview migrants, many take out large loans to pay smugglers to deliver them to U.S. border agents. As of 2019, despite the frantic blockades of the Trump administration, many Nebaj migrants still seemed to be winning quick release into the U.S. labor market.

In this essay, I will analyze migration from the Guatemalan municipio of Nebaj as the latest in a series of “hope machines” guiding the responses of Nebajenses to the hardships and opportunities of neoliberal capitalism. I derive the idea of the hope machine from three sources. The first is James Ferguson's (1994) “anti-politics machine,” a term that he applied to the international development apparatus. The second is Edward Fischer and Peter Benson's (2006) ethnography of the social production of desire, including the pervasive aspiration of Mayan peasants to *superar* (overcome adversity and prosper). The third is Daniel Reichman's (2011) ethnography of a Honduran coffee-producing town and how it has redefined itself in terms of the competing moral projects of social justice, evangelical Protestantism, and migration to the United States.

Putting the three together, I define a hope machine as a system of exchange that conveys a moralistic vision of *superación* (advancement) and delivers tangible rewards but that can turn against participants by extracting value from them and reinforcing power differentials. In the case of the migration hope machine, what it conceals, according to an innovative analysis by the German political scientist Hannes Warnecke-Berger (2018), is the extraction of rents. What this means in practice, I will add, is pressure within kin-based migration networks that can generate not just deep indebtedness but coercion. To neglect the debt and coercion is to neglect how obtaining asylum and joining the U.S. job market can combine to produce vulnerability to human trafficking.

NEBAJ AND ITS COMPETING HOPE MACHINES

For an example of how migration to the United States redefines the lives of Central Americans, let us consider the hardships, ambitions, and strategies of a Highland Maya boom town. Nebaj has exploded economically not by extracting a valuable mineral or manufacturing coveted goods but by exporting its young people to the United States and harvesting their remittances. Populated mainly by Ixil Mayas but also by K'iche' Mayas and nonindigenous Ladinos, the municipio has joined sociologically similar towns in Huehuetenango Department to become a migration hub (Camus, 2007; 2008). Streets are clogged with motor vehicles. Most of the old adobe houses have been replaced by multistory cement blocks. All but the poorest inhabitants have cell phones, and the overriding topic of conversation is how to *superar* (get ahead).

A decade ago, drawing on monthly remittance estimates in April 2008, I estimated that 4,041 Nebajenses had reached the United States (Stoll, 2012: 55–56). Many have since come home, but Nebajenses are astonished at how many more of their relatives and neighbors have gone north. They call it the American Dream, and about it they express divided emotions—from enthusiasm to tortured family debates and shock at the stratagems and risks it entails. The stories that Nebajenses tell each other and how they debate them are the basis of my analysis. Because paying smugglers to go to the United States has many sensitive ramifications, I have never done a household survey. Instead, in annual visits, I have asked migrant households and town intellectuals for stories they are willing to share and, with their help, looked for patterns.

The Ixils occupy what used to be a remote corner of Guatemala's western highlands. Despite the Spanish Conquest and the demographic collapse, they were in possession of their land until, at the end of the nineteenth century, coffee planters began to claim the lowest and most profitable valleys. Through legal chicanery and distilled alcohol, planters lured Ixils into debt peonage and took over their town governments. The plantation economy opened the way for a wider array of outsiders to recruit Ixils into their particular visions of progress. These included revolutionaries launching an insurgency against plantation owners and the Guatemalan state. Ixils neither founded nor led the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (Guerrilla Army of the Poor—EGP), but they contributed hundreds of fighters and thousands of auxiliaries, and their contribution to the struggle brought the Guatemalan army into Ixil country for the

first time. The army killed thousands of suspected supporters, destroyed rural settlements, forced survivors to live in closely guarded strategic hamlets, and shut down the Catholic Church.

Protestant missionaries had been in Nebaj since the 1930s but converted only a handful of Ixils. Now they started relief projects for Ixils under army control, and Pentecostal churches (all led by Guatemalans) popped up everywhere. The Catholic Church returned with its own relief projects. As the war came to a negotiated end in the 1990s, more aid projects rolled in, and Nebaj has been a magnet for international aid ever since. Amidst the cavalcade of improvements, two discourses have had special resonance with Ixils—what I call the evangelical hope machine and the social justice hope machine. Protestant churches are, judging from their multiplication in every village and neighborhood, the most successful new institution to arise from the war. Ixil Protestants refer to themselves as *evangélicos* (because they teach salvation through Jesus Christ alone), but most are Pentecostals who call down the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues. Their loud, rhythmic services have overshadowed the folk Catholic *cargo* system that anthropologists used to regard as the core of Mayan culture. The Catholic Church has made a strong recovery but represents a smaller fraction of the population than before. The majority of Ixil leaders—in political parties, the town hall, aid projects, and business—are now evangelicals.

The social justice hope machine is quite a contrast. While evangelicals usually preach nonresistance to unjust power structures, these are denounced by social justice activists. Some come out of the Catholic communal tradition and liberation theology. Others come out of the Maya movement, which has arrived in the form of cultural revitalization projects. As of 2019, however, the most visible social justice organizers are demobilized cadres of the EGP. The 1996 peace agreement envisioned that the EGP and its allies would cohere into an effective political party, but this failed to happen on the national level. Locally in Nebaj, the postwar EGP also failed to harvest votes. Social justice projects supported by international donors—including the return of refugees, new development associations, compensation payments for the army's victims, and the exhumation of mass graves—failed to build political muscle.

More recently, ex-EGP cadres have succeeded in asserting leadership by mobilizing opposition to corporate-owned hydroelectric projects, which take advantage of steep topography to supply the national power grid but fail to provide reliable electricity to nearby villages; importing the institution of *alcaldías indígenas* (indigenous mayoralties) from other municipios in order to reinvent indigenous self-governance as they see it; and recruiting witnesses for the 2013 genocide trial of the former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt. Not all Ixils supported putting Ríos Montt on trial; some continue to extoll him for humanizing the army's counterinsurgency operations and saving their lives. But all the powerful testimony about army brutality convinced many Ixils that what they used to call the "armed conflict" was actually a genocide.

The social justice and evangelical hope machines are competing moral projects, but Ixils merge the two idioms with ease (e.g., "Just as John 20:23 says, if Max gives us his *auto-crítica*, then we have to forgive him"). Both hope machines offer material improvement: if evangelicals stress the budgetary advantages of abstaining from vices, social justice activists demand a more equitable future.

Both can claim to have delivered some of their promises. Most Ixils now have a higher standard of living than their parents did. Most are living in better houses, receive more social services, and own more consumer durables than Ixils did a generation ago. Unfortunately, neither pastors nor activists have convincing answers to the question I hear most often from Ixils: “Where can my offspring and I find work?”

POPULATION GROWTH, UNDEREMPLOYMENT, AND THE EXPORT OF LABOR

Guatemala is a tropical country with year-round agriculture, so men can always work as laborers and women as domestics. For at least a century, Ixils and their fellow Nebajenses have been deeply engaged in labor migration to other parts of Guatemala, but menial occupations will not pay for several children’s secondary education or medical emergencies, let alone a house with a cement floor. When Nebajenses say “*No hay trabajo*” (There is no work), they wish to convey that, despite all the work they do, they are unable to pay for more than bare necessities. The many thousands of wartime deaths have not prevented Nebaj’s population from more than doubling since 1980. Parents value children as a labor source, so most continue to produce four, five, six, or more offspring even though they lack enough land for subsistence. In contrast to the situation before the war, most children now start primary school and many are starting secondary school. But paying for tuition, uniforms, and supplies, as well as mandatory class excursions and presents for teachers, is death by a thousand cuts. To cover all this, many parents take out loans that they plan to repay when their high school graduate becomes a *profesional*—a teacher or extension agent with a salary. But such jobs are scarce and usually can be obtained only through family or political connections. Despite all the resources that Nebajenses have poured into schooling, it often fails to boost their incomes.

The first Mayas to move to the United States in large numbers came from neighboring Huehuetenango Department. The first Ixils to follow them, in the late 1990s, sold land or borrowed money to pay Huehuetecos to smuggle them north. Their success in getting past the U.S. border, finding jobs, paying debts, and sending money to their families vouched for a new hope machine—the American Dream. Even stay-at-home Nebajenses joined the town’s migration industry by becoming moneylenders. Market women took out multiple loans from financial institutions and neighbors in order to reloan to migrants at 10 percent monthly interest. The result was a quasi-futures market not in a commodity such as maize or beans but in the one factor of production that Nebajenses had in abundance: their own labor power. As they went north and their remittances were harvested by speculative lenders, this bubble in remittance futures produced a second speculative bubble, in local real estate. Migrants acquired a reputation for paying any price for house lots. This gave sellers windfall profits that they could plow into yet more high-interest loans to the next crop of migrants.

The two bubbles—in remittances and real estate—popped in late 2007. Why then? One trigger was the collapse of several borrowing rings. Another was

migrants' failing to find enough work in the United States to keep up with their loans. Without legal status or English, Nebajenses were completely dependent on previously arrived relatives to find work. This is why most of them crowded into small ethnic niches in various locations that, in 2006, seem to have become saturated with too many job seekers. Back home, many borrowers had been keeping up with payments only by taking out additional loans from institutions, neighbors, and moneylenders. Borrowing chains extended from migrants to relatives to moneylenders to banks, at high rates of interest and with low amounts of collateral. Toward the end of 2007, so many migrants stopped making payments on their loans that borrowing chains went into serial default. Financial institutions stopped making new loans, which sent default rates even higher. As credit suddenly vanished, the number of Nebajenses going north plunged, as did the price of real estate.

THE NEW ERA OF UNDERAGE MIGRATION

From my 2007–2012 interviewing I never expected a robust recovery of Nebaj's migration industry. I failed to anticipate that the U.S. debate over border enforcement would open up spectacular new opportunities. In 2014, as unprecedented numbers of underage Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans arrived on the southern border, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) released a telling graphic. Over four and a half months it had detained between 75 and 150 "unaccompanied alien children" from Nebaj alone (Public Intelligence, 2014). From Ixil matrons I learned that they were sending relays of sisters, daughters, and grandchildren to the United States in ways that enabled the older ones to gain provisional legal status and become legal sponsors for the younger ones. Until this point, most Nebaj migrants were male. Few females made the trip because of the widely recognized danger of being raped. Now many women were going north, usually with a small child or pregnant. Nebajenses were also applying for tourist visas. For the lucky few whose applications survived their face-to-face interviews with the U.S. embassy, a US\$160 tourist visa became a de facto seasonal work permit. They could arrive legally at an airport, join relatives, and work in the informal sector for six months, then fly home for six months before repeating the cycle the following year.

Another sign of the new era was a remarkable drop in the prices charged by smuggling networks. In response to stricter border policies, the cost per capita had risen from as low as US\$3,500 in the late 1990s to US\$5,000–6,000 by 2007 and US\$10,000+ by 2019. The all-inclusive price covered evading or bribing Mexican police, evading or bribing U.S. border enforcement, reaching a Phoenix or Houston safe-house, and then being delivered to one's relatives wherever they resided. Now smugglers are charging a much lower price for a new kind of trip. One name for it is *entrega a la frontera* (delivery to the border). Smugglers instruct their customers to surrender to border agents and say that they are afraid to go back to Guatemala. The price ranges from US\$2,000 to US\$4,000 for a teenager or a parent-child combo. Such prices put a coyote trip through Mexico within reach of a wide range of Nebajenses. Given that remittances

have once again bid up even marginal house lots to US\$10,000 or more, anybody who owns a shack has the necessary collateral to finance a trip north.

Expediting this new chapter in migration history are humanitarian reforms in U.S. border enforcement. The William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act was passed by the U.S. Congress in the closing months of the Bush administration (2001–2009) and then implemented by the Obama administration (2009–2017). Bolstered by asylum advocacy and court orders, it enables almost anyone with a child to file an application for humanitarian asylum. One exception is previous deportees; most are barred from applying for asylum, and so, for them at least, evading detection the old-fashioned way is still mandatory.

Two very different kinds of “children” figure in Nebaj’s current migration strategies. In the U.S. legal system, anyone under the age of 18 is a minor, therefore a child, but not in U.S. society, where addressing an adolescent as a child is a serious insult. Adolescents are not children in Central American society either, for the obvious reason that they are expected to contribute to their families as soon as they reach puberty, if not before. Thus in Nebaj, sending ambitious 15- and 16-year-olds to the United States is nothing new or remarkable. However, using small children to make asylum claims is deeply troubling to some Nebajenses (of the 132,856 mainly Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran apprehensions on the Mexican border in May 2019, 84,486 consisted of adults accompanied by juveniles [U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2019]). “That’s the thing everyone knows now,” a migrant told the *Washington Post* (Miroff and Sieff, 2019). “If you go, you need to bring a child. You can bring someone else’s child, but they say they are now doing DNA tests on the border, which makes it difficult.”

Consider three Nebaj children—aged 10, 6, and 3—whose three fathers used them to gain entrance to the United States in 2018. The children were required by the DHS to go to school. The fathers were pleased that the schools were free-of-charge, but daily transport was a steep cost, as was child care after school. Could they fly their children back to Guatemala? The nearest consulate was willing to provide passports, but the children would need an adult chaperone on the plane. An evangelical pastor was agreeable if the fathers paid his fare. But the pastor (my source of information) was puzzled by the fathers’ thinking. “Are you really sure that you want to send your kids back to Guatemala?” he asked. “If it was me,” he told them, “I would want my kid to study in the United States, because everything in the United States is a little better. The school is better, the house is better, the food is better, the clothing is better.” But the children were crying for their mothers, as the pastor put it to me, and the mothers were crying for their children, so he brought them home in March 2019.

Nebajenses also debate whether it is a good idea to send adolescent girls north. Women’s rights have become a staple of international projects in Nebaj since the 1990s. Every institution and project must hire women staffers, the town’s municipal and national police include women, and parents are enjoined to send their daughters as well as their sons to school. But parents continue to enforce sexual double standards on their daughters to protect them from schoolmates and older married men. Pregnancy at 15 or 16 is still very common, and

impregnators often fail to become responsible fathers. Aggravating conflict with daughters is status competition out on the street, via the high heels, smart-phones, and motorcycles flaunted by nouveau-riche girls. Thus more teenage girls are demanding to go north. If they are not allowed, I hear from worried parents, some girls are threatening to get pregnant or kill themselves.

If a daughter's alternatives are dropping out of school to have a baby or finishing school and not finding a job, then sending her to the United States to earn money can look like the best alternative. But here Nebaj families have run afoul of the DHS requirement that minors can be released only to plausible sponsors, usually relatives, who sign legal pledges to send them to school. In the case of one 16-year-old girl, the plan was to persuade the DHS to release her to a girlfriend, who also had arrived as a minor and who supposedly would make sure that her buddy went to school. The DHS did not buy this idea and so, along with a number of others, the unfortunate 16-year-old was locked up in a shelter.

Her father, through a Nebaj organization, asked me for help. "I'm just a poor man and do not have the resources to send my daughter to school," he said. "That's why my daughter went [to the United States], to look for her future and obtain an education. I beg you to speak with the social worker. . . . Maybe there is a social organization [that can help her]." Notice that, while the father cannot afford to send his daughter to school in Nebaj (costing perhaps US\$500 a year), he can afford to borrow several times that amount to send her to the United States because he expects her to pay him back. Until she escapes the shelter and finds a job, all his cash flow will be sucked up by the interest on her loan. DHS school requirements are one reason sending parent-child combos has become a popular alternative to sending teenagers. Owing to a court order, U.S. authorities are not allowed to detain family units for more than a few weeks.

GOING NORTH AS A MORAL ENTERPRISE

Many migration scholars and advocates now frame migrants from Guatemala as refugees from violence, poverty, and climate change. On a number of occasions, Nebajenses have asked me to write letters supporting their applications for asylum. Judging from what I have seen and heard, Nebajenses typically tell U.S. immigration judges that they are fleeing the consequences of the Guatemalan civil war and threats from Nebaj gangs. It is doubtful that they are running away from gangs, because gangs have little presence in Nebaj. True, you can find a few tags spray-painted on walls, but no neighborhoods are controlled by gangs, and there is no pattern of gang-style killings. As does most of the rest of the western highlands, Quiché Department has one of Guatemala's lowest homicide rates.

Another theme in Nebaj asylum applications is domestic violence. In 2014 the Board of Immigration Appeals—the highest U.S. immigration court—ruled that an unauthorized immigrant named Aminta Cifuentes could qualify for asylum on grounds of life-threatening abuse by her husband in Guatemala. Four years later, as part of the Trump offensive against asylum claims, U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions barred domestic violence as a criterion. No one

seems to know how many applications have been filed on these grounds. But I do know that some Nebaj women have paid for trips north so that they can ask U.S. courts to protect them from their allegedly murderous husbands. I also know of men who say that their wives suddenly disappeared with children in hand, only to surface in the United States and file accusations that the men say are false.

When U.S. legal standards provide an escape hatch for some Nebajenses, they transfer the cost to other Nebajenses. Consider the pseudonymous Pedro, a high school graduate in his twenties who had tried to enter the United States on four occasions. Even as these failures saddled his family with enormous debts, his in-laws were successfully moving a sequence of parents and children into provisional U.S. legal status. And so a relative persuaded him to try once more, this time with his underage wife and baby. Upon delivery, the DHS obligingly took custody of the wife and baby but deported Pedro. When I heard about him in 2017, his wife was looking forward to a new life in the United States, including a good education for her child and a good job for herself, but back home Pedro was suffering recriminations from his family for indebting them even further. He was also on suicide watch.

Such situations can be played down as only a footnote to the hope machine that sends so many Nebajenses north. Nebajenses weigh the risks against an American Dream that has a strong factual basis in U.S. wages and living standards. They marvel not just at all the dollars they will earn but at U.S. social services. Is it true that American parents don't have to pay for their children's education? Is it true that children get free lunches at school? Proud grandparents tell me that their daughter gave birth in an American hospital without having to pay anything or that their daughter and grandchildren receive free food from the government.

Not echoing as loudly in Nebaj is the intense suffering, along the border and in the detention process, denounced by U.S. human rights activists. On each of my last three visits—in mid-2017, mid-2018, and mid-2019—I expected to hear that President Trump's harsh policies had taken a toll on Nebaj's migrants. Instead, migrant households told me about a *permiso* or special program under which the United States was welcoming women and children. They puzzled over why President Trump denounced illegal immigrants while accepting more than President Obama did. Could Trump have a hidden agenda? they asked. Were his agents organizing the migrant caravans out of Honduras? Given that the United States was a nation of old people and Guatemala a nation of young people, was the United States welcoming Guatemalans to turn them into soldiers for its next Mideastern war?

As of June 2019, my interlocutors believed that a large majority of migrants were gaining entry. Any foothold generates a new loop in the rumor mill. Thus parents wonder if their sons or daughters can find Americans to adopt them, help them enter a local job market far from the competition and tension of crowded immigrant enclaves, and support their education in a promising new career such as computers. For Nebajenses, paying smugglers for delivery to the DHS is a moral enterprise because it will enable them to provide for their families and give their children a better future. Moralism is common in get-rich-quick schemes because these belong to the wider realm of millenarian or

utopian fantasies (Cox, 2018; Verdery, 1995). What makes such visions moralistic is the wish to transcend deep-seated paradoxes. In the case of Nebajenses, their ever-deeper engagement with capitalism forces them to navigate between sociocentric and egocentric definitions of personhood. Traditionally, youth are expected to subordinate personal needs to the needs of parents and siblings. The new hope is that they will *buscar su futuro* (search for their future) in a country that will give them a better life.

How do Nebajenses reconcile self-advancement with family solidarity? The hope is that, once established, the young migrant will “receive” his siblings and even parents. Expedited by humanitarian reforms in U.S. border enforcement, the goal is a kin-based work team that lives together in an apartment or a small house. The team includes males, females, and, increasingly, birthright citizens, and its collective earnings support the many expenses of bringing up more family members.

REMITTANCES AS RENTS

Obviously, Nebajenses are not typical of all migrants from Central America. If the most important criterion is an urgent need for safe haven, Nebajenses as a group occupy the far end of the spectrum from, say, Hondurans escaping gangs in San Pedro Sula. The percentage of Central Americans who actually are fleeing threats to life and limb is a contentious issue (Cohn, Passel, and Gonzalez-Barrera, 2017), but whatever sends migrants north, remittances have powerful impacts. Even if Nebaj does not typify all north-south remittance flows, it can serve as a window on a widely shared problem: that the American Dream is a moral vision that conceals the extraction of rents.

Renta is Central American slang for extortion payments to gangsters. When kleptocracies run a country, rent extraction is an obvious metaphor for how they organize the economy. But can this concept also be applied to migration streams? So argues Hannes Warnecke-Berger in an analysis of El Salvador’s migration-dependent economy in terms of rentier relationships. Rents are extracted when an entitled class derives its income not from its ability to compete in markets but from its power to monopolize land or other claims to ownership. Usually we think of rentiers as an upper class, but the term can also apply to elders who live off the labor of juniors.

The Salvadoran economy has long been organized around the extraction of rents, but how this occurs has changed over time. Until the 1980s, the Salvadoran state and its leading exports, coffee and cotton, were controlled by an oligarchy—the same one that the Salvadoran revolutionary movement tried and failed to overthrow. Because of the war, so many Salvadorans left for the United States that one of every four may now live there. Then came such a severe structural adjustment program that the Salvadoran economy was dollarized. Now its principal industry is the export of labor and the harvesting of remittances. Keeping up with the times, Salvadoran elites have withdrawn from export agriculture and moved into tourism and the leisure industry, big-box retail and construction, the financial industry, and computer services. So if the Salvadoran oligarchy no longer extracts as much rent from coffee and cotton exports as

before, asks Warnecke-Berger (2019: 130), where does it extract rent now? From the consumer demand structure of households receiving remittances, he answers. Instead of monopolizing agricultural exports, the upper classes now extract rent from ownership of financial institutions, shopping malls, and other service sectors that attract remittance dollars.

Rent extraction is no surprise when it flows to the upper classes, but Warnecke-Berger (2018: 232) argues that even remittances can represent the extraction of rent. Given that remittances flow mainly to lower-income Salvadorans, how could they too be rentiers? According to Warnecke-Berger, remittances become rents because of a paradox facing the households that receive them. Even as remittances increase the spending power of a household, they also make it dependent on the loyalty of a member who has gone north, hence the insecurity that turns remittances into rents to which a family is entitled by its “transnational moral claim” on a migrant’s earnings (220–224).

Some migrants are models of self-sacrifice, remitting faithfully through thick and thin. But this is not just altruism, Warnecke-Berger emphasizes: it is a moral obligation because most migrants reach the United States thanks only to their families’ engaging in heavy borrowing from which they expect a financial return. Up north, migrant loyalties are tested in many ways. Given the high cost of living, the emotional cost of prolonged separation, and the launching of new families, remittances tend to diminish over time. Then there is the question of exactly who will receive remittances—conflict between wife and parents over who administers a husband’s earnings is no novelty in Nebaj. Nor are suspicions and accusations—in Warnecke-Berger’s (2018: 234) focus groups, he heard remittance receivers accuse their stateside relatives of being selfish and remittance senders accuse their relatives of milking them like cows. Ethnographers of Latin American remittance households such as Ann Miles (2004) and Sonia Nazario (2006) have noticed receivers and senders trading accusations of selfishness and ingratitude. Kristin Yarris (2017) notes the disappointment of Nicaraguan grandmothers with the amounts that migrant daughters are sending to support their offspring. Cecilia Menjívar (2000: 115–156) and Sarah Mahler (1995: 78–104) describe the monetization of reciprocity among Central American immigrants, with the result that they feel exploited by their own relatives and co-ethnics.

If a family expects to harvest remittances from its members in the United States, these are rentier expectations. Nebajenses often lack power to enforce their demands. Consider this mother’s criticism of a daughter for failing to perform her assigned role:

I didn’t give her schooling so that she would go to the United States and produce children. . . . We gave her schooling and now we owe a lot [of money] for her. . . . I give my children their schooling, but they don’t help me. I give them their schooling so they will get me out of poverty, but instead they look for a husband. We spent a lot to give her schooling, she went to the United States, now she has two children, and she left behind lots of work. I gave [my other daughter] her schooling, and now she’s gone off with *her* husband. They’re producing more children, and we remain behind in debt. All I can do is ask God to help me.

Remittances are so conflictual, according to Warnecke-Berger (2019: 127), that they set off “a vicious cycle of instability.” For example, amounts often vary quite a bit from month to month and may stop altogether. As a result, in Nebaj as well as El Salvador, even households receiving remittances often accumulate new debts to moneylenders and banks. Both their consumption and their debt levels are rising, which is one of the reasons migrant households always seem to be debating who will go north next. Beyond the household, remittances destabilize neighbors because they have such an inflationary impact. In neighborhoods and villages where incomes used to be broadly similar, recipient households exhibit spurts of purchasing power, acquire status goods like motorcycles, and pay higher prices for local real estate. This is a divide that Robert Smith (2005: 50) terms a “remittance bourgeoisie” versus a “transnational underclass” without access to dollars.

In the Salvadoran migrant hub of Intipucá, David Pedersen (2013: 12, 61–62, 206–208) found that the conveyor belts of youth migration and remittance ended up favoring its bourgeoisie, not its lower classes. Intipucá’s first migrants to go north were from the local landowning class. U.S. journalists mistakenly portrayed them as being from humble origins. By the early 1980s, these landlord scions were sufficiently established in Washington, DC, to become the employers of other arriving Salvadorans. The remittances that they sent home, far from lessening wealth disparities, strengthened the local elite’s hold on economic opportunities.

Remittances are such a powerful engine of inequality that they can set up different social classes within the same household. Leah Schmalzbauer (2008) found that Honduran transnational families of the early 2000s had both a transnational underclass (parents being exploited at the bottom of the U.S. labor market) and a remittance bourgeoisie (teenagers living it up on their parents’ earnings). The juxtaposition was confusing for all concerned, and one of its effects was unjustified optimism about future earnings. Beth Baker-Cristales (2004: 31) noticed the same kind of disorientation in El Salvador and went on to state:

The development of a remittance economy, the spread of U.S.-style consumerism, and a generalized contempt for politicians and the political class have refocused popular attention away from politics and toward the acquisition of material goods. As consumerism and higher standards of living spread among the families of U.S.-bound migrants, more and more Salvadorans feel the pull of migration to maintain their now higher expectations. The spray-painted political slogans of the war era are giving way to another kind of appropriation of public space—gang-related tagging dominated by the names of Los Angeles area gangs. Migration has come to take the place of class struggle in El Salvador.

Alisa Garni and Frank Weyher (2013) found the same reconfiguration around remittances in Salvadoran coffee towns, as did Peggy Levitt (2001: 73–124) in the migrant hub of Baní in the Dominican Republic.

Warnecke-Berger observes that migration is a form of intensification—self-exploitation—in which migrants no longer have time or energy to invest in the kind of socializing that gives rise to political movements. The relentless focus on dollars is not a mere lifestyle choice or psychological compulsion; it is a

necessity, to pay off the loans that enable migrants to join the U.S. labor market. And so their priority becomes to “stabilize future remittances,” even as the impact of dollars “atomize[s]” social relationships in the surrounding population (Warnecke-Berger, 2018: 221, 237). In my 2007–2012 interviews with Nebajenses, I detected pyramid-style investment patterns in which migrants struggling to keep up with too many loans were seeking to increase their cash flow by inviting more migrants to join them in the United States. The new recruits were typically relatives and neighbors who believed they were being given a marvelous opportunity. But if the trip went wrong they too would be saddled with debt. The ability of losers to transfer their losses to a new cohort of investors is what distinguishes a pyramid scheme from a Ponzi scheme. To translate this into Warnecke-Berger’s terms, rent payers were hoping to become rent recipients by inviting relatives and neighbors to come north and add to their cash flow. All the credit washing around in these networks can make it very challenging for migrants to figure out whether they are getting ahead or slipping backward.

BORDER ENFORCEMENT, ASYLUM, AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

How much of the indebtedness of Central American migrants can be laid at the door of U.S. border enforcement? President Trump’s crackdowns on asylum applicants aroused wide condemnation. “Why Are You Putting Kids in Cages?” became an effective countermeme to “Build the Wall!” For asylum advocates and now apparently for the majority of migration scholars, U.S. border enforcement is an exercise in state violence that reverberates southward through Mexico and into Central America (Slack, Martínez, and Whiteford, 2018). In this view, U.S. border hardening explains much of the predation that Central Americans suffer in Mexico, and U.S. deportations are an important reason for the rise of gang violence in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. For scholars who think about debt (e.g., Johnson and Woodhouse, 2018), this too is mainly the consequence of U.S. border hardening.

A new Democratic president took office in January 2021. Joe Biden has pledged to reverse his predecessor’s border policies, so let’s say that he adopts the recommendations of more than 100 law professors and migration researchers (Heyman, 2019). The new priority becomes, not stopping unauthorized border crossers, but providing safe haven for asylum applicants. Per the scholars’ recommendations, unaccompanied minors receive professional care. Families are not detained unless strictly necessary. All asylum applicants receive government-funded legal counsel. Applicants who say they are fleeing gang and domestic violence are taken seriously. And so, as predicted by the migration scholars making these recommendations, many Central Americans applying for asylum receive it.

Now then, will legal status transform the way Central Americans fare in the U.S. labor market? To answer, let us consider the impact that low service-sector wages have on U.S. citizens. Many work full-time without getting their chins above the poverty line. Will Central Americans be more successful in those same jobs? Probably not, because paying immigrants below the poverty line

has the same impact as paying Americans below the poverty line—it generates chronic deficits and pushes them deeper into debt. What differs is how natives and immigrants deal with these deficits. For low-wage Americans, access to the financial industry makes it easy to bleed them. They run up balances on credit cards, pay penalties, become chained to payday loans, and lose everything but their due dates.

Many Central American immigrants still have little access to the financial industry, so how do they cope with deficits? One way is to bring up reinforcements from Central America—additional family members who become additional earners. However low each wage, these can be pooled to rent a crowded apartment. Any kids can be put in school, serious injuries can be taken to an emergency room, and any newborns will be U.S. citizens who qualify for certain benefits. But their ceaseless struggle against deficits reverberates in Central America in the form of irregular and declining remittances, pressuring more of their relatives to come north.

Remittances, by pouring down on some but not all households, by stopping and starting unpredictably, can be thought of as a hope machine whose most reliable product is relative deprivation. This is what sucks an endless stream of hopefuls into the dangers of the migrant trail and the illusions of the U.S. labor market. Sixty dollars a day in the United States is eight times what a migrant can earn in Guatemala, but that impressive purchasing power depends upon their being remitted to Guatemala. Only there do the dollars vault a migrant's family into the lower middle class—temporarily. If the migrant stays in the United States long enough to start a new family, or if he brings his family along, that daily US\$60 or even US\$100 is far below the U.S. cost of living. Once a migrant's frame of reference shifts from Guatemala to the United States, he returns to poverty. The dollars that were worth so much in his own country lose most of their value once he decides to make his life in the United States, even as their treacherous allure pulls more of his relatives north.

In Nebaj, along with many success stories, I hear of one disaster after another. A local organization has become a mortuary coordinator for a steady flow of bodies not from border crossing but from car accidents, alcoholism, other diseases, suicide, and drowning in swimming pools. Some of the success stories are due to falsifying legal identities, which makes it easy to mask exploitation of one migrant by another. In one such case, a Nebaj man achieves provisional liberty in the United States thanks to a teenager who is not actually his daughter. Once they have found a place to live, he demands that she cook and clean for him, alarming observers that pregnancy will soon result. In another case, an enterprising 18-year-old becomes acquainted with a new stateside boyfriend on Facebook. He lends her the money to come north as an unaccompanied minor. If this approach to fundraising continues, it will lead to sexual exploitation.

Once migration produces unrepayable debts, coercion can arrive quickly, at which point human smuggling becomes human trafficking (Naim, 2005: 89). According to the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act, human trafficking involves "force, fraud, or coercion" (Weitzer, 2014: 8). This threshold is easy to cross when traditional gender norms are applied to young women in debt. A 16-year-old from Nebaj named Cecilia got as far as Texas before someone in the

coyote network to which her parents had entrusted her decided that she owed more money. When her parents could not pay up, she was rescued only by a Florida human rights activist who purchased her from two men with a gun. And so Cecilia ended up not as a debt slave but on the front page of the *New York Times* (Cave and Robles, 2014). The force, fraud, or coercion threshold is also easy to cross when small children are used to obtain legal status. If all it takes to establish lawful presence in the United States is a child in hand, this incentivizes the sale or rental of children. The *Washington Post* found a Guatemalan village whose schools were emptying out as children were taken north, with some families selling their children to other adults for this purpose. Such “adoptions” were being facilitated by the nearest government registry, which was selling fake papers to prove parenthood. “This is a crime,” observed a local educator. “This is human trafficking” (Partlow and Miroff, 2018).

Once in the United States, the very scale of arrival guarantees that minors are exposed to dangers that U.S. social workers will be unable to detect. Thus in Palm Beach, Florida, the school district has 2,000 seventh-to-eleventh-graders who need remedial English in summer school, but only half of them enroll. “They have to go to school, but that is not what they came here for,” observes a school official. “Many are tending to younger siblings or working to help their families make ends meet.” They work “either to send money home, to pay off debts to migrant smugglers, or to support themselves” (Jordan, 2019). In the meatpacking town of Worthington, Minnesota, 129 unaccompanied minors arrive in the summer of 2019. Many are housed “with unfamiliar relatives who offer little support,” to the point that schoolteachers buy them groceries. According to Michael Miller (2019), “A lot of these kids suffer horrible trauma on the journey to the United States” and “feel pressured to work to pay off their debts and contribute to household expenses.”

ASYLUM AND NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM

Asylum advocates believe that many Central American migrants are fleeing death and therefore have a human right to reach the United States by any means necessary. Thus, if Central Americans frame themselves as refugees, the cautionary principle calls for asylum advocates to accept them as such. But asylum advocates don’t just want Central Americans to be welcomed; they also want them to be protected. That requires U.S. authorities to distinguish between victims and victimizers in a migration stream, and that requires monitoring how migrants are being treated by relatives and employers in the United States. Therefore the cautionary principle cannot be applied merely to border enforcement. It also must be applied to how migrants get here and what happens after they arrive. Asylum advocates further believe that Central American migrants will be better off in the United States than they are at home. Certainly the migrants believe this, but this is an empirical issue that researchers cannot decide merely by invoking the latest horror story from Honduras or the purchasing power of the dollar. In the case of Nebajense households and no small number of Central American households like them, they are sending their most energetic earners to a foreign country where their earnings will be higher but their resiliency and reliability will be lower.

Yes, the American Dream would have us believe that migrants will make a better life in the United States. But migration scholars know enough about the American Dream that we should keep this question open. We know that, while the U.S. economy has a long history of soaking up immigrant labor, the way it does so refutes national mythology that the United States is a land of opportunity for all. When we think about neoliberal capitalism at the macro-level, we have no trouble recognizing how the marketization of governance produces deficits that turn into debts and become extractive mechanisms. At the micro-level, we seem to have a harder time acknowledging how migration monetizes familial relationships and heightens familial exploitation.

The reason for this blind spot, I believe, is anger over the human cost of border enforcement. For scholars who make their living by studying human flows across borders, nothing provokes more distress than human remains in the Arizona desert or a small child crying for her mother or a despairing deportee who, as far as we can tell, did nothing to deserve this fate. Long before President Trump, many of us became accustomed to justifying our research by supporting immigrant rights. The most obvious way to do so is to train our moral spotlight on U.S. border enforcement and the deportation industry (Peutz and De Genova, 2010). Left in shadow by the spotlight on the deportation industry is the migration industry. Human smugglers are harder to interview than officials, and they don't leave paper trails accessible under the Freedom of Information Act. Focusing on border enforcement casts an even deeper shadow on the familial financial relationships that Warnecke-Berger compares to the extraction of rent and I compare to pyramid-style investment patterns.

If we look carefully at the indebtedness generated by the American Dream, it becomes apparent that the migration industry is deepening the hold of neoliberal capitalism on Central Americans not just by making them dependent on the U.S. labor market but by encouraging them to financialize their relationships with their closest relatives. Asylum advocacy that neglects debt, and debt analysis that neglects how this is generated by the U.S. economy, means neglecting how labor migration obliges migrants to exploit each other. With or without legal status, the underlying issue for migrants will continue to be their position in the U.S. job market, because this is the ultimate source of the deficits that increase their vulnerability to human trafficking.

REFERENCES

- Baker-Cristales, Beth
2004 "Salvadoran transformations: class consciousness and ethnic identity in a transnational milieu." *Latin American Perspectives* 31 (5): 15–33.
- Camus, Manuela
2008 *La sorpresita del Norte: Migración internacional y comunidad en Huehuetenango*. Antigua, Guatemala: Editorial Junajpu.
- Camus, Manuela (ed.)
2007 *Comunidades en movimiento: La migración internacional en el norte de Huehuetenango*. Huehuetenango, Guatemala: Centro de Documentación de la Frontera Occidental de Guatemala.
- Cave, Damien and Frances Robles
2014 "A smuggled girl's odyssey of false promises and fear." *New York Times*, October 5.

- Cohn, D'Vera, Jeffrey Passel, and Ana Gonzalez-Barrera
2017 "Rise in U.S. immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras outpaces growth from elsewhere." *Pew Research Center*, December 7.
- Cox, John
2018 *Fast Money Schemes: Hope and Deception in Papua New Guinea*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- De Leon, Jason
2015 *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dialogue
2019 "Fact sheet: family remittances to Latin America and the Caribbean in 2018." February 8. <https://www.thedialogue.org/analysis/fact-sheet-family-remittances-to-latin-america-and-the-caribbean-in-2018> (accessed November 5, 2020).
- Diaz-Barriga, Miguel and Margaret Dorsey
2015 "The constitution-free zone in the United States: law and life in a state of carcelment." *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 38 (2): 204–225.
- Ferguson, James
1994 *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fischer, Edward F. and Peter Benson
2006 *Broccoli and Desire: Global Connections and Maya Struggles in Postwar Guatemala*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Garni, Alisa and L. Frank Weyher
2013 "Dollars, 'free trade,' and migration: the combined forces of alienation in postwar El Salvador." *Latin American Perspectives* 40 (5): 62–77.
- Heyman, Josiah
2019 "Expert response to the Final Emergency Interim Report of the CBP Families and Children Care Panel of the Homeland Security Advisory Council." https://www.academia.edu/39492879/EXPERT_RESPONSE_TO_THE_FINAL_EMERGENCY_INTERIM_REPORT_OF_THE_CBP_FAMILIES_AND_CHILDREN_CARE_PANEL_OF_THE_HOMELAND_SECURITY_ADVISORY_COUNCIL (accessed December 10, 2019).
- Johnson, Richard L. and Murphy Woodhouse
2018 "Securing the return: how enhanced US border enforcement fuels cycles of debt migration." *Antipode* 50: 976–996.
- Jordan, Miriam
2019 "Schools scramble to handle thousands of new migrant families." *New York Times*, July 9.
- Levitt, Peggy
2001 *The Transnational Villagers*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mahler, Sarah
1995 *American Dreaming: Immigrant Life on the Margins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Menjívar, Cecilia
2000 *Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Miles, Ann
2004 *From Cuenca to Queens: An Anthropological Story of Transnational Migration*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Miller, Michael E.
2019 "Immigrant kids fill this town's school: their bus driver is leading backlash." *Washington Post*, September 22.
- Miroff, Nick and Kevin Sieff
2019 "Trump administration to send DHS agents, investigators to Guatemala-Mexico border." *Washington Post*, May 31.
- Naim, Moises
2005 *Illicit: How Smugglers, Traffickers, and Copycats Are Hijacking the Global Economy*. New York: Doubleday.
- Nazario, Sonia
2006 *Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite with his Mother*. New York: Penguin Random House.

- Nowrasteh, Alex
2019 "1.3 percent of all Central Americans in the Northern Triangle were apprehended by Border Patrol this fiscal year." *Cato at Liberty*. <https://www.cato.org/blog/13-percent-all-central-americans-northern-triangle-were-apprehended-border-patrol-fiscal-year> (accessed November 1, 2020).
- Partlow, Joshua and Nick Miroff
2018 "For Central Americans, children open a path to the U.S.—and bring a discount." *Washington Post*, November 23.
- Pedersen, David
2013 *American Value: Migrants, Money, and Meaning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Peutz, Nathalie and Nicholas De Genova (eds.)
2010 *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Public Intelligence
2014 "Border Patrol apprehension data: 1 January to 14 May 2014," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, originally released by Adam Isacson, Washington Office on Latin America. <https://publicintelligence.net/dhs-uac-map> (accessed November 5, 2020).
- Reichman, Daniel R.
2011 *The Broken Village: Coffee, Migration, and Globalization in Honduras*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Romero, Simon and Caitlin Dickerson
2019 " 'Desperation of thousands' pushes migrants into ever remote terrain." *New York Times*, January 29.
- Schmalzbauer, Leah
2008 "Family divided: the class formation of Honduran transnational families." *Global Networks* 8: 329–346.
- Slack, Jeremy, Daniel E. Martínez, and Scott Whiteford (eds.)
2018 *The Shadow of the Wall: Violence and Migration on the U.S.-Mexico Border*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Smith, Robert
2005 *Mexican New York: Transnational Lives of New Immigrants*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stoll, David
2012 *El Norte or Bust! How Migration Fever and Microcredit Produced a Financial Crash in a Latin American Town*. Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield.
- U.S. Customs and Border Protection
2019 "Southwest border migration FY 2019." <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration/fy-2019> (accessed November 5, 2020).
- Verdery, Katherine
1995 "Faith, hope, and *caritas* in the land of the pyramids: Romania, 1990 to 1994." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37: 625–669.
- Warnecke-Berger, Hannes
2018 "Salvadoran transnational transgressions: remittances, rents, and the struggle over economic space," pp. 219–242 in Gabriele Pisarz-Ramirez and Hannes Warnecke-Berger (eds.), *Processes of Spatialization in the Americas: Configurations and Narratives*. New York: Peter Lang.
2019 *Politics and Violence in Central America and the Caribbean*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Weitzer, Ronald
2014 "New directions in research on human trafficking." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 653 (1): 6–24.
- Workman, Daniel
2019 "Top Central American export countries." <http://www.worldstopexports.com/top-central-american-export-countries> (accessed November 5, 2020).
- Yarris, Kristin E.
2017 *Care across Generations: Solidarity and Sacrifice in Transnational Families*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.