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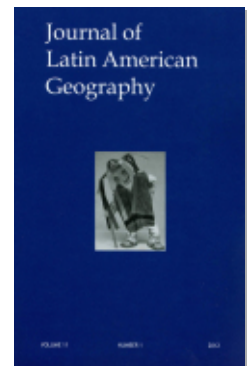
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The City Will Come to Us: Development Discourse and the New Rurality in Atotonilco El Bajo, Mexico

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Abstract

A declining agricultural sector and decades of US migration have transformed Atotonilco El Bajo, Mexico into what local residents call “the ghost town.” More recently, Atotonilco’s increasing connections to nearby Guadalajara are prompting a shift in local development discourse towards one that is more focused on regional integration than transnational migration. These changes are broadly reflective of a “new rurality” in Latin America, an intensified process of spatial and economic transformation that is blurring the line between rural and urban. Drawing from transnational ethnographic research, this paper calls for “new rurality” studies to more explicitly engage with locally-contingent development discourses.

Keywords: *migration, new rurality, development discourse, transnational ethnography*

Resumen

La disminución del sector agrícola y décadas de migración a los EE.UU. han transformado Atotonilco El Bajo, México en lo que los residentes llaman “el pueblo fantasma.” Recientemente, la creciente conexión entre Atotonilco y Guadalajara ha provocado un cambio en el discurso del desarrollo local hacia uno más enfocado en la integración regional que la migración transnacional. Estos cambios reflejan una “nueva ruralidad” en América Latina, una intensificación del proceso de transformación rural que está borrando la distinción entre las zonas rurales y urbanas. Basado en la investigación etnográfica transnacional, este artículo pide que investigaciones dentro de “la nueva ruralidad” se acoplen más explícitamente con los discursos de desarrollo local.

Palabras clave: *migración, nueva ruralidad, discurso de desarrollo, etnografía transnacional*

Introduction

Several decades of neoliberal economic reforms, transnational migration, and, within the last decade, regional infrastructure projects have exposed Atotonilco El Bajo, Mexico to international and regional economies that have irrevocably altered village life. This paper draws from multi-sited in-depth ethnographic research to detail how residents of Atotonilco have adjusted to the challenges and opportunities of economic integration, and how those strategies are always situated within particular discourses about development. Atotonilco El Bajo has been heavily influenced by over forty years of transnational migration, contributing to a sense of migration dependency

and a depressed entrepreneurial culture for those who have been “left behind” in “the ghost town.” More recently, the village is being affected by its increasingly strong connections to the city of Guadalajara, connections that are causing many locals to consider how they’ll be positioned when the city “comes to them.” In what follows, these development discourses, and their associated narratives and practices, will be presented relationally, as a product of Atotonilco’s relationship with the primary destination for its migrant community, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and the most influential city in the region, Guadalajara. This multi-sited relational approach highlights the increasingly open nature of material and discursive life in Atotonilco, an openness that is characteristic of what’s being called a “new rurality” in Latin America. This paper also serves as both an illustration of, and a call for, new rurality studies that are more explicitly engaged with relationally-constructed, yet locally-situated development discourses.

The New Rurality and Development Discourse

Nearly three decades of neoliberal reforms have resulted in profound political, economic, and social changes throughout the Latin American countryside. The support for smallholder agriculture that dominated rural development policies through the 1970s has given way to national and, indeed, international strategies of agricultural industrialization and liberalization (Kay 2002). While some have argued that the reorientation of rural development policy since the early 1980s has rendered peasants “superfluous” (Otero 2004) or “a residual political category” (Hecht 2010), rural families continue to develop household survival strategies that deserve investigation. Since the mid-1990s, a growing body of literature has attempted to explain recent changes under a loose analytical framework, known as the “new rurality” or, in deference to its Latin American roots, *la nueva ruralidad* (Arias and Woo 2007). It should be noted that even the “new ruralist” might concede that most of these changes are not, in fact, new. Rural communities in Latin America have long been implicated in processes of industrialization, urbanization, and globalization. Rather, it is argued that these processes have intensified under neoliberal policies, and have come to dominate the development of rural Latin American.

The new rurality framework is built on empirical observations of several key transformations that are underway in the Latin American countryside (Arias and Woo 2007; see Kay 2008 for a concise discussion of the origin and evolution of new rurality literature). Primary among these changes is the shift from primary economic activity to participation in non-farm occupations in manufacturing and services. Salaried employment and formal and informal commercial activity have come to supplement and, in many cases, supersede the household income generated from farming (Appendini 2007). Furthermore, the participation in non-farm economic activity ties rural communities to urban centers where products are bought, sold, and, often, produced. Daily or weekly commutes to nearby cities for work or commerce are becoming a regular routine for many rural residents (del Rosario Cota Yáñez 2007). This shift in economic development has been accompanied by the feminization and flexibilization of the labor force (Estrada Igúñiz 2007). Women are increasingly taking part in rural non-farm commercial activity, particularly in the informal sector, reflecting changes that have been underway in urban areas for some time (Escobar Latapí and González de la Rocha 2002; Chant 2004).

The increasing dependency of rural households on the urban economy is blurring the line between urban and rural. Indeed, this ambiguity provides the ontological thrust for those who argue that a truly new rurality is taking shape (Arias and Woo 2007). This argument is reinforced by an inverted process whereby urban residents

are increasingly looking to the countryside for refuge (Hecht 2010). The rising cost of land in the city and disaffection with a hectic and often polluted urban environment is encouraging more mobile urban residents to look for land farther outside the city limits. In addition to residential flight, manufacturing facilities, sometimes encouraged by government policies, are relocating outside of the urban core to suburban and peri-urban spaces (Chong Muñoz 2007; Aguilar and Ward 2003). In a related phenomenon, business communities in outlying areas are organizing to take advantage of developing infrastructure and commercial networks in order to market their products to urban residents (Buzán 2007).

Another prominent characteristic of the new rurality is the increasing importance of international migration and remittances for rural households. Faced with limited economic opportunity in rural villages, including limited access to productive resources that would enable the commercialization of agricultural activities (Gravel 2007), rural residents are drawing on transnational migration networks to supplement household income. The money that is sent back is primarily used for basic consumption, but also goes to subsidize small-scale agriculture, education, and household and village infrastructure and maintenance (Durand *et al.* 1996; Conway and Cohen 1998; Martin 1998; Cohen *et al.* 2005). The role of migration and remittances in the new rurality has led to a situation where some small rural communities are perceived to have more resources than larger, more-established towns (Yarnall and Price 2010). It has even been argued that migrant remittances may contribute more to poverty reduction in rural Latin America than any other component of the new rurality (Kay 2008). However, in the absence of significant government investments in infrastructure, education, health care, and small business financing, and, without a migration regime that facilitates the cyclical flow of labor migrants, productive investments in migrant communities are likely to be limited (Durand *et al.* 1996; Smith and Bakker 2008; Jones 2009; Portes 2009).

Much of this work on the new rurality employs mixed methods using a case study approach to track changing livelihood strategies and materialities in the context of neoliberal economic restructuring. For example, Yarnall and Price (2010), writing for this journal, used a combination of field observations, census data, remittance surveys, and interviews to highlight how migration and remittances are altering material relationships among and within communities in the Valle Alto of Bolivia, creating a “new Bolivian rurality.” While their findings are clearly explained and elucidated through example, they only begin to hint at the normative reactions of locals to those changes. Similarly, in Gravel’s (2007) work on the “new rural economy” in Querétaro, Mexico, we find ample evidence of changing livelihood strategies as small-scale farmers struggle to compete with mechanized agri-business, but little in the way of local narratives about their reorientation away from agriculture. This same pattern is seen in Arias and Woo’s (2007) collection of essays on the new rurality in Mexico. However important this body of work in tracking material changes at the household and village level, it fails to make strong connections between the livelihood decisions that are made in the household and how those decisions are influenced by local narratives and discourses about development.

It is my contention that research into the social and economic restructuring occurring under the new rurality would be enriched through a more explicit engagement with local narratives about development and the articulation of those narratives with particular discourses. Though the household is still the primary unit of economic organization for most rural families, social, political, and economic integration has a tendency to marginalize households and communities at the expense of a larger project of national modernization (Foucault 1991). Neoliberal reforms in rural Latin America have not only exposed rural families to national and international markets,

forcing a reorientation of the household economy; they have also caused many people to change the way they think and talk about their respective positions in their village, the nation, and the world (Radcliffe and Westwood 1996; Chase 2002; Larraín 2004). As the modernization paradigm takes hold, and particularly its neoliberal strain, rural communities are increasingly characterized as “underdeveloped” (Cruikshank 2009). Globalization and development are seen as aspatial processes and the integration and modernization of all places is only a matter of time. The modernization narrative is then reified by dominant discourses that both naturalize Western notions of development and delegitimize local, place-based efforts (Crush et al. 1995; Escobar 2001). But development is spatial and highly uneven, and the narratives and discourses that accompany neoliberal globalization are mediated by specific interactions in particular places (Massey 2005). This is especially true in the countryside, where, after many levels of mediation, already hybridized development discourses must be able to positively articulate with local actors and local environments in order to gain legitimacy (Woods 2007). Thus, as a way of understanding why rural places develop as they do and how alternative paths might be envisaged, Woods calls for “more qualitative and ethnographic research uncovering the discourses and narratives of globalization, rurality and place that frame the responses of local actors (*Ibid.* 503).” As the new rurality takes hold in the countryside, it is important to ask not just how people are responding to changes, but how those responses are framed by local narratives about what is happening, and what is and is not possible going forward. The following study attempts to elucidate particular narratives surrounding development in the village of Atotonilco El Bajo, and to show how those narratives work to shape an evolving, though locally dominant, discourse that is highly reflective of a new rurality in Latin America.

Methodology

To capture the relational nature of development discourse in Atotonilco El Bajo, Mexico, a multi-sited transnational ethnography was used in this study (Marcus 1995; Kurotani 2004; Courtney Smith 2006). I lived as a participant observer in Atotonilco El Bajo, a village of 2,466 in the state of Jalisco, Mexico, from December 2009 through June 2010. A follow-up trip to Atotonilco was made in December 2010. Over this period, I conducted over a dozen in-depth interviews, held several focus groups, attended village meetings and parties, surveyed sixty households, and spent innumerable hours on the street in casual conversation. Purposive sampling was used in selecting participants for the in-depth interviews and focus groups in order to capture the perspectives of people from a variety of targeted social positions (e.g. a school principal, the manager of the money transfer office, highly educated youth, business owners, a government delegate, clothing factory employees, a history teacher, the *ejido* leadership council, etc.). In contrast, the surveys were designed to capture a random sample of households from throughout Atotonilco and to offset potential bias from the in-depth interviews. Furthermore, my extensive time in the village allowed me to interact with locals from a wide variety of socio-economic and demographic backgrounds. My initial contacts with residents of Atotonilco were developed in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where well over 1,000 *totachos* (residents of Atotonilco El Bajo) now reside. I spent over two years developing these contacts as an ELL tutor and, later, as a member of a Milwaukee-based soccer team, composed mostly of players from Atotonilco. In Milwaukee, I conducted ten in-depth interviews and held dozens of conversations with migrants from Atotonilco in preparation for my Mexico-based fieldwork. Snowball sampling was used in selecting interview participants in Milwaukee. Contact with Milwaukee-based migrants and residents of Atotonilco El Bajo have been sustained since returning to Milwaukee,

where I live. The transnational ethnographic approach has enabled me to gain a better understanding of the relational construction of development discourse in Atotonilco, while keeping in mind the political-economic contexts which influence its production (Buroway 2000; Lawson 2000; Bailey 2001; Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2007; Smith and Bakker 2008).

In keeping with the multi-sited ethnographic approach, the results of this study are divided into three sections based on three places – Milwaukee, Atotonilco El Bajo, and Guadalajara – that together influence development discourse in and about Atotonilco. These place-based sections are not intended to sharply delineate particular spaces nor are they assumed to capture the perspectives of all migrants from and residents of Atotonilco El Bajo. Ethnographic work reveals how the places of Milwaukee, Atotonilco El Bajo, and Guadalajara mean different things to different people depending on age, gender, education, and occupation among other characteristics. However, this research also reveals how a dominant set of relationally constructed narratives, when taken together, contribute to a remarkably consistent, though evolving, discourse about economic life and development in Atotonilco El Bajo.

The Construction of Development Discourse in Atotonilco El Bajo

Milwaukee: a place to work and settle

Like many cities in the Midwest, Milwaukee has seen a substantial increase in its Latino population over the last 20 years, more than doubling from 1990 to 2000, when it reached over 71,000 (US Census Bureau). There are now over 100,000 Latinos living within the city limits, comprising 17.3 percent of the overall population (*Ibid.*). The majority of the over 1,000 migrants from Atotonilco El Bajo in Milwaukee live on the south-side, where they began settling in the 1970s. Migrants from Atotonilco work in a variety of employment sectors, including manufacturing (e.g. food processing, die-casting, Harley-Davidson), service (e.g. custodial, hairstyling, day-care, hospice-care, restaurants), and construction (e.g. dry-walling, landscaping, roofing) throughout the Milwaukee metropolitan area. Like many residents of Milwaukee, Atotonilco's migrants have struggled during the present period of high unemployment. Many, if not most, have had their work hours reduced and some have lost their jobs and homes; yet nearly all interviewed migrants continue to send money back to Atotonilco, though in lesser sums.

It should come as no surprise that the primary motivation for migration to Milwaukee has been economic opportunity. Most of the early sojourners to Milwaukee spent some time in the Los Angeles area but found less competition, higher wages, and a lower cost of living in Milwaukee. These initial migrants, the *primeros*, then began luring friends and family to Milwaukee with the promise of steady employment, beginning the process of chain migration that led to a phenomenon where about half the population of Atotonilco now lives in Milwaukee. Although many of those who made it to Milwaukee permanently settle there, few left Atotonilco with that intention. Due to the lack of either gainful employment or available credit, the majority of migrants came to earn enough money to build a house back in Atotonilco in hopes of settling there. Although migrant return had been a prominent practice for several decades, the character of migration began changing in the 1990s and 2000s as many of the *primeros* and their new families became residents following the amnesty provisions of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA).

Migrant settlement in destinations like Milwaukee is now far more common than return to Atotonilco. In fact, four out of five adult migrants from Atotonilco are estimated to be settled in the US with their children (author's survey, May-June 2010). However, many immigrants from Atotonilco, particularly men, still talk of retiring in

Mexico. Milwaukee, for them, has come to represent a space of work, stress, and pressure. Although grateful for the economic opportunities they have found in Milwaukee, they characterize the city, in stark contrast to Atotonilco, as a place where “you live by the clock,” “there are always bills to pay,” and “if you don’t work for a day, you’ll be in trouble with the business, you won’t have enough to pay the electricity, or to eat.” Many of these migrants have not given up the dream of returning to their homes in Atotonilco to live out the final years of their lives. This dream of return is made practical through remittance investments in home construction and improvement, and the planting of sugarcane, which affords a pension after ten years. Though this may be a feasible economic plan, it is invariably complicated by familial relations. The desire to be close to grandchildren, who are often settled with their parents in Milwaukee, particularly for women, becomes a major restraint on the retirement plans of Mexican migrant couples. Furthermore, for many Mexican women the macho space of Atotonilco has lost its appeal. Retirement homes remain as vacation homes for most. The resulting urban form in Atotonilco is one of spatial expansion, as more homes are built on the edge of town, and declining urban density, as the population steadily decreases from outmigration. In the words of one immigrant woman who has been settled in Milwaukee for over 20 years, the paradoxical process of both growth and decline is due to the narrative that “we all have the idea – the illusion – that we’re going to return to Atotonilco.”

Atotonilco El Bajo: “the ghost town”

Atotonilco El Bajo is a small village of 2,466 located in the traditional migrant sending state of Jalisco, Mexico (COEPO 2010). As in many other rural communities in Mexico, under the neoliberal era the traditional agricultural base of Atotonilco is giving way to a more diversified economy. In 2000, residents of the village were nearly equally employed in the primary, secondary and tertiary employment sectors, marking a significant change from 1990 when over 50 percent worked in the primary sector (COEPO 2005). There is a small clothing factory and candy-making operation and some residents are now making the daily or weekly trip to Guadalajara to study or work in manufacturing and retail. There are also numerous convenience stores, several internet cafes, clothing stores and hardware stores, and about a dozen formal and informal small restaurant operations. Many of the men still work in agriculture, mostly as laborers in the corn, sugarcane, or agave plantations around town, while a few manage small greenhouse operations. The younger generation is considerably more educated than their parents and is unlikely to work full time in agriculture, particularly doing the arduous work of harvesting agave or sugar cane.

A particularly important set of recent developments is the rise in both land values and extra-legal land sales in Atotonilco. On the heels of a decade of neoliberal economic and agricultural reforms and, in preparation for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Mexican Constitution was amended and a new Agrarian Law was passed in 1992 to allow communal landholders (*ejidatarios*), who formerly held only usufruct rights over parcels of communal land (*ejidos*), to legally sell or rent their parcels to other residents or outsiders (see Cornelius and Myrhe 1998 for a comprehensive analysis of these changes and their varied outcomes throughout Mexico). The Program for Certification of Ejidal Rights and Titling of Urban Patios (PROCEDE) was created to implement this reform charging the National Institute of Statistics, Geography, and Information (INEGI) with mapping ejidos and the National Agrarian Registry (RAN) with providing titles to individual ejidatarios. The ejido of Atotonilco, like well over 90 percent of ejidos throughout Mexico, has taken part in PROCEDE in having its communal lands mapped and individual parcels certified. However, by law, a two-thirds

vote by the ejido general assembly is required for individual parcels to become fully privatized (*dominio pleno*), and, to date, no such permission has been granted in Atotonilco. Nevertheless, the possibility of legal transfer from public to private land tenure, when combined with Atotonilco's proximity to the ever encroaching city of Guadalajara, has driven up both land values and the incentive for ejidatarios to sell to developers. Thus, in order to avoid official transaction costs as well as the challenges of getting approval from the *ejido* general assembly, most land sales in Atotonilco are being made illegally, without officially transferring the land to private ownership. This trend towards certification without full privatization, and the consequent extra-legal land transfers, is seen throughout much of Mexico and is reflective of a range of fairly resilient locally specific de facto semi-private ownership systems that existed before the 1992 reforms (Perramond 2008; Barnes 2009).

Though Atotonilco El Bajo is only about 70 km from Guadalajara, its location eight kilometers off the main highway that connects Guadalajara to the coast has kept it free of unattractive commercial development. It boasts clean streets, well-kept homes, two modest but well-maintained plazas and two cathedrals. Add to these features rich agricultural soils, a moderate rainy season, and thermal springs that are piped right into local homes and one can see why residents are so proud of their pueblo. Migrants in Milwaukee and local residents alike speak of the tranquility of their village and the friendliness of its people, contrasting it with nearby villages, which, according to totachos, have been scarred by commercial development or made dangerous by the vices of lost youth. The tranquility of the village, however, all but vanishes in December as hundreds of migrants return to Atotonilco from the US, many of them spending lavishly on the two patron saint festivals that fall within the month or on the near daily string of *quinceñeras* (birthday parties for girls who turn 15; an important step towards womanhood), weddings and baptisms. Live entertainment, food and alcohol are all provided, and often paid for by money earned in the US (Figure 1). This is an important social time for migrants and residents alike, as communal and familial bonds are strengthened, couples are made, and migrant social status is reasserted; but it is also a crucial economic time for locals, as tens of thousands of dollars are flushed into the local economy. However, by the middle of January, most migrants have returned to the US, and the tranquility of the village returns along with a sense of economic isolation and stagnation for many local residents.



Figure 1 – An advertisement for a nationally renowned band that played at Atotonilco El Bajo's patron saint festival at the expense of a prominent migrant family.

(Photo by author)

Atotonilco El Bajo is known by locals, as well as those in neighboring villages, as “the ghost town.” Its plazas are all but empty eleven months out of the year and its streets have none of the bustle seen in other pueblos of similar size. Its commercial core consists of an ice cream shop, a video arcade, a furniture store, a clothing store/internet terminal, a liquor store, the money exchange/transfer office, and a small un-advertised restaurant. Outside of the festival season, business is nearly always slow and the young employees who operate these establishments spend much of the day chatting with each other on store-front stoops. Perhaps the one exception is the money exchange and transfer office, a branch of the Mexico-based Giramex, which has a fairly steady flow of costumers, particularly during the first few months of the year when money from US tax returns are wired to Atotonilco, often draining the exchange of all its cash before the 4 pm closing time. The manager of the local Giramex estimates that on average \$40-50,000 is transferred to her office per week, 90 percent coming from Milwaukee. These regular cash transfers, according to many residents of Atotonilco and migrants, provide the means for nearly everyone in the village to, at the very least, purchase all household necessities. However, a household survey (May-June 2010) suggests that just over half of Atotonilco’s residents actually receive remittances, most commonly about \$100 per month. Many residents have simply been left out of the remittance economy relying more on government assistance to purchase basic goods, the cost of which have risen along with the spending power of those who do receive money from abroad (Stark *et al.* 1986, Jones 1998). Nevertheless, nearly everyone agrees that the purchasing power of the average resident of Atotonilco today is far greater than in previous generations, so why is there still so little entrepreneurial activity?

The following exchanges during a focus group with employees in the town center reveal that despite the friendliness and familiarity of the village there are deep-seated cultural elements of life in Atotonilco that residents believe limit economic opportunity:

Author: What other opportunities are there in Atotonilco apart from these businesses [where you work]?

Silvia: There is also the clothing factory and the sugar factory, but what I’ve heard is that they don’t pay very well, or at least they don’t value your work. You work long days and the pay isn’t commensurate.

Marta: [There is little opportunity] because people here don’t understand growth. If you want to expand [your business] people get jealous and they want to keep you down by, for example, going somewhere else to buy something [that they could buy here]. So, the money doesn’t stay here. If we all thought about consuming what there is right here, we would grow. [But] the money doesn’t stay here and the pueblo will never grow, and it will always be the same.

Author: Why do people always go to other places to do their shopping, is it economic, is it cultural?

Marta: I think that more than anything it’s a tradition of leaving the pueblo to go shopping. People say I need this I’m going to go here, even though those same things are available in the pueblo.

Sylvia: In the case of the money exchange, they check the rate and yes it's a little more than in Zacoalco [de Torres] (about 30km away) but if you think, "OK, I'm going to change \$200," I'm going to give you 20 cents less. OK, the bus to Zacoalco, how much does that cost, the time, how much are you going to spend in gas, but people do it to leave [the pueblo].

Author: How will Atotonilco change in the future, economically, demographically, and culturally?

Marta: My husband and I have both observed that almost everyone doing business here comes from outside the community. Why is this? Because people from here want to go to the US. The Ice Cream shop, the furniture store, Giramex [all started by people from outside the community]...why don't the people from here start businesses? Because they don't have faith in the pueblo.

Sylvia: Yes, it's progressed in the last ten years. Ten years ago there wasn't a furniture store, there wasn't a money transfer business, there was no internet cafe...now we have three. Yes, it's gotten better for me because some streets have been paved [and] the government has improved. But, yes, every year it's emptier. But now it's not like before, when after December ten guys would leave...

These excerpts are representative of a particular discourse that dominates local understandings of economic development and entrepreneurial culture in Atotonilco. First, though the clothing and candy operations employ more people than any other local business, they are rejected outright by most as an undesirable employment option, only fit for desperate women with no more than a primary school education. A focus group with employees of the clothing operation confirms that factory wages are indeed extremely low, about U\$35 on average for a 50 hour work week, and working conditions are poor. The owner of the clothing factory defends the low pay, telling me that, as a contractor under the *maquiladora* (or contract work) system, regional and international competition has significantly trimmed his profit margins, necessitating the low wages. Far more salient in the minds of most residents is the idea of starting a small commercial or service-based enterprise. However, there is a remarkably consistent narrative about entrepreneurial culture in Atotonilco, reflected in Marta's comment about the "jealousy" of others as an impediment to growth: locals won't allow any one individual "to get ahead." The words "jealousy", "envy", "egotism", and "pride" were all used by residents I interviewed to describe a culture in which individual success provokes feelings of resentment among others. In order to keep things in a more egalitarian stasis potential entrepreneurs are dissuaded from opening businesses. And if someone does move forward with his or her plans, the question of "why him and not me" is used to launch either a smear campaign or a rival business, often selling the same product.

The lack of economic development, according to local residents and observed elsewhere in Mexico (Reichert 1981; Weist 1984), is also attributed to another related cultural practice; the tradition of leaving the village to go shopping. Whether it's a trip to exchange money and slurp slushies in Zacoalco, dinner and a stroll in the plaza in Cocula, "the cradle of Mariachi," or the bank and Tuesday street market in Villa Corona (the three major towns that are within 45 minutes), residents here savor their trips out of town. To be sure, all three of these towns are larger than Atotonilco; they all have major

banks, larger street markets, and a greater variety of relatively well-supplied shops and restaurants. However, as both Sylvia and Marta point out, many of the products found there can also be found in Atotonilco at a comparable price, which is even cheaper when you factor in transportation. Nearly all interviewees acknowledge that there have indeed been some changes in the commercial landscape of Atotonilco over the last ten years. The money exchange (yet still no bank branch), three Internet cafes, and several small businesses, selling building supplies, basic household items, and prepared food have been started. However, as Marta mentioned, it is often outside investors or transplants to Atotonilco, like herself, who start the most successful businesses – local residents “don’t have faith in the pueblo.”

After several decades of fairly intense transnational migration, most residents of Atotonilco have come to see greater economic opportunity doing wage labor in the US than in entrepreneurial investment or low-wage labor in their hometown. There is, of course, a practical basis to this perspective. Mexico’s economic integration with the US has created economic opportunities for low skilled laborers in the US, while failing to increase real wages or access to low interest credit for the vast majority of workers in Mexico (Massey *et al.* 2002, Delgado-Wise 2004). However, much of the money earned in the US is transferred back to Atotonilco, creating at least some potential for entrepreneurial investment. Despite this potential, however modest, the business owners and residents that I interviewed are frustrated by a culture that eschews individual success, by a lack of consumption or investment in the local economy, and by a work force that they claim has become dependent on remittances. Indeed, this discourse of dependency dominates discussions about the potential productive role of remittances in Atotonilco, confirming several decades of literature on the subject (Mines 1981, Reichert 1981, Wiest 1984, Kearney 1986, Binford 2003, Courtney Smith 2007). The resulting economic landscape in Atotonilco is one of very little economic differentiation; witness the dozens of small convenience stores, or *abarrotes*, selling very similar assortments of products, or the multiple food stands or small restaurant operations offering remarkably similar foods at nearly identical prices.

Guadalajara: the city will come to us

Nearly all interviewees were asked what they thought the future economy of Atotonilco might be like. Despite the abovementioned sense of economic stagnation, the general outlook on future economic development is, for the most part, positive. When relating this positive outlook, locals usually refer to fairly recent developments in government, education, and infrastructure. Though government corruption and mismanagement are still acknowledged to be widespread, the majority of residents I spoke with in interviews and while conducting the household survey are generally upbeat about recent government reforms. Totachos, like most rural residents in this region of Mexico, were consistent supporters of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which held the power and purse strings at every level of government for some 70 years. However, in 2000, with the election of Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (PAN), the corporatist system of the PRI finally broke down and with its demise, according to local residents, government support began reaching the pueblo. In terms of education, Atotonilco did not have a formal secondary school until 2000 (secondary school became compulsory in Mexico in 1993), before which few children made the trip to neighboring Estipac to continue their studies. For example, one exceptional interviewee who finished primary school in 1996 and went on to get a college degree, saw 32 of her 38 classmates drop out after primary school. She claims that every one of those 32 went to the US. In 2005, adult residents of the *municipio* of Villa Corona, to which Atotonilco belongs,

averaged only 6.55 years of schooling (COEPO 2005). In contrast, today, nearly all children (many with the help of government grants) go on to secondary school and a majority are now likely getting some form of post-secondary education (author's survey, May-June 2010).

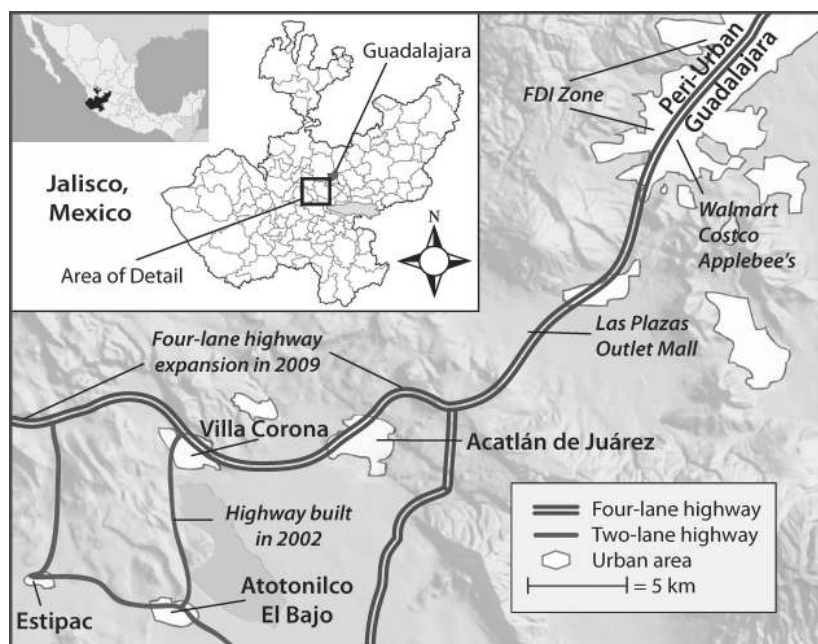


Figure 2 – Recent highway projects have cut the travel time between Atotonilco El Bajo and Guadalajara in half giving residents greater access to employment, education, and shopping. Meanwhile, peri-urban Guadalajara continues its expansion southwest.

(Map by author; Source: INEGI 2011a)

Another extremely prominent event that factors into development discourse in Atotonilco is the 2002 construction of 8 km of paved highway linking Atotonilco to the county seat of Villa Corona (Figure 2). The material and psychological impact of this project cannot be overstated. Prior to the construction of this direct link to Villa Corona, residents had to either grind along a rough unpaved and occasionally impassable road or, more commonly, access the county seat through a much longer circuitous route that was finalized only in 1999. Atotonilco had been physically isolated from the county seat, relying more on its historic connections to Zacoalco de Torres. More importantly, the most direct route from Atotonilco to Guadalajara is through Villa Corona. With the finishing of the Atotonilco-Villa Corona spur, and the widening of the highway from Villa Corona to Guadalajara in 2009, a trip by personal vehicle to the periphery of Guadalajara has been cut in half from about 1.5 hours to around 45 minutes in the last ten years. Buses to Guadalajara now depart from Atotonilco's central plaza every hour.

Easier access to metropolitan Guadalajara offers locals more employment and educational opportunities, while allowing them to continue living in Atotonilco, thus keeping costs down. The early morning buses out of Atotonilco contain handfuls of students and workers headed to the city for class or work. There's also a private bus that comes to pick up a half dozen Walmart employees for the daily commute to the city.

In addition, shopping trips to Guadalajara and the box stores and outlet mall that flank the highway as you approach the city are becoming more common. For many locals, Guadalajara is still a big, foreboding place, and most do not consider it a viable location to find employment. Even for those who would like to find work, Guadalajara has seen stagnant job growth in the neoliberal era and unemployment is extremely high, especially for those with a post-secondary education (Gallagher and Zarsky 2007; INEGI 2011b). But what is important is that the stronger physical connections between Atotonilco and Guadalajara are not only offering an actual material opportunity for some totachos; they are changing the psychology of what's possible in the minds of many young residents. The following observation by Lía, a 25 year old special-education teacher, points out how remarkable this change is:

In fact, a really curious thing is that we have a lot of family there [in the US] and sometimes some of our cousins come back in December and [my brothers and I] start talking about how “in Guadalajara there is this, that we went to the theater..., or we took a walk through downtown,” and later they ask us, “you know a little bit about Guadalajara...you’ve been there?” [So], we took them there after spending their whole youth without ever knowing the closest city. It’s amazing that they’ve never known anything more than the US.

As this story illustrates, and subsequent interviews confirm, the connections to the US had indeed been so established that many young residents had been migrating there without ever getting to know Guadalajara, or considering what options they might have in the city.

Although increased access to Guadalajara might seem appealing to some of today's young professionals and students, the majority of totachos are focused on how the city is “coming to them.” When asked about the future of Atotonilco, many interviewees responded by saying that it was going to become the next Tlajomulco (an increasingly peri-urban *municipio*, some 35 km away, that is being swallowed up by the southern flank of Guadalajara; home to Walmart, Costco, Applebee's, an outlet mall, and several technology campuses housing both foreign and domestic firms) or that land values were going to double like they have in nearby Acatlán de Juárez. Indeed, land values have risen sharply over the last several years as buyers from Guadalajara have begun purchasing formerly ejido land, which is then subdivided and marketed as ideal places to build rustic weekend homes. For many, like Viv, a 22 year old law student, there is ambivalence about the encroaching city, a sense that it will offer economic opportunity at the cost of the town's tranquility:

[Atotonilco] is going to change into a Tlajomulco, an unsafe place. Because people are coming here and no one knows where they're from. Maybe I sound racist, but I'm worried that people come from other places and come here to build their homes. On the positive side, if they come here to enjoy the tranquility of the pueblo, OK, this is something we have to offer. But, don't forget that we are in a country that is one of the number one places in drug trafficking. [However], everything has its positives and negatives. Because many of these people bring new forms of investment, of businesses...maybe we can see a positive future with these things.

This quote reveals an anxiety about the social changes that could result from the “exurbanization” of Guadalajara, but it also highlights a very prominent narrative, represented by the excerpt below, that envisages Atotonilco’s economic future as improving due to its connections with the city.

Evy: Those from Guadalajara are bringing more life to the pueblo. Because here, during the day, we sell food to those who are building homes. They mostly arrive on Saturdays, but sometimes during the week too...I don’t think that of the US migrants...it’s not the same due to the crisis. The majority has family there and they’re not sending like before, because they don’t have jobs. It’s not good right now. What I see is that the pueblo is getting better due to those from Guadalajara. They come here for a visit and they leave money. In December, yes, those from the US make an effort so that they’re family can have fun... Those two parts, Guadalajara and the US, are working. But the United States is now less.

Evy’s quote reveals a fascinating dynamic in local narratives over economic development. Though migrant remittances still contribute more to the local economy than spending by *tapatío* (of Guadalajara) weekenders, declining remittance transfers over the last several years (Lopez *et al.* 2009) and the tapering off of circular migration patterns due to family settlement and stronger immigration control enforcement (Cornelius and Lewis 2007; Jones 2009), when contrasted with the rising land values and year-round consumption attributed to *tapatíos*, is beginning to shift the focus of economic opportunity for many locals from 5,000 kms north to 70 kms east.

Perhaps the greatest stakeholders in the ex-urbanization of Guadalajara are the 564 owners of ejido land parcels, or ejidatarios. Although the ejido leadership is considering steps to control illegal land sales to non-residents, their political clout is weakening and there is a sense of resignation regarding the future role of ejidatarios as the principle landowners and decision-makers of Atotonilco. This is compounded by the fact that many ejidatarios have actually settled in the US. A recent series of poorly-attended assembly meetings (May–June 2010) were more focused on encouraging ejidatarios to pay their property taxes to the municipality to enable infrastructure projects, than on discussing how to bolster the local agricultural economy. When asked whether local ejidatarios will buy each other’s land, two members of the ejido leadership responded with the following:

Ejido President: We’re not going to buy this land because people are coming to buy the parcels to build homes. I think that people from the city are going to pull us in. The city is coming. They’re going to get rid of all of the ejidatarios.

Member of the Ejido supervisory council: Are you familiar with Tlajomulco? Tlajomulco was a huge ejido where they grew corn. Now, if you go to Tlajomulco you won’t see any corn, you’ll only see subdivisions...

The resignation of Atotonilco’s ejidatarios should be understood within a larger discourse in which farmers see themselves as constantly struggling to make ends meet in an environment where commodity prices fluctuate drastically on the open market and agricultural inputs seem to increase yearly. Otero (2004) provides an excellent collection of articles on various peasant responses to the restructuring of the Mexican agricultural

economy. The farmers with whom I spoke are well aware of their scalar disadvantages in an agricultural market where they're competing with heavily subsidized agribusiness, particularly in the US. Many of them have seen the vast, uniform cornfields of the US Midwest. Indeed, the neoliberal agricultural reforms that have caused a crisis for smallholder agriculture in Mexico have been a primary driver of migration to destinations like Milwaukee (Massey *et al.* 2002; Durand and Massey 2004). The potential economic gains from Atotonilco's growing connections to Guadalajara and, in particular, the prospect of profiting from the sale of formerly communal land is another chapter in the story of Atotonilco's decline as an agro-economic space, and one that is told with much ambivalence.

Discussion: When the City Comes to Them

Over the last several decades residents of Atotonilco have responded to neoliberal economic and political reforms with a set of narrative-driven practices that have reshaped the cultural landscape of Atotonilco. In the early stages of this process the practice of circular migration was encouraged by a narrative based on the ideal of home construction, land acquisition, and eventual resettlement in Atotonilco. As has been observed elsewhere in this region of Mexico, there was a cumulative causation to this pattern of migration; it was initiated by a lack of economic opportunity, but perpetuated by cultural norms that encouraged young men to migrate through developing migrant social networks (Massey *et al.* 1990). However, for at least the last two decades, migrant settlement for men, women, and children in the US, particularly Milwaukee, has become the dominant practice for totachos – the dream of return has become an “illusion” for most. Indeed, decades of Mexican migrant settlement throughout the US is reflected in the fact that today there are far more children born in the US to parents of Mexican origin than new immigrant arrivals from Mexico (Lopez *et al.* 2011). More recently, stepped-up immigration control enforcement at the US-Mexico border has dissuaded many migrants from making the journey north while at the same time effectively locking-in undocumented migrants, who patiently await some form of legalization (Cornelius and Lewis 2007). This paradoxical process further severs transnational social and economic ties thereby increasing locals' sense of economic isolation (Jones 2009). Although a majority of the adult migrants from Atotonilco send back some money to their families, significantly contributing to consumer demand in the village, most of the business owners I interviewed argue that a debilitating culture of migrant dependency has developed, draining the community of its entrepreneurial resourcefulness and contributing to a sense of economic stagnation, embodied by the “ghost town” narrative. But there is a major discursive transition under way in Atotonilco. Over the last several years, high unemployment in the US has combined with higher educational attainment in Atotonilco to make migration a much less appealing option for young totachos, many of whom are now utilizing improved regional transportation networks to access education, employment, shopping, and entertainment in and around Guadalajara. Meanwhile, business owners, young professionals, and ejidatarios are focused on how they will be positioned when the city comes to them.

This research is consistent with the new rurality literature in documenting a shift away from agricultural as the primary source of income to a more diversified livelihood strategy that draws from regional and transnational connections. This study, however, differs from most of the work on the new rurality in that it explicitly situates those livelihood strategies within an evolving discourse composed of a set of relationally constructed narratives and material practices. Through an understanding of how most totachos believe that the ex-urbanization of Guadalajara to places like Atotonilco is

inevitable, we are able to see why there is very little political resistance to neoliberal economic policies that have marginalized peasant economies in favor of global economic integration, privatization, and foreign investment. Despite the failure of these policies to create enough jobs or to raise real wages in the city, many totachos are investing in the education of their children in hopes that they will benefit from the regional integration of Atotonilco. Meanwhile, the consolidation and privatization of communally held land is being met with strategies of accommodation that are likely to diminish the productive capacities of *ejidatarios*. At this intersection of narrative and practice, critical questions about the future of Atotonilco arise. How will Atotonilco's young residents utilize their increasing levels of education given Mexico's poor record of quality job creation? Will Atotonilco become a site of reproduction for workers in low-wage factory jobs in the urban periphery? Will it become a bedroom community for the managerial class or a weekend retreat for the wealthy? Or will demand for labor in the US, once again, shift the focus of Totachos to the north? And how will these changes be situated in particular discourses about the challenges and possibilities of economic life in Atotonilco El Bajo? These questions will be investigated in this ongoing research project; and there are many similar questions to be asked of other people in other places experiencing the new rurality.

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