

Mexico's New Type of Emigrant: Well-to-Do, Skilled, Disillusioned

By LARRY ROHTER
Special to The New York Times

MEXICO CITY — Acting quietly, the father-and-son team that runs one of Mexico's leading industrial groups recently liquidated most of the men's assets here. Then they boarded their personal planes and flew north to new homes and headquarters in Aspen, Colo., and La Jolla, Calif.

When a lifelong resident of the Mexican capital finished one of his regular visits to the dentist recently, he was surprised to be told not to bother coming back. The dentist was closing his practice and moving to the United States the next day with his family, the patient was told.

Disenchantment Is Noted

Amid its most serious domestic crisis in nearly half a century, Mexico has begun exporting a new type of emigrant who could not be more different in background than the workers and peasants who have traditionally left in search of opportunity. Thousands of established, affluent professionals, ranging from prominent businessmen and intellectuals to skilled craftsmen and ambitious young college graduates, are reluctantly joining what Mexicans call "la fuga de cerebros" — "the flight of brains."

The primary cause of this outflow of talent, according to diplomats, immigration specialists and the emigrants themselves, is the severe economic

downturn that has gripped Mexico since 1982. But underlying the exodus is what they describe as a deeper "frustration" or "disenchantment" with the political and social system, dominated by the ruling Institutional Revolution-

Neighbor in Distress Mexico's Crisis and the U.S.

Third of six articles.

ary Party, that has prevailed in Mexico for more than 50 years.

The number of professionals who have elected to leave Mexico is far smaller than the more traditional flow of farm workers and other unskilled laborers back and forth across the border. But Mexican businessmen and scholars and foreign diplomats agree that the consequences of the recent outflow of professionals are potentially far more dangerous for Mexico.

The illegal immigration of unskilled workers into the United States has been widely viewed as a safety valve for a sputtering economy that cannot create enough new jobs to accommodate the one million entrants to the Mexican labor force each year. The loss of highly educated professionals, on the other hand, strips Mexico of the skills and experience it desperately needs if it is to resume the rapid economic growth of years past.

Impact 'Very Serious'

"In terms of the overall migration, this group almost doesn't count," said Jorge Bustamante, director of the College of the Northern Border in Tijuana, referring to the professionals. "But the impact of their departure is very serious since it deprives us of the human capital we need for our development and represents the loss of a tremendous investment on the part of Mexican government and society."

The United States Immigration and Naturalization Service estimates it will make 1.8 million apprehensions — including many people caught more than once — along the Mexican border this year, up from 1.2 million last year. Figures on the occupational status of detainees are not kept, but I.N.S. officials say their border stations are reporting an increase in the number of educated and professional Mexicans being detained.

"There is a perception on the border that there are more people with higher-level skills coming in," said Duane Austin, an I.N.S. spokesman in Washington. "We seem to be running into more middle-class people and family units than we did before the big influx

that began with the start of their economic crisis."

In fiscal 1985, the last year for which official statistics are available, 241 Mexicans were admitted to the United States under special preference visas for professionals and 694 as skilled or unskilled workers, including technicians. In the previous year, the figures were 7 and 25, according to I.N.S. figures.

But those statistics, Mr. Austin cautioned, do not include Mexican professionals who may have entered the United States under other programs, such as those for Mexicans who have immediate relatives in the United States. Nor do they take into account what immigration officials believe are significant numbers of middle- and upper-class Mexicans who overstay tourist visas or who illegally cross the border on foot.

"There is a considerable percentage of people here who by birth are entitled to choose whether to work in the United States or Mexico because they have dual citizenship," said Dr. Guillermina Villalva, director of the Ciudad Juárez branch of the College of the Northern Border. "Whereas before, the majority did not opt to work in the U.S., especially those who had high social or intellectual levels, now we find that 80 percent are deciding to work and live in the U.S. This is a serious loss for Mexico."

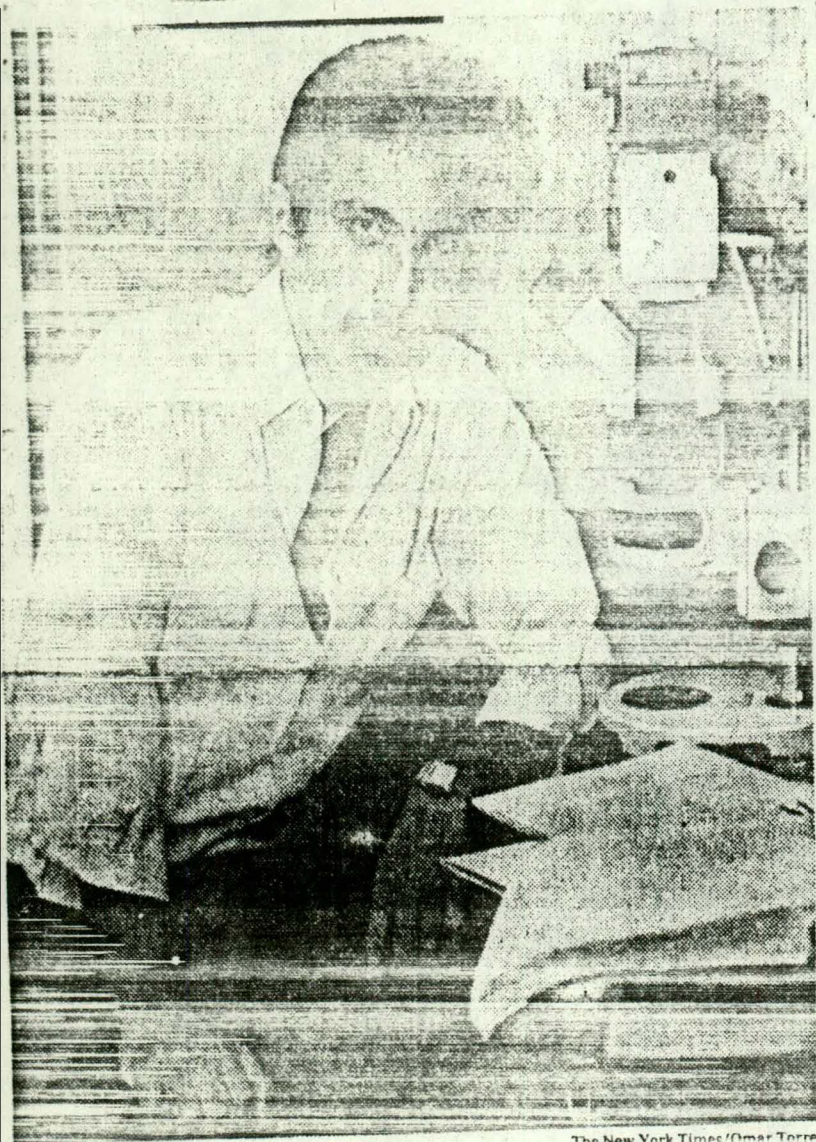
A Man's Breaking Point: Company Is Nationalized

Doctors, nurses, translators and language teachers are among the occupation groups that have swelled the exodus, Dr. Villalva said, joining skilled craftsmen such as carpenters and plumbers. United States officials here

say stonemasons, cabinetmakers, shipyard workers, pipeline fitters and computer operators, as well as "budding entrepreneurs frustrated with the system," are also heavily represented in the outflow.

Neither the Mexican nor American Governments have yet made public any statistics on the outflow of talent or middle class flight. But some scholars and consumer market researchers estimate that up to 5 percent of Mexico's urban middle class, or more than 100,000 people, may have left in the last five years.

A New Type of Mexican Emigrant: Well-to-Do, Skilled and Disillusioned



The New York Times/Omar Torres

"The only way to live and be able to study is to go abroad. A lot of people just end up saying, 'I can't go on living in this system.'"

Rafael Rodríguez, marine biologist

Eduardo Pérez-Verdía, a Mexican businessman who lives in Dallas, has a visa granted to foreign workers of "exceptional ability," which allows him to work as vice president of strategic marketing at the Frito-Lay division of PepsiCo, earning more than \$100,000 a year. Mr. Pérez-Verdía said his breaking point came after the appliance company of which he was president was suddenly nationalized in 1982.

"When I went to work one day, there were soldiers with machine guns there and they wouldn't let us in," he said. "When I was finally able to return to work, I found that I was working in a totally different environment, as a government bureaucrat with no future."

Other factors in his decision to leave Mexico, he said, included constant currency devaluations and a high income tax rate. He also says he was embittered by an experience as a poll watcher in which "I delivered one set of figures, which when they were published weeks later were totally rigged," thus strengthening his conviction that "fraud is just rampant" in the political system.

"It was very difficult to leave, it was something I had never seriously considered, though I had many opportunities," said Mr. Pérez-Verdía, who has a master's degree in business administration from Columbia University. "But I had the realization there were enormous abuses at a national scale, and that nothing had been done or was going to be done."

On a Return Visit, He Finds Disillusion

Mr. Pérez-Verdía, 41, said he hopes eventually to go back to Mexico, in part because he would like his three children to retain their Mexican identity. But a recent visit to relatives here left him pessimistic about an early return.

"Disenchantment with the system and open abuses of government are now very widespread," he said. "Under the last three presidents, the situation in the country has just gone to hell, and people start losing hope after a while."

Immigration experts and scholars say many other professionals are leaving in spite of the stake they have here and the comfort in which some of them can live. An American official here said he realized that patterns of Mexican emigration to the United States were changing "when I started meeting a lot of people asking me, 'Can I take a maid with me when I go?'"

"There is definitely an interest among the professional classes in seeking opportunities outside of Mexico, perhaps for the first time since 1910," said Craig Dudley, president of Conrey Interamericana, an executive recruitment concern here. "Some have just gone up and done it on their own, while some who work for transnational companies are seeking very hard to get transferred."

Nevertheless, one United States official here says it is primarily "the young and hungry ones who are leaving," college-educated men and women "in the 20-to-35 age bracket" who are products of increased opportunities in the Mexican education system but who are entering the labor market at a time when jobs are extremely difficult to find.

According to Mexican Government statistics, the number of students en-

rolled in Mexican universities grew by more than 300 percent between 1970 and 1985, to 1.2 million. The number of people graduating from college each year increased by more than 400 percent in the same period, to 123,000 last year.

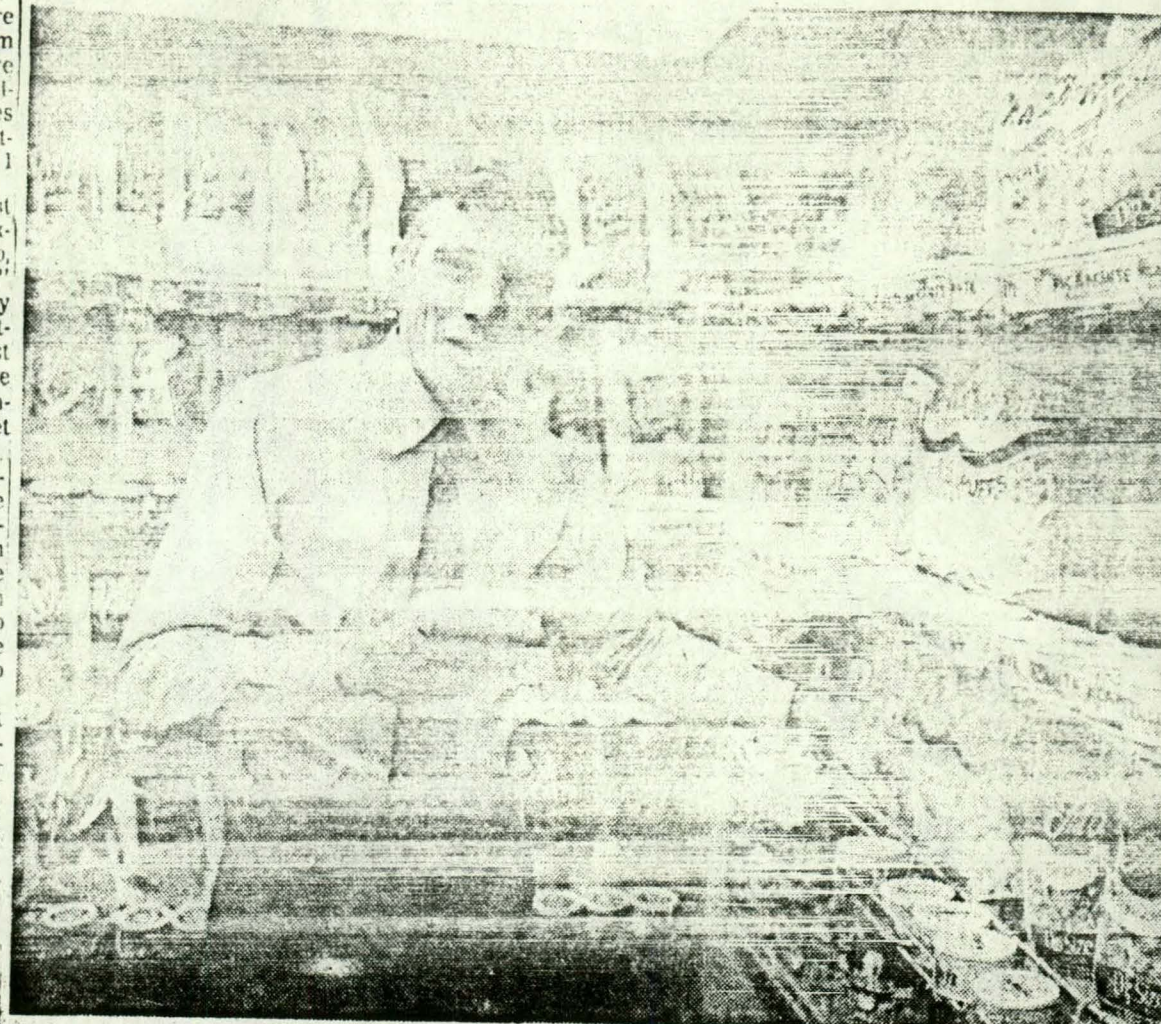
"I can't prove it, but it seems to me Mexico is losing some of its most aggressive young people," said Alan Ellison, chief of the United States Border Patrol station in San Diego. "It's not the weakest ones that are making the trek up here; they're exporting some of their best and their brightest."

"We are definitely getting more educated people in the flow, occasionally even government employees," he added.

The Engineer's Story: Flight From Nepotism

Jose, a 25-year-old civil engineering graduate of the University of Chihuahua, fits that profile on all counts. He came to Mexico City after the earthquake a year ago with hopes of finding a satisfying job and aiding in the rebuilding of the capital, but quickly found his idealism crushed by what he describes as a pervasive pattern of nepotism and petty self-interest.

"The chief engineer in the section in which I was working went out and hired his wife, son and son-in-law, as well as more distant relatives," he complained. "It doesn't seem just to me that in order to get somewhere in Mexico you have to be the son of lawyer so-and-so or engineer such-and-such."



The New York Times/Mark

"It was very difficult to leave, it was something I had never seriously considered. People start losing hope after a while."

Eduardo Pérez-Verdía, business

In May he quit his job in disgust and went to the United States on a tourist visa. He now works as a bartender in Chicago, studying English in his spare time in anticipation that he will eventually be able to legalize his status in the United States and work in his own profession.

"I'd like to go back home if I could, but the situation is bad, very bad," he said. "There's a way to change things, but they don't want to."

To most Mexicans, talk of a talent flight comes as a shock. Because of the country's high growth rates and liberal policy of political asylum, Mexico has traditionally been on the receiving end of a talent flight from other Spanish-speaking countries.

"Prior to 1982, Mexico was unusual in that it had virtually no brain drain, in

contrast to countries like Argentina and Chile," said Manuel García y Griego, who studies Mexican emigration at the Colegio de México, a major research institute here. "But since 1982, the Mexican pattern has come to look more and more like the rest of Latin America."

Mexicans' Buying Power Has Faded Rapidly

Both Mexican and foreign analysts agree that the key to stemming the talent outflow is a resumption of economic growth. But that turnaround must come soon, they say, a prospect that does not seem realistic at the moment.

According to independent economic analysts, buying power here has declined in each of the last five years, by a total of more than 40 percent. As a result, per-capita income, as measured in constant dollars, has now fallen to \$1,875, compared to \$2,200 in 1981.

Economic forecasts have predicted the economy will shrink an additional 3 to 4 percent this year. In addition, the Mexican Government has said that inflation this year will exceed 100 percent, and the peso is now valued at about 750 to the dollar, compared to 24 in early 1982.

"The slide of the peso and the rise in inflation over the last year and a half have really accelerated the crisis psychology here," said a United States official. "It has brought about a deterioration in the status of life for the middle class that has caused some to move and many more to think of it."

"There is definitely a movement outward," he added. "There is a lot of analysis and soul-searching going on right now."

Professional groups representing doctors and architects, many of whom were trained and educated in the United States, say the exodus has been especially significant in their areas. But researchers in the hard sciences also appear to have been hit hard as a result of cutbacks in program financing, fellowships and imported equipment and materials.

"The situation of scientists is much more acute than that of doctors or architects," said Alfonso Vilchis, professor of Microbiology at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. "It is not that there is bad will on the part of

the Government, but rather that there is a scarcity of resources."

For Rafael Rodríguez, a 24-year-old marine biologist who works at the Secretariat of the Ecology, is an unpaid part-time researcher at a university institute here and has conducted research for the Cousteau Society, the situation has already gotten out of hand. He has been offered a graduate fellowship at a university in Texas and expects to leave Mexico in January.

"The only way to live and be able to study is to go abroad," Mr. Rodríguez said dejectedly. "As a graduate student in the United States, I will earn more than the director of the institute in which I work here."

"A street sweeper or a dishwasher in the United States earns more than a brilliant professional here," he added. "You can't buy a house, you can't buy a car, your wife has to go to work just to make ends meet. A lot of people just end up saying, 'I can't go on living in this system,' and opt for living overseas."

"I can earn less here or more there," Mr. Rodríguez, who makes less than \$250 a month, said. "But the important thing is to develop my career, to put into practice the knowledge I have obtained."

Mexican Government officials, however, say that talk of a talent drain is exaggerated. While acknowledging that significant numbers of Mexican professionals and technicians are taking advantage of job opportunities in the United States and Europe, Franklin Rendón, director of technological development at the National Council of Science and Technology, estimates that "no more than 1 percent" stay abroad permanently.

"In reality, we do not have a brain drain," Mr. Rendón said in an interview here in September. "What we have is a permanent flux, a permanent interchange, particularly with the United States."

"There are invitations from abroad, and the participation by Mexicans sometimes prolongs itself for two or three years," he said. "But the majority, I would say almost the totality, come back to the country."

"I would not speak of a brain drain," Mr. Rendón concluded. "I would regard it as a loan of talent."

NEXT: The governing party's hold on Mexican political life.