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Legacies of Inequity: How Hometown Political Participation and Land Distribution Shape Migrants' Paths into Wage Labor

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Summary. — While scholars have examined how migration impacts development, this paper asks the opposite question, examining how local development conditions shape patterns of migration. Specifically, I consider how political institutions in rural sending communities create economic opportunities and constraints for their members, channeling potential migrants into farm or urban jobs. To date, scholars have explained differences in the migration paths of similar communities by looking at features on the receiving end, or at the development of social networks tied to migration. I add to this work by showing how hometown conditions influence out-migration. I compare the histories of two rural villages in Southern Mexico whose members migrated at similar times and volumes, first within Mexico beginning in the 1960s, and then to the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. I find that in the village I call “Disposeo,” hierarchical power structures dispossessed members, drove them into debt, and limited their access to urban areas. As a result, when agricultural recruiters came to the village, most potential migrants accepted. By contrast, in “Igualdad,” communal landholding enabled members to reject farm labor. At the same time, rotating political posts helped them build networks into more desirable urban service jobs. As other research underscores, such labor market insertion has long-term consequences: migrants' first job niches shaped their destinations, social networks, patterns of movement, and social mobility. Thus, even as rural villages erode in the face of emigration, they structure migrants' prospects in the contemporary economy. In particular, participatory governance and resource redistribution can insulate members from the worst agricultural jobs.

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Key words — community development, sending context, migration, Mexico

1. INTRODUCTION

When migrants leave rural villages, the labor sectors they enter shape their long-term prospects. Research shows that most migrant farm workers face bleaker economic and social conditions than their urban peers (Fussell, 2004; Massey & Espinosa, 1997; Mines & Anzaldua, 1982). There is more physical and labor abuse on farms than in urban service jobs. Migrants' internal destinations can also act as stepping-stones to international migration. So, while service work within the home country is not a definitive path to social mobility, it can give onward migrants access to preferable urban jobs abroad. These effects also reverberate across hometowns, as migrants from a given village concentrate in the same sectors and destinations (Durand & Massey, 1992).

Even though scholars of migrant social networks have done much to explain the perpetuation and evolution of distinct migration patterns, most still portray communities' *insertion* into different migrant labor sectors as a matter of chance. Indeed, several prominent studies suggest that pioneer (that is, early) migrants from a given village get their first jobs from whomever they happen to encounter (Lopez & Runsten, 2004; Massey, Alarcon, Durand, & Gonzalez, 1987). Thus, labor networks appear almost accidental, independent of the development contexts from which they emerge. Meanwhile, despite a broad literature tracing how macro-level processes of development drive migration and urbanization (e.g., Portes & Bach, 1985; Sassen, 1990), few studies consider how local, sending community institutions may shape migrants' vulnerability to labor recruiters and access to distinct labor niches. This paper begins to fill that gap.

Labor market insertion has key implications. Existing research makes it clear that even within the low-wage labor market, migrants' occupations influence their patterns of movement and integration in their destinations. Both as

internal and international migrants, farm workers tend to live in more isolated, rural areas and circulate between hometown and destination, while service and manufacturing workers tend to settle in more hospitable urban zones. Migrants' occupations also affect their social and economic advancement. While precarious urban jobs are no definitive path to social mobility, scholars find that they offer more stable wages and facilitate greater social integration than farm work (Goldring, 1990; Mines & Massey, 1985; Zabin, Kearney, García, Runsten, & Nagengast, 1993). Finally, internal migration patterns often link migrants into similar jobs abroad, providing skills and networks that shape their options as they move on to international destinations (Hagan & Hernández Leon, 2015; Paul, 2011; Portes & Bach, 1985).¹ Studies also show that migrants from the same sending site often concentrate in the same sectors and locations. On an individual level, migrants get selected for jobs through social networks, which

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generally revolve around their hometowns, especially in the case of rural communities (Durand & Massey, 1992; Massey *et al.*, 1987). Thus, occupational effects reverberate across each migrant community.

However, it remains unclear how conditions in the hometown shape the job options available to pioneer migrants. Most explanations of community-level differences focus on the receiving end, or on the prevalence of migration from a given village. Theorists of social networks suggest that the more migrants there are from a hometown, the more diversified their occupations. As migration increases and early migrants build social networks in their destinations, they diversify into new jobs (Aguilera & Massey, 2003; Massey & Espinosa, 1997; Massey, Goldring, & Durand, 1994). These scholars argue that apparent variations across communities may reflect differences in the timing and volume of migration. They do little to explain differences across communities that move at the same times and volumes.

In light of existing theory, the contrast between two sets of indigenous migrants from the state of Oaxaca, Mexico—one of them Mixtec and the other Zapotec (specifically, from the Sierra Norte)—poses a lingering puzzle. Socioeconomically, the two groups appear similar: prior to migration, both were poor, indigenous subsistence farmers. Both also migrated at similar volumes, in similar historical moments. Starting in the 1960s, villagers left both areas to seek work elsewhere in Mexico. Then, in the 1980s, both groups began to move on to California. US migration became large scale in both cases by the early 1990s, and the Mexican Population Council has marked both as “high [US] expulsion” for three decades. In Northern Mexico as well as in the United States, both groups have been racially excluded and undocumented (in the US), facing labor abuse and social exclusion (Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004; Holmes, 2013; Velasco Ortiz, 2002).² Yet despite these similarities, their initial occupations within Mexico diverged. While both were recruited by Mexican agro-industries starting in the late 1950s and 1960s, most Mixtecs became trapped in farm work, subject to the whims and control of labor contractors. By contrast, most Sierra Zapotecs dismissed farm labor as too grueling and instead built their own networks into urban areas. As scholars might predict, this initial labor market insertion within Mexico reverberated for several decades: for the most part, Mixtecs moved from Mexican farms into US farms, suffering more exploitation, worse social and economic mobility, and more frequent circulation than their Zapotec peers. By contrast, Sierra Zapotecs used urban ties in Mexico as a stepping stone to more education and to urban jobs in the US, aiding their social and economic integration across the migration path (Lopez & Runsten, 2004; Stephen, 2007).³ Understanding these differences requires looking not only at social networks or receiving-end factors, but also at the hometown conditions that set the stage for migration.

This paper examines how political culture and resource distribution in sending communities shape the networks members build to outside jobs. To construct a hypothesis, I compare the migration pathways of two paradigmatic communities, one in the Mixteca, which I call “Disposeo” and one in the Zapotec Sierra Norte, which I call “Igualdad.” Following the broader Mixtec/Zapotec trend, members of these two communities migrated at the same times and volumes. Both began moving within Mexico in the late 1950s and 60s and then to the United States in the late 1970s and 80s, with US migration peaking in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, despite the parallel intensity and timing of migration, migrants from Disposeo accepted farm recruitment, while those of Igualdad refused, forming their

own networks into urban jobs. To explain this divergence, I reconstruct the historical process by which each village developed ties to labor markets within Mexico during the 1950–70s. My data combine 104 in-depth interviews with migrants and non-migrants, hometown surveys, archival research, and historical accounts of these and nearby villages dating back to the 1950s.

I find that the community-level distribution of political and economic control shaped members’ vulnerability to farm recruiters, as well as their access to urban social networks. Specifically, I highlight two factors: (1) the level of popular participation in village politics, and (2) the local distribution of arable land. Disposeo, on the one hand, had a power structure ruled by *caciques* (local political bosses). Using their positions as political power brokers, these *caciques* stripped other villagers of land and converted them into sharecroppers, driving the villagers into debt. By the 1950s and 60s, when rural Oaxaca started to become integrated with the broader Mexican economy and political system, debt forced the poorer villagers in Disposeo to migrate. Meanwhile, elites monopolized access to and information about cities. As a result, potential migrants had little alternative but to cooperate with agricultural recruiters who visited the village and to work in farm labor.

By contrast, Igualdad had a participatory power structure, considered customary in many indigenous villages. Its members rotated into leadership positions in the local government. This structure also reinforced communal landholding and collective farming, sustaining most families at a subsistence level. Thus, when people of Igualdad encountered agricultural recruiters, even though they were poor, most had the resources to reject farm work and hold out for urban jobs. Meanwhile, political participation distributed interactions with urban bureaucrats and markets across villagers, enabling members to forge their own urban ties. This spread of power and resources enabled people of Igualdad to migrate on a more voluntary basis and opt into cities. While past research focuses on the evolution of social networks after migration has begun, these findings show how job networks can also be shaped by hometown stratification. Migrant networks are not coincidental, I insist, but instead embedded in the forms of political and economic power in the sending site. Table 1 summarizes the contrasts between these two cases.

2. THEORIZING THE HOMETOWN ORIGINS OF MIGRATION

This paper uses a development perspective to help understand how migrant communities become inserted in distinct job networks. The migration literature makes it clear that migrants’ job placements shape their patterns of movement and settlement, as migrant social networks expand. Here, I add an important prior step by showing how political and economic institutions in sending communities affect members’ access to external job networks in the first place. As Adams and Page (2005), Clemens, Ozden, and Rapoport (2014), and several articles in the January 2015 special issue of *World Development* highlight, there is a growing literature on how migration affects development—through remittances, transnationalism, return migration, and other processes. Yet, there has been far less investigation into the opposite question: how development shapes migration.

Most research about migrant communities’ patterns of movement, settlement, and social and economic mobility emphasizes the impacts of “contexts of reception” (Lopez &

Table 1. *Hometown power structures and migrants' job networks*

	Disposeo	Igualdad
Political structure	Oligarchic	Participatory
Economic structure	Dispossession	Distribution
External job networks	Limited/built by recruiters	Multiple/built by members
Migrants' initial occupations	Rural (farm work)	Urban (service work)

Runsten, 2004; Menjívar, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 1990). Scholars show that even within the low-wage labor market, work is stratified between rural and urban jobs. Compared to urban service and manufacturing workers, farm workers face lower wages, less stable employment, and more abuse (Durand & Massey, 1992; Fussell, 2004; Goldring, 1990; Massey & Espinosa, 1997; Mines & Anzaldúa, 1982). Farm workers also tend to live in rural areas and be more isolated, so they develop fewer social networks into non-farm labor markets and thus less job mobility (Aguilera & Massey, 2003). In addition, migrants are more likely to circulate if they work in temporary agricultural jobs and to settle if they work in more stable service or industry jobs. While migrant communities may ultimately diversify into multiple sectors, evidence suggests that their capacity to do so—along with their wages, status, occupational mobility, circularity, and social mobility—are profoundly shaped by the niche where they arrive (Goldring, 1990).

In addition to economic niche, scholars also show that migration laws and migrants' legal status influence their social and economic mobility, as well as their circulation versus settlement (Menjívar, 1997; Portes & Rumbaut, 1990). In particular, undocumented status and hostile immigration control regimes such as current US policing and deportation increase migrants' isolation, limit their social networks, and stymie their social mobility (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012).⁴ Thus, exclusionary laws may entrench the effects of initial job placement. This leaves the question: if entering under the same historical moment and policy context, how do some groups of low-wage labor migrants get into farm work, while others land in urban service and industry?

On an individual level, scholars show, the answer lies in social networks. Migrants follow their compatriots, so pioneer migrants set the stage for whole communities. Particularly when migrants come from relatively insular rural hometowns like Disposeo and Igualdad, most people from a hometown concentrate in a similar sector, location, and pattern of movement (Massey, 1990; Massey *et al.*, 1987; Rodriguez, 1987; Waldinger & Lichter, 2003). Extending this theory, which Massey and associates dub "cumulative causation," scholars also suggest that migration unfolds in a regular, predictable way, fueling itself and evolving as more members of a sending community build connections to their destinations (Durand, Massey, & Zenteno, 2001; Kandel & Massey, 2002; Massey, 1990; Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002; Massey *et al.*, 1987). According to this theory, differences among otherwise similar communities may reflect the stage of migration, rather than distinct starting points. Massey *et al.* (1994), for instance, argue that as the number of migrants from a hometown rises, members branch out from their initial labor niches to build ties into other sectors. They explain, "Variations in the amount and quality of social capital can, therefore, produce very different migration streams over time and across communities, making migration patterns appear to be discrepant when in fact they represent the same underlying process" (p. 1495).⁵ In other words, communities that appear to hold

better jobs and be more settled may simply be at a more advanced stage of the process of developing social networks (see also Aguilera & Massey, 2003; Kandel & Massey, 2002; Massey & Espinosa, 1997). Meanwhile, scholarship on the "context of exit" often focuses on the scope of migrant networks tied to a given hometown, rather than the political or economic structures of the hometown itself.

On the sending side, existing research primarily attends to macroeconomic conditions and federal-level policy (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2008). Scholars show that migration emerges as a sending country develops economically, driving peasants out of the countryside and into the most economically dynamic sectors of the national economy (Portes & Bach, 1985; Sassen, 1990). In turn, internal urban and farm labor migration serve as a stepping-stones to international destinations (Hagan & Hernández Leon, 2015; Paul, 2011). Thus, different countries produce different migration patterns, depending on their political and economic structures (Pedraza, 1985; Portes & Borocz, 1989; Portes & Rumbaut, 1990; Portes & Zhou, 1993).⁶ Nevertheless, there is little attention to how local conditions in sending communities—and indeed villagers' own, active efforts—may mediate this broad process.

Instead, most analysts assume that a village's selection into jobs and employer networks is coincidental. For instance, Massey *et al.* (1987) suggest, "All that is necessary for a migrant network to develop is for one person to be in the right place at the right time and obtain a position that allows him to distribute jobs and favors to others from his community" (p. 169). Durand and Massey (1992) add, "To a large degree, this choice [of job] is a matter of chance - of being in the right place at the right time" (p. 23). Other scholars such as Lopez and Runsten (2004), who examine Mixtec and Zapotec differences, contend, "Though there are specific stories associated with how migrant networks started in specific industries and places, they are almost random occurrences" (p. 250). By contrast, I suggest that political and economic factors in the context of exit condition members' capacity to "be in the right place at the right time."

In doing so, I build on studies of migrant transnationalism, which have drawn attention to the political economy that links different sites in a migrant labor system (Burawoy, 1976). Early studies of transnational migration helped situate the analysis of migration in the context of global capital accumulation and governance, highlighting how the exploitation of migrant labor intersected with the dispossession of resources from migrants' hometowns (e.g., Kearney, 1991; also see Glick Schiller, 2013 for a review). While most studies of migrant transnationalism focus on the ongoing ties between migrants and their hometowns (e.g., Levitt, 2001; Smith, 2006), this earlier literature lays the groundwork for my own investigation into how local-level political and economic arrangements set the stage for distinct forms of migrant exploitation.

To fill the gap in scholars' understanding of the context of exit, I also turn to the sociology of development, particularly studies focused on the historical implications of political

institutions (see [Evans, 2006](#)). Scholars of Latin American development show that inequalities forged during colonialism and state formation—particularly those governing access to land—have enduring legacies for contemporary development ([Mahoney, 2003](#); [Nugent & Robinson, 2002](#)). For instance, [Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson \(2001\)](#) note that the distribution of property rights is key to growth, while property protections that privilege elites undermine development. Similarly, [Gillian Hart \(2002\)](#) shows that not only do local policies structure land distribution, but that land rights can also serve as a “social wage,” providing a minimum level of economic security that protects workers from economic shocks. Thus, while one might assume that indigenous institutions of participation and communal landholding impede members’ integration into the contemporary political economy, in my observations, such institutions may in fact help protect members from the worst migrant labor jobs.

By tying labor migration to the politics of debt and dispossession in migrant hometowns, I also extend recent research on debt-driven migration. As scholars like [O’Connell Davidson \(2013\)](#) and [Stoll \(2010\)](#) point out, debt-fueled migration interrupts the divide between forced and voluntary that is often used to make sense of migration: debt-fueled migration is active without being voluntary, and it can lock migrants into violent relations of power. Others, such as [Graeber \(2014\)](#) and [Hours and Ahmed \(2015\)](#) highlight that debt is not merely an economic variable but instead a political and social construct that fuels hierarchies among debtors and creditors. Thus, it is important to understand how political power arrangements can create debt, fueling migration. Here, I show that hometown political institutions mediate macroeconomic pressure to migrate by shaping members’ job networks and the pressure of debt.

3. BACKGROUND: “MODERNIZING MEXICO

In *Disposeo*, *Igualdad*, and other rural, indigenous villages in Oaxaca, people began to leave their hometowns as part of a vast transformation of Mexico’s political economy. In the 1940s, more than 80% of Mexicans lived in rural areas, most of them without running water or electricity. Indigenous Oaxacan villages, located high in the mountains, were some of the most isolated. The state had excluded groups like the Mixtecs and Zapotecs since colonization, subjecting them to extraction. As of 1940, more than 90% of villagers in *Igualdad* and *Disposeo* survived by corn farming, less than one in four owned shoes, and less than one in five could read ([INEGI, 1940](#)).

However, beginning in the 1940s, Mexico’s ruling party, the PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional* or Institutional Revolutionary Party) began seeking to “modernize” the country. The government invested in industry for export, agricultural technologies, energy, and transportation, driving a three-decade period of 3–4% economic growth that would come to be called the “Mexican miracle.” In 1941, with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation, Mexico launched a massive effort to develop large-scale, high-yield agricultural production, building irrigation projects, highways, and rail connections to US markets, and introducing environmental restructuring, fertilizers, and chemical pesticides.⁷ The Valley of Culiacán, Sinaloa, a once-sleepy area in the middle of Mexico’s Western coast, became a lynchpin of this growth, requiring massive imports of labor ([Garduño, 1991](#)). In the early 1960s, farm recruiters from Sinaloa sought workers in rural Oaxaca, offering cash advances, free transportation, and double or even triple the wages villagers earned at home ([Stephen,](#)

[2007](#)).⁸ By the 1970s, hundreds of thousands of workers from Oaxaca’s indigenous villages staffed the tomato fields in Culiacán. Later, they would also move into the nascent vegetable industries in Baja California and Sonora, just South of the US border ([Krissman, 1995](#); [Thompson & Martin, 1989](#)).

Meanwhile, a second arm of the “Mexican miracle” entailed rapid urbanization. In the course of three decades, Mexico’s investment in transportation infrastructure and manufacturing transformed its almost entirely rural, farming population to a country that was almost half urban ([Alba, 1982](#)). As cities like Mexico City and Oaxaca City grew, the rising middle and upper classes demanded domestic workers. Indigenous people often took these posts, coming to the cities to work as household servants as young as age eight or ten ([Hirabayashi, 1993](#)).

In the countryside, villages also became increasingly connected to national politics and urban markets. Until the 1950s, the government was largely absent in rural Oaxaca. Villages like *Disposeo* and *Igualdad* were mostly monolingual (in Zapotec or Mixtec) and accessible only on foot. Then, government modernization programs introduced rural primary schools, followed by piped water and dirt roads. In the late 1950s, the state also began seeking to integrate indigenous villages into the political system, mandating fiscal accounting. The new infrastructure and bureaucratic demands dramatically increased villages’ interactions with the state government and urban markets. At the same time, however, modernization programs crippled family farms, as the state instituted price controls on maize that dropped the market value of corn by 33% from 1957 to 1973 ([Arizpe, 1981](#)). Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, debt crises in Mexico and increasing openness to US trade would fuel further the privatization of land and create downward economic pressure on rural villages ([Stephen, 2007](#); [Taylor, Yúñez-Naude, Barceinas Paredes, & Dyer, 2005](#)). In the process, Oaxacan migrants within Mexico began developing ties in California and moving on to the United States—most of them undocumented.

4. TWO MIGRANT VILLAGES: DISPOSEO AND IGUALDAD

Indigenous villages in Oaxaca are a strategic site to understand how community-level institutions mediate economic transformation and the rise of migration, because their internal political structures vary dramatically. I focus on two particular cases, *Disposeo* and *Igualdad*, in order to zoom in on the mechanisms that link political institutions and patterns of migration. While these are not “representative” cases in a statistical sense, in depth study of contrasting examples can help build hypotheses about how hometown conditions may differentiate migrants’ access to jobs. The community is also the primary social, political, and economic unit that organizes life in rural Mexico and structures migrants’ networks, so it makes sense to consider access to migrant jobs at the community level.

Disposeo and *Igualdad* offer an interesting comparison, because they shared the economic, political, and social characteristics that scholars have previously used to account for contrasts in communities’ patterns of migration ([Massey et al., 1994](#); [Portes & Rumbaut, 1990](#)). They are located in the same country and state, less than 100 miles from each other. On the eve of migration, both were rural, indigenous, corn-farming villages of about 1,500 people ([INEGI, 2005](#)). Each lay about 50 miles from the nearest urban center and both were municipal seats, self-described as indigenous. Until the 1960s, neither had electricity, running water, or roads; less than 25% of the

population could read; and more than 90% of villagers lived in adobe or palm huts and earned a living by farming (INEGI, 1950). In the 1950s, both started to develop increasing ties with state-level political institutions and economic markets, including labor recruiters. Then, starting in the 1970s, both were debilitated by debt crisis, the rollback of farm subsidies, the privatization of land, and the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which undermined subsistence in rural farming communities (Barkin, 2003).

Politically, Igualdad and Disposeo were both governed under a system of customary indigenous law referred to as “*Usos y Costumbres*” (ways and customs), used in 73% of municipalities in 20th century Oaxaca.⁹ In contrast to contemporary Western governments, which define citizenship in terms of individual rights, *Usos y Costumbres* ties membership to the fulfillment of mutual obligations, at least in theory (Hernández-Díaz, 2007; Kearney, 1998; Stephen, 2007). In a prototypical village, adult men face three duties: (1) serving in unpaid civic posts in the village on a rotating basis,¹⁰ (2) participating in collective labor on public works projects ranging from road upkeep to planting trees, and (3) attending community assemblies, a direct democratic body in which all major village-level decisions get made.

In conjunction, both villages held most of their land under communal titles. As of 2007, more than 70% of land in the state of Oaxaca was communal holdings, 44% of them communes—including Disposeo and Igualdad—and the rest *ejidos* (collective landholdings granted under Mexican land reform).¹¹ Under these communal titles, members could pass on usufruct rights within families but were not allowed to sell their land on the market (Nagengast & Kearney, 1990). Many indigenous communities used communal land to enforce citizen participation, withdrawing land rights from those who reneged on their duties.

Even though Disposeo and Igualdad were both officially communal, implementation of this system varied dramatically across villages (Hernández-Díaz, 2007; Stephen, 2007). Oaxaca’s indigenous villages were politically autonomous and geographically isolated. So, in practice, they ranged from the ideal of land redistribution and rotating political posts to the other extreme, at which ostensible participation became perverted into exploitation, clientelism, and elite control. As national-level markets and the state intruded into rural communities, local-level power structures also shaped the distribution of social and political networks outside the village. The variations between socioeconomically similar villages in Oaxaca—including Disposeo and Igualdad—make it possible to better understand how local institutions mediate macro-level policies and economic pressure to migrate.

At first glance, Disposeo and Igualdad also appear similar in factors of concern to scholars of migration; both migrated internally and to the US at the same historical moment and roughly the same level of intensity. Both moved to sites within Mexico starting in the 1960s and then to California starting in the 1980s. In contrast to earlier US migrants from Western Mexico, both groups were too poor and lacked the social networks to cross to the US directly; instead, they sought jobs within Mexico first. While reliable quantitative data on internal migration between the 1950s and 1970s is limited, historical accounts and interviews suggest that large numbers of villagers from both areas migrated internally during this time (e.g., Hirabayashi, 1993; Wright, 2005). Subsequently, these paths of internal migration gave them the wages, skills, and social networks that would connect them to work in the United States (Lopez & Runsten, 2004). Starting in the late 1980s, both groups began to migrate to California, and became what

the Mexican Population Council (CONAPO) ranked as “high expulsion” international sending communities. US migration from both villages peaked around 1993, with more than 95% of migrants crossing to the US undocumented and more than 70% remaining undocumented as of 2011. In surveys conducted for this research (described below), 63% of respondents living in both Igualdad and Disposeo reported that they had at least one immediate family member (spouse, child, sibling, or parent) living elsewhere in Mexico, while 59% in Igualdad and 68% in Disposeo reported that they had at least one immediate family member living in the United States.¹²

Nevertheless, low-wage migrants from the two communities went into different job sectors. In the 1960s, when farm labor recruiters arrived in Oaxaca, people from Disposeo and many surrounding Mixtec villages succumbed, while their counterparts in most of the Sierra Norte did not.¹³ Like most Mixtecs, those from Disposeo went into farmwork, largely in Sinaloa and Baja California; like most Sierra Zapotecs, those from Igualdad went urban service work in Oaxaca City and Mexico City (CONAPO, 2000; Lopez & Runsten, 2004; Stephen, 2007). Decades later, the people of Disposeo continued to migrate circularly to farm jobs in both Mexico and the United States, while those from Igualdad went to Oaxaca City, Mexico City, and ultimately Los Angeles, in more linear patterns of movement. In turn, the people of Disposeo faced lower wages, less consistent work, more circulation and family separation, and greater social exclusion (Lopez & Runsten, 2004). The rest of this paper looks to hometown histories to build an explanation for their initial divergence.

5. METHODS AND DATA

My findings draw on 104 life-history interviews, scholarly accounts of these and other nearby villages beginning in the 1950s, archival research, and random-sample surveys conducted in each village in 2011. Most of the data in this paper come from in-depth interviews, 28 in Disposeo, 23 among its migrants in San Diego County, 28 in Igualdad, and 25 among its migrants in Los Angeles, as well as hundreds of informal conversations in each of these sites. After conducting nearly 2 years of ethnographic fieldwork for a larger project, I selected key informants for in-depth interviews. In sampling for these oral histories, I did not treat informants as individual, equivalent “units” whose views could be aggregated (Ragin, 1997), but instead as distinct agents who interacted with each other in a common historical process. In particular, I sought out pioneer migrants, political leaders, and other villagers who had played important roles in each community’s history. Of the final respondents, 68% had migrated to the United States, 62% were married, and 57% were women. Their ages ranged from 20 to 86, with an average of 46, and education levels ranged from no schooling to university education, though fewer than half had completed primary school. Among those interviewed in the United States, three quarters had prior internal migration experience. While I visited all respondents on multiple occasions, formal interviews lasted an average of 1–2 h, in Spanish, in a location of respondents’ choice, usually their homes. I asked respondents about their parents’ and their own landholding, civic participation, education history, migration history, and decision-making around migration. Thus, the interview data illustrate the process by which key migrants entered urban or rural jobs. To supplement, I also read interviews conducted among respondents from Disposeo by researchers in the Mexican Migration Field Research Program, Hernández-Díaz and Hernández-Hernández (2011),

and Velasco Ortiz (2005a, 2005b). Except when quoting published material, I use pseudonyms to protect respondents' identities.

Historical archives and past scholarly accounts enabled me to triangulate and confirm retrospective interview data. For Disposeo, I used recent studies conducted by Velasco Ortiz (2002, 2005a, 2005b), Cornelius, Fitzgerald, Hernández-Díaz, and Borger (2009), Curiel (2011), Rivera-Salgado (1999) and Kearney (1996), as well as several histories of the Mixteca. For Igualdad, I drew from studies of neighboring villages by Nader (1990), Hirabayashi (1993), and Aquino (2009) as well as historical research by Chance (1989) and others. To track community governance and landholding patterns starting in the 1930s, I also gathered archival data from Oaxaca's National Agrarian Registry (RAN), National Institute for Statistics and Geography (INEGI), and the municipal archives of each village. These accounts gave me reference points to interpret oral histories, enabling broader historical and geographic scope than might have been feasible in research conducted by a single scholar (Fitzgerald, 2012).

To quantify the two villages' migration trends, I used random-sample surveys of each hometown, through which I also gathered secondary data on respondents' migrant family members. In Disposeo, I collaborated with the Mexican Migration Field Research Program (MMFRP) of the University of California, San Diego to conduct a village-wide survey. In January 2011, nearly 40 students and faculty from UC San Diego and the Universidad Autónoma de Benito Juárez in Oaxaca visited every household in the village, interviewing all members aged 15–65, for a total of 741 surveys with a 12% refusal rate. Then, in Igualdad, I used the same questionnaire to conduct a household-level survey in February 2011, implemented by five Mexican research assistants I hired, trained, and supervised from the Universidad Autónoma de Benito Juárez. Because a census was not feasible in Igualdad given the team size, I randomly selected a starting point then surveyors visited every third inhabited household where a randomly selected household head or acting head aged 15–65 could be contacted after multiple attempts. In total we conducted 121 surveys, with a refusal rate of 8%.

The survey took an average of 45 min and used a standard questionnaire designed by the MMFRP, based on the methodology of the Mexican Migration Project.¹⁴ Questions covered the internal and US migration histories of respondents, as well as their parents, spouses, siblings, and children. For all trips, we asked about the migrant's age and marital status, destination, sector of employment, and trip duration (thus also yielding data on return and circular migration). We also inquired about the landholding patterns, occupations before departure, education levels, and civic participation of respondents and their families.

Finally, to capture the experiences of those who had migrated to the United States, I also drew on snowball-sample surveys with multiple points of entry in each village's major US destinations, using contact information from relatives in each hometown. I focused on the US, because approximately three quarters of US migrants had previously migrated within Mexico, and by 2011 internal migration had largely been replaced by US migration in both cases. While snowball surveys are not representative, they are accepted among scholars as the primary means of contacting undocumented migrants, who often remain underground (Massey, 1987). These US-side contacts yielded a total of 133 surveys among US migrants from Disposeo, conducted by the same MMFRP team, and 51 surveys among those from Igualdad, which I conducted. While the snowball method makes it impossible

to give a precise refusal rate on the US side, US-side refusal was likely higher than the rates in the hometowns, due to the climate of fear in which most undocumented US migrants live. In total, surveys yielded data on 1924 persons from Disposeo and 686 from Igualdad. For analyses in which the samples were pooled, I weighted the cases by the inverse of the sampling fraction at each of the sites, following the procedure established by Massey and Espinosa (1997, pp. 941–943).

6. FINDINGS: LEGACIES OF INEQUITY

I find that in Disposeo and Igualdad, local political cultures and economic structures created distinct constraints and opportunities for members in the face of migrant labor recruitment, urban integration, and downward economic pressure. Disposeo, on the one hand, was dominated by an oligarchic elite who monopolized ties to the city, limiting others' access to urban networks. Elites also dispossessed other villagers of land and drove them into debt, making it difficult for most to resist farm jobs. By contrast, Igualdad sustained a rotating political structure that helped to distribute ties to the city among many villagers. Participatory politics also reinforced the distribution of land, giving villagers the economic capacity to opt out of farm jobs.

(a) Pre-migration power dynamics

(i) Disposeo: oligarchy and dispossession

As of 2011, Rosa Delgado had spent almost four decades circling back and forth between Disposeo and the tomato fields of Northern Mexico. When I interviewed Rosa, she traced her story to the power of the Garcias, the Coronados, and the Castillos, that is, the political bosses—or *caciques*—in her hometown of Disposeo. Leaning against an old, rusted heater behind her tortilla shop, she recounted that in the decades before her birth, these families took the positions of power in the village government for themselves, robbing the indigenous majority—including her parents—of access to leadership posts, and, over time, of land. By the time labor recruiters arrived from Culiacán in the 1960s, her parents had little choice but to acquiesce.

Like most Oaxacan villages, Disposeo operated under customary indigenous law and held a communal title to its land that dated back to the late 1500s. This structure ostensibly helped ensure both equal representation and an even distribution of land.¹⁵ In practice, however, local elites dismantled communal landholding prior to the onset of mass migration. Historical accounts suggest that compared to other parts of Oaxaca, the Mixteca stands out as the region where native political bosses persisted the longest and remained the most powerful, positioning themselves as privileged go-betweens to urban magistrates throughout the 19th and early 20th century (Chance, 1989; Spores, 1967). In the early 1900s, as Mexican President Porfirio Díaz began to formalize the municipal structure and urge the privatization of land, respondents reported that *mestizo* (mixed race) outsiders moved into Disposeo, buying up communally held land and declaring it their own. Such property holders crushed local attempts at rebellion, claiming political control (Smith, 2009).

The Mixteca's strong Catholic Church buttressed the new elites' power. As early as the 1600s, the Catholic Church established Disposeo as a regional center for evangelizing the Mixtec people, and through the 1900s the church remained powerful across the region (Velasco Ortiz, 2005b). In the early 1900s, parish priests reinforced their influence by aligning with

mestizos who came to Disposeo to buy land, by marking the *mestizos* as holy, and by insisting that villagers call them “people of reason” (*gente de razón*)—as distinct from the “*naturales*,” or native, plain, simple, indigenous people (Bartolomé, 1997). By affirming the new landholders’ divine rights to power and insisting that the indigenous people address them in the same terms one would speak to God, church leaders helped endow the new *caciques* with more durability and influence than local landlords in nearly any other part of the state (Chance, 1989; Monaghan, Joyce, & Spores, 2003; Pastor, 1986; Velasco Ortiz, 2005b). In turn, interviewees recalled, the political leaders reciprocated by integrating obligations to the church into the scope of “participation” in the village government, such that each year, every family in Disposeo had to donate tributes and labor to as many as twelve annual Catholic festivals.¹⁶

To solidify their fiefdoms, the new elites also perverted indigenous customs of participation. Instead of rotating leadership posts among all villagers, the Garcias, the Coronados, and the Castillos monopolized the positions of influence, while demanding that the indigenous people contribute labor to the town’s more taxing jobs. In an interview with Velasco Ortiz (2005a) conducted in the 1990s, Rogelio Mendez, whose family began to migrate to Culiacán in the early 1960s, said that by the time he was a child in the 1950s, “The *mestizos* always held the posts of judge, president, secretary, and they used everyone else [the indigenous people] to be assistants and such . . . The job was mandatory, obligatory only for those [lower] positions. That was the evil, that they used the customs for their own benefit and *Usos y Costumbres* only helped the *gente de razón*” (p. 61). When I interviewed Basilio Ramos, another town leader who migrated back and forth starting the 1960s, he added, “There were some *mestizos* here in the village who were very influential after the [Mexican] Revolution . . . They were the teachers, the priests, and the landlords. The judges. The mayors. They were the owners of the town.”

Economically, elites also distorted “participation” into a means of dispossession and labor extraction. In the 1940s and 50s, as Mexico began to extend infrastructure into Disposeo such as roads and running water, elites used the “custom” of participation to exploit others’ labor, while appropriating the benefits for themselves. For instance, in the late 1940s the government began building running water to the village. As the water pipes arrived, wealthy families demanded that the indigenous people dig ditches as a form of customary community service. Abundio, a thin, gray-haired farm worker in his late 50s now living in the US, often heard stories of such abuse from his parents when he was growing up. He told me that shortly before he was born, “My father went to dig the ditches where they’d lay the pipes—months and months of work. The whole town had to work . . . [Yet] none of it was for his benefit. The benefits were only for the houses in the center.” Though the pipes were intended as a public good, they reached only the homes of the elite, concentrated in the middle of town.

Elites’ hold on political power also helped them appropriate land. Because just a few families controlled Disposeo’s records and interactions with the state, they were able to formally delegitimize the village’s communal land title. In a 1960 report to Mexico’s National Agrarian Registry, for instance, the municipal secretary—considered one of the “*caciques*”—stated that despite the communal title, “It shall be made known that in this village, all of the lands that belong to the population have been used for many years as if they were private property, to make money for the owners, and there is very little remaining communal land.” Summarily, elites informed the

state government that despite Disposeo’s communal land title, private property was the norm. Fifty years later, respondents reported that though Disposeo’s land is almost all legally communal, it has “always” been treated as private property.

Internally, meanwhile, the *caciques* used their political influence to demand tributes and charge high interest rates that drove the poor into debt and forced them to hand over land. Rogelio Mendez, a migrant from Disposeo interviewed by Velasco Ortiz (2005a), described his family’s history:

The indigenous people had to abandon their *pueblo* for not paying tributes, ever since those times when they [elites] used to demand so much from them—and because they were humiliated, mistreated, and their families raped . . . When a family member got sick, when someone had an emergency, [the poor] would say: “Lend me money, and I’ll give you the papers for my land,” . . . For example, if someone had a very sick little girl, he would have to take her to the *cha za’a*, that is, to the [*mestizo*] healer, so that he would cure the girl. They would have to treat them with luxury (*con lujo*), sometimes even give them land. That’s how people slowly lost their lands. When the epidemics and sicknesses came, they [elites] hunted, surrounded [the people], and they took their land from them. By every means, they took possession of the land (pp. 61–62).

Like Rogelio, most elderly villagers I talked to remembered similar processes of dispossession. For instance, 80-year-old Santiago, weaving palm mats in his courtyard, recalled, “My father held communal land up on the mountains. But he had to sell it when I got sick [in the 1940s]. All his money disappeared, so I don’t have land, just a little plot for my house.” Other scholars’ accounts show that across the Mixteca in the early 20th century, *mestizo* settlers appropriated thousands of hectares of indigenous land, crushing attempts at resistance and fueling dispossession on a scale unheard of in other parts of Oaxaca (Aquino, 2009; Lopez Barcenas & Espinoza Saucedo, 2003; Smith, 2009). As elites appropriated arable land for themselves, respondents added, they allotted only the most arid plots for common use: the rugged, rocky terrain high on the nearby hillsides, where it was nearly impossible to farm.

By the middle of the 20th century, my surveys and other scholars’ histories suggest, more than 75% of Disposeo’s population worked as sharecroppers or day labor. Jorge, a long-time migrant in his 60s, explained that as a result of this loss of land, in his childhood:

We were the servants. Us, our parents, our grandparents were the hired hands, the ones that did the work, the ones that planted, the ones that brought them firewood . . . They [my parents] worked for the rich men of the village, from the start of the corn planting season, and they would go work each day for them until the harvest. Then they [employers] would pay them with a sack of corn. That was their whole salary, for working from May until December.

Marcelo, another migrant, recalled that when he was a boy his parents worked as sharecroppers, and “On that steep slope allotted to us [in Disposeo], we got to keep maybe 25%, and 75% would go to them [the landlords].”

By the eve of migration in 1950, although 92% of the population in Disposeo made a living by farming, almost none had enough cultivable land to keep their families alive (INEGI, 1950). While an average-sized family of the time, of nine to ten people, would need between 4 and 5 ha to get by, the median landholding in Disposeo was around 6/10 of a hectare—less than 1.5 acres,—and 92% of the village population owned less than one hectare (Curiel, 2011; Rivera-Salgado, 1999). Able to grow only about 20% of the corn they needed for personal consumption, families in Disposeo had to purchase more than 80% of their food for the year, forcing them to borrow additional funds (Kearney, 1996; Stuart & Kearney, 1981).

(ii) *Igualdad: participation and distribution*

By contrast, as I drove into Igualdad in 2010, I noticed signs along the road proclaiming, “In this community there is no private property; purchase and sale of communal lands is prohibited.” Samuel, a villager in his mid 70s, assured me that along with land, Igualdad’s political system sustained the collective character for which indigenous villages were famous. In Igualdad—like much of the Sierra Norte where it is located—villagers resisted the land grabs and evangelization that fueled political and economic dispossession in the Mixteca (Guardino, 2005). Instead, they clung fiercely to the egalitarian intent of indigenous, collective control.

Igualdad preserved participatory politics by resisting outside incursion, keeping the population more racially and economically homogeneous than Disposeo, and refusing to let individual villagers position themselves as go-betweens to urban magistrates. While the full explanation of this obstinacy is beyond the scope of this paper, it dates back to the colonial era, when indigenous people of the area resisted Spanish control for more than 35 years and murdered evangelists attempting to convert them to Catholicism (for further explanation see Chance, 1989; Guardino, 2005). As a result, historian John Chance (1989) reports that by the mid 1700s the population of Igualdad remained 99.5% indigenous, with just “a tiny, impoverished group of Spanish colonists” (p. 13). Compared to the *caciques* in the Mixteca, indigenous leaders in the Sierra Norte had little influence, living like commoners and using their positions to promote populist projects such as infrastructure (Chance, 1989; Guardino, 2005).

Likewise, in the 19th and early 20th century, Igualdad restricted the rise of internal hierarchies. While the growing Mexican state sought privileged clients to mediate bureaucratic control, people in Igualdad dismissed would-be go-betweens as “pimping” and expelled them from the village. In the 1800s, certain villagers began attempting to monopolize positions of influence in the local government. They demanded that civic posts be made hereditary, so that families could pass on positions, and each individual would not have to work his way up from the lowest role to the highest. In answer, other villagers rioted, insisting on holding local leaders accountable for funds, expelling individuals who accepted patronage or defied community decisions, and refusing to make civic posts hereditary (Guardino, 2005; Mallon, 1995). At the turn of the 20th century, when the government began to push the privatization of land, people in Igualdad invoked a 1589 title to reinforce the communal status of their land. To this day, respondents take pride in the same communal title (see Aquino, 2009). Sierra Norte villages were also at the fore of Oaxaca’s anti-clerical campaign in the 1930s, pushing to de-link political participation from the church and diminish the demands of Catholic festivals (Smith, 2005, 2007). Thus, by the 1940s and 50s, Igualdad sustained political participation, rotating male villagers into civic leadership. Across the region, in contrast to the Mixteca, there was no landholding larger than 100 ha (250 acres) (Aquino, 2009).

Economically, Igualdad’s political rotation helped reinforce communal landholding and resource distribution. While Igualdad as a whole was just as poor as Disposeo, with most people as of the 1960s living in mud huts, going barefoot, and subsisting on corn farming, its distribution of resources was more equitable. Igualdad’s communal title granted each active member the right to use common farmland, forest, and river resources (Aquino, 2009; Smith, 2009; Stephen, 2005). Villagers also worked this land by mutual aid, relying on labor exchanges in which they rotated among each other’s plots. Sitting in the phone booth he ran at the bottom of the hill,

Samuel, born in Igualdad in 1942, remembered that when he was a child:

There were one or two people that didn't have any land, but yes, the majority had [usufruct] land—if even just a few parcels,¹⁷ but they had it. Yes, my father had land, but the way he planted—well, here, in those days, there was what they call *gozona*, a kind of work that you do with several people. So, you come help plant my land, and in 10 or 20 days they would plant the land, and after that they would go plant someone else's . . . So my father would go to help other people in order to bring his own work along . . . We worked through reciprocal labor; that's how we all got corn.

Samuel’s explanation makes it clear that while his father had usufruct rights to a given plot, in light of the practice of shared labor, even these limited property rights were mostly irrelevant. Similarly, when Lane Hirabayashi (1993) conducted research in the 1970s in a neighboring village, respondents repeatedly told him that they “simply don’t sell labor to other villagers” (p. 44). Rather, according to Hirabayashi’s surveys, approximately 70% of families exchanged work reciprocally, while only 30% engaged in wage labor, 10% employing and 20% providing work.

Rotating political control helped contain stratification. In contrast to Disposeo, respondents in Igualdad explained, civic posts were so burdensome—and collective oversight of leaders so stringent—that nominating someone to a high leadership post served as a way to *curb* his economic accumulation, rather than as a means for him to appropriate greater resources. José, a former village president in his 50s, told me that if a particular man began to amass more wealth than others, the village assembly would nominate him to a demanding local government position, which would take up his time, prevent him from working, and help even out wealth disparities. To the extent there were inequities, respondents added, they reflected an individual’s willingness to work. Samuel went on, “The poor man is the one who doesn’t work; the rich are the people that work hard.” Similarly, Claudia, who grew up in Igualdad in the 1940s, remembered that when she was a girl, “Everyone was poor. There were no rich people here . . . No, my father would say that if people suffer here, it’s because they don’t farm.” As of the 1950s, each family in Igualdad had use of about four or five parcels (nine acres), just enough to support a family if they were willing to do the work.

(b) *Debt, networks, and the insertion into migrant labor*

In the 1960s, agricultural employers from Culiacán, Sinaloa arrived in rural Oaxaca to recruit cheap labor (Garduño, 1991). The distribution of power and resources within each village mediated members’ vulnerability to farm recruitment, as well as their capacity to build their own urban ties.

(i) *Disposeo: limited networks and the pressure of debt*

Interviewees from Disposeo (other than elites) said that when these farm recruiters arrived, their families had no choice but to leave. For one, there were not enough waged jobs in Disposeo to go around. Rosa explained that when she was a girl, “Here [in Disposeo] we worked as day laborers. Weeding fields, picking corn . . . We didn’t have land. If we wanted to work, it was only as hirelings, on other peoples’ land. That’s what you did . . . Here there wasn’t work every day; sure, some days we found work, but the days we didn’t—that was the problem. That’s why we had to leave.”

When I asked respondents why their families migrated, more than half of those from Disposeo talked about debt. In the 1940s and 50s, Disposeo’s families borrowed to cover gaps in slow seasons of sharecropping, buy medicine for sick children, or make obligatory contributions to the village

government and the Catholic Church. By the 1950s and 60s, most faced pressing debts, fueling a cycle of farm migration. Rosa continued: “We used to go to Sinaloa seasonally. We’d leave in November or December and come back in May or June. It became a custom: we came home from the North [of Mexico], my dad paid his debts, and then he took out more loans; so, by November or December we had to go again in order to pay them back.” Similarly, Rafael, a migrant in his mid 40s who worked in Sinaloa then California, explained, “With the [Catholic] festivals of Disposeo and all, the person nominated to sponsor the festival spent thousands of dollars. Thousands of dollars, and the worst is that they didn’t have it. They would go around borrowing among the people, and whoever borrowed had to pay with interest, which is why many people migrated, to pay their debts.” Marcelo, whose family began working in Sinaloa seasonally when he was ten, faced a similar pattern. Lingering over a tepid coffee at his home in Vista, California in 2010, he sighed:

My family went back and forth [to Culiacán] in the 1960s and 70s. We would go home just to put in our crops, and then the harvest would come, and at the end of the year we would go back to Sinaloa . . . My parents went into debt a lot. Among the people in the town, the ones that had money at that time made great profit off this, because they would charge high interest. We wouldn’t make enough [in Sinaloa] to pay off what my father owed, so again we had to go.

Basilio summarizes: “Many families from Disposeo had to go, because they were so indebted.” Yet, low-paying migrant farm labor hardly solved their problems; instead, it fueled an ongoing cycle of migration. Landless and barely able to eat, villagers in Disposeo became what [Stuart and Kearney \(1981\)](#) call “economic refugees” (p. 7).

At the same time, many elites left Disposeo for urban areas. In an interview conducted by the Mexican Migration Field Research Program, Basilio recalled:

More or less at the same time [the early 1960s] people went to farmwork and to Mexico City . . . There were some *mestizo* people from here in the village who were really influential, people who arrived after the [Mexican] Revolution according to what people here in the pueblo say—the Garcias, the owners of those old houses that are just above the town hall. Those are some palaces! So people with a lot of money . . . These people, of course, their parents were rich . . . they were accustomed to being businessmen, to being rich, so the place seemed small to them, and they went to other places, too . . . The *mestizo* men went to Mexico City, as an ethnic group, and the “*natural*” people—the ones they called “Indians”—to the farms.

For elites, the reasons to leave were more voluntary and aspirational. Well-off interviewees explained that they went to Mexico City or the nearby town of Huajuapam to seek education or “better themselves” (*superarse*). As Diana, a returned migrant in her 50s who moved to Mexico City in the 1970s, explained, “I wanted to *be* something—to be someone in life.” The benefits of these urban sojourns were lasting, giving elites more education and more job opportunities within Mexico. Because elites had the means to migrate to urban areas *without* working, many got high school and college degrees, enabling them to become accountants, nurses, or other professionals. In surveys, not one farm-work family completed primary school, but more than half of elite urban migrants finished secondary school or beyond.

While villagers like Basilio were aware of such urban opportunities, they lacked the funds to travel or the social networks to access urban jobs. Disposeo was a few days walk from the nearest city, and it was costly to pay for rides and lodging. Few poorer villagers made the trip. Elites’ greater literacy and *de facto* control over Disposeo’s key political posts gave them a near monopoly over urban ties. In the 1940s and

50s, the ruling PRI extended its reach into rural areas. New roads and schools brought Disposeo into closer contact with Oaxaca and Mexico Cities. Yet, the Garcias, Coronados, and Castillos claimed to be the sole intermediaries to the state. As of the 1960s, respondents recounted, one family, the Coronados, had held the position of municipal secretary for more than 20 years, controlling information flows to and from the state PRI. One villager explained, “Juan Coronado [the secretary] had a lot of power, because he was the one who knew how to write, how to do the paperwork, get funding, and talk with PRIistas in the capital (Oaxaca City). It was a *cacicazgo* of 20 years” (Quoted in [Curiel, 2011](#)). As this respondent hinted, elites used their literacy and position to control urban interactions, siphon political favors and funding into their own pockets, and reinforce their positions as political bosses. Thus, they were the only ones who could travel to the city on the municipality’s dime, discover job openings there, or meet people through whom they might find work.

Over time, farm work trapped the poorer migrants from Disposeo in a cycle of seasonal migration, limiting their social stability and their economic prospects. Given the exclusion of poor families within Disposeo, one might expect poorer migrants to stay away. Yet throughout the 1960s, 70s, and into the 1980s, hundreds of families rotated seasonally between the village and Northern Mexico. In farm work, they were underpaid and often abused. They lived in squalid, makeshift huts with no clean water and rampant illness ([Wright, 2005](#)). Thirty years after the fact, many respondents wept as they described the sickness, filth, and abuse they suffered in Culiacán. So, from June to November, migrants returned for the clean water and respite, and from December to May they left again, as hometown debt intertwined with farm labor abuse. While working on Mexican farms, migrants met agricultural recruiters from California who promised higher wages, but they built few contacts into other sectors ([Zabin, 1997](#)). Even when people from Disposeo moved to the US starting in the 1980s, 88% continued to work on farms and nearly 100% returned to Mexico at least once, many circulating ten times or more. By the peak of Disposeo’s US migration in 1993, two thirds of families had divided across borders, and only 22% had settled in the United States.

Meanwhile, villagers built few alternative networks into US jobs. When elites went to Mexican cities, most found professional work, allowing them to avoid migrating to the US at all. Many disdained manual labor—particularly farm work—as a step down. For example, Sonia, the self-proclaimed daughter of a *cacique* who studied nursing in Mexico City, told me she never considered going on to the United States: “Why would you go to have them exploit you, when here you can be the boss? At least here you’re the lion’s head; there you’d end up being a rat’s tail.” Even when elites did “try” working in the United States, they quickly gave up. In another example, Milagros Garcia, who had worked as an accountant in Mexico City, explained that at one point she attempted to go to the US to “sweep dollars.” Yet, she added, “I only lasted a month and a half before coming back; it was so degrading.” The class divisions that shaped internal migration thus echoed in migration to the US. Elites did not forge a contrasting, urban path to the US; only those who *had to* undertook the journeys of debt.

(ii) *Igualdad: distributed networks and the economic foundations to opt out of farm work*

By contrast, people in Igualdad largely rejected farm labor migration. They were able to do so because (1) the village’s distribution of resources made them less economically

desperate, and (2) the rotation of political posts gave most villagers independent access to urban areas. As in Disposeo, agricultural recruiters came to Igualdad in the 1950s and 1960s (Hulshof, 1991). Yet, surveys and interviews show that people in Igualdad almost universally refused their offers (see Hirabayashi, 1993; Stephen, 2007). While a few people from Igualdad tried farmwork, they quickly returned with wrenching stories, convincing their families and friends to avoid it. For example, 82-year-old Alfonso told me that in the late 1950s he tried agricultural labor for two months, quickly returning to Igualdad because he could not stand the work. He explained, "I never got used to it there—because the work is really hard, really backbreaking." Edgardo, age 72, also rejected farm work after a short stint picking vegetables. Although the foreman urged him to stay, he recalled, "I said, 'Enough.' I didn't like that work, so I came back. The work was really hard." When Edgardo returned, he insisted that his children avoid farm work as well, telling them, "Study, study, so you don't have to migrate [as farm workers] . . . You get up at 5:00 am, and they don't treat you well." Such villagers, the first to experience farm work, dissuaded others from following in their tracks.

Unlike villagers in Disposeo, those in Igualdad could reject this suffering, seek education, and hold out for better alternatives because they had the means to subsist at home. In interviews in Igualdad, not one respondent attributed her departure from the village to debt. While some mentioned poverty, they did so in comparing the lifestyle of the city to that of the village, all the while insisting that even before they left the village they "never wanted for anything." Hirabayashi (1993) reports a similar pattern: "By general agreement of both early and later migrants, [villagers] were not starving and did not flee the village out of dire necessity" (p. 64). Instead, like the elites of Disposeo (albeit with fewer resources), 97% of migrants from Igualdad moved to the city in order to "improve themselves" through schooling and urban jobs.

In addition, in Igualdad, urban networks were more dispersed, as bureaucratic responsibilities rotated among villagers. In the 1950s and 1960s, as the state government began to require increasing levels of accountability from rural villages, Igualdad sent whichever villager was currently serving as local secretary or treasurer to report to urban bureaucrats. As (male) villagers rotated into civic duties, they found they had to read government documents, travel to the city, and interact with state officials, motivating them to gain greater literacy. Indeed, many interviewees said that their families began sending their children to urban areas precisely *because* they had to navigate these new urban ties. For instance, although Samuel's parents had never gone to school, when he was ten (1952), they sent him to Oaxaca City to learn Spanish. When I asked why, he explained:

It was precisely because sometimes it's our turn to carry out civic posts in the town government. My father was a town councilman, policeman, and so on. He had to be on the education committee, to sponsor the village festival, to be the judge. He's a farmer, but he never even went to school . . . And because we spoke Zapotec here, we felt stunted in our language capacities. The teaching in the village school was really bad, so our parents felt an obligation to send us to Oaxaca City. With the goal of learning Spanish, they sent us to work as servants.

Samuel went on, "The families used to go to Oaxaca City, and there would be ads up saying 'servant boy wanted,' so parents would just go there and say, 'We have a boy that can work for you.'" As Samuel explained, his parents were subsistence farmers, hardly well off. Yet, their responsibilities

compelled them to pass through urban areas, where they began to notice such advertisements and be exposed to hearsay about urban jobs.

Other villagers began to want urban education to facilitate trade. In the late 1950s, the state built roads into rural Oaxaca, opening markets for trade. After seeing urban markets while serving in their civic posts, several villagers in Igualdad began to trade clothing, produce, or tools in nearby communities. Yet, they often encountered stumbling blocks. Otilio, a 55-year-old teacher whose grandparents began trading cattle, recounted:

My grandparents didn't study at all. Pure brains. But sadly, on the way to the city [to buy cattle], people would attack them, and they wouldn't let them past with their livestock. Since my grandparents didn't know Spanish [they were native Zapotec speakers], they had no idea what people were saying to them. So my grandfather sent my uncle José, the eldest, to Oaxaca [City saying], "You're going to go to Oaxaca to learn—not just to write, but Spanish. So that when they are attacking us you'll be at the head [to negotiate]."

Though Otilio cried in protest, his father insisted, "Son, you're not going to end up like me, ignorant, without knowing how to write. You have to study. So they put my clothing in a little bag, and *vámonos* (let's go)." As more people in the village interacted with urban dwellers, they not only became aware of opportunities but also felt pressure to gain Spanish literacy to manage such interactions. Thus, most respondents obtained their first urban jobs through visiting the city themselves or hearing about opportunities from those who had. While Igualdad's migrants could not afford the professional education sought by elites from Disposeo, their exposure to urban areas made them aware of work opportunities such as domestic service, where they could learn Spanish. Thus, networks into the city were not as stratified as in Disposeo. By the 1960s, so many villagers were transiting back and forth to Oaxaca City that even girls as young as 10 or 12 might get to town by jumping on the back of a fellow villager's truck.

As scholars would predict, Igualdad's labor market insertion reinforced its advantages compared to Disposeo. For one, urban migration built literacy and Spanish language skills. While young migrants worked as servants, they were able to learn Spanish from other urban dwellers and sometimes attend a few years of school. Thus, even though both Disposeo and Igualdad remained poor, literacy in Igualdad rose from under 20% in 1930 to 60% in 1950 and 80% in 1970. By comparison, literacy rates in Disposeo went from 25% in 1930 to only about 45% in 1970 (INEGI, 1930, 1950, 1970).¹⁸ In addition, they became exposed to urban commodities and lifestyles, convincing many to settle in the cities and abandon their home village for good. In Oaxaca City, migrants from Igualdad built informal ties to urban opportunities in Mexico City, and then in the United States, through friends or employers. Starting in the 1970s, migrants from Igualdad also went on to California. There, survey data suggest that they had more stable jobs than those from Disposeo, with more than 90% working in garment manufacturing and domestic service, 99% living in urban areas, more than 85% settling permanently, and only 3% of families dividing across borders (see also Lopez & Runsten, 2004; Stephen, 2007).

7. CONCLUSION

These findings add to research on migration and development by suggesting that migrant communities' entry into different labor sectors is embedded in the historical contexts of

their home villages. While researchers have become increasingly interested in the intersection between migration and development, they have largely focused on how migrants impact their hometowns, rather than examining how hometown power dynamics may affect the prospects of their migrants. Existing research often generalizes the condition of underdevelopment in migrants' sites of origin, examining how networks drive migration only once they have become activated in relation to the receiving side. I add that while social networks and receiving sites are important, they *interact* with historical factors on the sending side.

The comparison between two migrant communities, Disposeo and Igualdad, leads me to propose that rural villages are not homogeneously "underdeveloped" units but instead have important local political and economic dynamics that mediate macro-level economic pressure. The case of Disposeo, on the one hand, suggests that political oligarchy and economic dispossession can fuel debt and confine urban ties to the elite, which in turn forces poorer villagers to accept precarious work, particularly farm recruitment. By contrast, political participation and economic distribution, as in indigenous villages such as Igualdad, may help sustain families at a subsistence level and disperse networks into the city, insulating members from farm recruitment and enabling them to develop more voluntary ties to urban jobs. Existing research indicates that such initial differences can bear long-term weight, as each village's ties to a given sector shape migrants' level of settlement and their socioeconomic prospects.

These impacts may have varying longevity, depending on conditions both in the home village and in the destination. Within a village, power structures may be subject to change. In Disposeo's case, farm migration entrenched the cycles of debt, illiteracy, and social isolation that had trapped migrants in this sector in the first place. Even though a separate set of urban "pioneers" existed, the separation of urban, elite migrant networks and rural, poor migrant networks limited the options available to the latter. In Igualdad, urban migration may have introduced new socioeconomic differences, but it also presented new opportunities; even individuals who *tried* farm migration could later use social ties to opt into better urban jobs. In these cases, the patterns set by pioneers "cascaded" partly because later migrants faced the same mechanisms as their predecessors. Hometown conditions coincided with migrant social networks to channel them into similar paths. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to examine whether in other cases, village-level changes produced *different* sets of "pioneers" and alternate migration paths. In addition, while I have proposed that sending contexts play an important role in sectoral insertion, the long-term implications of this insertion are of course shaped by the receiving context. In particular, migration laws and migrants' legal status—along with many other conditions in their destinations—weigh critically on their long-term trajectories. In the cases of Disposeo and Igualdad, migrants went to the US under hostile receiving-end policies. As a result, their circularity and job mobility were comparatively limited. Compared to more tolerant periods, these conditions may have left farm workers with even fewer chances to find alternative employment, or to spread their limited wages by bringing dollars back to Mexico.

While the extent of the impact may vary, the relationship I find between political power and migrants' insertion into labor niches holds elsewhere as well. Among impoverished rural sending communities, Disposeo and Igualdad likely represent extreme ends of a spectrum from dispossession to distribution, and there may be various hybrid versions between the two (see Cohen (2004) for examples). While in-depth exploration of the

spread of such differences is beyond the scope of this paper, other case studies appear to confirm the hypothesis I have built here. Oaxacan villages were more likely to lose their communal structures if elites operated as privileged agents of the colonial powers or the PRI party and state (Chance, 1989; Smith, 2009). Villages that had stronger political bosses and more local dispossession—including a few Zapotec villages—sent fewer migrants to internal, urban destinations and more to farm labor (Aquino, 2009; Chance, 1989; Guardino, 2005). Meanwhile, those that were more egalitarian had greater access to urban options, including ethnically Mixtec communities such as those in nearby Puebla (Chance, 2003; Smith, 2006). The more land equity in a village, a study on several Zapotec communities affirms, the less susceptible it was to farm migration (Van Wey, 2005). As hinted above, these patterns held regardless of whether the village was Zapotec or Mixtec. The consistency of these patterns *across* ethnic lines suggests that the differences observed cannot simply be attributed to cultural or ethnic variation. While Zapotec migrants have been found to be more bilingual in Spanish and the native language, and show less attachment to indigenous identity than most Mixtec migrants, I speculate that these differences represent an *effect* of the Zapotecs' mostly urban migration patterns, rather than a cause.

One might predict that even under *Usos y Costumbres*, most villages would operate more like Disposeo and the hierarchical *haciendas* that predominated elsewhere in Mexico, while relatively few practiced communalism like that in Igualdad. Even in villages governed by *Usos y Costumbres*, land redistribution and political participation are more common in theory than in practice. Despite the egalitarian aims of communal structures, in most Mexican *ejidos* and communes, state pressure coincided with local power struggles to encourage the rise of local political bosses and the *de facto* privatization of communal land (Smith, 2009). The Mexican state has also persistently encouraged clientelism and pressured villages to privatize land in law and in practice, especially in the 20th century. Thus it is possible that scholars like Massey *et al.* (1994) came to see farm work as the "standard" path of Mexican migration—despite the country's comparatively widespread land reform—precisely because real political participation and redistribution is so unusual in the Mexican countryside.

In other places and time periods, the institutional foundations of migrant job network formation could be different. For instance, one might imagine a benevolent leader, more efficient landlords, or natural endowments that ensured subsistence, minimized members' economic desperation, and thus decreased their vulnerability to recruitment. Likewise, while this paper focused on the urban ties nurtured by indigenous practices of participation, it is likely that other kinds of communities with more widespread access to urban areas and less bounded social networks—such as peri-urban hometowns—might be better able to enter urban jobs (see e.g. Cohen, 2004; Stephen, 2005). Future research might seek to further flesh out the scope conditions and range under which political participation and economic distribution constrain migrant labor market insertion. Scholars might ask if there is a resource threshold that enables members to refuse recruitment into farm work (or other undesirable recruitment), and they might consider which *other* political and economic arrangements help enable members to cross this threshold. Finally, one might ask how the conditions of recruitment affect the implications of political and economic resource distribution. Systematic comparisons across place and time would help hone the hypotheses I have developed here.

Still, these findings offer a conceptual starting point, which may bear theoretical weight for many potential migrant-sending communities. Popular logic often assumes that migration and globalization destroy the solidaristic villages that protect people from the ravages of capitalism (see e.g., [Davis, 2006](#)). However, this paper shows that communal villages like Igualdad may actually give their members tools to make choices about how and where they migrate, and to opt into more desirable sectors of the migrant labor market. In particular, indigenous communalism, despite its apparent clash with the contemporary political economy, may mediate structural pressure by distributing networks to cities and giving people the economic foundations to resist farm recruitment. The historical legacies of local institutional development not only reverberate over time, as past scholars of Latin America have shown, but also across place, as migrants carry advantages and disadvantages into their internal and even their external migration destinations.

While research about migration and development has generally focused on the ideas and funds that flow from industrialized areas and the Global North to rural areas and the Global South, migrant networks do not start from a blank slate. There is also a cross-site interaction going in the opposite direction, linking hometown resource deprivation and social and political exclusion to stratification within the low-wage labor market. Indeed, oppressive industries may rely on—such exclusion and deprivation (see [Hart, 2002](#); [Kearney, 1996](#)). When members of rural villages are economically desperate, indebted, and socially isolated, they are likely to be vulnerable to recruitment into the most grueling migrant labor, whether in farm work or in other sectors of the changing global economy. To the extent that groups of people in poorer countries can insulate themselves from such patterns, they may be able to shape their prospects, even when macroeconomic pressures force them to abandon their natal homes. By contrast, when local inequities prevail, they echo across space, as migrants' opportunities get shaped by their hometowns' injustices.

NOTES

1. This labor market continuity is particularly strong between Mexico and California, where industries such as agriculture are tightly integrated, down to the packing boxes ([Krissman, 2002](#)).
2. While Mixtecs and Zapotecs are distinct ethnic groups, prior research suggests that employers lump indigenous groups together, with farm employers recruiting both Mixtecs and Zapotecs ([Mines, Nichols, & Runsten, 2010](#); [Stephen, 2007](#)).
3. One might ask whether these differences are cultural. Indeed, past scholars have noted that Zapotec migrants tend to be more bilingual than Mixtecs in Spanish and their native language, and less likely to affirm their indigenous identity (e.g., [Lopez & Runsten, 2004](#)). However, the patterns I observe in this paper hold across ethnic lines. Therefore, I suggest that this apparent “cultural” difference may in fact be an *effect* of urban versus rural migration patterns, rather than a pre-existing cause of the differences in migration. I elaborate this point in more detail in the conclusion.
4. Increased border enforcement has also reduced circulation ([Massey, Durand, & Pren, 2015](#)).
5. In its ideal typical form, this pattern begins with migrants from the middle rungs of a village social hierarchy, who have little knowledge of wage rates, work habits, or social and legal conventions in the destination; depend on their employers; and are especially subject to exploitation. Over time, as members of a community develop knowledge and experience, not only do more migrants leave, but those in the destination are able to seek better opportunities and locations ([Aguilera & Massey, 2003](#); [Massey et al., 1987](#); [Munshi, 2003](#)).
6. For instance, studies comparing Cuba and Mexico show that while Mexico's shortage of work drove labor migration among the lower-middle class, Cuba's revolution sparked the political exile of elites ([Massey et al., 1987](#); [Portes & Bach, 1985](#)).
7. The “Green Revolution” technologies developed here later spread worldwide ([Wright, 2005](#)).
8. While a few recruiters from the sugar cane fields on the coast of Veracruz had come to Oaxaca in the 1940s, drawing a smattering of workers from both Disposeo and Igualdad into cane cutting contracts, agro-industrial recruitment became widespread with the rise of Culiacán.
9. In rural Oaxaca, Spanish colonizers and the Mexican state relied on indirect rule, dividing communities from each other while giving each the autonomy to run its own affairs ([Kearney, 1998](#); [Nagengast & Kearney, 1990](#)). Long observed in practice, this system of *Usos y Costumbres* was legally formalized in 1995.
10. Each year, a community might appoint 50–100 people to civic posts, ranging from night watchman to mayor. Male villagers generally rotate into a new civil service posts once every few years, starting at the lowest ranks and moving up the hierarchy toward mayor ([Stephen, 2005](#)).
11. Communes (*comunidades agrarias*), which predominate in Oaxaca, are governed under similar laws as *ejidos* but different in that their communal status dates back to colonial land titles ([Esteva, 2007](#); [Kearney & Besserer, 2004](#)). Because Oaxacan communities were so isolated and their terrain so rugged, they largely avoided the land grabs that swept the rest of Mexico in the 19th and 20th century ([Massey et al., 1987](#)).
12. CONAPO tracks several municipal-level indicators of migration. However, compared to my survey data, they dramatically underreport the intensity of migration and remittances. For instance, CONAPO reported that in 2005 14.9% of households in Igualdad and 9.7% of those in Disposeo had migrants in the US, while my surveys show numbers closer to 60–70% in both cases. Likewise, CONAPO estimates that 3–5% of households receive US remittances, while my surveys show numbers between 35% and 37%. Thus, while both CONAPO and my surveys indicate that the two villages had *similar* migration intensity, I am reluctant to use CONAPO data alone.
13. As I mention in the conclusion, a few communities in each region did diverge from this norm, suggesting that regional patterns cannot be attributed simply to ethnic or cultural differences but must be considered in light of the political and economic arrangements described here.
14. For details of the MMFRP methodology, see [Fitzgerald, Hernández-Díaz, and Keyes \(2013\)](#). For a description of the Mexican Migration Project methodology see [Massey \(1987\)](#).
15. Accounts like [Dow \(1977\)](#) and [Greenberg \(1981\)](#) suggest that in some cases *Usos y Costumbres* can mediate class hierarchies and provide as much as 30% of a villager's annual food budget through redistribution. Others note that the system can enable villages to organize collectively to

defend themselves against extractive institutions such as the state, landlords, and corporations (Aquino, 2009; Esteva, 2007; Kearney, 1998; Nagengast & Kearney, 1990).

16. While an anti-clerical movement swept other parts of Oaxaca in the 1930s, dismantling the association between religious obligations and political participation, it was summarily crushed in the Mixteca, reinforcing the ties between clergy and elites (Smith, 2005).

17. Each parcel is around two acres.

18. In the 2000s, after large percentages of each village have migrated to the United States, approximately 62% of people in both Igualdad and Disposeo still lived in homes with dirt floors. However, Igualdad had 87% literacy, and 65% of villagers had completed primary school, while Disposeo had only 68% literacy and 33% of villagers completing primary school. By 2005, the GDP per capita (purchasing power parity) was \$4,472.41 in Igualdad—where residents had ties to urban migrants—but only \$1,483.17 in Disposeo, where most migrants went to farms and remained trapped in cycles of debt (CONAPO, 2000).

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