

Heterogeneity and social incorporation. Elite and non-elite German-speaking immigrants in Yucatán during the extended Porfiriato: Paper presented at the 17th Congress of Mesoamericanists. Basel, Switzerland, 31st. of January to 2nd. of February, 2014

Alma J. Durán-Merk

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**HETEROGENEITY AND SOCIAL INCORPORATION.
ELITE AND NON-ELITE GERMAN-SPEAKING IMMIGRANTS IN YUCATÁN DURING THE
EXTENDED PORFIRIATO**

Dr. Alma Durán-Merk
University of Augsburg
Department of European Ethnology
alma.duran@phil.uni-augsburg.de

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Thanks to the organizers, especially to Antje Gutsenheimer and to Alexander Brust, for giving me this opportunity to share with you some of the most important findings of my dissertation, entitled "*In Our Sphere of Life". Dimensions of Social Incorporation in a Stratified Society. The Case of the German- Speaking-Immigrants in Yucatán and Their Descendants, 1876-1914,*¹ which will be published soon.

In this empirical analysis I explored the migration and acculturation processes of 188 people into Yucatán, and those of some of their 419 descendants, that is, 607 individuals in total. Those of you who attended the congress two years ago might remember that I presented some of the study's preliminary results; therefore, I will cover here some new aspects and emphasize the final outcome.

Today's presentation consists of five parts: how I came to this theme; the questions that guided this research; how it was conducted and the theoretical framework used; some of the most important results, and, finally, the new research perspectives it offers.

¹ Augsburg, Universität Augsburg, 2013.

1 Point of Departure

In 2002, as I began to research about this minority group in Yucatán, I realized that many of its demographical and occupational characteristics, as well as the migration experiences of their members and their selected acculturation modes seemed to be dissimilar to those reported in the academic literature. Until recently, this had concentrated on elite immigrants in México D.F.

These privileged newcomers were “migrants of choice”, mostly propertied single men with economic capital and good connections. They came mainly from the Hanseatic cities, and resided in México’s capital. They saw themselves as *Auslandsdeutsche*, and looked at the receiving society with certain contempt. Their objective, according to the literature, was to increase their capital as soon as possible and to return to Germany. While in México, they formed a closed, tight, and relatively homogeneous ethnic community until the 1940’s, and chose an economic accommodation with socio-structural self-segregation as mode of acculturation. For them, supposedly, the migration experience was coupled with success and socio-economic power. Given their characteristics, the Germans in México are depicted by many scholars until our days as a group that is difficult to integrate.

Contrary to this portrait, the information that I was finding in Yucatán pointed to a more heterogeneous reality. Most of the German-born people there were not elite migrants. For example: Christiane Franke, from Nordhausen, wrote:

Hace el espacio de veintisiete años poco más o menos, que en unión de mi finado esposo Don Federico Worbis, venimos de Alemania en completo estado de pobreza ... con el ánimo de trabajar honradamente para procurarnos nuestra subsistencia y la de nuestros pequeños hijos ...

As she created this letter the 27th of July of 1909, Christiane sold chickens in a market in Mérida and still lived in humble conditions; that was not going to be much different for several generations of the Worbis family in Yucatán.

Testimonies like this let me to suspect that many migrant experiences were still ignored by scholarly research: Those of peasant families and other individual working-class people; those of middle-class individuals that did not climb the social ladder; those of minors that for some reason found themselves alone in México; and those of women

who worked as domestic helpers or street vendors, and had nothing to do with the portrait of the German experience in México as one predictably tied with “economic success and great political influence”.

That is how I identified a research gap that my study fulfilled.

2 Research Questions

The goal of my dissertation was to answer two questions:

1. What were the social and cultural characteristics of the German-speaking residents in Yucatán between 1876 and 1914?, and:
2. How did these newcomers and their descendants became incorporated into the Yucatecan society?

To answer them it was necessary to analyze both migration as processes as well as the post-migratory experiences at the macro-, mezzo- and micro-levels.

3 Research Design and Theoretical Framework

The integration of diverse methodological and theoretical approaches was required.

Methodologically, I blended historical and ethnographic techniques to obtain data, concretely:

1. Critical analysis of historical records, secondary texts and other materials. This included archival and hemerographic documents, photos and objects; the sources were consulted in 26 public archives and 31 family collections in four countries —Austria, Germany, México and the United States.
2. A total of 80 qualitative interviews —which included expert, biographical, narrative, explorative, focused, individual and familial formats— were evaluated for this work.
3. Participant observation by activities organized by current descendants of the immigrants.
4. And systematic analysis and comparison to other communities, whenever possible.

Given the large amount of data, all the acquired information was imputed into the computerized Database “Yuca-Alemanes, 1876 to 1914”, which was specially created for this dissertation. In this image, you can see an example that shows some of the data captured in seven of the 24 different fields. The empirical facts were evaluated both quantitatively and qualitatively.

A question kept going through my mind: How was it to arrive to the Port of Sisal or Progreso, coming from Hamburg, at that time? What did the newcomers experienced as different, alike, interesting or shocking, for example? I was very interested in the receiving society and the concrete conditions it presented to the immigrants, which made necessary for me to include a detailed ethnography of Mérida at that time. Additionally, in order to be able to understand what this experience meant in the daily lives of people, five detailed family portraits —conceived as life-worlds— where developed; to create them, I departed from the individual migrant as unit of analysis, extending out to cover the whole family up to four generations.

In order to proceed clearly with the analysis, I created a methodological frame by recurring to the Migration Typology of Klaus Bade, the systematic analysis of dimensions of social incorporation by Friedrich Hecker and Dominique Schnapper, and the proposed model of social stratification of México during that time by Hugo Nutini. Likewise, several analytical concepts showed to be useful to understand, contrast, and explain this migration, such as Acculturation, Segmented Integration, Transculturation, as well as some tools from Transnational Theory.

Departing from a socio-economic classification of the immigrant generation at the point of arrival to Yucatán, a largely differentiated profile of the group emerged.

4 Findings

To present some of the most important contributions to knowledge of this study, I will first answer the two questions that guided this research by comparing *a grosso modo* what was presumed about this migration before (on the left column), and what the empirical results from Yucatán show (on the right column):

To the first question, about the characteristics of the migrants: Yucatán received a minimal amount of elite migration. Members of all social-strata were documented. It

was possible to distinguish three sub-groups for analytical purposes:

- The superordinate classes represented barely a 3.78%
- The middle classes constituted the largest group, with circa 59%.
- And a 36% belonged to the lower stratum .

It is possible, therefore, to say that this was in its majority an income-seeking migration—and not an elite one—, with a good number of cases of family reunification. More than becoming richer, people wanted to find better life conditions. Another important demographic difference is that instead of a large majority of males, many women and complete families with children were detected.

In regards to origin, only 10.6% of the germanophone migrants came from the Hanseatic cities; the rest from other parts of Germany and 16 different countries, from Austria to Jamaica.

Some of the characteristics identified by the elite migrants in México City were also noticed in Yucatán, such as a relatively brief length of stay. Sojourners, however, were a minority. A large number of the migrants stayed in the peninsula and formed German-Yucatecan families. Furthermore: instead of a migration experience marked by socioeconomic mobility, many stories of hardship were identified.

I am now moving on to the answer of the second question. About the social integration of the migrants it is clear that in regards to the life of the community, their intra-relationships were relatively loose and strata-conditioned. Contrary to what was presumed, the networks they constructed were varied, open and flexible to associations with the majority group and with other minorities, but almost always determined by class.

Instead of mainly self-segregation, diverse modes of acculturation were discovered. Among them, structural-cultural- and social integration were the most common ones, with a good part of generation 1.5—that is minor migrants—and the second generation entering into symbolic forms of relatedness with locals of all socio-economic strata, that is, in relationships such as matrimony, *compadrazgo*, and common-law marriages.

Contrary to the notion that, I quote, “*los germanos retuvieron sus fuertes características*

culturales y sus rasgos fisionómicos por varias generaciones”, there is clear evidence that transcultural processes took place. Some of these started already by the immigrant generation, and increased subsequently.

Moreover, not all German-Speaking migrants experience a position of control and superiority as foreigners in the society of reception. The practices and discourses of German merchants and workers in Yucatán showed, on one side, cooperation with—and mutual dependency from—other cultural groups. On the other side, however, these also reflected clearly that they were perceived as rivals in certain occupational niches. Commoners reported that although they competed with some locals for jobs such as construction worker or carriage driver, they benefited from an extra-ethnic solidarity based on social class. The host society accepted willfully some of those immigrants, while rejected others.

If the elite Germans in México’s capital spoke of themselves as *Auslandsdeutsche*, among those in Yucatán a regional self-identification prevailed over a “German” identity, unless until about the turn into the Twentieth Century. By the second generation, a good number of them spoke of themselves as “Yuca-alemanes”.

I will continue by listing some of the main theses generated from my study.

a) The modes of integration of the migrants were fashioned by seven factors:

- migrants’ class origins
- pre-migratory occupation
- the host society’s structural conditions
- its reception of the three specific sub-groups
- demographic and personal characteristics of the newcomers—such as gender, age, life-phase, marital status, etc.
- the migrants’ actions, aspirations, preferences and skills
- familial configuration in both, the sending and the receiving society.

b) Preponderance of European or German cultural practices and objects correlated with socio-economic power of the head of the family.

c) Retention of ethnic markers among the upper classes facilitated a successful economic integration; among the lower stratum it created a status dissonance. Some individuals of

the last mentioned subgroup and/or their descendants resorted to diverse discursive strategies to reduce such imbalance, such as biographical reinterpretation, appropriation by commoners of upper-class ethnic narratives, and enhancement of the ancestor's socio-economic background.

d) More than as intrinsic, ethnic identity was an achieved status: a social position taken voluntarily, constructed partly through external and cultural markers. Therefore: ethnic identity was constructed, negotiated, contested and, occasionally, symbolically extended. Empirical evidence of the usage of transnational identities formations was collected and interpreted.

e) Nationality and other forms of belonging were understood and/or practiced as syncretistic. Several forms of identification co-existed, were situational, and flexible.

f) In place of a return migration to Germany as rich capitalists, most migrants who left Yucatán relocated into other Mexican or Central American cities, either as employees or as small- to middle-sized merchants.

g) Instead of investors, “modernizers” or “civilizers”, the mayor contribution of this migration was to help expand and solidify the Yucatecan middle classes, which in Yucatán at that time barely reach between a 3 to 5% —one of the lowest in the country.

5 Impulse for Further Research

I am coming now to the last part of this presentation. This study opens new venues for further research in different forms. I will mention here just a few of them:

1. Our conception of the German migration received by México ought to be reframed: it encompassed migrants from all socio-economic strata, and their migration experiences varied highly.
2. A historical perspective and the inclusion of non-elite migrants in the analysis allow us to grasp the processes of stratification within migratory streams. Additionally, this reevaluation is important giving that currently a discussion in the academic community is taking place: To what degree do the challenges and opportunities that contemporary migrants are faced with today are related to antecedents and long-duration processes?

3. The Databank “Yuca-Alemanes 1876-1914” can be made available to other scholars for further inquiries, and it is currently being extended to cover until 1966.
4. The integrative framework of research applied in this inquiry is appropriate for historical and contemporary migrations. Its further use by other researchers would facilitate comparative research.
5. Yucatán’s structural characteristics during the Porfiriato show certain parallels to those found in other Caribbean or Latin America extract societies, specially monoculture ones. The results of this study, then, have extra-regional application.
6. Theoretically, this work contributes with empirical data to the ongoing academic exploration of concepts such as identity and acculturation, suggesting also additions to various typologies and models commonly used in migration studies. It has done the same with issues and processes about which we still do not know much, such as the motivation for religious re-affiliations, for sequential migrations, and the factors that explain downward mobility, for example. Besides, the study revisited some controversial notions, such as that of “economically motivated migrants”, the role of ethnic institution in promoting or impeding interconnections with the receiving society, and the issue of multiple-nationality and its weigh on a sense of belonging.

To close this presentation, I wish that this study contributes to our understanding of the high diversification of how newcomers interacted with new environment; that it helps us to understand that there is not such a thing as “the immigrant experience”, in singular, but a large variety of migrant experiences, in plural.

Thank you very much for your attention.