

Guillermo Merelo

# Political déjà Vu:

## Symbolic transferability and political cultural reconstruction among Mexican immigrants in New Zealand

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### Abstract

Using a semiotic-interpretive approach to the concept of political acculturation this paper explores the processes of political cultural reconstruction of 60 members of the Mexican community in New Zealand. Based on four years of ethnographic research it argues that the post-migratory reconstruction of the political arena follows common cognitive and emotional lines. These are illustrated in a four-stage process of cultural mediation through which individuals ascribe meaning to symbolic representations of politics experienced in two political settings. The paper depicts political acculturative phenomena as endless processes of negotiation resulting in constantly evolving hybrid frameworks through which migrants understand and respond to the challenges posited by the polities they inhabit.

### Bio notes

Guillermo Merelo is a doctoral candidate in politics and international relations at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. His research revolves around the topic of culture and its implications on public policy, democracy, citizen formation, elections, and migrants' integration to their new polities. He is also policy maker in the fields of elections and democracy and until 2011 he served as Executive Director of the Electoral Service in Mexico City.

I know that a good government must have three separate powers; that whoever is in charge let's say the president, or in the case of New Zealand, the Prime Minister, is the ultimate responsible for the future of the nation and should not stay in power forever; I know that education should be free, secular and mandatory; I know that natural resources belong to the nation. I know all that stuff because I learned it when I was a kid. It is all I know [about politics] but I think it is what is correct, what is fair. New Zealand does not follow all these rules because it is a very young country; people here have not learned many lessons yet.

This opening testimony came from Alejandro, a 46 year old Mexican migrant who arrived in New Zealand almost seventeen years ago. To him, as to many other members of the Mexican community in New Zealand, politics is a term that carries extremely negative connotations, a world he prefers to stay away from in order to avoid trouble. This quiescent approach to politics, however, does not stop him from bearing an opinion about his new political arena. Such an opinion is based on what he considers to be universal positive attributes of politics, what politics should be like and what he assumes to be "fair". These convictions did not appear randomly, instead they are embedded in a complex symbolic system, a world of heroes and battles, fiction and reality, practice and myth that has accompanied Alejandro for most of his life. Not surprisingly, when talking about these issues he reveals a sense of pride in what he considers to be his heritage, the lessons he learnt from his family, friends and teachers when he was in Mexico. A system of signification constructed throughout life experience in a different political setting that still affects his perceptions of politics even after years of living thousands of miles away from his Motherland.

Alejandro's remarks were made whilst answering a question related to the process he undertook to understand New Zealand politics. Although they evidence an attempt to transfer his previous political baggage in order to understand his new political environment, something seems unbalanced in his response. On the one hand he evidently possesses a clear notion of the Mexican political system, its underpinning principles and formal structures. On the other, he appears to have a limited understanding of those same factors in the New Zealand political context. It is from this perspective that he disregards New Zealand politics based on the novel character of its practices and institutions.

In this paper I explore how migrants' cultural conceptions of politics and the state are recomposed in order to adapt to the challenges posed by inhabiting a new, and sometimes radically different, political culture. Using an interpretive approach it aims to shed some light on the complex process of political acculturation conceiving this as the product of semiotic practices<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> From this point onwards I will use the term acculturation based on the classical definition coined by Redfield, Linton and Herskovitz (1936). As such it should be understood as a neutral term referring to the phenomena that occurs through continuous interaction between two distinctive cultural systems and upon which different strategies -such as assimilation,

Based on four years of ethnographic research in New Zealand it explores four stages of political cultural reconstruction as it is experienced by a small community of Mexican migrants in a remote, peaceful and inclusive democracy in the southern hemisphere.

## Culture, symbols and politics

Based on the work of political interpretive scholars in this article I argue that cultures in general, and political cultures in particular, are systems of signification embedded in symbols and meanings. They are intricate nets of stances, values and behaviours people collectively adopt to make sense of the world they inhabit in order to manage their daily lives (Ross, 1997; Topf, 1989; Adams, 1986; Chabal & Daloz, 2006). Such understanding of culture departs from the basic notion proposed by Clifford Geertz (1973) as ‘an historical transmitted pattern of meaning, embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life’ (p.89). Following Weber’s conception of man as an animal suspended in webs of significance, Geertz asserts that these webs constitute culture and that its analysis requires not an experimental scientific effort but an interpretive one. In this context, every human society has its own shape, its own purposes and its own meanings. Moreover, the making of a society is precisely ‘the finding of common meaning and directions and its growth is an active debate and amendment under pressures of experience’ (Williams, 1989, p4). Without such meanings and directions ‘man’s behaviour would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experience virtually shapeless’ (Geertz, 1973, 43)

In this framework, the synchronic relation between culture and politics flows naturally from live experience and continuous contact with the long-held socio historical factors bounding people together in a circle of shared intelligibility, what Sewell (1990, p.47) refers to as a “semiotic community”. Within a semiotic community people collectively construct notions of politics and the state and develop a common language that is mutually comprehensible to his members. It is through that language that meaning is transmitted, reproduced, and gradually modified. An advantage of understanding culture as the product of semiotic practices is that such conception does not depart from the assumption of cultures as seamlessly coherent scripts homogeneously followed by members of any given nation. Instead they are circles of vivid discussion fed by years of understanding and practice with structures of power. As Wedeen observes semiotic communities are circles of shared intelligibility where people recognize the same set of contrasts and engage in mutually comprehensible symbolic action but that is all (Wedeen, 2002, p.722).

Following this line, what a symbolic form comes to represent to a member of a semiotic community is largely affected by the positions and trajectories that such person has historically occupied in any given social context. But that

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integration and exclusions- followed by migrants and promoted by governments (Berry, 2005).

does not supersede the fact that whatever position one may adopt this was crafted within the borders of a circle of understanding of the world forged within socio-historical factors accumulated in the *longue durée* (Chabal & Daloz, 2006). Political discussions of topics such as gun control in America, secularism in France or rural land tenancy in Mexico cannot be devoid from the underpinning elements historically sustaining the relationships between individuals and the state. In this regard these types of discussions are infused with the sort of significance that could hardly make sense in a different political culture.

But if a proposition of symbolic politics is to be used, then it is necessary to state clearly the meaning of the term political symbol. Such an attempt cannot start but from the classic proposition made by Murray Edelman (1964) that the political world is as complicated and ambivalent as the men who create it. Politics, he argues, is a passing parade of abstract symbols to which we react at two levels: cognitive and affective. The cognitive involves information that the symbol communicates while the affective consists of the feelings that political symbols comprise. Therefore it is to be expected that its institutions and forms bear strong meanings that men teach each other to expect. Political forms and institutions thus symbolise what large collectives believe about the state, and can be as broad as the set of ideals about which values governments need to embrace, or as specific as the structures, goods and services encompassed in governmental action.

From this perspective concepts such as democracy, human rights, accountability and civic duty, practices such as participating in elections, signing petitions and joining community clubs, or institutions such as the executive, the tax system of the post, come to collectively represent something in the minds and hearts of people. In this regard individuals are not simply passive recorders of meaning but active participants in its construction. It is precisely because of this that meaning-making processes come to create stable cognitive and emotional frameworks people trust and cherish as a source of illumination and stability. They provide responses about how to act and react to the multiple challenges posited by living in the polity. They represent not only what people know but also, as in the case of our opening testimony, what they collectively believe and expect of the state. It is in this context that the disruptive character of migration raises several questions about how such stable systems of signification are affected and recomposed when entering a new semiotic community.

### Migration, politics, and cultural reconstruction

Wittgenstein (1953) highlights the mutually enigmatic character of people born and brought up within the confines of two different semiotic communities; we discover this, he exemplifies, when we enter a strange country with entirely different traditions and, what is more, even after mastering the language of such a country we are still unable to understand its people, “we cannot find our feet with them” as he stresses. From this perspective, when migrants enter a new country they cross not only national

borders but also semiotic ones. It is in this context that the acculturative experience is quintessentially one of interpretation embedded with sentiments of turmoil, perplexity and confusion.

Just like it is impossible to ask newcomers to immediately understand and adopt the meanings of a new country's political arena, it would be equally naïve to assume that they can simply "unthink" their previous experiences with politics. As Sergio Wals (2011) argues, migrants do not enter their new countries empty-handed; instead they carry political suitcases filled with values, beliefs and behaviours accumulated throughout a lifetime of experience with the state. Such accumulated knowledge constitutes a rich semiotic repertoire people cannot simply throw away to re-start their lives in a blank-slate kind of fashion. If cultures result in specific ways of seeing and interpreting the political world based on historically accumulated meaning, then it is valid to assume that the process of political acculturation into a new political system is one of reconstruction of the semiotic repertoires migrants use in order to build a notion of the state and respond to challenges posed by a new political system.

For the past three decades, a group of scholars have explored the idea that during the process of acculturation into a new political system, migrants can capitalise on previous political information and skills acquired and developed in their country of origin. Black (1987, p.732) refers to this phenomenon as "political transferability", and based on his research in the Canadian context, he proposes that even in the presence of radically different political systems, migrants can still use their understanding of certain basic political elements found in all regimes. Similar propositions have been articulated in the works of scholars in Australia (Wilson, 1974; Finifter & Finifter, 1989) and the United States (Wals, 2011), providing valuable insights into the stable character of political concepts and choices. Given the quantitative nature of these studies is still difficult to determine how exactly political transferability intersects with the process of political cultural reconstruction, and how the continuous first hand contact between different systems of signification affect the readjustment of people's cultural frameworks to make sense of politics. What is true is that the political transferability proposition is a powerful one and can constitute an important bridge between epistemic communities to shed new light into the triangular relationship between culture, politics and migration.

If an epistemic bridge is to be created this needs to depart from the idea that cultural reconstruction is both a cognitive and affective process involving both safekeeping and regeneration. It also involves the recognition that migrants, as any other human beings, privilege stability and look for ways to create certainty whenever put under perplexing circumstances. This recognition does not imply accepting neither a lack of agency nor an impossibility of change but the acknowledgment that humans are cognitive misers who rely heavily of the past to interpret the present. In this regard embodied practices with their former states, institutions, rituals and practices are indeed an important source of illumination, a point of departure to understand the present. A newly encountered political symbol may thus be both a fresh seed sown on the

ground of interpretation and a familiar experience reminding us of our previous relationships with structures of power.

Another point that deserves special recognition is that understanding culture as a product of semiotic practices implies that political transferability is just one step in a more complex process semiotic reconstruction. We cannot expect people to understand their new political arenas based exclusively on unmovable semiotic repertoires. As I argue in this paper, even the more resistant of migrants will be confronted with the inevitable need of adjusting – at least some degree- the cultural frameworks used to understand politics in his or her receiving society. In this regard political transferability serves the major purpose of helping the acculturative processes through the synthesis of symbolic forms<sup>2</sup>. Such a process is hardly a finite one, and is better represented as a continuous circles fed by the multiple interactions between citizens and the state.

Without minimizing the relevance of traditional forms of political participation such as voting, signing petitions or joining protests, migrants' semiotic repertoires are also subject to be nourished through different forms of interaction with structures of power. Migrants do not need to wait three or four years to add new meanings to their systems of signification through experiencing an electoral campaign in a new country. In the meantime they are taxpayers, public service users, official protection seekers and welfare beneficiaries just to mention some. Nuijten (2003, p.17) refers to this phenomenon using the term “culture of the state” and describes it in terms of “the practices of representation and interpretation that characterize the relations between people and state bureaucracy and through which the idea of the state is constructed”.

## The field

Following Edelman's remarks that ‘men try to find meaning and order when placed in a confusing or ambiguous situation’ (Edelman 1964, 16), when it comes to politics, New Zealand can be considered to be quite a confusing place for Mexican migrants. A small and stable democracy with a unicameral parliamentary system and a unitary geographical distribution of political attributions is a contrast to the enormous political apparatus that characterises Mexico's federal, bicameral and presidential political system. Furthermore, historically New Zealand has been considered as the world's social laboratory driven by values such as collective action, tolerance and equality (Spoonley, Pearson & Shirley, 1994; Mein Smith, 2005). In contrast with the efforts made by the Mexican regime to unify the country based on the idea of ethnic homogeneity behind the concept of the mestizo (Chance, 1979)<sup>3</sup>, the multicultural approach adopted by the New Zealand government has shaped a diverse society in which one in four inhabitants was born

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion on cultural synthesis and hybridisation from the semiotic perspective see Vestel (2009).

<sup>3</sup> According to Chance, Mestizo refers to a social and cultural characterization employed in the Latin American region to refer to individuals of mixed Spanish and indigenous origin.

overseas. In this context, the New Zealand political regime not only recognizes, but also encourages migrants' political participation through governmental action and public policy. For instance, it is one of the few countries in the world to grant both national and local electoral rights to newcomers from the moment they become residents and to be employed in its civil service without being nationals of the country. These policies are arguably a reflection of a stable, participative political culture characterized by relatively low levels of distrust and political intolerance (Barker, 2010).

The Mexican community in New Zealand is a small group comprising approximately seven hundred individuals, equally balanced between men and women. It is shaped mostly by middle and lower-middle class migrants, most of whom originate from urban areas of Mexico. Its median age is 27 years, and 94% of those aged 15 and over have formal educational qualifications. In terms of geographical distribution, 80% of Mexicans live in the North Island, mostly in the urban centres of Auckland and Wellington, although a significant portion (11%) is located in the Canterbury region of the South Island (Statistics New Zealand, 2014).

## Methods

This research is part of a larger project on the political acculturation of Mexican migrants in New Zealand. The project is an interpretive analysis of the influence of pre-migratory experiences and the way people feel, think and act towards the political arena. The results are based on the stories of sixty first generation migrants collected over four years of ethnographic research in New Zealand. Stories were collected mostly through in-depth interviews in recurrent encounters with participants between 2011 and 2016. I attempted to collect an inventory of personal stories on political acculturation through the exploration of participants' previous and present experiences with politics. Other orthodox methods closely related to the interpretive tradition such as participant observation and document analysis helped to construct different parts of the study.

In terms of the criteria for participation, only migrants who had lived for more than one year and who intended to establish themselves in New Zealand permanently, were considered to participate in the project. The mean age among participants was 30 years, within an age range of 24 to 79. Levels of education were high among all interviewees, with 8% holding a post-graduate degree, 43% a Bachelor's degree, 41% some university education, and 7% with high school education only. In terms of length of stay in New Zealand, the mean length of residency was 7 years, within a range of 2 to 43 years. 44% of participants were men, while 56% were women. English language proficiency among participants was high overall.

Narrative lines were coded using a multi-step process based on the methods developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Charmaz (2014). The coding scheme was developed from multiple readings of the materials in order to construct thematic strands commonly found in participants' narratives. Once

testimonies had been organized according to the strands, each case was contextualized in its own terms and in relation to other cases – as well as within specific frameworks of disciplinary knowledge. By doing this, I was able to establish points of contact between experience and theoretical knowledge.

In the case of this paper, the narratives collected on the field resulted in four major coding lines which were organized in a way that reveals a four stages process of cultural reconstruction. Stories of inception gives account of how symbols and meanings are originally socialised in the polity. It reveals a commonly shared political mythology that constitutes a crucial guiding point to the development of further semiotic practices. Stories of transference explores the exchange of previously stored understandings of the political world as a source of illumination and a path to follow when people aims to make sense of the world they inhabit. Stories of confusion comprises narratives of cognitive dissonance between two distinctive systems of signification and explores how in turn such confusion, constitute the starting point to the creation of new understandings of politics, the state and power structures. Finally, in stories of construction I give account of the complex process of cultural hybridization through which people reshape their cultural frameworks. There I proposed that cultural reconstruction is better seen as the construction of a “patch quilt” to which participants sew new pieces while still retaining keeping others that are near and dear to their hearts. Although such a process may give the impression of being linear is indeed a continuous circle of interpretation that seems to accompany participants throughout their lives.

### Stories of Inception

Politics involves the presence of clusters of political symbols that exist in relation to each other. Nonetheless, the fundamental relationship between political signs and signifiers is not randomly given but crafted through inculcation and practice. A legitimate national culture –a true civic religion–write Bourdieu and colleagues (1994, p.8), is universally imposed by the state through the school system. Hence school education is regularly seen as crucial to the accumulation of political symbols in the first place. Stories told by participants are not devoid of such influence. In fact, when interviewees gave account of their original sources of political knowledge, school and family education occupied a crucial position, revealing that their processes of political socialisation started early in life. Often testimonies included vivid representations of politics embedded in rituals, notions and myths that were part of the Mexican primary and secondary school curricula. In this context, the Mexican political system is perceived as a reward for a long process of fighting against oppression and social inequality. Understanding such conceptions requires context though.

At the beginning of the 20th century, with the pronouncement of an extremely progressive constitution in the country, the Mexican revolutionaries had successfully articulated the footprints of a national project embedded with

social and political rights designed to reduce inequality and foster economic progress (Yllanes, 1967). These included a massive program of nationalization of private industries in key economic sectors, an advanced system of labour rights to protect and organize workers, a series of strict measures to ensure the secular character of the state, a massive program of expropriation and redistribution of land to poor farmers, and an ambitious educational program to reach all corners of the country.

This project was not only endorsed but actively fed by intellectuals, academics, and artists who joined the ideals and values of the revolutionary cause and contributed to the construction of a new idea of *lo mexicano* (what is Mexican). An official political discourse gave way to an official version of history articulated in a commonly shared political mythology<sup>4</sup>, a romantic world of heroes and enemies, battles and victories, a collective memory of how the country fought against injustice and tyranny. From this perspective, the Mexican state is commonly seen as an omnipotent and generous father rewarding his children for years of suffering and oppression. Every new president was to become the latest caudillo (military leader) in charge of defending the values and ideals contained in such mythology. When talking about this official version of Mexican history Pansters (2005, pp.74-83) describes this in terms of “the ideological adhesive of the Mexican political system”, which guided the relationships between Mexicans and their government for most of the 20th Century.

A key factor to the success of the project was the brand new educational system. Indeed, the massive literacy campaigns implemented in Mexico through the course of the century brought not only better educated people but ideologically well-rounded citizens able to reproduce the core components of such dogma. Certainly, at its different levels the education system was structured through the idea of integral, nationalistic education. The political orientation of the Mexican curriculum has been explored by several authors<sup>5</sup> whose coincidental findings indicate that during primary and secondary school, the average Mexican student is exposed to numerous and intense political messages, purposely designed to make him feel a proud heir of Mexican culture, “a fusion between the glorious indigenous past and the best of the Western culture” (Zuniga & Hamman, 2008, p. 69). In this context, Mexican political education starts at some point between the age of eight and nine, with basic notions of division and distribution of political powers, governmental structures and federalism. These are later expanded in secondary school with more detailed information on legislative processes, governmental functions, and the political organisation of Mexico’s states.

In order to ensure a homogeneous standard in the application of the curriculum, the Mexican educational system has historically relied on the distribution of free and mandatory textbooks. Indeed, for decades Mexico was the only nation outside the communist block to provide these types of

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<sup>4</sup> I use the term political mythology based on the political anthropological tradition. A comprehensive review of the term can be found in T n soiu (2005).

<sup>5</sup> See for instance Segovia (1975); Zuniga (1998); Rippberger & Staudt (2002), and Zuniga & Hamman (2008).

educational materials for its people (Hodges & Gandy, 2002, p.101). The influence of these textbooks was clear in participants' stories. When remembering his primary school days a participant I will refer to as Juan Manuel stated:

We used to have this textbook that I remember really well because it was about social sciences; I think it was on sixth grade but I am not sure; definitely in primary school, for sure. There, in the cover, was the picture of a woman, la patria [the Motherland], who had a very generous bosom to nurture every Mexican. And really, those books taught you everything you needed to know about Mexico, how the country was organized, all its history, and how to be a good citizen. I think they were great to teach you a little bit of love for your country.

Similar to Juan Manuel, during their childhood all participants were exposed to the contents of textbooks as well as to periodic nationalistic rituals that reinforced allegiance to the ideals of the 1910 Mexican Revolution<sup>6</sup>. The progressive connotations of some of these texts can be better illustrated in Macias' (1990, pp.302-303) translation of some of their passages. Among them is this next statement found in the sixth-grade social studies textbook, probably the one referred by Juan Manuel:

This domination of some countries by others is called colonialism, and the economic and political system that makes it possible, imperialism. The capitalists (of Britain, France and the United States) sometimes joined the Mexican capitalists, exploited our resources, but the situation hardly improved, because they were not interested in solving the problems of the country but rather only in doing business

Entrenched in this passage are a series of meanings to justify the national character of key industries in Mexico. A shared agreement that the nationalisation needs to be undertaken to prevent unfairness and exploitation is structured through an almost romantic conception of its genesis. This is a good example of the simple characterisations of goodness and badness that shape most Mexican nationalistic history where the system is presented as a reward after years of injustice and oppression. It is in this context that the gross constituent unit, the mytheme, of such history is justice and not democracy –at least not as currently understood. It is not surprising to see how such idea of fairness in a political system is articulated in many of the stories told by participants. For a vast majority, the political system they know, at least in its dogmatic dimension, represents the goodness in society, or in the words of Alejandro, what is fair. Indeed, regardless of the differences given by specific ideological positions, most participants seem to uphold clear and unified positions that take the form of ideals, the most important of which is justice.

Such clear principles from which an ideal image of the political system is

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that this system started to be modified after the Mexican democratic transition that started in the year 2000. Nonetheless, all participants were educated under the old system.

created and meaning deposited, contrast with the negative perceptions that all participants exhibit towards the Mexican political regime. Going back through my field notes I found the following question: How can Mexican migrants be simultaneously so secure about the goodness of their political ideals and structures and so disappointed in their achieved results? Exploring the field further I found that the answer seems to lie in the division made by participants between the Mexican political system and its political actors. After a couple of decades of living in New Zealand, a participant from Wellington stated:

I think the Mexican system is very good. My father was a lawyer and he used to say that our laws were perfect; and at least when I was living there, they were. The problem is not that, the problem is in our politicians. They are the ones twisting, ignoring or violating the rules our grandparents fought for. The rules are still there but no one obeys them.

How the Mexican political culture has been affected by these opposing conceptions has been the centre of attention of a number of political cultural analyses. When referring to some of these, political historian Alan Knight (1996, p.10) uses the word “schizoid” to describe in general terms how such culture has normally been portrayed. On the one hand, a set of aspirational and idealistic components based on the principles of the Revolution seems to drive the pride Mexicans feel for their political institutions; but on the other, embodied practices with the state lead to constant disappointment based on accusations of corruption, clientelism or simply inefficiency to achieve such high expectations.

The amalgamation of such dissimilar conceptions into the Mexican semiotic framework helps explain how a culture with such a high regard for its political system is also one where political apathy, extreme distrust in politicians and institutions, intolerance towards dissent, and generally speaking, discontent towards state action have been stable components of the Mexican psyche for decades<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, it suggests that beyond this nationalistic discourse, lies a series of culturally developed understandings about how to endure such a corrupt system. Some of these were captured in many of participants’ stories and will be used in the following sections to illustrate their application to the New Zealand political arena.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that in a globalised era several new symbols have started permeating Mexican political culture. At a slow but steady pace, a number of new components such as democracy, human rights, gender equality, and transparency of the state, just to mention a few, are becoming more present in the discourses of the Mexican semiotic community. There is no doubt that this situation has provided new sets of meaning to most

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<sup>7</sup> This stability can be fully appreciated in the analysis of different studies on Mexican Political Culture conducted since the 1960s. Although most of them were developed in the midst of the behavioural revolution, political interpretivists and cultural anthropologists seem to have arrived to similar conclusions. See for instance (Hansen, 1970; Gonzalez-Casanova, 1970; Segovia, 1975; Craig & Cornelius, 1980; Tejera, 1996; Gutmann, 2002).

Mexicans. Nonetheless, the stability of the results provided by a number of studies on political culture suggests that such meanings cannot be understood in isolation from the complex arrangements of a semiotic system that has been shaped over decades. In that regard they have been incrustated in a complex system of signification, and as such their results are sometimes not as optimistic as could be expected.

## Stories of Transference

When talking about their experiences of making sense of a new political environment, participants unveiled the first traces of transferring previous understandings of politics that originated in the Motherland. Indeed, by following participants' narratives, a rich field of interaction between the past and the present appears. Interestingly, most of the times such transfer seems to occur almost unconsciously. Like using an impeccably oiled cognitive machine participants appear to decode political information in a perfectly synchronized manner. Meaning making, in short, starts with simple transpositions of what is familiar in order to establish points of reference through which participants make sense of their worlds. In so doing, the disruptive character of migration in their social world is partially reduced and efficiently managed.

Similar to what occurs with ordinary meanings which are unchallenged by the mind and therefore simply transposed across cultures –for instance the meaning posited upon concepts such as bank or restaurant- a collection of previously known political notions and conceptions are imposed by participants as a set of footprints that guide their understandings of the New Zealand political world. The interaction between the old and the new owes its form thus to the objective structures that have produced such notions and conceptions regardless of their compatibility with the contextual arrangements of the new country. This is understandable since migrants' lists of priorities will rarely include political topics. As stated by this participant from Christchurch:

When you start understanding this world [New Zealand politics] you need to look back to what you know. There is no real science in politics, every society is organized in a similar way. It is just a matter of looking for the specific points and then you realize, this is like a *déjà vu*.

Indeed, the term *déjà vu* -a feeling of certainty that a current experience is a repetition of something already lived, where actions that are about to happen, can be predicted- is a useful construct to synthesize the sentiment encountered by migrants when attempting to assign meaning to New Zealand political symbols. In this context, participants' quest of making sense of the New Zealand political world did not depart from zero. For instance, when speaking about the process she undertook to understand New Zealand politics, a participant I will refer to as Sara mentioned:

Obviously, I didn't start from zero; there is a Mexican ABC of politics that you learn at school... you know... the executive, legislative and judiciary, the kind of things that are going to work kind of similarly

wherever you go.

This testimony fits perfectly into Black's (1987) proposition of political transferability. Nonetheless it is necessary to explore further how this "Mexican ABC" is structured and transferred if light is to be shed over transferability as a semiotic process. Considering that the definition of political symbols from which this thesis departs is broad enough to accommodate any part of the political spectrum, talking about symbolic transference is in fact a proposition of enormous magnitude. Furthermore, such a notion is wide enough to accommodate a range of diverse elements that may be seen as overlapping from the traditional political science perspective. This is because political concepts, institutions and practices, (elements traditionally belonging to different classical taxonomies) all come to symbolize something in the mind of the average citizen. Constructing classifications of symbolic transferability is thus not an easy task since the effort may be seen as a disruptor of semiotic inventories, coexisting harmoniously in abstract terms. Nonetheless, the stories told by participants reveal notorious distinctions in the types of transferred symbols assisting the interpretation of New Zealand politics.

In his classic work, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, Murray Edelman (1967, p.6) distinguishes between two types of symbolic arrangements that individuals use to posit meaning upon experience: referential symbols and condensation symbols. The former are described as "economical ways of referring to the objective elements in objects or situations: the elements identified in the same way by different people"; the latter are symbols that evoke emotions associated with "patriotic pride, anxieties, remembrances of past glories or humiliations, promises of future greatness". Similarly, in this section I suggest that participants' political transferability occurs mostly through two different types of constructs: what I call *references* and what I call *positions*.

### *Transferring references*

References are the most basic symbolic forms that assist migrants' processes of political acculturation. They can be broadly characterised as unchallenged notions or conceptions, assumed to be universal organisational principles, through which political systems are articulated. Their transference provides participants with core notions about how politics works in the broadest possible sense. In other words, references are symbolic constructs that help migrants make sense of their new world by identifying similar categories across systems. Participants' stories include a plethora of successfully transferred references that are employed to understand New Zealand politics.

Migrants do not need to re-learn many aspects of the political spectrum such as what is understood by political parties, public offices or taxes. These are concepts already stored in the semiotic repertoire of most Mexicans. Consequently, whenever participants aim to understand and discuss a political topic, they can safely rely on such concepts since their meanings, at least in part, seem to be shared across semiotic communities. Interestingly, the transfer

of these types of references occurs almost unconsciously, like a word naturally bound to appear in the structure of a translated sentence, the type of flexible schemata proposed by interpretivist theorists (e.g. Thompson, 1990). A shortcut of the mind grounded from live experience through which a piece of knowledge is structured and later used consistently in such a way that its meaning is no longer challenged.

This cognitive process, a cornerstone of the migratory experience, constitutes the point of departure in the shaping of a new semiotic framework. If people are to build new political knowledge, it is obvious that first they will dig into their semiotic repertoires to find referential categories and use them as a blueprint to follow. It is fair to say that most of the time, pairing referential categories is a successful enterprise that provides people with the information needed to build a basic picture of New Zealand politics. Moreover, even when paired categories are not exactly accurate, their construction proved to give most participants the type of operational knowledge they needed to respond to the basic challenges posited by the environment, as seen in the following fragments from different participants' stories:

Governments are not that different, I mean the New Zealand President is just like in Mexico the guy you need to know if you want to make it in the public sector.

I mean it is the same, in Mexico have our deputies and senators, here [in New Zealand] they have their deputies and senators.

I see the difference between Auckland and other states like Waikato where opening and keeping a business running is more complicated. Here in Auckland is easier. I think this Len Brown is one of the best governors Auckland has ever had.

By deductively constructing analogies between points of reference, each and every one of these participants attempts to make a statement regarding the New Zealand political world. Although part of the transferred reference is most of the time inaccurate –New Zealand does not have a president, there are no deputies and Senators in the New Zealand Parliament, and Len Brown is not the governor but the mayor of Auckland- they all serve the purpose helping people to comprehend the political world they now inhabit. They are helpful in illustrating the “Mexican ABC” stated by Sara in her earlier testimony.

Regardless of this positive facet, it was found that referential transferability does not occur without some negative consequences. Probably the most obvious relates to how plain and simple transference of political categories can prevent people from crafting their own understandings of politically related concepts as experienced in New Zealand. Indeed, fieldwork of this research reveals that most of the time, transferring political inventories serves the purpose of operating socially, so once a number of referential categories have been successfully transposed, further exploration of the New Zealand political arena is less likely to occur.

For instance, when a female participant referred to the Mexican Congress and the New Zealand Parliament in terms of two institutions “baking the same cake with a different recipe”, she acknowledged that differences between systems were not her concern. “In the end what is important is the cake” she mentioned shortly afterwards. “Moreover if we consider that people don’t care much about processes but outcomes” she later continued. “I learnt what I need to know about the subject in Mexico and I am not going to do it again” she concluded.

The level of self-confidence embedded in these comments makes one wonder about the types and dimensions of political knowledge countries expect newcomers to absorb. This participant is indeed a politically educated person with a clear notion of political structures and procedures. In fact, her recipe analogy is clear and adequate considering the type of political information she requires to function socially and respond to the challenges posited by contact with the state. Moreover, as she later observes in the conversation, it would be difficult to know if all New Zealanders “know by heart”, as she allegedly does, the details surrounding legislative functions and procedures within their semiotic community.

But what is probably more important in this testimony is the open acknowledgement that detailed political information regarding the new country is not relevant, and that the construction of inferences based in one’s semiotic repertoire is enough to make sense of the New Zealand political arena. Stories collected in the field consistently revealed that, most of the time, people prefer to think about politics using unaltered transferred references that are not always a good match between systems. For instance, it was found that by simply transferring the geographical distribution of local powers in Mexico, a number of participants believe they inhabit a Federal system with states, governors and even municipalities. This transference reaches beyond the simple nomenclatural imprecisions explored in an early testimony and enters the more complex world of transposed cultural meaning.

Indeed, symbols such as a president, a governor or a legislator are embedded with multiple meanings beyond their mere semantic connotations. What one understands, assumes and expects from such constructs is the product of shared understandings embedded in long time contextual processes of forging intelligibility. From this perspective the transference of a referential category does not occur in a vacuum and, as constantly results in a series of misleading conceptions and harsh judgements about the fundamental role of the state.

Within participants’ stories lies a rich inventory of such types of misconceptions, all product of the transfer of references in its purest form. They touch on subjects as delicate as political representation, corruption, taxation, public services and the welfare system. Although they can vary from case to case, it is worth noting that they are overwhelmingly present in all stories, even those of the most politically experienced. In the end they all reveal two sides of referential transferability. One proves to be valuable and almost inevitable to the political acculturative experience, providing it with

core information crucial to shaping a basic picture of the New Zealand politics. The other, less optimistic, prevent people from gathering further political information and can mislead their interactions with the state.

### *Transferring Positions*

People may grasp the meaning of a reference symbol such as voting, public office, or legislative power without developing any sort of special bond with it. But there are certain aspects of the political parade that can be perceived as important enough to shape emotional bonds and therefore posit significant meanings upon them. Such special meanings are structured in the shape of a position that people hold towards that symbol. For instance, individuals who openly identify themselves to be at the extremes of a right or left oriented ideology, usually –although not always- reveal a set commonly shared positions developed around topics such as abortion, the economy or homosexuality. In other words, such a cluster of symbols is relevant enough to take specific stances on which strong conceptions and emotional ties are articulated. In this context, positions can be conceived as presupposed sets of preferences that individuals produce towards state constructs, as originally experienced in the semiotic community. To put it simply, they are meanings attached to political symbols that are considered to be relevant.

Interestingly, when applying the strict categories that distinguish left and right political ideologies, it is plausible to state that, broadly speaking, most participants do not seem to bear a particularly well-rounded political ideology. In fact, most of the time they seem to struggle whenever applying this commonly known taxonomy to their semiotic frameworks. It is unclear though whether such uncertainty was grounded on the lack of interest in politics that characterise the average participant, or on the limited contact with clear-cut political ideologies that characterised Mexican political culture for decades (Garrido, 2005). Following this line, many participants' positions revealed more exposure to a commonly shared nationalistic discourse than adherence to any of the classifications traditional employed in mainstream political science<sup>8</sup>.

A well-condensed example of such nationalistic discourse can be found in this paper's opening testimony where Alejandro successfully synthesises what he considers to be core principles upon which governments should be designed. Based on the semiotic anthropological tradition, I have previously referred to such discourses in terms of a political mythology, a world of heroes, battles and enemies through which an idea of the state and its political system has been presented to the eyes of many Mexicans. It is clear that Alejandro's remarks could hardly be understood outside such mythology. Similarly, several components of this nationalistic arrangement have shaped some of the political opinions held by members of the Mexican community in New Zealand. This collage of fragments from different participants' stories

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<sup>8</sup> Here I refer to the traditional Western classification of political ideologies along the lines of right and left oriented citizens. For further information regarding the connections between semiotics and the formation of political ideology see Voloshinov (1930); Merelman (1969) and Noth (2004).

illustrates this proposition:

The government has the obligation to provide free education at all levels. I simply don't get why in New Zealand politicians cannot understand that simple principle. In Mexico...

Sometimes I feel like there is not a clear division between state and religion in New Zealand. I am not sure but someone told me the government is funding religious schools. That it is totally wrong. In Mexico...

Privatisation is always a bad idea, I am not sure what they want to privatize here but it is obvious that there should be a principle protecting what belong to all kiwis. In Mexico...

These fragments reveal how in shaping understanding of New Zealand politics, people can capitalise on previously held positions that were developed in their country of origin. The ellipses, intentionally posited at the end of each sentence, highlight the connections between past and present. Of course they are also there for reasons of economy since each and every one of the remaining words leads to long and detailed explanations that are embedded in the Mexican political cultural tradition. To further illustrate this proposition let us take a look at the complete version of the third testimony:

Privatisation is always a bad idea, I am not sure what they want to privatise here but it is obvious that there should be a principle protecting what belong to all kiwis. In Mexico we needed to suffer many years of exploitation and fight many battles to understand that. New Zealand does not have so much history so they don't have these kinds of memories. Nonetheless, I think they have too much to lose if they follow this path. I know that the Mexican government is now trying to privatise PEMEX [the national oil producer] but let's face that is not going to happen, Mexicans would never allow such a thing, kiwis should be more like us.

A simple taxonomy of this testimony reveals clear transference of meaning based on accumulated experience with politics which is drawn upon to form an opinion of the issue of privatisation. Regardless of the differences between contexts and the acknowledged lack of information on the situation in New Zealand, the meaning given to the term privatisation is strong enough to provide a beacon of light through which a response is articulated. Privatisation thus, is abstractly considered in its symbolic terms as an instrument of unfairness and a vehicle for inequality and exploitation.

But not all positions flowing from this mythology are posited upon clear ideological structures. As observed in the fieldwork, there are also strong meanings attached even to mere components of the democratic process. Such is the case of the symbolic meaning attached to the idea of re-election. Here, it is worth noting that to the average participant, the referential transferences regarding the notion of a Presidential system to the New Zealand context

results in a series of misconceptions regarding the Westminster Parliamentary System. Mexican migrants rarely distinguish between the process of electing a President and a Prime Minister. From this perspective, they interpret the constant stay in office of a Prime Minister after an election not as a party victory, but as a President being re-elected.

As a political symbol, the re-election of a President is probably one of the most controversial items in the semiotic repertoire of many Mexicans (Barbadillo, 2009). This is because, since the end of the Mexican Revolution, the principle of non re-election has been officially articulated in Mexican political discourse as a symbol of justice –the only way to prevent presidents from becoming dictators. Indeed, the origins of the Mexican Revolution can be synthesised in its more widely known slogan *sufragio efectivo no reelección* (effective suffrage, no re-election). Until recently, all governmental communications in Mexico –ranging from internal memos to public written statements and even bank notes- were embossed with this phrase. In this context, observing what is perceived as the recurrent re-election of the person in charge of the executive power was most of the times received harshly by participants.

But it would be absurd to think that all transferred positions are embedded in a commonly held nationalistic discourse. Indeed, as previously mentioned, at the turn of the century Mexico started a democratic transition over which new political symbols have started to emerge, such is the case of topics such as: same-sex marriage, indigenous rights, gender equality and human rights. Evidence of this research shows how exposure to these newly encountered symbols either directly in Mexico or through transnational practices has also affected the meaning-making process by means of transposed positions. I will attempt to illustrate this through the following new set of story fragments from different narratives:

I don't know exactly about their [Maori] rights but for sure I know that the government is doing a good job. I have always being in favour of indigenous rights because in Mexico our indigenous people are constantly being mistreated and they have literally no rights.

I don't feel totally comfortable with the idea of two guys getting married to each other. I don't know much about the topic here but in Mexico, at least in my hometown, we don't believe in this kind of nonsense.

Well, I don't know about that here, but let's face it in Mexico this idea of human rights has served the purpose of protecting thieves and murderers. In my opinion human rights are meant to be for humans not for rats.

All of the above reveal the use of transposed positions flowing from embodied practices with the Mexican state. Different from previous cases, these positions were far less cohesive in participants' stories. Indeed people proved to hold radically different opinions over specific subjects that were not bounded by nationalistic ties. Such heterogeneity does not detach these positions from their cultural character. As already mentioned, a semiotic conception of culture and

politics does not necessarily reflect the existence of a group of identically minded individuals. From this perspective, the genesis of all these testimonies can be traced to a series of more current political discourses that feed Mexican political culture with new streams. Although some of these claims may indeed find parallels in the New Zealand political context, they were all crafted almost exclusively in the context of a radically different political arena. Probably the best example to illustrate this is the statement talking about human rights: the slogan “human rights are for humans not for rats” has been part of the contemporary campaign slogans of some Mexican politicians, allegedly as an expression of discontent with the constant release of convicted prisoners on the grounds of violation of their human rights. As such, regardless of the position people may take over the issue, this understanding makes sense exclusively within the confines of the original semiotic community. Its transposition to the New Zealand context is in that regard almost unintelligible<sup>9</sup>.

The final issue to discuss regarding positional transference refers to the fact that, similar to what it occurs with referential transferability, transposed information in its purest form frequently seems to take over participants’ understandings of New Zealand politics. Certainly, the vast majority of stories explored so far shows people acknowledging how little they know about the topics that they are about to explain in the New Zealand context. In this context, participants’ accounts of positional transference seem to follow a similar structure. They normally start with a couple of sentences regarding their position on an issue found in the New Zealand political arena. This is later followed by the acknowledged lack of contextual information surrounding the problem, and finally they compensate such shortage by purely transposing the contextual arrangements upon which the position was constructed in Mexico. Once again the well-oiled cognitive machine seems to work efficiently, providing answers to the challenges posited by the environment based on previously stored information<sup>10</sup>. Although this efficiency may look positive in the eyes of some, it is clear that it often has pernicious consequences to the process of political acculturation. Not wishing to repeat the points already made in the previous section, it is suffice to say that, in similar terms, the simple transposition of long held positions created in a different contextual arrangement prevents people from exploring further their new political arenas and regularly results in confusing and misleading conceptions of the state and its institutions.

## Stories of Confusion

When individuals are left in a new land and a different parallel with no proper tools to guide their orientation to it, they can rely on the position of the sun to distinguish between north and south. The sun then becomes a symbol, a beacon

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<sup>9</sup> Here is worth noting that the testimony was made in the context of discussing New Zealand prisons. According to this participant’s views when compared to Mexico, New Zealand “pampers” most prisoners by being worried about their “human rights”. This piece of information, he mentioned, was obtained through watching a TV News report on prisoners’ rehabilitation.

<sup>10</sup> Not only social and political interpretivists but also political psychologists have long argued in favour of understanding these types of previously stored constructs as being schematically organized (Sears, Huddie & Schaffer, 1985).

lighting the path. One becomes so reliant on that symbol that one will follow it regardless of the real direction one is taking. Moreover, since one may be unfamiliar with the new land and have no idea of what is to be found and where, let's say south, one may end up east or west without realizing one's true position. Something similar to this was found in participants' testimonies. Indeed, after years of living in a parliamentary, unitary system guided by values of equality and political participation, many interviewees believe that the New Zealand political system operates within the same concepts they know from the homeland. As already established, for many, New Zealand is seen as a republic, its regions as states and its mayors as governors. Similarly, testimonies revealed that some participants see no difference between the attributes of the New Zealand prime minister and the Mexican president. Legislative functions and procedures are regularly seen as "baking the same cake with a different recipe" and participants refer to Members of Parliament as Deputies or Senators. Such knowledge may not be accurate but it is perceived as enough to "operate socially" or "avoid being seen as stupid".

But while some explanations of New Zealand politics can remain dormant for years, evidence of this research shows that different interactions with the New Zealand social and political environments force individuals to confront others and face a state of confusion. Although confusion is normally seen in negative terms there is considerable theoretical justification to suggest that it plays an important role in the creation of meaning (D'Mello, Lehmand, Pekrun & Graesser, 2014). Following this train of thought, confusion can be seen as a state of mind created through the observed dissonance between understandings of a symbol. This normally leads to a lack of clarity about a possible course of action over which solutions need to be taken. Inside these newly crafted solutions lies a new set of understandings that, in turn will affect the composition of a semiotic framework.

From this perspective, confusion is a necessary product of acculturative practices. Without being confronted with perplexing situations, migrants – especially those with low levels of political interest- would rather remain tied to the comfort provided by transposed meanings in their purest forms. Confusion has thus been described as a motivational force affecting learning (Dweck, 1986, p.1040).

Additionally, an important feature of this notion of confusion is the fact that the production of understandings that it triggers, occurs in real life. In other words, it is meaning that come from embodied practices in social and political arenas. Within participants' stories lies a rich inventory that illustrates this type of confusion. However, it is worth noting that often these stories also show how the construction of meaning does not necessarily involve aligning one's thoughts with those shared in a new circle of intelligibility. In other words, confusion can force meaning production but such a process can result in a number of interpretations different than those contextually crafted by the average New Zealander. This section illustrates confusion and meaning-making through the examination of four stories from different participants' narratives.

In this first story, a participant from Otago expressed the confusion he

encountered after discovering that there was no ‘governor’ of his ‘state’ who could help him solve an issue with his landlord:

I remember that once, we had a problem with our landlord and we wanted to send a letter to the Governor of Otago asking for his help, however we were shocked when I found out that there was no such governor. We didn’t want to go to the council because in Mexico that is a pretty minor office in comparison to the governor, a governor can solve problems, a council I am not so sure. In the end we went to the bloody council but they told us that that was a private matter and there was nothing they could do to help. It was a lesson to learn how things work in New Zealand.

Beyond the obvious simple nomenclatural dissonance, this story reveals a degree of confusion over what the state should be and how it should operate. Based on culturally given understandings this participant thinks of politicians, especially governors, as omnipotent mediators able to solve all sorts of problems<sup>11</sup>. Although the paternalistic nature of such views has been explained in previous sections it is worth adding that Mexican political sociologists and anthropologists have previously described the search for this sort of intermediaries, especially at the local level, as “expressions of the magical and meaningful aspects of the power of the state” (Nuijten, 2003, p.3). As such, different than in New Zealand where politicians at the local level may be seen as accessible to citizens, this participant thinks about governors not in terms of approachable representatives but of people occupying a high position in a hierarchy of power. It is in this context that he minimises the role of local councils (thought to be municipalities) based on the strict observance of governmental roles and positions existing in his community of origin. Put it differently, what he needs is not someone approachable but someone imagined as powerful.

Once he is aware of the discrepancies between systems he is utterly confused, even “shocked”. Moreover, he is uncertain about a suitable course of action. In a single moment, a simple stimulus originated in necessity disrupts the imaginary structural arrangement of the political world. An expected reality has turned out differently and the predicted responses to it are no longer valid. Interestingly there is some sort of bittersweet ending to this story, where the participant acknowledged having gained an understanding of “how things work in New Zealand”; nonetheless he is not totally convinced about the effectiveness of the system in solving a problem that was private in nature.

But not all stories of confusion depart from interaction with the New Zealand state and its forms. In this second story a male participant tells how, when discussing the issue of same-sex marriage with his “kiwi team mates” he got utterly confused by the response they had to his comments:

There were six of us and we were mucking around in the changing room

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<sup>11</sup> Lomnitz (1995; 1999) makes a compelling argument about the construction of structures of brokerage in Mexico by linking them to historically rooted compositions of the relationships between peasants, landlords and the Mexican state.

when someone started talking about this idea of gays getting married. As a Mexican guy my reaction was start making a couple of jocks and play with some albuces (jokes involving double meaning), the kind of things we do in Mexico to make fun of gay guys. But my mates went ballistic about my comments, told me that they were unacceptable and even accused me of being some sort of a bully. Honestly it was super awkward because I didn't know what to do... I think I will never feel totally comfortable with the idea of two dudes getting married, but now I know that there are ways of being politically correct when expressing an opinion about same sex-marriages.

Once again, live experience in the social world creates a state of confusion, resulting in the crafting of new understanding. In this case, understanding is not posited upon a specific political challenge but upon the correct way of expressing an idea about it. Similar to the previous story, the encountered dissonance between social reality in both worlds results in a new way of seeing how New Zealanders deal with social issues that affect their political context. Also, in a similar way this participant expressed that his original notion of the issue –in this case same-sex marriage- remains mostly stable, nonetheless he acknowledges having learnt an acculturative lesson from the experience.

But some of the symbolic manipulations that the mind exercises to adapt its structures to a new symbolically arranged political context come with the crafting of less positive understandings. Indeed it was not rare to find stories with crude negative meanings resulting from the perceived discrepancy across systems. For instance, in this next story a female participant storms into his recently elected MP's office demanding the provision of free school uniforms for her children in exchange for the vote given to him as a candidate:

I visited my local MP's office to try to get some assistance as I used to do in Mexico. But after many visits it was clear that these guys are more interested in organising petitions to save birds than in working for the electorate. I voted for the guy and what do I get in return? Nothing, not even what is fair to everyone.

Based on her accumulated experience in Mexico, this participant finds it unacceptable that an elected Member of Parliament he supported with her vote was unable to reciprocate by helping her obtain something she considers to be fair. To her this is more than clientelist practice but a relevant social issue. Earlier in the conversation she expressed harsh comments about the high prices parents need to pay for school uniforms in New Zealand: “with a tight budget and more than one child it is almost impossible to pay one hundred dollars just for a school sweater” she mentioned. It is in this context that she made the decision to visit her MP's office to ask for help.

Again it is important to say that, for decades, deputies at the local and federal levels in Mexico have traditionally exchanged goods and services as part of clientelist practices surrounding electoral campaigns. In this regard, the delivery of school uniforms and materials is common practice in several Mexican states. In fact, in many cases deputies have been provided with permanent offices in

their constituencies where these practices have since been turned into a permanent arrangements –disguised in the form of public brokerage- between voters and elected officials. Later in her story this participant revealed that when living in Mexico she regularly looked for this kind of ‘apoyo’ (supporting help) whenever she knew it was available.

It is following that logic that she decided to follow in the footsteps of the procedure she knows. But in this case something different happens since the MP’s office refuses to give her what she considers to be morally hers. Confusion arrives and a new understanding of the political system is crafted. However, this time it is not a positive one. On the contrary, based on embodied practices and transposed meaning she condemns and disregards a system she considers to be unfair and inefficient, a system concentrated on “organising petitions to save birds” and not on what she considers to be the real demands of the electorate. Here, fairness is understood in terms of the historical reasons that gave birth to the practice of clientelist mediation in Mexico and not to the contextual elements on which parliamentary practices were founded in New Zealand.

But transposing culturally acquired symbols can lead to confusion, not only from the symbol itself but from the position people occupy in relation to it. Moving in crescendo this final story from a young mother living in Auckland with her two daughters and her extended family seem to be a vivid example of the confusion regarding such positions:

I was in the back seat of the car with my one year old daughter; we did not have a proper chair for her so she was sitting in my lap. My brother-in-law was driving. All of a sudden a police car pulled us over and two police officers asked for my brother-in-law’s driver’s licence. He did not have one but he had been in that situation before and he knew what to do. So instead of handing over a license he handed over his Mexican electoral ID because it was in Spanish and the police officer could not know if it was a drivers’ license. But these guys were cheeky so they started asking about the word electoral which is similar in Spanish and in English. So we got caught and they issued a ticket for 600 dollars, for the lack of proper chair and for lying to the police. I found that extremely abusive and unfair. I really believe that the New Zealand government is abusive to its citizens. In Mexico I would have never received such an expensive ticket for something that stupid. Moreover, in Mexico police officers have a real sense of social justice and you can bargain with them according to your situation. Here it is just rubbish.

Law does no more than symbolically sanction the relationships of power between individuals and the state (Edelman, 1967; Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu et al. 1994). Nonetheless, such relationships operate socially through concrete contextual arrangements pertaining to each semiotic community, its meanings and dynamics. Through inculcation and practice, relationships become embedded in peoples’ minds and their reproduction is key to the preservation of political order. Stability and continuity are achieved through the symbolism of authority as embedded in peoples’ semiotic inventories. These do not only contain the meaning assigned to a symbol but the positions and reactions

considered to be valid within the relationship. Such validation occurs within the limits of intelligibility that is granted by the semiotic community. In this context, actions, thoughts or feelings that make sense within a society, may only be intelligible within the confines of the community.

The narrative of this young mother seems consistent with this proposition. In places where the law is not always on the side of the person, a bribe can become a symbol of transactional nature guiding the relationships between individuals and the state. In this context the ‘illegality’ of certain actions may remain negative in peoples’ eyes but understandable within the community as a means of interaction with the state. In time, continued practices lead to the development of codes guiding these relationships, thus limits are established to guide the degree of unfairness considered to be acceptable by individuals – how much it is expected one should pay every time someone gets pulled over by a police car, is a good example. Here the mother is incapable of understanding the associational relationship between an action and its consequence in New Zealand. Such misunderstanding occurs through the transposition of a semiotic framework that is deeply rooted in her mind.

The dissonance created by such simple transference is encountered with confusion and anger. The shaping of a new understanding is thus based not on the act of transgression of the norm per se, but on what is perceived as an excessive punishment and a diminishment of her capacity to negotiate what is considered to be “fair” treatment. In a nutshell, such cognitive arrangement reveals a particular way of conceptualising the position between the individual and the state. Although such a position may be condemnable for some, it is understood within the limits of a community where similar practices are sometimes the only option to survive under a corrupt regime. Transposition to New Zealand reality perplexes the mother who concludes then that the New Zealand system is abusive to its citizens.

The extent to which the transferred meaning leads participants to confusion, varies greatly between stories. However, it is plausible to say that a constant struggle to understand the present based on culturally acquired frameworks seems clear in most participants’ testimonies. In this context, a continuous process of concession and negotiation between the past and the present takes place, leading to a decisive moment in the political acculturative process of individuals; that being the more integral reconstruction of the semiotic framework used to interpret politics in the mind of individuals.

### Stories of Construction

The resulting effects of transposition and confusion lead to the construction of a new semiotic framework through which politics are interpreted. From a semiotic point of view, cultural frameworks are created in the interaction among meanings that come from previous semiotic processes, and the creative interpretation through which such meanings are incorporated, used, and at times, strategically manipulated by subjects in continual confrontation with living practice (Vestel, 2009; Holland & Leander, 2004). Living transnational

lives in a new country logically results in the multiplication of the points of entry that characterise such a process. As such it relies on countless negotiations between the old and the new, the meaningful and the irrelevant and what one understands and what others do not<sup>12</sup>.

As participants' stories reveal, this is far from being a 'one in a lifetime' type of process. Instead it is a never-ending quest to synthesise different sets of meanings in order to comprehend political phenomena. The product of such endless cultural negotiations is a hybrid semiotic framework; an intricate amalgamation of culturally acquired elements based on live experience and accumulated knowledge. For instance, when thinking about the processes undertaken to create such a framework, a participant I will refer to as Ramón observed:

It is like a patch quilt with contending parts of my Mexican me and parts of my New Zealand me. Obviously my Mexican me normally wins, especially since understanding these kiwis is far from easy. But with time and after understanding some things I can say I started sewing some kiwi patches to my quilt as well.

During the past couple of decades there has been an intense academic debate in the social sciences on the subject of hybridity<sup>13</sup>. In general terms, hybridisation has been described as "the processes through which cultural forms become separated from already existing practices and recombine with new forms into new expressions, identities and practices" (Vestel, 2009, p.466). Such an agreed description seems to fit perfectly the above mentioned patchwork-quilt analogy. To Ramón, moving into a new political system has resulted in contact with different understandings of politics through which old understandings are reformulated. This does not mean that all parts of his semiotic repertoire have radically changed. Indeed, as he clearly acknowledges during this intricate process, his "old me" frequently wins. But within his words there is also the open recognition that time and experience have also helped him attach new pieces to his semiotic framework.

Building on Ramón's analogy it is possible to state that every participant of this thesis has his or her own quilt with intertwined transferred and transmuted patches carefully arranged in such a way that uncertainty over the political world is reduced. These arrangements of course will vary greatly according to participants' individuals' motivations to understand politics, the deployment of acculturative strategies, and the positions and trajectories occupied in two different social and political contexts. In this regard, while some participants' quilts are more homogeneous in terms of their transferred patches –a Mexican oriented quilt, one could say- others display more marbled patterns revealing numerous syntheses of meanings.

Despite the multiple outcomes that such processes can provide, evidence of this research shows how many of them are still bound by old and new forms of group intelligibility. Here commonly shared nationalistic understandings

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<sup>12</sup> For comprehensive analysis of transnational life on members of the Mexican community in New Zealand see Merelo (2016).

<sup>13</sup> See for instance Garcia-Canclini (2001), Vestel (2009) and Linger (2005).

embedded in the Mexican political mythology such as re-election, the secular character of the state, free education, land tenure, privatisation of public assets and many others already mentioned in previous sections seem to remain almost indelible. Following Ramon's analogy, these types of meanings seem to be very well sewn patches that are extremely difficult to remove from most participants' quilts.

But just as some meanings seem non-negotiable, others are indeed reconstructed in the presence of a new political system. Hybridisation as a semiotic practice therefore occurs on the edge between cultural reproduction and recomposition. This is because the process necessarily requires entangled forces to pull in opposite directions. Several of the stories explored so far illustrate this struggle. They are examples of a number of interpretations created through the interaction between critical events and nets of signification. The results have not always been as positive as some scholars in hybridity would expect, however. Indeed, examples such as the young mother in the car and the person demanding school uniforms based on clientelist conceptions of the state are unflattering examples –at least from the perspective of liberal democracy- of such synthesis. But that does not prevent a number of other cases illustrating such processes in more positive terms.

Certainly, moving to a new cultural setting has forced participants to come into contact with new political institutions and practices that they appreciate, cherish and embrace. Newly encountered political symbols such as transparency, collective decision making and accountability seem to have marked many participants; furthermore when such encounters have occurred after years of experience with a highly authoritarian regime such as Mexico's. For instance when talking about her life in New Zealand, this next participant mentioned:

There are many things I like about the way [political] things work in New Zealand. The fact that the council sends me different letters to inform me about things in my community is fantastic. That would have never happen in Mexico. Furthermore, the fact that they ask me my opinion about things such as bus-stops or building development in my area is amazing... Mexico is such a corrupt country that most of us would sometimes prefer to put some distance with it, but that is impossible. Our relationship is complicate and we love it and hate it at the same time.

That does not mean that everything about New Zealand is perfect. There are things I am never going to like. For instance the fact that there are no real public universities where I can send my children to have a free education is clearly a flaw in their system; the fact that they don't have good public transport like we have in Mexico is another one... I mean, I can go on and on but I think I made my point clear. This system has good and bad things just like any other system.

This passage offers a glimpse into an inventory of reflections regarding the Mexican and New Zealand political arenas. It is a complex collection of points about politics upon which a framework is reshaped. Change and ambivalence seem to be at the core of such exercise as the participant balances between two

worlds. Based on the recollection of past and present elements, new symbols are certainly processed, embraced and added to this participants' semiotic framework. In this line, these may be seen as successfully amalgamated new additions. But as is also seen, meaning-making can also result in new understandings crafted mostly from the perspective of what is considered to be correct or fair, based on embodied political practices in the Motherland. From this perspective cultural mediation is at the centre of cross-cultural hybridity.

I would like to close this section with a point that is rarely made about cultural hybridity. That is, the way in which this can reduce migrants' circles of intelligibility. Just like the understandings Mexican-Americans may have about politics could be confusing to the eye of either Mexicans or Americans, but not to the Mexican-American group as a whole, participants' stories reveal how constructing a new semiotic framework is not devoid from feelings of isolation and frustration resulting from their positions not being understood in either of the two cultures. It is in this context that this participant stated:

Thinking back in time, I realize I am no longer the person I used to be in Mexico. I see things differently now. I don't think I can call myself a New Zealander even though I have a New Zealand passport, but neither I reason like most Mexicans do these days. I am more sensitive to all the garbage I see in politics there, I don't allow myself to get tricked by politicians so easily. Is like being trapped in a whole new dimension.

Of course that is something that comes with consequences. Most people in Mexico don't want to get any type of criticism from people living abroad. They think we are judgmental and pretentious because we live a better life now. But here I cannot help but thinking that people look at me as a savage, a strange guy coming from the third world, and as such what I say does not make much sense to them either. So you end up like *la India Maria* [A Mexican television and film character] neither from here nor from there but from somewhere no one fully understands.

I found this testimony to be a clear example of the shrunk-intelligibility that characterises semiotic reconstruction. Such a paradox was commonly found in the stories of participants who regularly talked about how "knowing more" often results in "speaking less" since people can "get sensitive over things they don't understand because they haven't lived what I have". It is in this context that many of the harsh comments made about New Zealand and Mexico are circumscribed. To the average participant, New Zealanders are unable to understand many of the conceived positive features of the Mexican political culture because "they haven't suffered" or "struggled" in the way that Mexicans have. Similarly, Mexicans are conceived as unable to understand what "democracy really is" since they have not experienced the positive features of living in New Zealand. As mentioned by one participant: "all they [Mexicans] know is corruption and injustice".

Of course, this does not mean that participants' stories are unhappy ones since the main purpose of semiotic reconstruction is precisely to help people adapt to

their new settings. But that does not supersede the feelings of isolation and frustration that sometimes arise from the perceived impossibility of being understood in a new land that one is incapable of fully understanding.

## Conclusions

This paper began with the argument that culturally acquired political symbols are enduring constructs that guide Mexican migrants' interpretations of the New Zealand political world. The ethnographically oriented exploration of the field revealed the pervasive character of meanings which are, to some extent, facilitators to understanding New Zealand political institutions, practices and concepts. Although this proposition seems consistent with the underpinning assumptions of theories transferability (Black, 1987), treating pre-migratory political capital in terms of cultural frames embedded in cognitive structures reveals new dimensions to the study of political transferability.

By exploring cultural reconstruction as presented in participants' stories it is possible to appreciate how, broadly speaking, political acculturation operates according to a series of commonly observed stages. This is just a simple model constructed on the basis of people's experiences with new social and power structures; nonetheless it was found to be more than adequate to gain insights into new types of phenomena normally unexplored in the political acculturative literature. In enunciating the continuous transferences of meaning and elaborating on the rupture of an inherited culture it was possible to appreciate the complexity of meaning-making processes among migrants. As it has been shown, participants' stories of acculturation are intricate and heterogeneous. Yet they consistently show how people normally build new understandings of the world based on accumulated knowledge and experience. This process is mostly deductively subconscious and as such is linked to the reproduction of habitual practices. Here, the long held symbolic order reproduces itself in participant's accounts in order to protect them from harm and to guide their actions from the perspective of familiar grounds. What is assumed to be a shared political reality results in the transposition of old conceptions of the political world, capable of providing some operational understanding of politics, a safety net of political knowledge preventing people from making basic mistakes.

But as shown in this paper, migrants are not just recorders and reproducers of meanings but active builders of their own worlds. Moreover, it demonstrated how live experiences within a social and political context confront people with their misconceptions and force them to constantly reshape their semiotic frameworks. The hybrid nature of cultural reconstruction proposed in this paper is not only in synchrony with similar studies undertaken in the other disciplines across the social sciences (e.g. Garcia-Canclini, 2001; Ewing, 2004; Friedman, 1999) but with those held by some scholars arguing in favour of understand hybridity as a product of semiotic practices (e.g. Ipsen, 2001; Vestel, 2009). From this perspective hybridization is understood as a process through which meanings separate and recombine into new sets of understandings of the social world in general and politics in particular. In this regard, the political worlds constructed are varied and sometimes contradictory. Moreover, as

constantly argued along this article they are not necessarily positive accounts of reality, at least not in terms of what is understood by native populations. They are true products of amalgamation and negotiation between concepts, resulting in unique ways of seeing politics.

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