

Guatemalan Youth, Migration, and Return

December 4, 2007

On December 4, the Center for Human Rights and International Justice hosted Ricardo Falla, S.J., a Guatemalan Jesuit anthropologist who has spent many years living and working with Mayan communities, and Ana Gutierrez Castro, a Guatemalan educator and researcher, in a talk entitled “Guatemalan Youth, Migration, and Return.” Falla gave an overview of his experiences with youth, migration, and return. He observed four main lines of identity for youth in recent years: working in agriculture and *artesania*, attending school, engaging in transnational migration, and joining gangs known as *maras*. Falla explained that transnational migration between Guatemala and the United States, in its current form, began during the 1990s in the post-war period. Previously, members of the community would migrate in large groups, such that their lives abroad were a reflection of their lives in Guatemalan communities. In the post-war era, people have begun migrating independently, and it became much more difficult to retain a strong sense of identity while abroad. Falla believes that the effects of globalization on social systems are responsible for the change in migration patterns that have been seen during this time.

In discussing return migration, Falla stated that few people who migrate choose to return to their Guatemalan communities. Yet those who do return have the potential to empower the community because they have learned many things as a result of the experiences abroad. Falla sees hope in the possibility of returnees bringing positive transformation to their home communities, and works actively to address these issues. However, Falla also emphasized that it can be difficult for returnees to re-adjust to community life after living in the U.S.

Gutierrez Castro added to Falla’s discussion by providing many personal anecdotes about her experience with youth, migration, and return in her home town of Zacualpa. During the civil war in Guatemala, Gutierrez’s father and brothers were forced to migrate due to the violence. Gutierrez also spoke about a close knit group of about twenty of her friends, many of whom chose to migrate to the United States over a series of years. She regretted that many families and relationships have been broken by the forces of migration, and emphasized that maintaining communication has been difficult in communities that lack access to cell phones and other modern modes of transportation.

As they answered a series of follow-up questions, Falla and Gutierrez emphasized issues of identity in the migration process. Falla has found that those who leave have trouble retaining a strong sense of identity to their homeland. Similarly, those who come back often have trouble re-adjusting to community life. They emphasized that it is important for those who are abroad to maintain a sense of connection with their home communities, and Gutierrez showed the audience a newsletter which was recently created to serve this function. The newsletter is sent to those who have migrated, and includes information about community members and events.

In their closing remarks, Falla and Gutierrez emphasized that children are the future of the world. They stated that it is important for community members to fight to maintain a sense of identity in the face of migration, so that the children have a firm understanding of their roots.