

TRIBUNAL PERMANENTE DE LOS PUEBLOS

INTERVIEWS

1. Alfredo Cepeda

MG: Good afternoon. Welcome to New York and to the Hemispheric Institute. Could you say a few words about yourself and why you are here participating in the *Tribunal Permanente de los Pueblos*?

Alfredo Cepeda: My name is Alfredo Cepeda, and I am part of the Jesuits. I live in the *Sierra Norte* of Veracruz where indigenous groups of Nahuas, Otomíes and Tepehuas live. They are part of the three linguistic branches in Mexico: the Mayans, the Otopames, and the Nahuas. This is a very important multicultural region, and it is where we are currently working. We have been coming to New York every year to connect with those who have come over here. Mainly young men that come to New York to work, save money, and go back to their communities. The later is becoming increasingly difficult due to the closing of the border. SO this is what brings us to New York, and this time also the Tribunal that was planned to take place in New York due to the increasing number of Mexican immigrants that have come to the US especially since 1994. It is not only the case of indigenous Mexicans and campesinos but also that of Hondurans, Ecuatorians, and those of the Cuenca region. They all come here to work at car washes and restaurants.

MG: How would you describe the situation of the migrants you work with nowadays? What changes have you noticed in the last few years?

AC: Well they get here and the jobs they start at will most likely be the ones they do all throughout their stay. They are mainly employed in low-skilled jobs, such as car washing and restaurants. As times go by and they acquire skills they go from being dishwashers to busboys, to helping in the kitchen. But all of this is not due to any sort of formal education, it is mainly due to their own skills to advance in these sort of jobs. They are also working in construction. Construction has the advantage that is better paid than other precarious jobs they have. Carwashes are paying about 6.50 an hour, it is one of the lowest salaries. In restaurants it is similar, they end up getting about 400 dollars a week, sometimes up to 500. In construction sometimes they get more, up to 15 dollars an hour. But the truth is they are stuck in there. They come here with the idea of going back, only 2.5 percent of women come here and the vast majority of them are mestizas and campesinas; indigenous women very rarely come. This creates an obvious dynamic, it is a mainly male migration and the ages of the newcomers keep getting lower and lower. When it started the average age was between 25 and 30 years, now a lot of people 15 and older are coming.

MG: A while ago you mentioned a phenomenon of entrapment that immigrants are currently experiencing due to the fact that there used to be a process of coming and going back that now has become impossible.

AC: That is central to understand the contrast between what they aspire to and what actually happens. In the beginning they came for cycles of a year and a half, in part because they were

not used to live away from their families for long periods of time. After, the period extended to two years, two years and a half for economic reasons, because they saw it was easier to save that way. The main purpose of the savings is to build a house back home, and to have some savings to better their life conditions and their status within the community, without standing out. But the border has been progressively closed, especially starting in 2006. What this closure entails is that those who originally had come to stay for a couple of years, and that were used to coming and going some up to 5 times, are now completely stuck in here. When I say stuck I mean it that way, because they could go back to their homeland but they would not be able to come back to the US. So they consider they have to be here, to send money to their sick relatives, to pay for their children's education, to build their houses. They are scared of going back and not being able to get a job that pays enough to survive. This situation stands in sharp contrast with the campesino way of life which involves producing your own food without having to buy them, as well as other things. People really come here for the dollars. That idea of the "American Dream" has no meaning for them. They really just want to get money to send back to their families and if they cease to do so it is because they have lost their life project and spend every penny they make.

MG: And this entrapment that you describe, what impact does it have in the migrants? What does it mean in terms of their social worlds, their development, and life projects?

AC: Temporal migration is what is best for them. In fact, they have substituted it - now that the border is closed- for short-term migrations to Teotihuacán and Sinaloa, inside of Mexico, to harvest tomato and tuna. Also, for internal migratory movement to Monterrey, an urban alternative to Mexico City or Pachuca, the closest metropolitan areas to where we live. I really think that for them to be able to get enough money is crucial within the capitalist system as it exists nowadays. They need money for transportation, to get to health clinics, etcétera, so they need to go where the money is. This system used to work before, when they were able to come back, but now that is completely sealed. So now we have an Otomí Texcatepec in the United States and another in Veracruz, completely sealed off. In a way this is tragic because young men that come to the US at 18 are now 28 and can't establish a life project with a Dominican, an African woman, or even one from a different region. It is hard to have an intercultural partner, especially in such complicated situations. So the fact is that most have not been able to have families in here, or they are waiting for a possible amnesty to bring their families here or go back to them. Nowadays, for every 10 that want to come, only one manages to cross the border. However they are slowly going back, because what really matters to them is back there.

MG: You also told me about the disappearance of the *coyote*, another illustration of the changes in the border dynamics.

AC: Yes, around 2005 when the *Minute Men* thing started, I don't remember exactly what year, the ranchers started shooting migrants that crossed their properties. When one asked the *coyotes* if that was going to stop immigration they said that maybe if you lined them up all along the border, implying that migration would not stop. However, things have changed drastically. Starting in 2006, and particularly since 2010, crossing the border became harder due to restrictive laws, increased surveillance in the border, and the partnering of immigration and police forces -that would've been unthinkable before. Additionally there are other restrictive elements the mosquito helicopters, the drones, the day cameras, and the infrared night vision equipment. Another central element is the detention centers, that have a very clear objective to

be seen from the outside: dissuasion. They are consigned for 4 days the first time, a couple of months the second one, and then isolated and sent back to Tijuana, or Mexico City. This is also new, sending them all the way to Mexico City instead of the border. So all these elements constitute a deterrence framework. Before, when you were bounced back at the border you could attempt to cross again the next day, 10 or 11 times if necessary. But the picture changed, from my perspective as well as what is made public by organizations at the border such as *Iniciativa Quino*, a Jesuit led organization that works with deportees in Nogales. The issue is that the cartels started controlling the border, that was the definite change from 2011 until now. Now the same Otomíes, Nahuas and Tepehuas we work with say that you are not dealing with *coyotes* anymore, you're dealing with the mafia. Before it was 'la Panchita', 'el Tony', 'el Martín Orozco'; people who everyone knew, everyone had their numbers. One could think that the FBI also had them, and they were part of the system; but they had been working for 14 or 15 years from Phoenix, the *coyotes'* headquarters. Nowadays it is 'the Che', and who is he? A member of the mafia. You still call them by the phone but now what used to cost 1,500 or 2,000 dollars costs 7,000 for Mexicans. We still don't know how much it is for people from Central America, who have to cross the long border that starts in the Suchiate river and ends in the United States, Mexico. Sadly, this is an elongated border, a rupture in sovereignty. So that is what happens now, but also the mafia does not share the codes that *coyotes* operated by, mainly commercial codes: they offered something and complied if they were paid. Just like any travel agent. Nowadays, the mafia operates on a more random basis. For example, they ask migrants to cross with backpacks full of drugs. This is the most drastic change. Yesterday some boys were talking directly with people that are not *coyotes*, and they were the ones saying that now it is 7000 USD, those are the new rules. It takes almost two years two pay that loan.

MG: On a slightly different subject, I wanted to ask you, being a Jesuit, what is the role of religious actors and institutions in this process? Both as providing support but also as taking part in the debates around immigration on this side of the border?

AC: Well, I think that is a broad question. For us this is a very important matter. On the one hand it is a reflection of the church's solidarity with the immigrants, the most dispossessed, which is an old tradition that was revitalized in the 60s. However, with Juan Pablo II there was a significant drawback of the church, a shift toward the right to put it bluntly. Nowadays there is what I consider to be a hypocritical group of people that are concerned with stopping the migrant children for instance. With the Honduran children for example, 8 to 12 year olds, there is a mitigation and calls to stop migration. But I see it as a conservative discourse, as something aimed to stop migration framed in humanitarian ideals. But there is also another part of the church that is focused on understanding why this migration is happening, particularly in the case of Honduras. The root of this migratory movement is in the coup d'etat, in the association of the government with the mafias, in the social decomposition that resulted from an imposed and illegitimate government established after the coup; a government that handed the country to transnational mining companies. All this creates an exodus. Not only for economic reasons, but also because of State violence, people leave the country as a result of political persecution. So this group asks what the reaction of the United States, facing this reality, should be. They argue for the right for asylum. So I see two contrasting currents. On the one hand a right wing narrative disguised as compassion, and on the other hand a genuine solidarity that goes hand in hand with a search for the actual causes. I think that the church should aim for the later, a solidarity that cannot leave out an analysis of the causes, and the omnipresence of rampant

capitalist forces in the causes and consequences of what is going on in our countries. Mexico is the country of violence, of the dirty war, of feminicides, and outrageous patterns of migration. It is the country of communication blockages and monopolies, also of the devastation of corn and forests, and overall predation. This is what is happening in the country and that is also the reason of us being here in New York. We want to show how instances like the Tribunal Permanente de los Pueblos are key for society's moral weight to be felt.

MG: As a way of concluding, what concrete things do you see coming out of this Tribunal? And how can you project them within a larger struggle to put an end to the horrific situation you just described?

AC: We are experiencing a complex situation, and what one sees is that power does not ask, power acts, crushes, decides: Power has a discourse that is imposed. What we are seeing now are Peña Nieto's government structural reforms, called reforms but more like dismantlers of the country. The energetic reform, the labor, and telecommunication one, the one that seeks to turn the country into transnational company's loot. So I think that the Tribunal Permanente is on the one hand a historical process, it also has moral relevance, and finally it has symbolic power. One could think that it goes unnoticed but the fact that it is taking place in New York and that we emphasize the connections of the situation with NAFTA, and the following dismantling of the country, is symbolically relevant.

MG: Father Alfredo, thank you so much for your time. We'll see you during the Tribunal in the coming days.

AC: We'll be here in this long process as long as life allows us to. Thank you.