

The transnational politics of the Tomato King: meaning and impact

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Abstract In this article we deploy transnational ethnography to explore the transnational electoral politics by which Andrés Bermúdez, a successful tomato grower and labour contractor from Winters, California, who came to be called ‘the Tomato King’, was elected mayor of the municipality of Jerez in the Mexican state of Zacatecas. We seek to explain the meaning of his transnational electoral victory and its impact on the role of ‘the migrant’ as a new social actor in Mexican political development. We thus situate the Bermudista phenomenon in the context of the literature on migrant transnational politics. We hope to move the literature on migrant political transnationalism forward by advancing an agency-oriented perspective that incorporates both the politics of representation of ‘el migrante’ in transnational electoral campaigns and the emerging dynamics of transnational coalition politics. Our approach underlines the need to carefully historicize the relationship between transnationalism and citizenship – namely, to map the contingency and agency underlying the changing practices of states, migrants, and transnational institutional networks vis-à-vis questions of transnational citizenship. This is best done by paying close attention to the actual social and political practices whereby human agents pursue historically specific political projects that extend the practices of citizenship across borders.

On 4 July 2004 Andrés Bermúdez Viramontes, a successful tomato grower and labour contractor from Winters, California, was elected *presidente municipal* in the municipality of Jerez in the Mexican state of Zacatecas. Bermúdez has been nicknamed ‘*El Rey del Tomate*’ because of his economic success as a grower, contractor and inventor of a tomato-transplanting machine. This is a story of the rise, fall and dramatic rebound of the most prominent transnational political candidate to emerge in the current struggle over dual citizenship in contemporary Mexico.

Andrés Bermúdez was initially elected mayor of Jerez, Zacatecas on 1 July 2001, only to have his election invalidated in an ongoing political struggle over the meaning of cross-border electoral power. Bermúdez positioned himself as a quintessential binational candidate, a symbol of the rising power of *el migrante* in Mexican political life. His politics of representation and his victory caused much consternation among his opponents from the existing political class. The legal actions of those opponents eventually led to Bermúdez’s disqualification from the mayoral post by a federal

electoral court. Ruling on a complaint filed by the once dominant Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) party, the court determined that Bermúdez was ineligible to hold the post of *presidente municipal* because he had not maintained residence in the municipality for an uninterrupted period of one year. This defeat, publicized widely in the Mexican and US press, made clear a principal legal obstacle preventing transmigrants from participating in Mexican politics.

However, three years later the exclusionary state law had been changed and Bermúdez launched a second run for municipal president. He had made political allies on both sides of the border, fostered a dynamic Bermudista social movement at the grassroots level in Jerez, and won office for a second time by a wide margin of 2000 votes in a three-party race with 20,000 votes cast. How did this dramatic turnaround come about? What factors help us to understand and explain the Bermudista phenomenon, the dramatic rise, fall and rebound of *el migrante* in the discourses and practices currently transnationalizing Mexican electoral politics?

Our aim in this article is to explore the Bermudista phenomenon in the context of the literature on migrant transnational politics. Where is the study of transnational electoral politics best situated within this literature? How is the politics of a transnational electoral process similar to or different from other modes of transnational politics like the emigrant politics aimed at constituting dual citizenship, or the translocal politics of migrant hometown associations that has dominated the literature on US–Mexican political transnationalism? (For a useful elaboration of the various modes of transnational politics see Østergaard-Nielsen 2003a, 2003b). Who are the key social actors that must be taken into account as a transnational political coalition is constructed through the media and on the ground in two countries? Put differently, how were Andrés Bermúdez’s two transnational political campaigns for mayor of Jerez, Mexico, constituted both discursively and practically?

In this article we hope to move the literature on migrant political transnationalism forward by advancing an agency-oriented perspective that incorporates both the politics of representation of *el migrante* in transnational electoral campaigns and the emerging dynamics of transnational coalition politics. Our approach underlines the need to historicize carefully the relationship between transnationalism and citizenship, namely to map the contingency and agency underlying the changing practices of states, migrants and transnational institutional networks *vis-à-vis* questions of transnational citizenship. This is best done, as we hope this article will demonstrate, by paying close attention to the actual social and political practices whereby human agents pursue historically specific political projects that extend the practices of citizenship across borders.

In this respect we seek to move beyond earlier binary accounts of transnational practices that too often sought to distinguish between ‘narrow vs. broad’, ‘fleeting vs. resilient’, ‘core vs. expanded’ and/or ‘regular vs. sporadic’ transnational practices (see Guarnizo et al. 2003; Itzingsohn et al. 1999; Levitt 2001a; Portes et al. 1999). These typological distinctions, in our view, are too static to capture the dynamic processes of conflict and accommodation by which actual political projects are constructed and change over time, whether within nation-states or transnationally. The lived reality of transnational political mobilization is more contingent, likely to

reflect the practices of social actors situated within the ebbs and flows of historical moments and opportunities rather than a routinized and stable engagement with, or incorporation into, state structures. In this context of political flux the transnational coalition on which we focus is best thought of as ‘temporarily sutured’ rather than either regular or episodic (Mouffe 1988; see also Smith 2001: 130–6). The Bermudista coalition has been ‘stitched together’, so to speak, by local, regional, and transnational actors into a winning political force that simultaneously appeals to both democratic populism and neo-liberal modernization. Whether this temporarily sutured coalition has staying power is an open question that will likely turn on the ability of the Bermudez regime to satisfy the coalition’s multiple and at times contradictory constituencies.

Transnational ethnography

In an influential early essay anthropologist George Marcus (1989) anticipated the turn to transnational field methods. Marcus called on researchers to find new ways for ‘imagining the whole’ in a period when the grand narratives of systems theorists of all stripes were losing their capacity to inform our understandings of how the world works. Marcus called for the development of an ethnography of *places* and their *inter-connections* rather than a place-focused ethnography of single locales. He argued that ‘an ethnography of complex connections, itself, becomes the means of producing a narrative that is both micro and macro, and neither one particularly’ (Marcus 1989: 24). The shift from place to places, simultaneously and complexly interconnected by intended and unintended consequences, Marcus argued, requires three distinct moves, namely: (1) the use of multi-locale ethnography; (2) attention to networks of complex connections and to their simultaneous, reciprocal effects; and (3) an effort to contextualize the connections studied in terms of the sorts of ‘wider wholes’ in which the connections and their effects are taking place. Our current work deploys such a transnational ethnographic approach. (On transnational ethnography see Smith 2001; on the related approach of global ethnography see Burroway et al. 2000.) In this study we have combined transnational ethnography with political-economic and institutional analysis to study the complex dynamics connecting the multiple places where situated social actors have forged a path-breaking transnational electoral coalition.

Consistent with the transnational ethnographic nature of our field work, we conducted extensive ethnographic interviews over a two-year period in English, Spanish and at times bilingually with Andrés Bermúdez. The first two of these interviews were conducted in English in Davis, California in March and November 2002. Each was tape recorded and fully transcribed. These ethnographies were carried out in the aftermath of Bermúdez’s disqualification from office in 2001 and before he had decided to run again. These wide-ranging open-ended conversations focused on his reasons for running for office, his experiences in dealing with local Zacatecan political culture, his responses to efforts to invalidate his election, and his future plans once he had given up efforts to keep the mayoral office. Matt Bakker reconstructed a third ethnographic encounter with Bermúdez from field

notes taken in February 2003 following extended bilingual conversations between him and Bermúdez while the two were travelling from Davis to Los Angeles, where Bermúdez was scheduled to participate in a conference on the voting rights of Mexican citizens living abroad.

In the final weeks of the 2004 campaign both co-authors spent time in Zacatecas attending campaign events, interacting with Bermúdez and his supporters, and observing the campaign at the grassroots level. If we had held any illusions about the 'objective' and detached nature of our observation of this transnational campaign they would have been quickly shattered at a political rally we attended in Bermúdez's natal community of El Cargadero. As we lingered to observe the slowly arriving crowd, we noticed a sign on the wall of the community plaza telling us that it was named 'El Migrante'. A number of the men gathered around the plaza pegged us for outsiders. They approached us to recount their personal experiences with migration to the United States. Later, much to our surprise, we were drawn further into events as Bermúdez began his intervention, introducing us to the crowd amid rounds of applause and calling Bakker forward to say a few words. In this moment of ethnographic reflexivity, we realized that our relationship with Bermúdez had suddenly become reciprocal: not only were we gathering data through 'passive observation', but this pair of intellectuals from *El Norte* was helping to legitimize further Bermúdez's transnational credentials by offering additional material evidence of his multiple connections with influential actors on both sides of the border.

In the days leading up to the second election Bakker carried out additional interviews with Bermúdez in Spanish. Given the constraints on Bermúdez's time at the end of the campaign, these were conducted jointly with members of the national and international press; and were recorded and fully transcribed. At this time, Bakker engaged in further participant observation, accompanying Bermúdez's campaign staff in their final preparations. In the course of this experience, extensive field notes were taken and additional interviews were conducted with Bermúdez's campaign coordinator and with the president of the PAN party at the municipal level.

To help us develop a contextual frame for our extended case study we also travelled to Zacatecas, the state capital of Zacatecas, to interview public officials as well as key public intellectuals from the University of Zacatecas who have studied migrant political transnationalism in the state extensively and who actively participated in the transnational Bermudista coalition. Additional contextual understanding was provided by interviews we conducted for a related research project in Los Angeles and Orange County, California with leaders of the Southern California Federation of Zacatecan Hometown Clubs and of a transnational political organization, the *Frente Cívico Zacatecano*. Our comprehensive review of Mexican and US press accounts of the first campaign and its aftermath, as well as accounts of Bermúdez's return following electoral reforms allowing migrant participation, supplemented our qualitative transnational research data. Finally, we have drawn on documentary material, including Bermúdez's internal campaign literature and the legal decision of the Mexican court that invalidated his first electoral victory.

Transnational electoral politics: beyond translocality

In the past decade there has been growing interest in the political dimensions of transnationalism. This has included efforts to theorize such phenomena as transnational social movements, coalitions and networks (Cohen and Rai 2000; Fox 2002; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Khagram et al. 2002; Tarrow 1998); 'extra-territorial nation building' (Basch et al. 1994; Bauböck 2003); migrant membership in a transnational public sphere (R. C. Smith 2003a, 2003b); and various conceptualizations of transnational citizenship that have introduced new vocabularies of the 'substantive' (Goldring 1999, 2001, 2002), 'post-national' (Soysal 1994), and 'extraterritorial' (Fitzgerald 2000; M. P. Smith 2003b) citizen.

Empirical studies of transnational migrant politics are especially germane to our present purposes. Important studies in this literature have focused on the politics of transnational voting rights and dual citizenship (Guarnizo 1998; Martínez Saldaña 2003); the extraterritorial extension of homeland political parties (Levitt 2001b; M. P. Smith 2003a); and the politics of translocal community development (Goldring 1996, 1998; Moctezuma 2003a; M. P. Smith 2003b; R. C. Smith 1998). An important debate running through this literature is the potential role of 'the migrant' as a 'new social actor' in the democratization of countries of origin, as the key agent promoting either political transformation or migrant incorporation into elite sectors. This debate has been particularly visible in the literature on Mexican political transnationalism (see Bakker and Smith 2003; Guarnizo 1998; Kearney 1991; R. C. Smith 2003a, 2003b), although it has also been applied to other countries like the Dominican Republic (Guarnizo 1998; Levitt 2001a), Haiti (Laguerre 1999), and El Salvador (Guarnizo 2001).

These studies have been framed within a wider debate that focuses on whether globalization and transnational migration severely restrict, if not erase entirely, the sovereignty of the nation-state. In effect, these debates hinge on the relative importance of global capitalism, the state, or civil society in driving the extra-territorial conduct of migrant politics. Several authors have started to study state-level institutions that structure and make possible transnational politics in order to counter earlier works arguing that contemporary structural transformations on a global scale result in the transcendence of the nation-state (Itzigsohn 2000; Østergaard-Nielsen 2003a, 2003b; R. C. Smith 2003a, 2003b). Robert Smith, for instance, has rightly criticized what he terms the 'globalist' and 'hard transnationalist' perspectives for attributing causality to global capitalism and global structures and overlooking 'the role of an active state in creating transnational public spheres' (R. C. Smith 2003a: 301). Yet, in what amounts to a complete inversion of the global capitalism vs. nation-state binary, Smith's 'instituted process framework' tends to over-valorize the state's role in shaping and conditioning the agency of migrants. The key driving force in this framework is the state and its political and developmental strategies and manoeuvres aimed at the state's (re)positioning within the world system. The state largely determines the 'semi-autonomous' character of migrant civil society through 'channelling' the political opportunity structure, through its policies of transnational political re-incorporation, and through its capacity to extend recognition and resources

to particular migrant organizations. In the final analysis, the differences in membership practices and claims-making shown in Robert Smith's comparative study of Zacatecan and Oaxacan migrants are traced to the 'different ways each is embedded within relevant local, national and global institutions and conditions' (R. C. Smith 2003a: 311). The idea that migrants' practices might play a role in altering these institutions and conditions is nowhere to be found; in short, people are embedded in institutions and conditions they lack the capacity to remake.

In this article we seek to re-enter the debates on migrant political transnationalism from a clearly agency-oriented perspective that contextualizes migrants' political action within relevant historical, political-economic and institutional contexts without assuming that those contexts can be invoked to explain outcomes. Rather than present these contexts as determinative structures we conceive of them as factors that situate the acting subjects who form transnational networks and mediate their practices without determining them. Because the study of translocal politics has been the most ethnographically grounded, and therefore the most agency-oriented, approach to transnational politics, our starting point in this study of transnational electoral politics was to examine the translocal dimension of this process. Are the linkages between migrants in Winters, California and the villages and communities of Jerez, Zacatecas, Mexico crucial to the formation of the transnational Bermudista coalition? What other transnational linkages need to be adduced to understand the dynamics of cross-border political coalition formation? Who besides migrants play important roles in these coalitions? Where are the key coalition partners located and how do they interact? If we need to move beyond translocality, where do we need to move?

The literature on Mexican migrant hometown associations is central to the study of translocal politics. In this literature, translocal material and symbolic exchange are viewed as key resources promoting trust, sustaining collective solidarity and generating community development projects across borders. Translocal relations are envisaged as a triadic connection that links transmigrants, the localities to which they migrate and their locality of origin. Mexican transmigrants in early studies by Robert Smith (1995, 1998) and Luin Goldring (1996, 1998), for example, operate largely in these translocal social spaces. They are concerned with reconfiguring power and status relations within their villages of origin. Translocal relations and belongings generate a shared sense of interests and meanings that bind key actors in the translocal social field together, sustaining their sense of hometown membership and identity. Social networks in migration and their attendant modes of social organization – hometown associations, economic remittances, social clubs, celebrations and other social processes based on 'translocality' – sustain such translocal social structures. These translocal processes and the social structures they help to erect are clearly not unique to Mexico, as shown, for example, by researchers documenting similar processes among migrant groups such as the Turks and Kurds in Germany (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003a, 2003b), and Dominicans in the United States (Levitt 2001a).

Because of the growing role of the regional state in Mexico in attempting to redirect the collective remittance flows of migrants and shape the projects to which they contribute, research on Mexican hometown associations has necessarily stretched beyond the translocal political arena. An emergent theme in many studies of migrant

political transnationalism has been the importance of transnational political practices that seek to extend membership and citizenship across borders (R. C. Smith 2003a; Goldring 2002). In her recent work Luin Goldring focuses on the emergent role of migrant hometown associations (HTAs) and home-state associations as interest group claimants for substantive citizenship status at the regional as well as the local level of Mexican political life. Focusing on HTAs from Zacatecas, Goldring argues that the interaction between 'state-led' and 'migrant-led' transnational practices creates a context in which transmigrants can exercise 'substantive citizenship' and make claims to membership in the transnational Mexican nation (Goldring 1999, 2001, 2002).

A number of recent studies by Mexican scholars document and analyse migrants' efforts to reform Mexican political institutions and formalize their membership and citizenship status and rights (see, for example, Badillo Moreno 2004; Martínez Saldaña 2003; Moctezuma Longoria 2003b). These studies, written by important Mexican scholar-activists and public intellectuals, offer us interesting insights that are rarely seen in the more academic literature. However, they rarely engage explicitly with theoretical debates on transnationalism. An exception is the work of Miguel Moctezuma Longoria (2002), which explicitly frames migrant politics within larger theoretical discussions of new social movements and new political subjects, which we have drawn on in this study.

The literature on Mexican migrants' construction of translocality and their informal quest for substantive transnational citizenship has clearly advanced our understanding of the emergent role of transnational migrants in Mexican local and regional politics. Yet it is not especially helpful in understanding the quite different ways in which Andrés Bermúdez's two transnational electoral campaigns have sought to give a more prominent place to *el migrante* in Mexican political life. In seeking office Andrés Bermúdez has not explicitly relied on political support from translocal networks of circular migrants between Jerez and Winters, California. His political ties to Mexican transnational migrants, as we shall see below, are spatially more dispersed, encompassing Zacatecan migrant association leaders in Los Angeles and southern California, and potential return migrant leaders from other US and Mexican states. Nor has Andrés Bermúdez framed his candidacy as a quest to establish a translocal 'Jerezano' identity. In contrast to a singular mode of group affiliation based on translocal relations and belongings, the Tomato King's political strategy, discourse and appeal have been multi-stranded and highly mediated by global mass media, wider transnational political connections and the constraints and opportunities offered by the Mexican legal system.

Constructing a new political subject: *el migrante*

The political discourse of Andrés Bermúdez has sought to mobilize a winning coalition based on a complex weaving together of a multidimensional heroic migration narrative applicable to the Mexican nation as a whole. His narrative appeals to a multifaceted sense of belonging based on articulations of *class*, *status* and *power* that cut across local affiliations while promising to improve local community life. Bermúdez touts his *campesino* class origin as a key qualification for holding public

office, in effect telling the electorate (particularly the women relatives of migrants who remain behind in the rural villages and make up a majority of voters in the municipality of Jerez) ‘I understand your problems and feel your pain’. The Tomato King then deftly links this class appeal to a discourse that valorizes the transnational status of his migration experience. Bermúdez’s migration to *El Norte* is represented as: (a) a source of his own successful transnational upward class mobility; (b) an experience that enabled him to acquire the business and technological skills needed to bring economic development to underdeveloped parts of Zacatecas; and (c) an understanding of an alternative political culture and institutional framework that do not depend on the graft and political corruption that has kept Mexico, both politically and economically, backward.

Consider the following excerpts from an interview conducted on 3 July 2004, the day before his electoral victory.

Andrés Bermúdez: Look, I have as much experience as the experience that you acquire in the United States building up a million-dollar business from nothing; where Andrés Bermúdez has the experience of 600 or 700 people working for Andrés Bermúdez; where the payroll of Andrés Bermúdez is around 140,000 to 160,000 dollars. Now, in order to govern, to know how to govern, to understand what it is to govern you have to understand the people. To be a good governor you have to have been born into poverty to understand poverty. It’s not the same to say, ‘that child is cold’, than to have felt that; nor ‘that child is hungry’, than to have felt it. Huh! That is the experience that Andrés Bermúdez has. But it’s so simple, it’s so simple to govern: it is speaking the truth and doing what you say. That is the politics of Andrés Bermúdez.

Matt Bakker: But the other thing is what would you like to bring to Jerez from the political system in the United States?

Andrés Bermúdez: Look, I’d like to bring from the United States the political system, the free vote, democracy – the free vote without any pressure. Look, the sub-director of the police department from here supported me and now they told him that he’s been fired. Principally, that is what I would like to bring – that the people be free, that they forget about the electoral gifts, that they forget about the hundred pesos and that instead they believe, they build Mexico. They think, ‘well, they give me the gifts and I continue to sleep’. No, wake them up.

(Bermúdez interview, 3 July 2004)

This is the tone of Bermúdez’s frequently made promise to ‘Americanize’ Mexican political life. His self-portrayal as a bi-national candidate seeking to transform Jerez into ‘a little United States’ (Quiñones 2001) is what garnered Andrés Bermúdez an inordinate amount of national and international press coverage in both election campaigns. And it was a key source of his electoral success.

Andrés Bermúdez’s populist valorization of the *campesino* turned successful migrant capable of bringing needed political change is framed against an antipodal

representation of an elite 'other', namely the corrupt political class at all levels of the Mexican state and society that has enriched itself at great cost. During elections this power elite has relied on vote-buying that creates passive citizens. After elections the large kickbacks that winning members of the political class skim off from construction projects create incentives to spend more and more public resources on public works that leaves too little available for education, poverty alleviation and productive investment. On a personal level, the ruling political class has never learned the value of hard work, making a handsome living, as they do, not by producing anything of value but by appropriating other people's hard-earned money. The following excerpts illustrate this theme.

Andrés Bermúdez: [There's] nothing harder in changing Mexico. But the government don't want to deal with that. He wants to deal, 'bring me the money'. [Say] I am the contractor [and] the governor says 'you do this street, how much?' 'One million dollars.' 'Okay, I [will] pay you two million dollars. When I pay you two million dollars you take your million dollars and give me back my million dollars.' That means the money around is already washed. That's clean.

Andrés Bermúdez: And the woman is a widow. Everybody feels sorry for this lady. I started my ideas working and I say, 'well, what's the reason the woman here is alone?' Migration. One time I got 200 to 300 women in one place when I start doing my speech, when I finished everybody [was] crying. I tell them, 'you see one of these, the sons of these politicians, cross the border? No. Why not? Why do our sons got to risk their lives? Why? ... Because you appoint these rich, because you give them the power, when you give 'em your money'.

(Bermúdez interview, 15 March 2002)

Once framed in this way, the Tomato King's electoral narrative then expands from class and status considerations to collective power as a source of political mobilization and social change. Voters are asked to empower a new political class by voting for Bermúdez. In so doing they are told they will be opening the door for the inclusion of more and more successful migrants in the political life of contemporary Mexico.

Michael Peter Smith: Do you think that more and more people like yourself are getting involved?

Andrés Bermúdez: Well, that's the reason [Governor] Monreal [is] scared with whatever I have behind me. Because if I do, becoming a president and later on maybe becoming a governor, but just say becoming a president and I do its job, in three years, there's a lot of guys jumping across the border and try to do it. Because some of the guys called me, you know some guy from Houston, he's got a big market, he's from Mexico City. He goes, 'How did you do it? I want to go back.' You know a guy from Guadalajara, you know, a lot of people called me: 'How can I go back and help?' I mean if you go back that government is scared. Scared of losing control ... of losing power.

(Bermúdez interview, 15 March 2002)

Like Bermúdez, these migrants are depicted as caring deeply about the transnational Mexican nation from which they have previously been excluded. Like him they are represented as caring, competent and free of corruption. Like him, they don't need the emoluments of office that the current political class has taken from the national treasury. They simply 'want to help' and know how to do so.

Bermúdez's emphasis on fighting corruption needs to be analysed in the context of contemporary political transformations in Mexico which culminated with Vicente Fox of the opposition PAN party defeating the ruling PRI in the 2000 presidential election by campaigning successfully as the 'candidate of change'. In our interviews, Bermúdez did not seem to have much faith that Fox or any other opposition party politicians would successfully transform Mexico's corrupt and authoritarian political culture(s). Instead, echoing remarks he heard the US consul in Monterrey make, Bermúdez argued that Mexico would only change if its emigrants were to return from the USA and make the change by bringing a different way of doing things without corruption (Bermúdez interview, 15 March 2002).

The bottom line of this narrative is that by voting for the Tomato King, voters will not just empower Andrés Bermúdez, they will empower themselves. Voters will usher in a new political era. They will legitimate the political participation of a new set of migrant political leaders who understand the needs of ordinary Mexicans, have gained much 'know how' from their migration experience and are free from the confines of the old political culture of corruption, authoritarianism and inefficiency. Put differently, *los migrantes* are the future leaders of the transnational Mexican nation; we are the best of you; and together we are 'us'. In his own words:

Andrés Bermúdez: Look, this campaign represents the future of the migrant. ... This is the true struggle of the migrant because if Andrés Bermúdez fails in this project the migrant also fails. In other words, I've come to open the doors for the migrant. I can't fail because I say to the politicians here that they are not afraid of Andrés Bermúdez, because Andrés Bermúdez is just one person, but if Andrés Bermúdez wins and if Andrés Bermúdez does the things that the people expect him to do, then a lot of Andréses are going to return. Because just like we left to go conquer a country, in order to survive, with that same energy we're returning and from over there we're helping out our communities, our towns, everyone. But we're also human beings that have the right to vote and the right to be elected. And we don't stop being Mexican just by the simple fact that we have left Mexico, like they're attempting, ignoring us.

They are afraid of the migrant because we see politics differently. We are a true politics. They are (not) going to be able to buy us off for a hundred pesos or with gifts. That is the difference! Us migrants are not politicians. Us migrants aren't living from politics nor do we eat from politics. So, we go to another country and we learn to do things because if we don't, we don't eat, we don't live.

(Bermúdez interview, 7 July 2004)

Contradictions of the Bermudista electoral coalition

Like Andrés Bermúdez's heroic discursive narrative, the winning political coalition he has temporarily sutured on the ground in the course of his two electoral campaigns is multidimensional. The political practices of this coalition operate at local, regional, and transnational geographic scales. They bring together social actors occupying different class experiences, ideological orientations and subject positionalities.

In winning the first election Bermúdez allied himself with a number of local and regional actors who had been working on the ground, often within the left-of-centre PRD party in Zacatecas, to incorporate migrants into a social movement to democratize the Mexican state by bringing migrants 'back in'. These included the local party militants eventually emerging as a local populist 'Bermudista' faction in Jerez as well as a group of public intellectuals, including Miguel Moctezuma Longoria and his colleagues from the Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas, who have both studied and participated in the transnationalization of Zacatecan political life.

Bermúdez also sought allies among the highly politically organized transnational migrant associations from Zacatecas in southern California. In fact the only debate between the major candidates for mayor of Jerez during the first campaign was held in Montebello, California in metropolitan Los Angeles. At the Montebello debate, Bermúdez solidified his candidacy and demonstrated the seriousness of his campaign by presenting the only formal outline of campaign proposals (Moctezuma interview, 3 September 2002).

Following the reversal of his electoral victory by the courts, Bermúdez forged an alliance with the *Frente Cívico Zacatecano* (FCZ), a political arm of the Zacatecan migrant organizations (see Goldring 2002). The aim of this alliance was to obtain state-level constitutional reforms recognizing 'bi-national residency' and facilitating transmigrant candidacies for popular elections. Originally touted as the '*ley Bermúdez*', this legislation was eventually passed as the '*ley migrante*'. Among its other pro-migrant provisions, this electoral reform allowed transnational candidates like Bermúdez to run for and hold office in Zacatecan municipalities by maintaining residence in the state for six months rather than the full year previously required. Thus, electoral reform produced by transnational social forces set the stage for Bermúdez's second successful run for mayor of Jerez.

Underlining the personalistic and populist dimensions of his coalition, during the second election Bermúdez and his local and regional allies in the Bermudista movement left the PRD party altogether, forming a temporary alliance with the ideologically more conservative PAN party. This alliance was clearly a marriage of convenience. It allowed Bermúdez to obtain a position on the ballot after he had lost a primary election to a PRD candidate backed by Governor Monreal (amid charges of vote-rigging). At the same time, this unholy alliance of neo-liberals and populists allowed PAN, with little electoral success in Zacatecan state or municipal elections, to hitch its fortunes to a populist candidate with proven electoral support from a Bermudista mass following. The contradictory character of this coalition is further underlined by the support Bermúdez and his movement have continued to enjoy from leftist public intellectuals at the University of Zacatecas, particularly Miguel Moctezuma,

who was active in drafting and promoting the *ley migrante*, and produced an impressive campaign brochure for the second election, touting the Bermúdez legend and its promise of future economic development of Jerez and Zacatecas.

The question that remains to be answered is whether this currently successful but potentially contradictory coalition of transnational migrant entrepreneurs, a neo-liberal political party, reformist public intellectuals, and populist oriented local and regional Bermudista movement activists can hold together as Bermúdez attempts to address the economic and social needs of the poor people who voted for the Tomato King. In our view, the long-term cohesiveness of this coalition will be rendered especially problematic if Bermúdez limits his policy options largely to the neo-liberal agenda of ‘public–private partnership’ that he has advanced during his electoral campaigns. We now turn to a consideration of the ‘productive investment’ theme that Andrés Bermúdez has advanced alongside his heroic migrant narrative. In so doing we ask what is likely to happen when populist-democrat oriented political reforms aimed at empowering ordinary people are combined with neo-liberal policy prescriptions intended to empower migrant entrepreneurs and promote local and regional economic prosperity.

The discourse on ‘productive investment’

Andrés Bermúdez’s multidimensional heroic migrant narrative adds an additional layer to the representation of the migrant as a new social actor uniquely positioned to transform and expand the political sphere. The migrant is also projected as a pivotal actor in the economic realm, a potential catalyst for economic development and regional prosperity. Economic development, and particularly the creation of employment opportunities, was the central campaign issue in Zacatecan regional elections in 2004 and Jerez was no exception. In this context, Andrés Bermúdez was forced to speak to the dire material conditions facing the bulk of the municipality’s residents and offer credible solutions to their economic woes. Expounding on the themes he first developed in the 2001 campaign, Bermúdez presented a set of economic development proposals outlining an entrepreneurial vision for local government. These policy proposals contained a curious blending of neo-liberal recipes for attracting businesses, measures requiring a strong state to guide the economy, and public–private partnerships with migrants to form job-creating enterprises.

His proposals to attract industrial and commercial investment tend to envision a limited role for the local state in encouraging corporations to relocate from other regions of Mexico and the United States through selective incentives like tax breaks and government subsidies. Yet these proposals, as the following excerpt from our 3 July interview illustrates, do require government to play a significant role in building and administering development sites.

Andrés Bermúdez: Listen, to create jobs in Zacatecas there has to be a big commitment and the government needs to invest. It has to build, let’s say, shopping centers and go to invite companies from the United States, from Monterrey, from Mexico to come to Zacatecas. But bring them and tell them,

'I'll loan you the building for two years. Come and put down your business. Create jobs. I won't charge you for the water. Just come here and create jobs. If within the next two years it's not working out for you, you can pull out. If within two years you're doing well, then you begin to pay.'

(Bermúdez interview, 3 July 2004)

The state would apparently be more aggressive under Bermúdez's agricultural proposals, moving beyond simply providing incentives and subsidies. His proposals envision the state 'modernizing' agricultural production and distribution by introducing machinery from the USA and by 'educating' local agricultural producers. Modernized agricultural techniques would significantly reduce the costs of production and allow the area to undercut its regional competitors.

Andrés Bermúdez: To create employment in agriculture first we have to look at which lands have water and then to bring modern equipment from the United States and teach the *campesinos*. Bring the equipment that I invented, to plant chili, to plant watermelon, to plant everything, all types of vegetable. Where the cost is cut in half ... if in Aguascalientes a kilo of chili costs 20, then we are going to sell it at 15 and we're going to make more money than they do at 20. So, you've got to modernize agriculture. We're 50 years behind. We need to modernize ourselves. But the point isn't to modernize ourselves in production. If we're going to modernize ourselves in production we need to find someone to buy it from us. Because if I bring them the machinery and they plant and plant, then when the crop is ready, where are we going to take it? We've got the same problem. So, we've got to figure out where.

(Bermúdez interview, 3 July 2004)

Given Bermúdez's own economic participation in these proposals the line between his role as government official and private investor begins to blur. At times the distinction between public official and entrepreneur is obliterated altogether. In an interview with an American reporter, for example, he claimed: 'I will personally invest \$1 million in two canneries that will create 600 jobs – if I win. You have my word on that' (Kraul 2004).

As the above excerpts make clear, similar to their position in the transformation of the political sphere, here too the heroic migrant – and particularly Andrés Bermúdez himself – is seen to play the leading role in creating a brighter economic future. Voters were told that by voting for Bermúdez they could assure the support of migrant entrepreneurs in job-creation projects. During the massive event marking the end of his campaign, Bermúdez suggested that his connections with migrants would lead to two specific projects: an air conditioner fabrication plant and a cannery capable of adding value to the *municipio*'s agricultural products. These contacts would permit Andrés Bermúdez to utilize a 'new 3 X 1 program':

These realities will be possible because we have reached consensus with our emigrants, agreeing that if Andrés Bermúdez becomes *presidente* the develop-

ers of the 3 X 1, 2 X 1 and 1 X 1 programs will no longer allocate their funds toward paving streets or urban infrastructure projects, many of which have been carried out at elevated costs. Instead, they will now put those funds in the hands of migrants in the government, like Andrés Bermúdez, to create jobs, businesses and employment.

(Cierre de Campaña 2004)

It is an open question whether or not these economic development proposals can prove effective in generating job opportunities sufficient in both quantity and quality to stem the tide of migration bound for the USA. Andrés Bermúdez himself appears sceptical of the possibilities for reducing migration levels. In recognition of the probability that economic livelihoods in Jerez will continue to depend on dollars sent home by the *Jerezanos ausentes* working in the USA, Bermúdez proposes to orient the local educational system towards generating the skills necessary to find meaningful work in the USA. In his words:

Andrés Bermúdez: [O]ne of my projects is to teach basic English from kindergarten through high school. At least when they arrive over there they'll know a little bit of the language. Now, my project is to teach them, to put up workshops to teach them: to cook, to become waitpersons, to be tractor operators, to work with computers, all of that. So that the people that leave from here, make it there knowing something, an occupation. If we're not going to be able to stop them ...

(Bermúdez interview, 3 July 2004)

Conclusions

Andrés Bermúdez's electoral campaigns brought together two important trends in contemporary Mexican politics: the emergence of new political subjectivities and the diminishing appeal of the nation's political parties. New political subjects, like *el migrante* and indigenous people, have increasingly mobilized to further the process of democratization unleashed in recent years. Beginning with the elections of 2001, Jerez, Zacatecas provided fertile ground for *el migrante* to emerge as a political subject in regional politics. By the time of the most recent elections, Jerez had ceased to be the only site of such mobilizations. Other migrant candidates contended for municipal presidencies during the July 2004 Zacatecan elections. Another migrant, Texas businessman Martín Carvajal, proved victorious in the small *municipio* of Apulco while two migrants were elected to the state legislature as required by the new *ley migrante*.

These multiple sites of surging migrant political mobilization suggest that the case of Andrés Bermúdez is not an isolated phenomenon resulting from the particular conditions of the translocal networks and relations connecting the *municipio* and its migrants in the United States. Declining popular support for the major political parties, and the political class they nourish, helps to explain the appeal of the multi-dimensional heroic migrant narrative among the Jerezano electorate. Bermúdez

successfully positioned himself as an anti-politician who shared in the traumatic experiences of most Zacatecan families forced to send their loved ones off to *El Norte* because of the state's deplorable economic conditions. In the minds of the state's inhabitants, those conditions are the result of the corruption and misdeeds of the political class and not due solely to Mexico's position in the international economy, the region's ecological conditions or a lack of natural resources. To the extent that such an analysis is shared across Mexico we are likely to see more popular mobilizations seeking economic improvements by displacing the political class.

The heroic migrant narrative so deftly constructed and deployed by the Bermudista coalition responds to the convergence of these trends in Jerez. That winning coalition presented an eclectic mix of proposals for political reform and social and economic change that spoke to the needs and demands of its broad transnational base of constituents. The Bermudista project must now face the challenge of sustaining the unity it forged during the campaign. If not carefully maintained, that unity may give way, bringing to the fore class-based tensions between Bermúdez's two key constituencies, the migrant entrepreneurial class and the region's non-migrant poor – tensions that have so far been tenuously elided through a combination of neo-liberal and populist discursive and programmatic elements. The next three years of the Bermúdez administration will go a long way in telling whether such an unlikely coalition can maintain its stability and respond to the potentially conflicting demands of its multiple constituencies. There are a number of reasons for scepticism. First, there is scant evidence, if any, in the record of neo-liberal policy application around the world to suggest that such policies are capable of alleviating poverty and addressing the needs of the poor. Second, migrants have gained their prestige in sending communities because of their selfless contribution to infrastructure projects that provide services to the local community. As migrants transition from being community benefactors to being local employers, conflict may well occur causing the electoral coalition to sour.

So what does this case have to say about the potential for transnational migrants to promote democratization in their countries of origin? The Bermúdez campaigns exemplify the potential contributions transmigrants can make to political and social change in their sending communities, and perhaps at regional and national levels as well. These campaigns have demonstrated that the commitment and tenacity migrant activists bring to their involvement in home-country politics can be successful in capturing the popular imagination and constructing the political alliances necessary both to gain formal recognition of the political rights of transmigrants and to win popular election. The campaigns also demonstrate a less flattering side of migrant political transnationalism. The heroic migrant narrative is exclusionary, at least implicitly, as it heralds the migrant for *his* economic contribution and potential as an investor. This representation of *el migrante* excludes the vast majority of women and impoverished working-class migrants at the same time that it offers a space for participation to a tiny fraction of male entrepreneurial migrants and HTA leaders. This exclusionary character is, of course, not entirely new, for it has been evident in the past when this small sector of migrants largely monopolized participation in social infrastructure and community development projects. As *el migrante* takes a more

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prominent position in regional politics it will be important to chart whether these exclusions are addressed or whether they maintain a central place in the constitution of this new political subject.

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