



## ***Alcohol Consumption, Maquilas and Everyday Life in a Nahuatl Community in Mexico***

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### **ABSTRACT**

The idea of a society in a repressive and controlled state such as happens currently in Mexico, is analyzed at the light of what happens in a tiny little Indian community of the north of the State of Puebla. As a dystopian society, San Sebastián features different kinds of repressive social control systems as well as forms of active and passive coercion. This happens through the establishment of the maquila industry that has provoked adverse effects and consequences in terms of social and cultural life. That is the case in the rise of alcohol consumption. In this paper, we analyze the following fact: there are around 300 maquila industries in and surrounding areas of the city of Teziutlán, Puebla, that produce clothing of different kinds for exportation at low-cost wages. Consequently, it is no longer easy to find agricultural workers because people prefer to work in the maquilas. The purpose is to discuss the effects of globalization via the installation of maquila industries on the socio-cultural aspects of the members of an Indian community in Mexico and pay special attention to the transformation of alcohol consumption patterns of the inhabitants of this particular Indian village as well as the nature of everyday life in this náhuatl community in Mexico.

### **Introduction**

In Mexico, the establishment of the maquila industry has provoked adverse effects and consequences in terms of social and cultural life: that is the case in the rise of alcohol consumption. There are around 300 maquila industries in and surrounding the city of Teziutlán, Puebla, that produce clothing of different kinds for exportation at low-cost wages. Consequently, it is no longer easy to find agricultural workers because people prefer to work in the maquilas. I analyze the effects of globalization via the installation of maquila industries on the sociocultural aspects of the members of an Indian community in Mexico close to Teziutlán; I pay special attention to the transformation of alcohol consumption patterns of the inhabitants of this particular Indian village.



## **Alcohol consumption and alcoholism**

As far as figures related to the problem of alcoholism and alcohol abuse in Mexico, broadly speaking we can say that currently, 16.9% of the total population drinks moderately highly, (five or more drinks for occasion monthly) and 12.4% 5 or more weakly. Transcultural studies report that the dependency rate in Mexico is 8%, lower than the 128% of EUA (Vega et al., 1998), but with rates higher of lesser frequent consumption but in great quantities (24% y 6%) and rates of less frequent consumption in low quantities (3% y 12%) (Caetano and Medina Mora, 1988); also, there are higher rates of urgency treatment in hospitals with positive levels of alcohol in blood (21% y 11%) (Cherpitel et al, 1993), which suggests that in Mexico, a high proportion of problems derived from alcohol consumption, are the result of inadequate practices in non dependent persons. Mexico has also an elevated rate of mortality for liver cirrhosis (48.6), higher than in France or USA. (SSA, 1998) (Borges et al, 1999; Edwards, 1994).

In spite of the richness of information concerning this matter, there is little known about use and abuse of alcohol and alcoholism and its implications in current Indian communities: for instance, we do not know exactly figures related to liver cirrhosis due to excessive alcohol consumption. As a result of that, we urgently need more research on this aspect concerning the effects of immoderate alcohol consumption in these marginal communities to be in the position of designing preventing programs agreed to their cultural situations. Consequently, more federal actions must be taken to attend this situation which represents drastic consequences in the affected individual, his family and the economic and social spheres: we urgently need also educational and preventive programs and rehabilitation strategies for the sick.

We maintain that Mexico is not one nation but many since its multiethnic and plural character, composed by many different populations and human groups of diverse cultures and customs not all of them occidental in their physical appearance or living styles. Thanks to archeological remains we know more about this civilizations and one interesting factor we have discovered is that they did not have alcohol problems before the Spanish conquest. This



situation began when Spaniards introduce other beverages in Mexico than *pulque*, drink which, by the way, was only allowed to warriors that recently came back triumphant or the elderly but not to general population.

### **San Sebastián: Everyday life, alcohol consumption and maquilas**

Teziutlán is located in the northern section of the state of Puebla. The last census reported a population of around 100,000 inhabitants. Around the city, there are 17 Indian villages where many people live in very poor conditions. They speak Náhuatl, which is the modern version of the so-called Aztec language, the most important spoken language in the country other than the official language, Spanish; the second language is the Maya. There are another 63 Indian languages spoken by 16 million people. The village I have been working at in different periods is known as San Sebastián. It used to be one of the more traditional and underdeveloped of all the 17 other villages. It is composed of no more than 2,000 people formerly dedicated to mostly agricultural activities. They used to keep their traditions intact; the language was not infiltrated by Spanish as it is now, and the culture was adamantly defended. Today, however, all of this is almost gone—due in a large part to globalization. In the recent years, a boom of maquiladoras suddenly appeared in the neighbor city of Teziutlán, affecting people's everyday life and traditions. (Berruecos 2000, 2008, 2012) Currently in Teziutlán, there are 320 maquiladoras, though only 120 are officially registered. Six of them have agreements with U.S. industries; 42 enterprises get direct benefits, and 28 get indirect benefits; the rest of them are maquila industries of the maquila companies (Martínez, 2000, Clark, 1990, CEPAL, 1996).

Today, there are 14,000 workers in the maquila (Heath, 2002, Kamel, 1999, Patrick, 1990, Sklair, 1988, 1993, Zaman, 1990 and Zúñiga 2000, 2002); most of them come from Indian villages such as San Sebastián. The law in Mexico requires that if a worker is on the job for more than 30 days, he must be registered at social security to obtain medical and other services, but only 8,000 workers have those benefits, and the rest work for less than a month to avoid registration and then are rehired for another 21 days. According to some



sources, there must be a floating population of around 6,000 workers in illegal maquila industries. Most of them work in assembly line factories that produce jeans and shirts. One of the main problems of the clothing industry is that workers do not have the proper qualifications for the job; there is also lack of employment security, which pushes the maquiladoras to rehire workers for different types of jobs every month. In addition, the highways do not facilitate transportation of goods, since their maintenance is very poor. Moreover, the unions do not provide adequate protection for their workers, and independent syndicates or unions always are at a disadvantage. There is a well-known independent syndicate known as “5 de Febrero,” that in 40 years, have only arranged for 400 definite jobs but have another 800 workers in temporary basis. The minimum wage for a worker is between \$45 and \$50 per week, but some of them can make as much as \$125. The local social security hospital for those workers have only 14 beds and 10 dispensaries, and the government has built only 300 little houses for the workers even though the demand is bigger. Each family of a worker usually has an average of four children, there are no sports or outdoor recreation facilities, and they work from Monday to Friday, 8 hours per day.

Prostitution and delinquency are recently common problems surrounding the industries and the city, especially on payday. Thirty-five percent of mothers are unmarried, and new sicknesses have appeared, such as AIDS and others. Most of the workers have no more than 9 years of education total. In the city of Teziutlán and its surroundings close to the Indian village where I have been working in the past years, maquila industries represent around 10% of all the industry in the country: most of them produce clothing of different kinds for exportation. In the city of Teziutlán, in one of its boroughs named Francia, it is very common to see trucks that come directly from the United States. Like Tijuana, Teziutlán and Tehuacán in the state of Puebla have become important maquila centers. Most of the people who work in the maquila industry are from Teziutlán and surrounding cities. Wages are paid according to the number of parts assembled and usually are a little higher than the official minimum wage (around \$3 a day). It is common to see that people move from one position to another according to the wages paid. Some maquilas have their own



transportation system for its workers, and some even go as far as the Indian village to bring the workers to the factory. Ecological effects of the installation of these maquila factories in the area are very clear: For instance, chemicals (bleach) are used for washing jeans. Rich local citizens own most of the maquilas from well-known families, and some even have small maquila industries for bigger maquila companies; others provide food for the workers or parts for the maintenance of the machines; I even found a Spaniard making products for exportation to Spain.

It is very common to see a new industry born almost every week, either in this city or the neighboring populations. Last calculations indicate that the employed population receives wages that go from \$45 to \$125 per week, depending on the qualifications of the worker and the amount of products he makes. Recently, the problem is that there is more demand for jobs than there are positions available. The owners maintain close relations to industries in the United States through special contracts in exchange for machinery.

All the exportation goods are handled by registered brands, but curiously, it is common to see goods in the local market with international brands at very cheap prices (e.g., jeans at \$8). Most of the imports that are used by the industries established in Teziutlán come from the United States through the states of Puebla, Tlaxcala, and Aguascalientes; there are many foreign supervisors with much better income, and it is common to see people in care of quality control of international brands who are from China, France, and United States, and receive around \$1,000 a week.

According to some informants, the only advantage of the maquilas in the city is the wages paid to the workers (at an average of \$80 per week) because the profits of the owners are invested in other growing nearby cities or even other countries for the establishment of new maquiladoras: As a matter of fact, Teziutlán is exporting only cheap labor. There is internal control systems supervised by local authorities but only for those officially registered. Because most of the industries are engaged in the production of jeans for exportation, a new business in the city is the laundry (there are so far five of them, most of which do not recycle the water and pollute the environment).



For the population, the establishment of maquiladoras in the region has provoked mixed reactions: On one hand, those who have a job are very satisfied, even if the wages are not that spectacular, but many complain about the pollution, the changes in lifestyles, and the growing of the city. Delinquency and associated manifestations that were very rare in the past are very common today, for instance. Also, people complain that vegetables, coffee, corn, beans, fruits, and cattle growing that were produced in the past are not being produced anymore, because peasants are abandoning their villages and their lands to work in the maquila and the prices are consequently higher. Now Teziutlán imports most of these goods when not too long ago they exported to the entire area. Most of the people in the city against the maquila industry comment that the recent governmental strategies to industrialize the Tehuantepec Channel, especially since the Panama Channel is fortunately no longer property of the United States, have something to do with this apparent boom of the maquila. Among others, the principal effects of the installation of these new industries in the vicinity of the village studied are as follows. First, the most striking fact is that Indians do not want to speak their own language anymore but only in the home: I obtained this information through interviews, questionnaire data, and so forth. Sometimes they even deny being Indians and consequently, they have abandoned their traditional garments and clothes and now wear jeans, shirts, and jackets. Since they have to go to the maquila every day, sometimes they decide to live in the city during the week and only spend the weekend at home; there is no more familial contact like in the past. The spare time is mostly spent in the cantinas where they spend most of their salary, affecting the family income. Alcoholism and drug abuse—formerly not only unknown but out completely of their traditions—is very severe because the introduction of the maquila and some other problems already mentioned such as prostitution and delinquency, are growing rapidly. As far as the alcohol problem in the area, I must first say that nearly 30 years ago, it was estimated that in Mexico, the annual per capita consumption of alcohol among the population 15 years old and above was 61.1 liters and that 9 of each 100 adults were alcoholics. In the Indian community I studied, 150 liters of *aguardiente* are produced weekly, but there are other beverages that people like such as beer or tequila and pulque.



The figures for this village are 2.91 liters per week (151.32 liters per year) for men and 2.94 liters per week (152.88 liters per year) for women, which mean that 6.62% of their weekly income was spent only on aguardiente, but if we add beer and tequila, the people spent almost 71.91% of their weekly income. Annual per capita consumption is therefore of 34.01 liters of aguardiente and 93.01 liters of beer, respectively. In this village, if we assume that the percentages for the country are correct, currently 72% of men and 13% of women have problems with alcohol as far as mortality associated with alcohol consumption. However, we know little about use and abuse of alcohol in Indian communities. Traditions in the community are changing at a very fast rate: For instance, the very common Feast of the Patron Saint of the town, San Sebastian, on January 20, is now celebrated not with services, praying, and processions (they still exist, but few people attend), but mostly with the establishment of fairs where people go to bet money and drink. Food habits have also changed: Tortillas are rarely made at home, and people prefer to buy them by the pack, electricity has come to the village, and unfortunately, people spend time watching soap operas and listening to American rock hits. Local music is gone, musicians are out of work, agriculture has been practically abandoned, and the women who in the past took care of the household and kept domestic animals, want to work in the maquila. People dress, eat, and live together in a very different way. All this has occurred over no more than 5 years. Utensils are plastic; clay containers have all but disappeared from the dining ritual. Bricks now substitute the former huts made of wood, and furniture is brought into the city and is no longer handmade. Goals are also different. People dream of having a job in the maquila, marrying city style, and celebrating life cycle happenings in a different way. They want to be like urban people; they do not like being rural or Indian. There are now compact discs instead of local bands, foreign music, junk food, consumption of liquors and other goods announced on TV; things not needed in the past are now essential. San Sebastián has changed radically by all means and in all terms. There is no cultural resistance, reinvention, indigenization, or creolization. The sociocultural consequences of globalization via the maquila industry are quite visible.

### ***Final Remarks***



The final results of globalization are still too far away to be known. Some scholars caution about the negative effects of this phase of capitalism in terms of the polarization of income, unemployment, and social exclusion, especially for vulnerable sectors. When capitalism arose, many warned against the need for control to prevent inequality and exploitation, and that logic is the same in global capitalism, whose obscure face is again exploitation, inequality, and exclusion. Moreover, in the case of Mexico, the government has followed the neoliberal model and has kept policy of compressed salaries; unemployment is one of the most severe problems in the country. The maquila provides some jobs but with low wages, and this affects the rest of the economy; that is why impulse to internal production and access to cultural and communicational resources must be developed to protect regional institutions (García, 2000, pp. 4-5).

The exports that come from the maquila have no effect in the reconstruction of the internal market or in the generation of jobs or the elevation of the level and quality of life of the majority since the maquiladora industry has intemperate the rest of the economy. Because the maquila (assembly plant) export industry is one of Mexico's most dynamic sectors, private investment and exports, as opposed to excessive public spending or indebtedness, must drive economic growth. Inflation must be reduced without artificial controls or price distortion, and with a free-floating exchange rate. The maquila industry now operates in an atmosphere of certainty and competitiveness. There is a need for a regulatory framework to generate certainty and favor competitiveness, but inflation must be reduced through a free-floating exchange rate and without resorting to artificial controls or price distortion.

All this consequences are clearly seen in the inhabitants of this Indian village: through the maquilas and by denying the rights of workers to health, education and housing, managers of maquilas exert all kinds of repressive social control systems and forms of active and passive coercion against the workers, formerly peasants dedicated to agriculture. It is forbidden to establish unions to defend their rights; people work beyond time limits (8 hours per day with no extra payment), they all work only 28 days since at day 29, the Maquila





has to register the worker in Social Security Systems and provide them with health insurance, education and housing advantages for the family members. Instead, they fire the worker and a week later hires him again.

Economic growth can be achieved on the basis of private investment and exports, as opposed to excessive public spending or indebtedness. The conditions required allowing the Mexican economy to maintain its dynamism and stability for years to come have to improve. If the economy is administered with a sense of congruence and discipline, these two spheres will complement and strengthen each other. More has to be done to further the creation of real development alternatives through economic growth, the application of an increasingly tangible democracy, the modernization of the educational system, and the maquila export sector: Mexico requires an infrastructure that will reflect its current industrial development and allow the country to assimilate the population growth of urban centers. Behind globalization, we must look for the wild concentration of capital in the banks as well as the great consortiums and the communication media enterprises (Kurnitzky, 2000). Globalization comes to be the process of intensification of reciprocal Interdependence and a way of interconnecting between societies that has to be re-evaluated in terms of the potential of national cultures and regional institutions because it is a process that not only makes countries closer and homogeneous but also produces breakdowns and segregation. In this article, we have seen very briefly the consequences in an Indian village. If wealth and access to education, health services, employment, and technology were globalized for all, we will of course welcome globalization. But unfortunately, I think that the global market is making the rich richer and the poor poorer.

As people joke in Mexico, globalization is a Hood Robin process, that is, the reverse of Robin Hood: giving to the rich what belongs to the poor.



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