Comparing Migration and Development Policy in Morocco and Mexico

[essay based on Introduction of Creative State: Forty Years of Migration and Development Policy in Morocco and Mexico (Cornell UP 2010)—
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In late August of 1989, a Spanish immigration officer observed the crush of Moroccans returning to Europe by ferry from Tangier at the end of their summer vacations. “Morocco is becoming to Spain what Mexico is to the United States,” he complained (qtd. in Riding 1989). For decades, Moroccan migrants had pushed on through to Europe’s wealthier countries, but as Spain’s economy started to expand, Moroccans began to stay and fill the growing demand for cheap labor. They took the same kinds of menial jobs in Spain’s fields, factories, restaurants, and homes that they had worked in for more than a generation in France, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands. These jobs were strikingly similar to the low wage jobs, an ocean away, which Mexicans crossed into the United States to fill. Morocco added Spain to the list of countries to which it could export its unemployed youth and also, when possible, the men that made up the political opposition that mounted occasional but serious threats to Morocco’s fragile monarchy. Meanwhile, Mexico continued to let millions of its unemployed and underemployed seep north past its border, just as it had for over twenty years, its autocratic one-party government quietly grateful for the economic relief as the country lurched from crisis to crisis.

“We’re separated by water, but people still keep coming,” noted the same Spanish immigration officer as he surveyed the narrow Strait of Gibraltar. In response to increased immigration, Spain had built higher walls around its outposts, Melilla and Ceuta, in Morocco, and had drawn on the array of policies its European counterparts had been honing for years to impose restrictive immigration controls. Likewise, the United States steadily tightened its immigration policy, launched increasingly virulent raids, and began erecting a fortress wall in San Diego that would, for the next two decades, advance doggedly toward the east coast, progressively girdling the belly of the continent.

But people kept coming. As they came, they began to transform the places that they had left as well as those to which they had traveled. The same longing that had propelled them across increasingly dangerous borders provided them with the motivation, political power, and resources to change the places they left behind. “Each year, I traveled back with a van filled with things for the poor,” remembered a Moroccan migrant I spoke with over a decade later, in 2000. “It never erased my memory of need, of not having shoes, of going to bed hungry. But I built my house and my parents’ house,
and this year, I am bringing back supplies for the clinic we opened in my village three
years ago” (Interview, Tangier, July 2000). His sentiments were echoed in the reflections
a Mexican migrant shared with me at a border crossing halfway across the globe, in San
Diego. “I went for three years without seeing my children; I was gone when my eldest
sister died in childbirth. That absence still sits heavy in my heart,” he said, “but now,
there is a sign with my name on it at the entrance to the road that I helped pave. It
connects my town to the hospital an hour away” (Interview, San Diego, August 1999).

This essay reviews the political story of how migrants from Morocco and Mexico
changed the communities they had left, and how their initiatives, small and bold, would
ultimately transform the nations from which they had emigrated. Accounts of the ways
migrants have changed their communities of origin for the better have become
widespread; in their most celebratory versions, migrants’ philanthropic efforts at
community development offer reassuring confirmation that small is indeed beautiful and
that economic change can occur far outside the reach of the state. These laudatory
portrayals omit a central protagonist. They minimize, when not completely obscuring, the
role of governments in shaping the impact that migrants’ efforts to improve the lives of
their families have on their communities and more broadly, on their nation. However,
neither was the clinic in the mountain village in Morocco built nor was the road paved
between the isolated Mexican town and the modern hospital without government support.
In both cases, government policies mediated migrant investment in their communities of
origin: in Morocco, government guidelines for medical equipment and the nursing staff it
provided turned the small concrete room into a working health center. In Mexico,
municipal officials with maps of the potential roads in hand sought out migrants and
asked them to raise funds for the project, with the promise that any road paved with
migrant dollars would serve as a permanent symbol of their strong commitment to their
communities, despite the border that kept them far from home.

This essay rehabilitates the place of the state in the narrative about the
relationship between migration and development. It argues that the impact that migrants
had on the welfare of their communities and countries of origin grew directly out of their
involvement with the very governments that had -- discreetly in the case of Mexico,
enthusiastically in that of Morocco -- encouraged their departure while actively neglecting the development of the areas they came from.

Whether the migrants of Morocco and Mexico elbowed their way into everyday practices of governing or whether the governments of those countries sought out their counsel, their exchanges would rework the patterns of state interaction with migrants and their communities of origin. As migrants and state bureaucrats worked together, they came up with new ways for migrants to contribute to development and new ways for the state to support their initiatives. Over time, the engagement between migrants and government bureaucrats became so dense that it began to blur the line between state and society. But it also grew so vital that it transformed the state in this context from a solid structure into a verb. From being a set of agencies and fixed policies, the state dissolved into fluid practices that both migrants and state actors renegotiated and reinterpreted as they went along. Out of the engagement between migrants and their states emerged policies, striking in their creativity, which tied emigration to development. Over time, these policies would revolutionize the way the governments of Morocco and Mexico perceived migration, crafted their national economic development plans, and reacted to migrant petitions for a greater political voice.

**The Paradox of Success**

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the impact of emigration on the places migrants left behind had begun to catch the attention of policy makers around the world, and the experiences of Morocco and Mexico in this domain acquired salience overnight. Conversations about globalization and development that had formerly focused on trade, foreign direct investment, and multinational production began to appraise international migration – the movement of people across borders – as a key determinant of local and national development. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the increased vigilance of governments that strove to track formal and, especially, informal flows of money made remittances newly visible. It became clear that migrant remittances worldwide had risen to stratospheric levels, mushrooming from an estimated $11 billion in 1975 to over $150 billion in 2004— a sum already almost triple the amount of international development aid and one that would, in a couple of years, surpass even
foreign direct investment (Chami 2005; International Monetary Fund 2005). For many developing countries, migrant remittances emerged as an indispensable source of capital, a flow of cash that could literally make or break their economic fortunes.

Over and above these infusions of hard currency, international migration had provided sending countries with other critical factors for economic development. Migration had sparked knowledge and learning transfer across national boundaries, it had woven social networks that served as infrastructure for international production and exchange and laid the foundation for powerful political lobbies that influenced the policies of both the countries that migrants had left and those they adopted as their new home. Through countless small transfers of savings and innumerable social exchanges, migrants were transforming the places they had left in fundamental and irrevocable ways. Community by community, they were changing their countries, redefining nationhood itself, and opening new avenues for economic development.

The sheer magnitude of migration’s effect on economic development made it impossible to ignore, and governments of migrant sending countries around the world began searching for ways to capitalize on it for economic growth. As they cast about for policy solutions, many looked to the experience of a handful of nations that already had long-standing policies that tied migration to development. Morocco and Mexico featured prominently as sources of “best practice” in this area. In 2001, they ranked as two of the top recipients of remittances in the world, with Mexico placing second behind India and Morocco ranking a decent fourth behind the Philippines. But the impact of emigration on the national development of both countries had less to do with the volume of those financial flows, or the flows of ideas and networks that accompanied them, than with the way both governments engaged with those resources and with the migrants that produced them. The governments of both countries had policies to forge a relationship between the emigration of low-skilled workers and economic development that were effective and well established, some of which had already been functioning successfully for decades.

Morocco pioneered financial institutions and services that met the needs of large numbers of emigrants with no previous exposure to banking and formal money transfer services. The financial tools it created, administered through a state-controlled bank, the Banque Centrale Populaire, allowed migrants to send money home, to save and invest,
while at the same time making remittances available to the government for monumental national development projects, ranging from dams to industrial parks. The Moroccan government also engaged in collaborations with migrants and their communities of origin to design better and cheaper systems to deliver basic infrastructure, like roads and electricity, to rural areas; once supplied with services that linked them to the rest of Morocco, formerly isolated villages were brought into the national economy. The Moroccan government complemented these economic and structural interventions with initiatives to support emigrants’ participation in the cultural and political life of their country of origin and their integration into their adopted homes: it established several agencies, including a royal foundation and a ministerial office for emigrants, which nurtured emigrants’ sense of belonging to their homeland.

In Mexico, after a couple of false starts, the government launched a major national program to encourage emigrant investment in communities of origin. The program matched migrant contributions to the provision of basic services, ranging from sewage to drug rehabilitation clinics to the beautification of village squares, with government monies; the program not only led to the development of migrants’ communities of origin, it supported organizing efforts by migrants on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. The Mexican government also expanded and refined its consular services to make them among the most attentive in the world: their offerings spanned everything from health counseling to legal advocacy to cultural and language programs for children. It opened new channels for migrants to exercise political influence in Mexico and in the United States: it afford Mexicans abroad the ability to vote in Mexican elections and created a representative body for migrants so that they could help to shape those policies, on both sides of the border, which affected their lives and the development of their communities.

Despite their different emphases, the policies of Morocco and Mexico shared two important characteristics that made them stand out among attempts worldwide to link emigration and development. First, they were innovative in their design. They embodied groundbreaking new ways of drawing the resources generated by emigrants into national economic development. In particular, both governments’ policies involved migrants, either directly or indirectly, in economic development planning, especially in the
envisioning of new possibilities for – and even new definitions of – economic transformation. Second, the policies were dynamic. Less like tools, they were more like expressions of changing patterns of interaction. They improved over time as the engagement between migrants and government deepened. They manifested the new ways of relating that migrants and government bureaucrats discovered and, as result, became more responsive to the specific and emerging needs that migrants felt as their experience of migration changed, and more attuned to the possibilities for development that migration represented.

Even as they evolved-- or rather, because they did --Moroccan and Mexican policies remained consistently innovative, sometimes exceptionally so, propelling government into new functions, extending it into unfamiliar geographic territory, and enlisting aspects of migration as slippery as cultural identity for political and economic ends. They also proved impossible to replicate. When governments new to policymaking in the field of migration and development mimicked Moroccan and Mexican policies, the results they saw were decidedly mixed. In the best cases, the reproductions were not as effective as they had been in their original settings, and on numerous occasions they turned out to be counterproductive, alienating emigrants and stunting economic growth, and had to be abandoned. Rarely tailored to the specific needs of these other economies and their emigrants, the borrowed templates often constrained the possibilities for positive transformation that migration could hold.

My project was to move beyond this problematic “best practice” approach to policy making that migrant sending countries seemed to be adopting as they eyed Moroccan and Mexican migration and development policy. Whereas a “best practice” approach congealed a broad, evolving, contextualized set of practices into a policy instrument, identified it as better than all the rest, and then applied that instrument indiscriminately in contexts that were very different from the place where it had emerged, I wanted to understand the processes by which governments made sense of migration and then designed policies to seize on the opportunities that it offered for economic transformation. More pointedly, I wanted to get to the bottom of how those processes had emerged in Morocco and Mexico decades before the potential of migration as a catalyst for economic development caught the attention of other governments, scholars, and
development institutions. Why—and more importantly, how—were their governments able to perceive the changes caused by out-migration, some of them very subtle and diffuse, and how were they able to translate those perceptions into innovative policies, often reframing their own role and mission in the process?

What I found was that, paradoxically, the Moroccan and Mexican policies emulated as models of excellence were never designed with a view to using migration for economic development, or at least not a version of economic development that included migrants and their communities in any meaningful way. Instead, they were initially devised to respond to domestic political crises. Both the Moroccan and Mexican governments dealt with migrants when doing so seemed likely to shore up their own—often shaky—political legitimacy. They engaged with migrants on an international level in order to strengthen their domestic hold on power. Furthermore, even though Morocco’s and Mexico’s policies fundamentally—even radically—redefined nationhood, development, and citizenship for both countries, the process of policy development was so iterative and improvisational that neither the governments nor their migrant constituencies ever predicted, much less intended, their outcomes.

I argue that it was precisely the indeterminacy surrounding their emergence that was the source of their originality. For the governments of Morocco and Mexico, the conceptual connection between migration and development became clear only when the policies to link them were already well established and being copied by other sending states. The question—how to link migration and development—and the answer—the policies that did so—arose in tandem. The welter of contradictory ideas and nascent understandings that permeated the process of policy development may have made it impossible for government planners, and the migrants they engaged with, to see where they were going, but it was also what allowed them to get there.

The Politics of Ambiguity

Rarely are the terms “creative” and “state” used in the same phrase. The state has generally been portrayed as a creaking behemoth badly in need of overhaul. The prescriptions for reform have focused on making sure the state fulfills its tasks with as little wastage as possible. Transparency, accountability, and efficiency have dominated as
catchphrases of the day, and efforts to refurbish dreary state bureaucracies have combined a free market–inspired drive to reduce the size of government with a bureaucrat’s obsession for standardizing the procedures that remain. Cultivating the ability of government to come up with new ways of doing things – to innovate – has almost never made it onto the reformers’ agenda. Instead, the handful of policies tapped as successes have been carefully scrutinized in order to identify why exactly they worked. An analytic scalpel has been taken to them and they have been meticulously dissected to pinpoint exactly which elements can be replicated in other settings. How the new policy instruments are invented, however, has received far less analysis, if any.

This tendency to overlook the process behind government innovations stems from an assumption that the political process by which novel ideas are embraced and fashioned into policy is too unpredictable to chart. Analyses of policy innovations characterize them as the product of random events or political maneuvers, with causal antecedents that are impossible to model: a bureaucrat serendipitously stumbles onto a new solution for an old problem (Tendler 1997); under political pressure from their constituents, legislators institute a policy that turns out, fortuitously, to be quite successful, although not at addressing the problem it was designed to target (March 1994); a political crisis on the scale of a war or national fiscal default unexpectedly comes to a head and forces a reluctant government to consider policy suggestions that it previously disregarded or actively suppressed, and even then, the approaches adopted are likely to have only a loose correspondence with the crisis that compelled their consideration (Schon 1971).

Ever since policy analysts began debunking the notion that the state followed any sort of linear or rational model in designing policy in the 1970s (Schon 1971; Cohen et al. 1972; Nakamura 1987), uncertainty and ambiguity have figured prominently in theories about policy development (Kingdon 1995; Feldman 1989). The cause of the ambiguity is the fact that there are as many takes on any given social problem as there are different actors, institutions, and political camps involved in policy making (Feldman 1989; Zaharaidis 2007). The ensuing confusion can rarely be remedied with additional data, especially if those data reflect only one particular worldview. The issue is not a lack of information but an abundance of viewpoints. The staggering multiplicity of
understandings envelop the policy making process in a morass so thick that identifying a single best policy option becomes impossible.

According to policy analysts, this ambiguity provides a platform, a wide-open stage, on which policy makers or social movements can push their agendas, and it is their political skill and the power they accrue, rather than rational choice or impartial analysis, which sways the outcome. How this political pressure manifests itself depends on the theory: institutional analysts tend to focus on bureaucracies and social rules, like laws and norms (Ostrom 2000, Powell and DiMaggio 1991); observers of coalitions and social movements stress the contingent relationships and identities that political actors form to advance their agendas (Jansen 1991; Marsh & Martin 2000, Skocpol 1992; Fantasia and Voss 2004); proponents of punctuated-equilibrium theories of policy making attend to intersections between channels of policy making and the way that political pressure applied at those junctions makes governments susceptible to lurching policy shifts (True et al 2007). But there is broad consensus that shaping meaning in this ambiguous political field is the most potent means of applying pressure. “Decision making,” concludes March, “may in many ways be better conceived as a meaning factory than as an action factory” (1997: 23, qtd in Zaharaidis 2007:69).

And yet, despite the careful stratagems or social momentum behind meaning-making tactics, the policy outcome remains uncertain. Policies are the product of competing efforts at political persuasion, to be sure, but they are also the product of a haphazard, even chaotic, collision of events and actors. Who will win the struggle to author policy is always far from clear. Cohen, March and Olsen (1972) go so far as to call the decisions that go into policy making an expression of “organized anarchy” where different ideas, problems, and solutions are dumped into a proverbial “garbage can.” With those different elements jostling around in the can, policies are the product of solutions that actors opportunistically attach to problems, of viewpoints that interest groups muscle onto platforms where they can be aired, and, more prosaically, of policy makers finding work to justify their presence on the payroll.

Confronted with so many confounding variables, the meanings produced to push a given policy agenda tend to be derived retrospectively. They have been “read off” policies once they have already been instated. But policy innovations, because they -- by
definition -- represent a break from past practice, often cannot be traced backed to a well-worn set of meanings in this way. Consequently, they are represented as the product of a process that is especially opaque and random-- one that is hopelessly indecipherable. Narratives about policy innovation reach back only to the point in the policy development process where the conceptual building blocks for the new policies have already been clearly articulated and adopted by the relevant bureaucracies, and the practices they embody have already been well rehearsed, if not already formalized into a policy intervention. These stories start after the action is already over; they begin once the creative moment has already passed.

The experiences of Morocco and Mexico suggest that we need to pay attention to the murky, unruly ambiguity that is the prologue to policy innovation. Both countries demonstrate that far from being an institution resistant to change, where innovation is always unintentional, the state can be a remarkable site of creativity. They also show that to understand the state’s potential for creativity and to nurture it, we need to delve into the messy and disorienting confusion that envelops policy making and explore the processes through which state and non-state actors made sense of the conflicting, hazy, incomplete meanings that are found there. In Morocco and Mexico, ambiguity did not just provide the stage on which political power struggles were played out. It was not just the field in which competing constituencies jockeyed to advance well-defined agendas or pushed to get their policies adopted. Instead, ambiguity was the stuff of which policy innovations were made. The dislocation, the complexity, and the contradictions caused by large-scale migration swept away the meanings that the Moroccan and Mexican states had used to understand both migration and development, and desiccated the practices that they had used to govern the two dynamics. Out of the confusion that resulted, policy makers, migrants, and their communities drew the nascent concepts and practices needed to create new ways of engaging in the living present. The new policies were more than mere accidents of chance. They were leaps of imagination, completely unforeseeable and indeed, inconceivable until they came to be.

**Emigration and Interpretation**
The Moroccan and Mexican migration and development policies that other countries sought to imitate took forty years to reach the form in which they came to be viewed as “best practices.” Their stories began in 1963. That year the governments of Morocco and Mexico radically changed the policies that governed the emigration of their citizens. Morocco launched an ambitious program to export workers to European nations that were still rebuilding after World War II. Mexico, meanwhile, confronted the United States’ formal termination of a two decades-long guestworker arrangement through which hundreds of thousands of Mexicans had been hired to work in U.S. agriculture, and made a strategic decision to ignore the movement of people northward across the border, a movement that grew much larger without formal regulation. Moroccan and Mexican policymakers quickly found themselves acting in changing social and economic contexts molded by migration patterns that were new, constantly evolving, and massive. Migrant by migrant, community by community, both nations were being stretched across international borders. The four decades of heavy emigration that began in 1963 changed local and national economic activities and redefined prospects for economic growth: rural areas in both countries hemorrhaged residents and became increasingly desolate, while the fortunes of industries in Moroccan and Mexican urban centers became linked to the labor of migrants who toiled in the factories and fields of countries to the north, as they came to depend on the increasingly indispensable capital migrants sent home.

The number of Moroccans who crossed into Europe and Mexicans who went north to the United States in search of work or to join their families grew steadily during the second half of the twentieth century, and by 2000 at least 10 percent of both nations’ populations lived beyond their borders. For Morocco and Mexico, the economic impacts of labor migration were substantial: while it undeniably created rude dislocation in many sending areas, it also infused local and national economies with cash, skill, and social capital. In 2002, the 2.6 million Moroccans living outside the kingdom’s borders -- 20 percent of the active workforce -- sent home US$3.6 billion, gifting their country with a sum equivalent to a little under 10 percent of GDP (Fondation Hassan II, 2002; Office des Changes, 2002; INSEA 2001). It was by far the largest single source of Moroccan national income. A similar proportion of Mexicans living abroad, an estimated 8-12 million of the country’s 100 million citizens, sent home almost US$9 billion in 2001.
(Central Bank of Mexico, 2002; World Bank, 2002). While that amount represented a smaller slice of Mexico’s GDP, at only 1.5 percent, the flows of money across the border were highly concentrated, disproportionately benefiting 9 out of 32 sending states (Woodruff and Zenteno, 2001). For those 9 states, remittances represented close to 10 percent of GDP, almost as large as the proportion in Morocco (Woodruff and Zenteno, 2001).

While the financial benefits of migration buoyed the economies of Morocco and Mexico -- at the very least dampening the painful spikes in poverty caused by periodic economic crises -- emigration steadily eroded the foundations on which the political legitimacy of both governments rested. From almost the first day that Morocco began to send workers to Europe in 1963, emigrants circumvented the Moroccan government’s repressive strategies, designed to confine their existence in Europe to that of docile laborers, and resisted its efforts to control the communities they left behind. From the time Morocco secured its independence from France in 1957 until the late 1990s, it functioned as a constitutional monarchy in theory, and as an authoritarian sultanate in practice. The king, Hassan II, was considered to be the temporal and spiritual leader of the Moroccan people: the monarch appropriated broad legislative and executive powers, including the right to dissolve parliament at will and to issue binding royal decrees, and invoked his lineage, traced back, according to Moroccan tradition, to the Prophet Mohammed, to claim the role of “commander of the faithful” (amir al-mu’minnin), a religious leader whose person is considered sacred and who is above the secular norms of the constitution. Hassan II, whose reign from 1961 to 1999 covered most of the period considered in this study, ruled through a mix of concentration of powers, repression of the opposition, and manipulation of the parliament (Layachi 1998: 28). Nevertheless, so insecure was his hold on power that in 1974, the New York Times gave the sultan the tagline of “Never sure he’ll be king by nightfall.” Moroccan emigrants were cognizant of how shallow the roots of his legitimacy ran, especially in the rural regions they were from, and they called into question the political rhetoric of his unending and divine supremacy. They challenged, vociferously at times, the allegiance required of the king’s subjects, and the obedience the king demanded of them, regardless of where they resided. (Layachi 1999; Tozy 1999)
The Mexican government’s system of patronage, its decades-long tradition of doling out social benefits in exchange for political support, also suffered as migration, with the economic alternatives it offered, sapped both its appeal and its constituency. Until 2000, Mexico was governed through the comparatively benign dictatorship of a single political party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). In a profoundly corporatist system, the PRI had maintained dominance since its founding in 1929 through the cultivation of strategic alliances with key sectors of society, most critically organized labor, and the performance of regular, but largely symbolic, elections. The PRI functioned as a mammoth, hegemonic political machine. The voluble revolutionary rhetoric the party churned out to mask what were essentially clientelistic relationships rang increasingly false to emigrants who found that their labor grievances, their families, and their communities of origin were consistently neglected by their government (Middlebrook 1998; Roett 1993).

More threatening to both governments than the newly transgressive political identities among migrant workers and their communities were the new strategies of political resistance that migration inspired. Migrants backed their critiques of their governments with political organizing, adapted in many cases from labor mobilization on assembly lines in Europe and from civil rights struggles in the U.S. Moroccan workers staged rallies and street marches in the 1970s and 1980s in France and Belgium to protest their government’s harassment and brutalization of emigrant labor leaders, and used the language of human rights to press their cause. Mexican migrants demanded that their government pay them the same attention it extended to the Mexican-Americans it was courting as a potential lobby in the United States and, in the late 1980s, forged alliances with Mexico’s fledgling opposition parties to drive home the message that they would chip away at the PRI’s political dominance unless the party addressed their concerns about sub-par working conditions and the increasing hardships they faced in the U.S.

In addition to shaking up the political landscape, long-standing emigration also challenged social norms in Morocco and Mexico. New prospects for economic advancement that migrants enjoyed abroad up-ended class hierarchies and gender relations in contexts as intimate as the family and as broad as the nation. Emigration reconfigured individual and community aspirations in small towns where the only work
to be had was across a national border, but did so just as radically in large cities where it had more of an impact on the public imagination than it did on the urban demographic makeup. In Morocco and Mexico, emigration meant very different things to different people at different times, but it always meant something, something powerful, to everyone -- and more often than not, something alarming to the state.

Confronted with emerging political and economic realities which were anything but intelligible and always shifting, policy makers at various levels of government in both countries found themselves compelled to engage with migrants and their communities to try and make sense of the social and economic changes that migration had set in motion, if only to contain them. Migrants and their communities, striving to take advantage of the new possibilities that migration offered but also to cope with the new constraints it inevitably produced, engaged with the state in an attempt to compel it to address their changing needs. Sometimes they were reluctant participants in a conversation too important to ignore, but just as often as they were the initiators of the exchange, determined to get their governments to pay attention to the way migration was impacting their lives.

Initially, state and non-state actors brought perspectives to the conversations that were mutually incomprehensible. The cacophony of meanings produced ambiguity so acute that misunderstandings strained already tense exchanges to the breaking point. But this ambiguity was precisely the attribute that enabled the conversations to yield new insights: as participants struggled to understand what their interlocutors were saying, as they probed the slippages between the different understandings brought to the exchanges, as they reflected on the meanings that underpinned their own perceptions, they brought buried meanings to the surface. They made them explicit enough so that they could be spliced together in new ways, recombining them in unexpected hybrids that recycled old beliefs into concepts that were entirely new. The conversations that policy makers and migrants used to interpret their shifting contexts were at times collaborative, at times combative, and most often colored by mutual suspicion, but they always generated new meanings, gave rise to new identities, and forged new relationships.

To tolerate the intense but generative ambiguity that characterized their exchanges, policy makers and migrants depended on a certain quality of engagement
characterized by dense interactions and a deliberate attentiveness to the nascent meanings that participants attempted to articulate. This interaction, which I call interpretative engagement, produced the novel insights and connections that served as the basis for new patterns of state-society relations and the institutions that would come to be regarded as major policy innovations because of the way they linked migration to development. Less celebrated but more important is the fact that these policies also opened institutional spaces in which the state, migrants, and their communities could re-envision local and national development in an ongoing manner, and could produce new generations of conceptual and institutional breakthroughs. The policies made room for the state, migrants and their communities to continue re-inventing themselves, and to continue imagining previously unthinkable possibilities for local development and state support. Stated differently, Moroccan and Mexican policies provided shelter for on-going state creativity.

In this sense, the Moroccan and Mexican experiences with migration and development policy illustrate that policy innovations and the processes that generate them must be considered together. They show that when we sever policy from process, we obscure, with that trenchant gesture, the extent to which the effectiveness of a given policy flows from the way it supports the continuing creative process that gave rise to it. So critical was the practice of interpretation to the effectiveness of both countries’ migration and development policies that any time the spaces for it were closed, the policies atrophied to brittle structures, drying from the inside out until they were little more than empty husks. At that point, the policies invariably began to fail. Without a careful consideration of the relationship between both countries’ migration and development policies and the creative practices they supported, the policies’ success, as well as their occasional failure, remains incomprehensible, and appears as random and as unpredictable as processes of policy innovation are widely deemed to be.

Interpreting Innovation

Interpretation can be thought of as the process of establishing functional communication between two or more interlocutors who do not share the same language, the same practices, or the same experiences. It is the act of revealing and explaining
meanings that are familiar, and of developing new relationships to concepts that are foreign by conceiving them in light of an existing set of beliefs, judgments, or circumstances (Lakoff 1987). In this sense, it is the process of creating new meanings by exploring the distance between understandings, by mining the gaps between concepts expressed as misinterpretation, ambiguity, or even conflict, and discovering the possibilities for new understanding and imagination held in those spaces.

Increasingly, studies on creativity and on organizational innovation identify interpretation as central to the process through which new ideas are conceived and new products are imagined (Cook et al 1999; Orlikowski 2002; Nootebloom 2000; Lester and Piore 2004; Fonseca 2002; Amabile 1998). These studies use the analogy of interpretation as a “conversational process” to describe how it supports creativity (Fonseca 2002); although they refer both to actual speech and enacted practices, they characterize interpretation as a exchange among people and organizations with different backgrounds, areas of expertise, and cognitive frameworks who are trying to reach a common understanding about the possibilities and constraints offered by technology and the market for the development of a given product or practice (Cornelissen 2006; Kaltoft et al 2006; Sawyer 2007; Ganz 2009). Replete with distinct and often mutually unintelligible meanings, ambiguity becomes the defining feature of interpretive conversations (Fonseca 2002; Lester and Piore 2004). Likewise, the conversations are unpredictable, sometimes even unwieldy, in their form and in their duration, and in retrospect, participants may find themselves unable to explain why the conversations evolved as they did (Lester and Piore 2004). But it is precisely this ambiguity, this blurriness of meaning and direction, which makes the interpretive conversations generative. As participants engage with others who perceive opportunities where they see constraints, and who ascribe different implications to both, they borrow their interlocutors’ perspective and view the problem they understand themselves to be faced with from a different angle. In this sense, interpretation is can be thought of as a process of problem finding, as opposed to a process of problem solving (Weisberg 2006). Participants use the meanings they encounter in the conversation to cobble together a question that captures concerns they still cannot fully articulate, and it is through that exploratory, messy process of asking that an answer emerges. Creativity, be it individual
or collective, is thus the product of an ordinary process of thinking and interpretation that is extended to new meanings, new contexts, and new phenomena.

Morocco and Mexico produced generation after generation of policy innovation by engaging in just such a process of interpretation. In much the same way as innovators studied by organizational scholars, migrants and policymakers found themselves compelled to engage with one another about the significance of migration, the role of the state in development, and the boundaries of citizenship and sovereignty. The meanings that surfaced through interpretation allowed them to consider the dynamic phenomenon of migration from multiple angles, which, like Rorschach ink-blots, became a way of redefining the economic and political potential of migration and envisioning new partnerships between migrants and the state.

Thus, interpretive engagement, as defined here, is not negotiation. At its base, negotiation begins with the premise that the parties know what their position is, or can figure it out, and will then enter into rounds of bargaining in order to secure an outcome that is as close to their objectives as possible. However, in Morocco and Mexico, neither the state nor the migrants could articulate what they were seeking. It was only through their conversations that they were able to begin to define their needs and comprehend how migration was changing the political and economic spaces woven together by the movement of people. In negotiation, the goal is to reach an agreement between the parties involved; in interpretive engagement, the aim, if it can be articulated at all, changes along the way, and is often radically different toward the end of an engagement than at its beginning. Instead of reaching an agreement, interpretive engagement is driven by a pressing policy need to make sense of social changes and to discover what possibilities for action they offer. In Morocco and Mexico, the impetus was different for the governments who sought to control migrants than it was for the emigrants who sought to improve their lives, but the quest for understanding brought them together to interpret what migration meant and how to build on it for change, regardless of whether the change envisioned was national political consolidation or community development.

Interpretive engagement is also not the same as deliberative democracy. Broadly defined, deliberative democracy refers to the process of citizens engaging in reasoned debate over a public issue through clearly established procedures (Cohen 1997; Elster
1998; Gutmann and Thompson 2004). Those deliberations often shift public preferences, causing participants to reevaluate their stance in favor of one outcome or another (Gutman and Thompson 2004; Fung et al. 2003). Sometimes, note observers of the process, deliberative democracy can also produce new insights and spin off original solutions for addressing social problems (Heller 2001). However, the scope of public discussion in deliberative democracy, and the range of new ideas it can produce, are well demarcated. Its boundaries are established by the requirements that arguments be reasonable and that deliberation follow a set process that is agreed-upon, explicit, and often formalized. This is different from interpretive engagement, in which what constitutes a reasonable approach remains as ambiguous as the social dynamic that participants are trying to understand. Moreover, the practices that shape how people engage are as emergent and mercurial as the meanings the process yields; they are constantly evolving, changing in response to new understandings that arise. In Morocco and Mexico, being reasonable was secondary to the urgent task of trying to sort through the implications that migration patterns would have for personal livelihoods and national economic growth. The ways that migrants from both countries and their governments engaged varied dramatically as interpretation yielded new understandings, new opportunities, and most importantly, new sources of power.

The Politics of Engagement

The ambiguity, the search for meaning, and the embryonic and fluid nature of the processes through which people engage make interpretive conversations extremely generative. These qualities also make them very fragile. With no straightforward mandate, with no question to answer or problem to solve that is clear to all participants, no agreed-upon conflict to negotiate, interpretive conversations are extremely vulnerable to being shut down (Lester and Piore 2004). Often, it is not the process of interpretation itself that is difficult, but rather tolerating the confusion and indeterminacy involved that represents the greatest challenge for people and organizations. Indeed, as organizational scholars have noted, the ambiguity that results when parties armed with different sets of understanding come together often incites anxiety and paralysis so intense that it
provokes people into searching for new ways of interacting in the present moment, and new artifacts and practices are just what is produced along the way (Fonseca 2002).

The fragility of interpretive conversations also makes them highly political. Precisely because interpretive engagement allows participants to reconsider meanings that are taken for granted and to use those meanings to imagine new concepts and new ways of doings things, the conversations that make it up become moments where different, and often transgressive, political possibilities can be envisioned and the practices to make them into realities can be explored. Opening up spaces to hold those conversations -- to say nothing of nurturing, renewing, and enriching them (Lester and Piore 2004)– is a matter of fierce political contest.

In Morocco and Mexico, the state entered into interpretive conversations with migrants in an effort to capture the resources that they had acquired because they crossed into Europe or into the United States. Migrants’ wealth and political clout was what drew the state into conversations with people that it had been only too happy to ignore or actively oppress before they emigrated. How the state perceived migrant resources informed how the conversations began. Governments of both countries initiated conversations with migrants when they could see the resources that migrants held and viewed those assets as being important for state priorities. The central government of Morocco and local governments in Mexico began conversations with migrants when they sought to capture remittances for economic development initiatives, projects that often bypassed the communities that migrants were from. Similarly, migrants were able to draw government into interpretive exchanges only when they succeeded in making the resources they held visible to the state. In both cases, migrants were able to pull the state into an interpretive engagement by organizing themselves into a movement so politically powerful that it threatened to derail state development plans, or by generating practices through their own interpretive processes that became irresistibly attractive to the state as solutions to long-standing development challenges.

Once the interpretive exchanges began, the relative power of state and migrant participants shaped the twists and turns their engagement would take; it determined when the conversations would be sustained, when they would be abandoned, and when they would be revived. Those power dynamics were specific and situated: they grew out of the
particular historical moments in which the interpretive conversations occurred, and they reflected the specific places in which the conversations unfolded, as well as the places to which these conversations referred. The coup attempts and the popular rebellions that threatened to unseat Hassan II from his throne during the 1970s made the Moroccan government strident in its response to any emerging ideas it viewed as disloyal. Similarly, when the PRI’s margin of victory in national elections grew so slim in the late 1980s and early 1990s that it had to rely on increasingly blatant fraud to stay in power, its patience with migrant petitions evaporated. In contrast, the economic crises that periodically convulsed both countries made their governments more attentive to the ideas that migrants were articulating: in times of economic freefall, Morocco’s need for remittances grew more acute, and Mexico’s need for harmonious relations with its northern neighbor, perennially ambivalent about Mexican immigrants, grew more desperate. The optimism surrounding the postwar economic boom in the United States and Europe and the robust need for migrant workers to fill new jobs made the conversations expansive and hopeful. And later, the decay of the industries that had been the economic backbone of Western Europe and the United States, and the layoffs, immigration restrictions, and xenophobic outbursts that accompanied it, strained the conversations. Migrants and their governments had more at stake, and their positions, the meanings to which they held fast, grew more entrenched. The conversations were also situated in more prosaic settings. They invoked migrants’ communities of origin, and were spoken in the intimate argot of identity and responsibility that kept migrants bound to their families, but they took on a weariness that reflected the relentless pace of the assembly lines that migrants manned and the harsh conditions in the fields where they worked. They were laden with the bureaucratic jargon of government offices, and with the political platitudes that became more formulaic during periods of political insecurity.

The power dynamics that moved through interpretive conversations in Morocco and Mexico were also situated within the interactions that made them up. Over time, repeated exchanges wove their own patterns of power, ones that were specific to the conversations themselves, and interpretations took on significance not only from their place in the flow of meanings, but from their place in the flow of power. In Morocco, for example, conversations that the state had opened with migrants about their financial
needs allowed it to create banking services that met those needs but also to channel remittances into state coffers. As the state came to rely on direct access to migrant wages, the leverage that migrants could exercise over the direction of the conversation grew: they were able to insist that the state address not just how they remitted their wages but the working conditions under which they earned them. In Mexico, migrants’ engagement with local government produced matching funds agreements for community development. Those arrangements, embryonic and informal as they were at the beginning, provided a structure around which migrants could organize into clubs and then federations of clubs. Soon, migrants, mobilized into a movement, grew too powerful for the federal government to rebuff.

These interpretive conversations, and the power relations they embodied, could allow for the imagination of possibilities regarding the link between migration and development that were not just technically innovative but politically radical precisely because they were situated in specific contexts and in specific exchanges. The meanings that the conversations produced in these two countries became intrinsic sources of power, but it was their “situatedness” that made them useful to migrants and their communities. Had they not emerged from these defined contexts, they would not have been specific enough to resist those particular practices of state control that migrants and their communities confronted. Migrants would not have been able to challenge the particular brands of state rhetoric used to marginalize them, or to assert the particular rights that they needed in order to be able to author their own futures. The meanings became crowbars that allowed them to pry open the space to act as agents of development and political transformation. Furthermore, migrants were able to use the specific, situated meanings that emerged out of their conversations with the state to challenge the particular methods of political repression and control both governments deployed, ruthlessly at times.

In Morocco and Mexico, the interpretive engagement between migrants and policymakers, and the intensive interactions it comprised, would ultimately redefine the state, blurring the boundary between state and society and revealing the state as a set of practices that permeated society rather than a freestanding (and impervious) institution. Over time, the repeated exchanges began to scuff out the political line that kept the state
separate from the society it governed. Soon, it was no longer a case of the state acting on society, but rather a matter of relationships between state and society that were producing new institutions, new policies, and new visions for economic development. Identifying who was “acting on” whom became impossible, and attributing authorship to actions, and to meanings behind those actions, became a futile exercise. Not only did this transform policy formulation from the act of designing policy to the art of forging relationships, but it opened up new avenues for political change. Once the thick wall between state and society was eroded through the repeated back-and-forth of interpretive exchange, the decision to open up the practices of governing to non-state actors no longer remained the prerogative of the state. Furthermore, when state practices were reinterpreted and enacted in new ways, ascertaining precisely who had reinvented them was often simply not possible, and thus exacting political retribution became a hopelessly inexact and pointless endeavor. Political resistance shifted from a strategy of opposition to one of engaging with the state in order to change its practices, and the meanings on which they were based, from within.

The interpretive engagement between migrants and the state in Morocco and Mexico would eventually become so durable that it would survive the political transitions that occurred in both countries at the turn of the century. It also helped to ensure that those shifts would represent a move toward political openness that was unprecedented in the modern histories of both countries. As of 1999, Morocco had a new king, the young Mohammed VI; hailed as a political modernizer, he presided over the most open and competitive parliamentary elections since Moroccan independence. In the Mexican presidential elections of 2000, an opposition party, the National Action Party (PAN), was elected to power, unseating the PRI and ending its 71-year monopoly of formal political control. In both countries, emigration continued apace, even under new political stewardship, but thanks to their intensive engagement with the state, emigrants were afforded a larger role in determining how their governments would manage emigration itself. This book follows Moroccan and Mexican migration and development policies through this heated yet delicate period of political transition at the turn of the 21st century, and documents their consolidation, as well as the deepening of the interpretive engagement that gave rise to them, over the five years that followed. By the end of 2005,
both countries’ policies would begin to reflect the inclusion of new interlocutors in interpretive conversations. At that point, new actors, such as multilateral donor organization, private companies, and other governments took those conversations global, and past the analytic scope of this book.

**Processing Impact**

Any consideration of migration and development policy risks getting caught up in an overly categorical debate about whether or not migration can actually foster positive economic transformation. For the most part, international labor migration, and low-skilled labor migration in particular, has been celebrated as globalization from below, benefiting those the bonanza of international trade has bypassed. The millions who cross national borders each year, legally and illegally, in search of work or opportunity, to join family, or to escape political or social oppression have been portrayed as a popular force that countervails the rapid and rapacious movement of capital around the globe. In a characterization that has increasingly garnered political and academic appeal, migrants are described as having set in motion flows that rival those of investment capital in scale and in impact, through their own movement across borders but also through the money that they remit (Orozco, M. 2001, de la Garza et al. 2002), the knowledge that they transfer (Saxenian 2006; Guarnizo 2003), and the social values and cultural norms that they transmit (Levitt 2001; Brinkerhoff 2009). Moreover, migrants have been characterized as resisting a global order which enables maximum mobility of capital while confining labor to national territories, enclosing workers behind the high (and increasingly material) walls of national borders. A growing body of literature on transnational communities fills in the details of this general picture by documenting “the initiatives of common people to establish durable economic and other ties” that stretch across national boundaries (Portes 2003: 875).

Even as this view has taken hold, a more sober evaluation counters that migration reproduces and reinforces global inequalities and stalls economic development. Studies of this ilk caution that remittances, for all their volume, have an unclear impact on poverty and may actually stunt long-term economic growth in migrant sending communities (Glytsos 2002; Ouaked 2002). Similarly, skepticism has emerged about
whether migrants bring back knowledge that actually fosters development, or whether instead they merely join, and even slow, processes of political and economic transformation already underway (Obukova 2009). Accounts of the social disruption caused by migration have challenged portrayals of transnational communities as cogent as being hopelessly quixotic, and have pointed to the painful breaches that have opened in communities, with migration privileging one group of residents to the exclusion of another (Suárez-Orozco 2005; Haour-Knipe and Rector 1996).

Despite their divergent views, the two sides of this debate share two pivotal traits. The first is that they attribute the effects of migration on development to some intrinsic quality of migrants themselves, and implicitly base their conclusion on an analysis of migrant behaviors and motivations. In their baser versions, these representations homogenize migrants, portraying them as all being cut from one cloth, but most accounts acknowledge that while migrants are often altruistic, productive, and invested in the political futures of their countries of origin, they can also be venal, self-interested, and economically manipulative. Similarly, these analyses recognize that the resources that migrants remit -- be they monies, knowledge, political influence or social networks -- can have complex effect, but they attribute the impacts of those flows to migrant choices. In other words, the positions staked out in this debate focus on who migrates and what they contribute – or don’t – to development, and recommendations concentrate on how to change migrant priorities. What they overlook is how migrants affect development and how they infuse the resource they remit with value.

Second, the scholarship that buttresses these different stands has tended to overlook the state, implicitly suggesting that migrants have been able to “rise above” state constraints and pressures for assimilation to create vital and coherent communities that exist in “transnational social fields” (Levitt 2001), seamless and seemingly suspended above borders (Basch et al 1994; Kearney 1991; Portes et al. 1999; Smith, M. 1998). When these accounts have turned their attention to the state, they have theorized about how migrant social practices, along with the identities and relationships they embody, traverse a terrain made challenging, even treacherous, by the institutions and policies that not just one, but several states erect to establish control and legitimacy (Goldring 2002; Smith, R. 2003; Levitt 2003; Guarnizo 1998). They have shown either
how state structures have directed migrants’ political activities and social identities (Kastoryano 2002; Brand 2002; Taylor 2002), or how migrants have challenged and even torn down state obstacles – set up in both sending and receiving countries -- that have prevented them from accessing political rights and achieving economic security (Smith, R. 2003; Goldring 2002; Moctezuma 2003; Argun 2003). For all of their richness and subtlety, these accounts firmly maintain state structures as analytically and actually separate from migrant community practices.

Instead of taking sides and staking a definitive position of whether emigration promotes development, it may be more fruitful to concentrate on the processes by which it sometimes does. A focus on process allows us to escapes the two main debates that confine current discussions on the relationship between migration and development. The first relates to the motivations and character of migrants, and whether or not they are intentional agents in promoting development. While the specific actors who author interpretive processes have multiple and complex motivations, a focus on process eschews the concern of defining or judging the intentions of migrants, or of state bureaucrats for that matter, and instead turns to the ways those actors engaged with one another to generate new ideas and insights for policy. The resources migrants remit become useful for economic development because of the ways migrants and their state partners draw them into their interpretive exchanges.

The second debate centers on the degree to which the state should attempt to link emigration with development, if at all. Implicit in this debate is the notion that policy is distinct from the actions of migration. Attention to specifics of the processes though which Morocco’s and Mexico’s migration and development policies were fashioned reveals that this distinction between migrants and their governments is false. Development outcomes were a product of neither state or migrant activity, but rather were woven out of interactions between the migrants and the state. The exchanges that produced the policies which mediated emigrants’ relationships to their countries of origin were intense and prolonged: the distinction between migrant practices and state structures is more often a matter of semantics than lived experience.

Many exchanges between migrants and the states that governed their countries of origin did not produce policy innovations. The argument made here is that the state can
be a site of creativity – not that it always or even generally is. What I argue is that those processes that produced policy innovations, even if those processes faltered at times, and should not be read as a comprehensive account of all interactions between migrants and their states. They should, however, be taken as evidence of the potential for radical policy transformation that those interactions very often hold.