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Stagnant immigrant social networks and cycles of exploitation

Rocio Rosales

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Based on over four years of ethnographic research among street vendors in Los Angeles and on interviews with family members of vendors and former vendors living in Mexico, this article examines the influence of a sending community and its social networks on migrant outcomes in the USA. These social networks affect migration patterns, ease entry into the fruit-vending business but also facilitate exploitation. Furthermore, these social networks do not always function as effective conduits of information because its members, due to feelings of shame or embarrassment, often fail to add to the existing body of knowledge. As a result, international migration patterns, job placement and exploitative practices do not change or improve for subsequent migrants. This creates a cycle in which social networks become stagnant and successively fail to function as effective conduits of information and resources in ways that might help network members equally and in the aggregate.

Keywords: immigrant social networks; exploitation; ethnic enclave; street vendors; shame; Mexico–USA migration

The connections between migrants and their sending communities have been a source of interest to American sociologists for more than a century (Thomas and Znaniecki 1917). In contemporary times, scholars studying migration to the USA and migrant ties to home largely focus on the ways that sending communities benefit from their emigrants through financial remittances (Massey and Parrado 1994), social capital (Kyle 1999), and continued political (Guarnizo and Portes 2003) and civic engagement (Smith 2006). In this context, migrants are often depicted as agents of change promoting positive development in their home countries, sending communities and/or family units. However, less is known about how ties to the sending community affect migrants' outcomes abroad. This article examines the influence of a sending community in Mexico (Dos Mundos) on a group of migrants living in Los Angeles and working as street vendors.¹ I analyse how the sending community and its social networks structure the migration process, employment opportunities and economic outcomes abroad. I argue that social networks tied to the sending community create avenues for exploitation that benefit a few while pushing many more into debt and economic precariousness. Throughout this process, moreover, emotions linked to notions of failure limit the amount and type of information that the social network carries and negatively affect the outcomes of later migrants.

The positive functions of social networks for newcomers are well documented. Within studies of international migration – between Mexico and the USA in particular – social networks ease entry into the country and reduce the short-term costs of settlement (Browning and Rodriguez 1985), facilitate job acquisition (Bailey and Waldinger 1991), perpetuate migration patterns (Massey and Espinosa 1997) and promote remittance practices (Cohen 2005). The Dos Mundos social network that I focus on offers some benefits: it directs migrants to Los Angeles – an immigrant metropolis – and steers them to work in the street-based fruit-vending business. The use of migrant social networks in that process is not novel. Previous studies examine how Mexican immigrants use social networks to acquire jobs in particular industries and create immigrant labour markets (Mines and Montoya 1982; Fitzgerald 2004). Nevertheless, the way that these networks funnel migrants into suboptimal jobs and facilitate exploitation is an understudied phenomenon.

Scholars have begun to unpack migrant social networks and understand them outside of a context in which they only promote or ease immigrant incorporation. Jacqueline Hagan's (1998) work demonstrates the dynamic nature of social networks; her study of undocumented Maya immigrants in Houston examines how these networks weaken for some and expand for others. Women's networks weakened due to social isolation experienced as live-in domestics. Meanwhile, men – working in a supermarket chain – benefited from an extensive network of co-workers, large-scale hiring practices and opportunities for promotion. Men maximized information flows and expanded their networks while women were 'uprooted from the social relations of exchange and reciprocity' and saw their networks contract (Hagan 1998, 61). In a similar vein, Cecilia Menjivar (1997; 2000), focusing on Salvadorans in San Francisco, examined the transformation, reconstitution and dissolution of social networks. As she explains: 'Obtaining and exchanging help entails a *negotiated process* of mobilization of resources, in which decisions to ask for and to provide help are contingent and fluid, not predetermined or fixed' (Menjivar 2000, 116, original emphasis). For the subjects of her study, giving and receiving help is conditioned by the structure of opportunities in the receiving context; state policies affecting citizenship status and the local economy influence the amount and type of material resources that a network carries and thus also its viability.

Other scholars have written about the failure of social networks in the context of multiple obligations and a lack of resources (Stack 1974; Belle 1982). In these studies, the negative effects of social networks are a consequence of their dissolution or inability to render aid and not a direct result of their actual constitution. I expand upon this understanding by focusing on a case in which networks do not dissolve due to a lack of resources, but rather structure themselves to facilitate and perpetuate exploitation. In the present study, individuals are not alienated or denied assistance; instead, migrants are invited or even recruited to come to Los Angeles and work with the expectation that they can, at least initially, be made to do so for little to no pay.

While Hagan and Menjivar show how gender dynamics play a role in the benefits that a social network can provide, Cynthia Cranford (2005) focuses on the power differentials and exploitation between Latino immigrant workers and their employers in the Los Angeles janitorial industry. She critiques the conceptualization of social networks as a form of 'social capital' because this distinction makes it difficult to

explain ‘who benefits from social networks, to what degree, and in which context’ (Cranford 2005, 379). She finds that ‘employers are able to maintain or (re)gain control over a decentralized organization of work by recruiting through social networks’ (Cranford 2005, 382). In this decentralized, de-unionized industrial context, undocumented immigrant workers are recruited because they are more easily exploited. In her work, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) assesses how benefits differ along veteran–apprenticeship lines among Latina domestic workers. The constraining effect of social networks involves exploitation and occurs when veteran workers take on novice assistants as apprentices. Veteran workers subcontract their labour and pay them little or nothing, while offering training and an often-unfulfilled promise of new clients. In such a veteran–apprenticeship relationship, the low pay ‘renders the experience exploitative and demeaning’ (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 57). Sarah Mahler (1995) also observed exploitation within an ethnic enclave in Long Island, but did little to explain why this exploitation took place. In this work, I examine not only how but also why exploitation occurs. I also show how it, unintentionally, perpetuates itself by shutting down information flows between network members following feelings of shame and embarrassment. The exploitation in this study occurs within an ethnic enterprise and a larger ethnic enclave; however, much of the literature on ethnic enclaves ignores co-ethnic exploitation and focuses instead on ethnic solidarity.

1. Ethnic enclaves driven by ethnic solidarity?

Immigrant (or ethnic) social networks have been seen as the mechanism through which ethnic solidarity manifests itself (Portes and Bach 1985). As Sanders and Nee (1987, 746) write: ‘Ethnic solidarity theorists focus on the institutions and social dynamics that facilitate the mobilization of ethnic resources for economic advancement.’ This solidarity in hostile contexts of reception allows co-ethnics to come together and associate, create ethnic markets and then ethnic enclaves in which ethnic businesses ‘organize themselves to trade exclusively or primarily within the enclave’ (Zhou 1992, 4).

According to Portes (1981, 290–291), the ethnic enclave consists of ‘immigrant groups [that] concentrate in a distinct spatial location and organize a variety of enterprises serving their own ethnic market and/or the general population’. Fruit vendors are an informal immigrant business operating within a larger Latino ethnic enclave. Although Portes and Stepick (1985) refer to the ‘informal’ sector as a new and distinct part of the labour market made up of immigrant minorities working for sub-minimal and illegal wages, Sanders and Nee (1987, 765 fn) see the ‘informal’ labour market as an ‘extension of the enclave economy [that] provides an employment niche for both legal and illegal immigrants’.

The purpose of the ethnic enclave model is to explain how immigrant and ethnic groups *thrive* on the basis of socially embedded small entrepreneurship and avoid a secondary labour market characterized by low-paying, low-skilled jobs with high turnover rates that lack opportunities for promotion. However, because the ethnic enclave model is meant to explain immigrant attainment, it obscures the exploitative undercurrents that may also constitute it. The ethnic enclave model captures how

immigrants create and promote industry within their communities but, in attributing it to ethnic solidarity, the model ignores the self-interest and opportunism that may guide certain actors and glosses over the exploitation that limits other network members' aspirations to upward mobility.

In assessing the limits of ethnic solidarity in the enclave economy, Sanders and Nee (1987) make a distinction between immigrant workers and immigrant bosses – a distinction premised on capital differentials. They find that entrepreneurs in ethnic enclaves do receive earning-returns to human capital comparable to those immigrants in the primary labour market, whereas the same is not true for employees. The authors stipulate a need to revise the enclave economy hypothesis to include this distinction, yet note that such a revision diminishes the claim that the ethnic enclave is a protected sector of the US economy where immigrants can avoid discrimination and achieve upward mobility. Sanders and Nee (1987, 765) note the need for 'detailed analysis of the actual pattern of exchange between bosses and workers within immigrant enclaves... before generalizations can be made about ethnic solidarity's effect on the socioeconomic mobility of workers'. My study responds to this call and examines the power dynamics that underpin the under-researched occupation of street vendor labour in the predominantly Latino community of Los Angeles. It highlights the experiences of immigrants upon which enclave businesses are built and presents a case in which exploitation contributes to downward mobility and return migration. Here workers are forced to recognize their low status in a newly constituted hierarchy of hometown associates.

2. The sending community of Dos Mundos

The street vendors that are the focus of this paper hail from the town of Dos Mundos in the Mexican state of Puebla. Dos Mundos is located about seven miles from the state capital of Puebla City. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography, in 2010 the town's inhabitants numbered just under 1,400. Its principal economic activity is agriculture (INEGI 2010). Town residents who do not work in agriculture often commute to adjacent towns and cities for work. The work sought and distance travelled is partly determined by an individual's gender. Men typically take week- or month-long construction jobs in urban centres like Mexico City and Monterrey. Women take jobs closer to home in Puebla City as maids, nannies and laundresses, commuting daily. A relatively new, young and largely male generation of residents also migrates north into the USA in search of work.

Unlike other towns and cities in Mexico, Dos Mundos does not have a well-established 'culture of migration' characterized by high rates of out-migration where international migration and the aspiration to migrate is 'transmitted across generations and between people through social networks' (Kandel and Massey 2002, 981). Historically, communities in western Mexico – in the states of Jalisco, Michoacán, Guanajuato, Nayarit and Zacatecas – have sent the majority of migrants to the USA (Massey and Espinosa 1997). The sons that Dos Mundos sends often do not have older relatives who have travelled north as migrants themselves. The social networks that connect migrants in Dos Mundos to communities in Los Angeles are accordingly nascent ones.

Nevertheless, the concentration of Dos Mundos migrants in street vending – selling made-to-order fruit salads out of large pushcarts – is a socially networked phenomenon. Street vending, a low-skilled occupation requiring little human capital, is one in which recently arrived migrants can quickly get a foothold. Most estimates point to an over-representation of foreign-born and undocumented immigrants engaged in street vending. In 2004 the Economic Roundtable, a non-profit public policy research organization, estimated that there were 679,000 informal workers in Los Angeles County, of which 61% were undocumented immigrants (Flaming, Haydamack, and Joassart 2005).² Recent estimates for Los Angeles reveal that a sizeable group of 10,000 participate in street vending on any given day (Muñoz 2008).

Although pervasive, street vending in Los Angeles is illegal. Street vendors who sell food products are in violation not only of municipal and county codes prohibiting the sale of goods in a public right of way, but also of the California Retail Food Code (Cal Code), which regulates the structural, equipment and operational requirements for all California retail food facilities. Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LACDPH) officials are charged with enforcing the Cal Code. Periodic crackdowns by the LACDPH and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), in which pushcarts and product are confiscated and/or destroyed, continually undermine fruit vendors' attempts to create and maintain a stable financial presence. Fruit vending is thus in many ways a suboptimal job, especially compared to other occupations that migrants with comparable skills may enter into (Rosales 2013). Local and national laws create a hostile context of reception for Dos Mundos migrants, both on the job as illegal vendors and on the streets as undocumented workers. These structural constraints impact the relationships that fruit vendors have with each other as *paisanos* (hometown associates or compatriots) and as business associates. The resulting conflictive webs of interaction fit the hostile context of reception and are partly governed by a scarcity of network resources, but contradict prevalent theories emphasizing the positive influences of social networks on immigrant socio-economic mobility and incorporation (cf. Wilson and Portes 1980; Portes and Bach 1985). The focus of this paper is on the hometown ties among fruit vendors in Los Angeles; however, larger structural forces also influence the relationship that these vendors have with each other.

3. Methods

This study is based on interviews, participant observation and over four years of ethnographic field research. I found participants by approaching vendors in distinct neighbourhoods throughout Los Angeles. These visits resulted in different snowball samples. The majority of participants are from Puebla (*poblanos*). I may have over-sampled *poblanos*, but all information gathered pointed to their over-representation in the fruit-vending business. I worked as a fruit vendor in two locations: in an affluent mid-city area and a working-class neighbourhood near downtown Los Angeles. Field notes were coded into themes for analysis.

I conducted twenty-two interviews with fruit vendors in Los Angeles. Twelve of these were from Dos Mundos or the surrounding vicinity and considered themselves

Dos Mundos *paisanos*. Respondents from Dos Mundos were asked for family referrals and interview requests were made prior to my visit in 2011. In Mexico, I interviewed the families of eight fruit vendors and re-interviewed four vendors whom I had met years before in Los Angeles. I conducted all interviews in Spanish, these were later transcribed and translated by myself and a research assistant.

The years of field research among vendors in Los Angeles, supplemented by a visit to the vendors' hometown, allowed me an understanding of the role that hometown ties play in migrants' lives abroad. This fieldwork in migrants' place of origin and destination can reveal the full scope of the migration experience and 'offers advantages for gaining access to members of multi-sited networks and explaining the effects of place on a variety of outcomes' (Fitzgerald 2006, 229). The exploitation rooted in hometown ties and social networks was highlighted during my visit to Dos Mundos and, later, upon my return to the fruit vendor community in Los Angeles.

4. Pushcart owners and fruit vendor employees

Most Dos Mundos migrants³ enter fruit vending as employees of established vendor-bosses who own multiple pushcarts. Costing between \$800 and \$1,200, pushcarts are neither easily nor quickly acquired by recent migrants with little capital and little information about where to purchase one. As a result, vendor-bosses become an important resource for recent migrants. Vendor-bosses pay vendor-employees a daily wage (\$40–\$60) in return for earnings made from daily sales. The sales that a fruit vendor makes can vary on a daily basis between \$100 and \$300.

In most instances, pushcart owners (i.e. vendor-bosses) are responsible for buying fruit at the wholesale market every morning (spending \$80–\$120); paying the monthly rent at the commissary warehouse where pushcarts are stored or providing storage in their own homes; and transporting workers and their pushcarts to their respective street corners to vend. As pushcarts are heavily weighed down by significant loads of fruit and ice, vendors remain on their street corner for the day and are not ambulatory.

Because vendor-bosses often work as vendors themselves in addition to owning other pushcarts with which they employ workers (vendor-employees), I do not refer to them only as 'bosses'. In some cases, vendor-bosses amass several pushcarts and stop vending themselves in an effort to focus on the logistics associated with vending. When they cease to be vendors themselves, they become owner-bosses. Owner-bosses will sometimes take on a supervisory role and 'patrol' the streets for ongoing crackdowns in an effort to protect their investments.

The risk that vendor-employees and pushcart owners face is different as well. Vendor-employees and vendor-bosses are exposed on the street corner: they receive summons to appear in court and/or pay a fine, can be harassed by customers and gang members, and can be subject to arrest for vending. If their carts are confiscated, they may be unemployed for some time before a new pushcart can be acquired. Pushcart owners lose their investment when crackdowns result in the confiscation of products, utensils and/or the pushcart. An owner may also see himself or herself as responsible for posting bail for a vendor-employee; however, this financial commitment varies

based on the type of relationship that exists between vendor-employee and pushcart owner.

Under favourable conditions, vendor-employees are able to save money in order to buy their own pushcarts and become independent vendors. When this happens, they may continue to rely on their former bosses for rides while paying weekly fees for fuel expenses. Depending on their relationship with their boss and the number of pushcarts the latter has available, an independent vendor may need to find a new street corner to work. Street corners 'belong' to the vendor who discovered them or the bosses who have worked a pushcart (as vendors or vendor-bosses) there. Pushcart owners who have multiple carts and a vehicle in which to transport them will often give preference to their vendor-employees over other independent vendors seeking transportation. In these cases, independent fruit vendors will look for another vendor with space in their pick-up truck to transport them. In ideal circumstances, a fruit vendor may be able to save enough money to buy a pushcart and a used pick-up truck in which to transport it. At this point, the vendor may be able to make extra money by providing rides to other independent vendors. If enough money is saved, these independent vendors may be able to invest in additional pushcarts and employ their own workers. The resulting hierarchy, from low to high, is vendor-employee, independent vendor without a pick-up truck, independent vendor with a pick-up truck, vendor-boss and owner-boss.

Due to multiple variables including daily sales, varying prices at the wholesale market, ongoing crackdowns and inclement weather, the income that can be generated is unstable. Throughout my time in the field, I saw vendor-employees save money for months and become independent vendors, only to have their pushcarts confiscated by the LACDPH and become vendor-employees once again. Others saved enough to buy a pushcart and truck only to lose them due to crackdowns, limited income or for driving without a licence. It is very difficult to save enough money to make an investment in pushcarts and vehicles, but it is even more difficult to maintain those investments.

The majority of vendor-employees and independent vendors whom I followed faced persistent economic instability. They also had few to no prospects for finding work elsewhere and were hindered by their grade-school education, limited occupational experience, lack of English-language proficiency and low-income background. Their reliance on the fruit vendor/hometown network also bound them to it. When some did think of alternative occupations, they feared losing the assistance that their work structure and peers provided. Among the twelve *Dos Mundos* vendor-employees and independent vendors whom I shadowed, four returned to Mexico due to economic hardship or dissatisfaction with their earnings potential in the USA. Four had been arrested for vending and had served time in a local jail in lieu of paying fines. All had had pushcarts, fruit and utensils confiscated by the LACDPH, resulting in lost wages. All reported not earning enough to make ends meet.

5. Exploitative bosses and indebted employees

During my time in the field, the only owner-bosses who were able to maintain their investments, or quickly replace them after a crackdown, were migrants working with

immediate family members. Two sets of brothers – Gabriel, Benjamín and Omar from the García family, and Manolo and Andres from the Martínez family – consistently had the most pushcarts and vendor-employees. The García and Martínez brothers were all in their twenties and early thirties. The García brothers had much more capital than other migrants when they arrived in Los Angeles because their father owned the only mill in Dos Mundos. The entire town depended on the mill to produce their dietary staple of corn tortillas. The García brothers had a high socio-economic status in Dos Mundos and transferred this standing to Los Angeles and its migrant community when they became owners and bosses. By contrast, the Martínez brothers had much less capital but, unlike every other Dos Mundos migrant, Manolo had US citizenship (although born in the USA, he was raised in Dos Mundos and did not speak English). As a result of his citizenship, Manolo was able to apply for benefits to which others did not have access, and could drive his pick-up truck with a state-issued driver's licence. His citizenship decreased his vulnerability as a worker and diminished the 'legal violence' to which he was exposed (Menjívar and Abrego 2012; Menjívar 2013). Andres Martínez benefitted from his brother's citizenship by purchasing vehicles and certifying pushcarts in Manolo's name.

These social and structural advantages mitigated the hostile context of reception. If the structure of opportunities conditions how help is given and received, then these brothers were ideally positioned to both *be* owner-bosses and to help each other *maintain* that status. Meanwhile, anti-vending ordinances and the resulting income instability pushed them to exploitative practices in an effort to secure a foothold in an unrelenting informal venture. On their part, vendor-employees were willing to take jobs with no pay and/or incur debt because of the limited opportunities found in both Los Angeles and Dos Mundos. This exploitation at the hands of compatriots and the willingness to endure it in the absence of opportunity elsewhere have been documented before. In the late 1990s, a smuggling ring run by a deaf Mexican couple in New York City was discovered. The couple smuggled and then enslaved dozens of deaf Mexican migrants and had them peddle trinkets on the subway; however, as noted in *The New York Times* on 27 July 1997, some peddlers believed that it was a hard way to earn an honest living. The García and Martínez brothers and their exploitative practices are not exceptional but rather a product of their context.

In order to save enough money to purchase pushcarts, the Martínez brothers employed unscrupulous tactics and had a reputation for not paying their vendor-employees even when no crackdowns had occurred. Vendor-employees often accused the Martínez brothers of 'living beyond their means' using vendors' salaries. Meanwhile, the García brothers had reputations for being verbally abusive and duplicitous in their relations with vendor-employees. They too occasionally did not pay their vendor-employees despite the seemingly high sales profits given to them. Vendor-employees, who, at one point or another had worked under a García brother, speculated that the lack of pay was due to the Garcías buying land in Mexico. One evening in 2007 as I was waiting with José for Benjamín García to pick him up, he said: 'I called home [to Dos Mundos] and my family told me they [Garcías] had paid for plots of land, I bet you that's my pay right there.' The Garcías had not paid José for over two months. José lived in a house with the Garcías and they justified the non-payment by postponing his rent due date and purchasing the groceries for the house

occupants (which included other vendor-employees). The groceries that José consumed were added to the tab that he owed the García brothers. The irony of this situation was not lost on José. Eventually, José became involved with a Mexican American woman and moved in with her to escape the García brothers' system of non-payment coupled with debt creation.

The system by which the Garcías employed and housed vendor-employees was often regarded as malicious and exploitative but not seen as debt peonage. This contrasts with the way that *padrones* were regarded by immigrant workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Gunther Peck (2000, 2) writes, a *padrone* was an immigrant boss who enslaved compatriots by acting as a professional middleman and was able to 'traverse legal, lingual, class, and racial boundaries that separated new immigrants from North Americans'. Unlike *padrones*, the García and Martínez brothers did not have the cultural or legal cachet to be middlemen and were consequently seen as exploitative migrants who had built their businesses upon the backs of other *paisanos*. The García and Martínez brothers, with the exception of Manolo, were undocumented migrants liable to deportation and/or having their investments confiscated during a large-scale crackdown. This idea provided vendor-employees with some solace, which they often voiced when things were difficult.

The García and Martínez brothers provided or created enough benefits (e.g. employment, housing) for vendor-employees to see some good in the midst of the bad. Vendors who received better benefits had more reasons to look beyond the exploitation. Domingo, one of the few vendors who was both over thirty-five years old and a cyclical migrant, depended on the Garcías to pay for his *coyote*, a guide with whom he crossed the border clandestinely. The Garcías would pay \$2,000 for this service and, in exchange, Domingo would work without pay for months. One rainy winter night when I was running errands with Carmen – a vendor from Mexico City firmly embedded in the Dos Mundos network owing to her relationship with Dos Mundos-born Cristian – she called Domingo to ask if I could interview him. We picked him up from the García house and he explained that he was thankful to leave it. We spoke for over three hours in Carmen's apartment and he asked if he could linger afterwards because he did not want to return so soon. He explained: 'It gets hard sometimes, to live like this and with them... here I can exhale but in there I only sigh.' Domingo did not own a car; when it rained and he did not work, he was stuck indoors with the other vendors and bosses. Although he was free to leave the house, the lack of pay resulting from his indebtedness meant that he had no money to spend and no transportation in which to move around. Domingo planned on returning to Dos Mundos, and this intent made his 'hard times' bearable. However, this sojourner mentality played a role in inhibiting the development of more diverse networks that could move him out of vending and into more economically valuable and viable work.

There were other vendors who endured the 'hard times' under the García and Martínez brothers because they considered return migration as the ultimate solution. Jesús, a vendor-employee, arrived in Los Angeles in 2006 when he was twenty-one with the intention of working for Gabriel García. He worked under him for a year, but was unhappy because Gabriel had a temper. When I interviewed Jesús, he was quick to describe his hostile workplace atmosphere:

I didn't like [Gabriel's bad temper]. Sometimes you had everything ready and [he'd still yell at you]. He had his girlfriend and sometimes on Saturdays or Fridays he'd go out dancing and... the next day, because he knew the man who sold fruit, he would just make the [wholesale] order on the phone and it would be delivered and we had to have the carts ready to go out at 8:30 am. There were days when he would stay asleep and ask for the fruit and the fruit would get there at 8:30 or 8am and then he would get up with his bad attitude and [yell at us]. Everything bothered him and if I answered back, well [shakes head]. You would try to explain that the fruit had just arrived and that you didn't have anything to prepare and he didn't care... [It takes an hour or an hour and a half to get the carts ready] so we wouldn't have enough time.

After a year, Jesús was finally presented with an opportunity to leave this work arrangement. During a large crackdown, the health department confiscated eight pushcarts belonging to the Garcías. Using this as an excuse, Jesús went to work with his cousin Cristian. He was so eager to leave that he worked out an arrangement sharing a pushcart with Cristian and working every other week.

Jesús was a victim of limited job prospects and underdeveloped social networks. Coming from Dos Mundos affected the opportunities available to him. Had his town been larger – more urban or metropolitan – and with a more diverse stream of migrants, his social network would have included more 'weak' and 'strong' ties to migrants working in different types of occupations (Granovetter 1973). Jesús might have had different job prospects in the USA. However, what and whom he knew was limited because of where he came from. He found a job working with an abusive *paisano* and later, when he was able to leave, moved into the same type of work with another *paisano* and took a pay cut. Jesús did not have much personal incentive to find a better job because he expected to return home as soon as he had saved enough money for his ailing wife. In the end, Jesús stayed in Los Angeles for three years and five months before returning. When I visited Dos Mundos, he was working a month-long construction job and was based in Monterrey – a city far north of Dos Mundos. I spoke to him on the phone from his mother's home and he told me that he had no plans to ever return to the USA. He said that the *paisanos* on whom he thought he could depend had deceived him, which made him return home with 'a sour taste [in my mouth]' for his 'so-called compatriots'. When I asked Jesús if he had told others of his treatment by the García brothers, he said it was not anyone's business; from our conversation I understood that he also did not want to be seen as a victim.

Cristian – the cousin with whom Jesús shared a pushcart – had his own stories of exploitation at the hands of both the García and Martínez brothers. In 2004, Cristian and his neighbour left Dos Mundos for Utah then Los Angeles to work with the Martínez brothers, Cristian's cousins, in fruit vending. By the time he arrived, however, the pushcart had been confiscated by the Health Department. As a result, Cristian was unemployed and without income for a month in Los Angeles. When Manolo Martínez finally acquired a pushcart, he employed Cristian without pay, stating that he was making payments for the pushcart. Cristian accepted this for some time, until he calculated that the length of time he had worked without pay would have been sufficient to pay for the pushcart. At that point, Cristian sought and found

work with another vendor-boss outside the Dos Mundos network and saved enough money to purchase his own pushcart.

Cristian returned to Dos Mundos in 2007 just as crackdowns by the LACDPH were beginning to take their toll and in an effort to preserve his limited savings. He was expecting to stay for a couple of months before returning to Los Angeles a second time. However, a tragic traffic accident near the US–Mexican border, during his attempt to return to Los Angeles, left him unable to walk for months and a fellow *paisano* passenger dead. In the months that he spent recovering in Dos Mundos, he married and had a child. When I interviewed him, he said that only in his dreams did he hope to return to the USA. Owing to the car accident and the gossip that it had provoked in his town, he rarely talked to anyone about either of his two journeys north.

The exploitation and treatment of vendor-employees under the García and Martínez brothers contradicts the ‘beneficial’ exploitation rooted in ethnic solidarity observed in the ethnic enclaves that Portes and others conceptualize. According to Portes and Bach (1985), ethnic ties create a sense of collective purpose and entail reciprocal obligation; employers profit from the willing self-exploitation of fellow immigrants but are also obliged to provide them with supervisory positions and training, and support their move into self-employment. However, owner-bosses were exploitative in a way that was interpreted by workers as self-serving. When the two sets of brothers suffered losses following a crackdown, workers tolerated non-payment. Non-payment by the owner-bosses without a corresponding crackdown contributed to workers feeling that they would never be able to save enough money to buy their own pushcart and establish an independent business, to survive a crackdown and the subsequent loss of employment, or to be economically stable enough to stay in the country. This exploitative treatment by bosses, combined with the punitive regulatory environment in which they worked, led workers to speak consistently of return migration as the only viable solution to their problems. Four vendors did return to Mexico, attributing their premature departure to the difficulty of the job situation and their treatment under the Martínez and/or García brothers.

The Martínez and García brothers did not train their workers (other workers did) and showed no signs of supporting workers’ movement into self-employment. They regarded employees’ movement into self-employment with indifference or disdain, such as when a former employee wanted to keep the street corner due to a customer base that expected to see him there. Their unwillingness to help employees establish their own pushcart businesses was due to the fact that former employees might one day compete with them in a city with a limited number of viable street corners (i.e. with pedestrians, close to the wholesale market and near storage locations). Vendor-employees consequently had restrained aspirations.

Among the García and Martínez brothers, self-interest and a desire for self-preservation amid continuous crackdowns broke down any semblance of ‘ethnic solidarity’. Yet a major problem with this concept is that in its absence, one cannot blame its opposite, namely ‘ethnic enmity’. The indebtedness, downward mobility and return migration of newcomers are not rooted in the desire of some compatriots to see other compatriots suffer, but in the power and status that some possess and seek to maintain.

6. Return migration, shame and the cycle of exploitation

The four vendors whom I re-interviewed in Dos Mundos spoke to me of feeling like failures after returning home with nothing to show for their time spent working abroad. Jesús had sent back enough money to pay for hospital expenses that his pregnant wife had incurred, but had missed the first three years of his son's life. He had no other savings from his time spent working in Los Angeles. When I visited, he was working a month-long construction job in Monterrey far from his family.

Luciano was also working in Monterrey with Jesús. Luciano had wanted to buy land and build a house, but had instead returned without accruing any savings in order to look after his ailing mother. Marcelino, who had also returned without any savings, had not managed to send sufficient money to his wife for the construction materials necessary to complete their house. Although he was away on a week-long construction job in Mexico City when I first arrived, I did see him during his weekend off. I was his mother's (Doña Josefina) guest in a two-room house inhabited by seven people. Early on a Monday morning, as Marcelino prepared to return to work, he gently knocked on Doña Josefina's aluminium door, which was next to the bed in which I slept. In a whisper, he asked if he could borrow money to pay for the bus ride to the capital. Cristian, for his part, had been the only one to return with a used pick-up truck, but it had been destroyed in the traffic accident.

When asked if they had talked about their experiences as vendors to others in Dos Mundos outside of their immediate families, most respondents said no or mentioned wanting to keep those details to themselves. This lack of communication was evident not only between vendors and prospective migrants, but also between vendors and their families. Manuel, a vendor living in Los Angeles, mentioned this lack of contact. He had been verbally abused by the García brothers but had managed to save enough money to purchase a pushcart and leave that work environment. In spite of this, he was having financial problems following several crackdowns. He had additionally been arrested twice for vending, once for driving under the influence of alcohol, and once for driving without a licence. He was in debt with the wholesale merchant. He had stopped sending money to his grandmother, Doña Josefina. Embarrassed by these misfortunes, he had also stopped calling home.

One morning, Manuel and I were driving to the wholesale market quietly listening to the radio. He broke the silence with a sigh and said: 'I want to go back to Mexico.' When I asked why, he replied: 'Why stay here if they don't want me here?' He had just been released from jail with an ankle monitor due to his undocumented status. After a few seconds of silence he added: 'But I can't go back a failure.' I asked whether his family, Doña Josefina, knew that he was struggling. He shook his head and said that he did not want to worry his grandmother. When I visited Dos Mundos, Doña Josefina attributed the lack of contact to Manuel's building a better life for himself in Los Angeles and forgetting about her.

In these cases, a cycle is created in which migrants leave Dos Mundos with limited information and are funnelled into suboptimal street-vending jobs through their hometown social networks. These jobs are high-risk and offer limited opportunities for upward mobility. As fruit vendors, migrants are exploited by *paisanos* in their social network. The exploitation and hardship that they endure makes them feel like

'failures', which in turn leads to unwillingness to communicate to others in Dos Mundos about their experiences abroad. Other would-be migrants are thus in no better shape to escape the suboptimal work or hometown-network exploitation that awaits them in the USA. This results in a cycle in which migrant social networks do not function as effective conduits of information and resources.

7. Conclusion

Dos Mundos social networks influence migration patterns and direct a large portion of the town's emigrants to Los Angeles. While these social networks lower the entry costs that newcomers face by facilitating entry into the fruit-vending business, they also expose migrants to exploitation at the hands of fellow *paisanos*. This exploitation by a handful of Dos Mundos bosses manifests itself on the job as verbal abuse, little to no pay, and limited opportunities for eventual self-employment and economic advancement. The subsequent economic precariousness that vendor-employees experience leads many to think of their venture into the 'land of opportunity' as a failure. Thus a confluence of factors, from *paisano*-initiated exploitation to punitive local anti-vending laws, contributes to the idea that return migration is the only viable solution to their economic troubles. Moreover, when migrants do return to Dos Mundos – and even when they do not – they keep their negative experiences to themselves even when this information could benefit other social network members. As a result, Dos Mundos social networks become stagnant, the migration process for subsequent emigrants does not improve, and the exploitative patterns repeat themselves. Bosses benefit, albeit unintentionally, from the non-communication among vendor-employees and are ensured another group of migrant workers whom they can exploit. Bosses remain at the top of the hometown hierarchy and vendor-employees at the bottom.

This case study builds upon scholarship that questions the positive role of migrant social networks. It also calls into question the concept of 'ethnic solidarity' and the positive function of the 'ethnic enclave' in the socio-economic lives of newcomers. The fruit vendors of this study find themselves trapped in the ethnic enclave due to income insecurity, debt and limited prospects outside of the enclave. For them, the enclave is not a safe space where ethnic resources are mobilized for advancement. Instead, migrants are funnelled into high-risk informal work on public street corners with exploitative *paisano* bosses, which together create a very hostile context of reception. This study reveals the exploitative undercurrents that are present in one ethnic enterprise; this enterprise constitutes a small fraction of the entire ethnic enclave, but its characteristics may be symptomatic and characteristic of other immigrant enterprises in the enclave. In the end, the upward spiral of accumulation and forward momentum of a few immigrant bosses is not sufficient to justify the counterpart downward spiral of loss and backward momentum experienced by many more migrant workers.

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Notes

1. Hometown and respondents' names have been changed to protect confidentiality.
2. The Economic Roundtable describes the informal economy as those jobs that are not in formal data sources, operate outside of established labour laws, and would be considered legal but are not regulated. They exclude criminal activities.
3. I use the term 'migrant' and 'immigrant' interchangeably. Most vendors expressed a desire to return to Mexico and their undocumented status made their prolonged presence in the USA uncertain (thus migrant). However, Dos Mundos migrants often pushed back return dates and lengthened their stay while settling into homes and neighbourhoods in ways that aspired for more permanence (like immigrants).

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