

The American dream in a transnational migratory circuit

Alfredo Sánchez Carballo

Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez

Abstract

The objective of this article is to explore how the idea of the American dream affects the discourse, relationships and imaginaries of the members of an emerging migratory circuit with transnational characteristics. Transnational social imaginary is proposed as the analytical tool constructed from social imaginaries and transnationalism in order to investigate the social imaginary meanings of the participants. Using a qualitative methodology, interviews and observations were conducted in Kansas (United States) and in Tres Valles (Mexico). One of the conclusions is that the idea of the American dream has been built from the experiences of the emigrants, encouraging the flow of people to the north. Nevertheless, the idea of the American dream is increasingly being questioned as the migrants realized that achieving this dream is not as simple as they had imagined. *Key words*: American dream, transnational, migrant circuit, social imaginary, emigration.

Resumen: El sueño americano en un circuito migratorio transnacional

El objetivo de este artículo es explorar cómo la idea del sueño americano afecta el discurso, las relaciones y los imaginarios de los miembros de un circuito migratorio emergente con características transnacionales. El imaginario social transnacional se propone como la herramienta analítica construida a partir de imaginarios sociales y transnacionalismo para investigar los significados imaginarios sociales de los participantes. Al presentar una metodología cualitativa se realizaron entrevistas y observaciones en Kansas (Estados Unidos) y en Tres Valles (México). Una de las conclusiones es que la idea del sueño americano se ha construido a partir de las experiencias de los emigrantes, alentando el flujo de personas hacia el norte. Sin embargo, la idea del sueño americano se cuestiona cada vez más a medida que los migrantes se dan cuenta de que lograr este sueño no es tan simple como habían imaginado. *Palabras clave*: sueño americano, transnacional, circuito migratorio, imaginario social, emigración.

Introduction

This article addresses the idea of the *American dream*, specifically the matter of its significance among the members of a migratory circuit. The analysis centers on the migratory circuit that connects Tres Valles (Veracruz, Mexico) and the state of Kansas (United States). The research hypothesis is that the members of this migration circuit, both those who emigrated and those who did not, have an idea of the American dream, which has been driving migration for the last 30 years from this Mexican municipality to the United States. On the one hand, while this idea has promoted the creation of an emerging migratory circuit between Tres Valles and Kansas, the *Tresvallenses* who emigrated remain critical about the possible ways to achieve the benefits that the American dream promises. For the migrants and their families, the American dream also alludes to the difficulties of this journey. On the other hand, over the years, the idea of the American dream has imposed a form of transnational exchange between Tres Valles and Kansas.

Fieldwork was conducted at both ends of the migratory circuit – the receiving and the sending communities, which facilitated the comparison and discussion about the meaning that the members of the circuit – including both those who emigrated and those who did not, known as “passive mobiles” (Salazar & Smart, 2011) – assign to the idea of the American dream. Furthermore, this study used a multisituated ethnography approach (Appadurai, 1991; Besserer & Kearney, 2006). This methodological strategy aimed to answer the following questions: How does the American dream affect the imaginary of the members of a migratory circuit? How do immigrants share their stories and experiences of the American dream with other members of the circuit? And more specifically, does the idea of the American dream promote migration, particularly in reference to this case of study, namely between Tres Valles, Veracruz, Mexico, and the state of Kansas, in the United States?

Different theories have offered explanations for the migratory process that takes place at global level. Among them, one deals with social networks (Massey, 1987; Massey et al., 1993; Portes, 1995). However, this theory leaves some questions unanswered, including how imaginaries confer meaning and continuity to the origin and maintenance of migratory networks. Analysing the ideas behind transnational migration may offer an answer that goes beyond the explanation already offered by social network migration theory (Awumbila, Teye & Yaro, 2017; Liu, 2013) and show other perspectives that explain transnational mobility. That is a key goal in this study. The American dream has different meanings, one of which identifies it as a phenomenon that structures and maintains the character and the identity of the United States as a nation. It is clear that, throughout history, ideas acquire new meanings due to migratory flows, borders, and territorial adjustments, wars, or transitions between type of power and government, but their hold on the collective imaginary often endures (Cullen, 2003). For this reason, examining the power of the idea of the

American dream help understand the attraction that the United States exerts on migrants, especially Mexican in this case.

The transnational social imaginary around that idea should enhance the link between transnational network migratory theory¹ and the social imaginaries theory. Thus, this study aims to describe the social construction of a meaning as it fuels a system of cross-border migration, especially one that developed throughout the last 30 years between some migration areas of Mexico and alternative destination areas in the United States. We consider a scheme which permits considering the problem beyond migration as an action of leaving. The capacity of attraction of the idea of the American dream is understood here as a conceptual framework which makes visible the stories that arise among those who left and those who stayed. Ideas are powerful and reinforced by the histories created among migrants. Thus, if we use an immersion methodology along a migratory circuit, we should be able to transcend territorial location and look into the ideas that propel human mobility. Moreover, if the American dream is about disputing spaces at the level of imaginaries, as a means of producing subjectivity, it is important to analyse the latter as a way to colonize the discourse of regions foreign to this society that ultimately ends up compelling migratory movement.

Fieldwork for this study included three stages, all of which took place between March and November 2016. The first was a ninety-day stay in Kansas. Key interviewees in this phase had been migrants for more than fifteen years while others arrived in Kansas during the lapse of 1995-2010. The second stage was a 60-day visit to Tres Valles, Veracruz. Members of the Tres Valles-Kansas migratory circuit were interviewed, including people who had never migrated, returning migrants, and circular migrants, that is, those who regularly travel to Kansas and return to Tres Valles. The third stage consisted of a stay of 150 days in Tres Valles to carry out direct observations and capture a dense description of the interviewees conditions and the distinctiveness of the social imaginary regarding the idea of the American dream. A focus group with four people, two women who have family in Kansas but never migrated, and two men who migrated and who, at the time of the interview, were living in Tres Valles, was also part of this stage. This last stage provided internal consistency because it delivered a cross of information obtained through individual interviews. A total of 34 interviews were conducted during fieldwork (in Kansas and Tres Valles) – 15 in Kansas and 19 in Tres Valles – with 14 women and 20 men. In Tres Valles, three different kind of individuals were interviewed – people who never migrated to Kansas, those who migrated and returned (deported or voluntarily), and those who keep travelling regularly between Tres Valles and Kansas (for business or for family visits).

Mexican migration to the United States

Through the years, Mexican migration to the United States created a variety of flows, including many emerging migratory circuits, that is, accelerated migratory processes which start in specific localities, towns, regions or states and are directed to particular destinations (Riosmena & Massey, 2012). In recent years, from 2010 to 2017, important variations have been registered in the number of Mexicans in the United States. For instance, in 2012 the number decreased to 11,7 million and, in 2012, 11,9 million were officially recorded (American Community Survey [ACS], 2000-2016). Historically, the area from which most of the Mexican migrants left in the beginning in the twentieth century was Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacan, San Luis Potosi, and Zacatecas (Durand, Massey & Zenteno, 2001). However, other regions from Southeast Mexico became relevant in the expulsion of migrants to the United States, among which we find Veracruz (Cohen, 2004; Smith, 2006; Rosas, 2008). The data collected for the census and similar surveys do not show the delicate narratives that emerge between the point of origin of the Mexican migrants and the destination areas in the United States.

Veracruz represented one of the Mexican states with the highest levels of migration to the United States nationwide in the last 30 years. In 2002, Veracruz was in fifth place among the areas with the highest number of migrants to the United States, after Jalisco, Michoacan, Guanajuato, and the State of Mexico (INEGI, 2002). However, Nava (2012) found that almost 90 percent of those who migrated from Veracruz to the United States went undocumented. Migrants came mainly from rural areas and from the agricultural and livestock sector. The increase in emigration from Veracruz continued, but by 2010 Veracruz occupied the sixth position with a total of 59,772 migrants, while Puebla was fifth. Overall, migrants from Veracruz headed for different destinations, looking for work. Their migration was mainly due to economic reasons, although other explanations have been found, such as family reunification and even escaping violence. Interestingly, among people from Tres Valles, another reason was the experience of ‘being a migrant’ in Kansas as experiences are conveyed and sometimes exaggerated by those who migrate and are listened to by those who decide not to migrate or cannot migrate. Nevertheless, Tres Valles shows that recounted experiences from the North affect migration that originates in the South.

The American dream as national identity

The ideas of the national identity, built from the first steps taken by the pilgrims, represented a new way of understanding community and were crafted as a result of the influence of migratory waves from the old to the new continent. The formation of this new identity depended, according to Hochschild (1992, pp. 144-145), “on the combination of principles commonly understood, even

unconsciously assumed, about how to achieve success.” A powerful initial principle was the American dream, a concept based on the structure that a government can offer an individual effort, which aggregates values such as determination, hard work, bravery, and perseverance (Stoll, 2009; Hill & Torres, 2010). The thought of an opportunity of social mobility by migrating became one of the mainstays that sustained the idea of the American Dream (Cannon, 2003). It was James Truslow Adams who coined and repeatedly mentioned the American dream in his work titled *American epics* in 1931. This national vision and this way of living spread inside and outside the United States. Its citizens advocated for the responsibility of building a nation based on the idea of freedom, where success was the result of individual efforts and abilities, and by being members of a State with a constitutional scheme based on freedom, justice, and equality (Pollina, 2003). Such an identity clearly supports the importance of the individual stepping through the abundance of opportunities to the superabundance of a successful life, all through the laborious supremacy of work and effort (Sloterdijk, 2010). This identity was supported by the English Parliament,² often contrasted with the logic of dependence that the Spanish Crown exerted over New Spain.

The spread of the idea of the American dream could succeed thanks to premises such as free markets and capital, industry, science, and technology, which were thought to lead to peace, justice, and abundance (Sloterdijk, 2010). Although its costs for society and humanity in general were omitted, Herbert Spencer would proclaim the benefits of individualism defined by free market and capitalism on the same grounds (Alexander, 2008). This finds support in the fact that communities are also the result of historical processes, where identities are created not only from material conditions, but also from symbolic constructions.³ However, it should be noted that the symbolism of the American dream has not been a static idea throughout American history, and much less as a state of individual and communal life everyone can access on equal terms. In this sense, it seems that the American dream has conditions for minority groups, for example, Latin American migrants, Afro-descendants, groups of Native Americans, European migrants of the mid-twentieth century, all of whom are representative cases of groups related to periphery of the ideals of the dominant groups that are the *chosen* to access the benefits of the American dream (Cannon, 2003).

In the discourse built around the American dream, there is an embedded way of communicating to the world what the United States is. The representation of the American dream is an identity mask towards the exterior, which gathered momentum in the last years, with the campaign slogan of President Donald Trump since 2017: ‘Make America great again.’ In other words, the American dream was created as a persuasive product, an assemblage of meanings rooted in the national imaginary that cannot be completely understood until the individual has a close experience of such a product. This metaphoric fabric is elaborated and supported by the strong marketing in which the United

States defines itself as ‘The land of freedom,’ a kind of commercialized identity that receives criticism and praise at the same time. This causes frustration and resentment (Mead, 2011), as it is the case with undocumented migrants, who encounter difficulties in achieving the American dream. Therefore, each human act raising the issue of cultural (national) identity can be analyzed in the logic of its signification. This social imaginary is a way of being and belonging – and it spills across borders, attracting migrants, from Mexico and beyond, who want to settle in the United States and, among other objectives, achieve the desired American dream as a means to a better quality of life (Alba, 2006; Greer, 2013; Talwar, 2018; Castellanos & Gloria, 2018; Skolnick & Alvarado, 2019).

Finally, identity is a specific meaning that helps understand, for example, the influence and construction of the American dream (Rosenbaum, 2017; Mahler, Cogua-López & Chaudhuri, 2018; Linn, 2018). Among the different meanings given to ideology are “all the beliefs, explicitly political or propagandistic, based on strict and dogmatic principles (Marxist ideologies, fascist, conservatives, etc.)”. The community, with its own ideology, places itself in a series of semantic rules and communicates desirability. This means that a nation is sustained by a generalized discourse that sensibly impacts the behavior of citizens towards themselves, those that do not belong to the same national community, and those who might want to belong. This makes it possible to answer the questions considered in the beginning of this section.

Transnational social imaginary and migratory circuits

This study relies on two theories. The first was refined, but not originally introduced, by Cornelius Castoriadis, who used the works of others to underscore his own explanations. It has to do with the ideas that underlay a common identity – the values, the institutions, the laws, and the symbols of the community and its members. The same would apply to the social imaginary linked to the dynamic of transnational migration. This allows the establishment and formation of bridges and symbolic limits and, of course, of meaning, that regulates the saying and orients the action of the members of that society (Castoriadis, 1984). Strictly speaking, social imaginaries are socially constructed schemes (Pintos, 1995). It is likely that the social imaginary answers the question of why and how individuals act in specific areas and in specific social institutions and lays out the order of their values. Thus, social imaginaries’ dispositions create temporal patterns in which people’s actions are determined, that is, social significations that regulate people’s behavior. Starting with this notion, we try to determine the meaning of the idea of the American Dream among members of the migratory circuit between Tres Valles and Kansas, distinguishing transnational characteristics in the relationships present in this circuit, which cut across the United States-Mexico border.

The phenomenon of migration between Mexico and the United States has produced, throughout the years, simultaneous social relations (Rouse, 1989), and these transnational interconnections often challenge current theoretical interpretations about migration. This makes transnationalism the second piece of evidence that confers conceptual consistency to the transnational social imaginary because this perspective considers, among other demonstrations, individuals, identities, habits, and exchanges as units of analysis unit. The work of Glick-Schiller, Bash and Szanton-Blanc (1992) is most likely the first to formally explain transnationalism in this way.⁴ Transnationalism's perspective is thus part of the subjective analysis about migration (Glick-Schiller, Basch & Szanton-Blanc 1992; Gupta & Ferguson 1992; Rouse 1995). Transnationalism faces real complexities due to the effect that transnational circuits have on the localities involved (Fernández, 2012). Guarnizo and Smith (1999, p. 88) explained that "transnationalism is a multifaceted and multi-local process," that is, in its interpretations and explanations it will always include two or more geographical points where migrants establish relationships (Cano & Delano, 2007; Morawska, 2009; Fernández, 2012; Bohem, 2012). Since this approach may reveal the background and motivations that move individuals to create or maintain migratory circuits, the contribution of these works on the perspective of social imaginary is considered relevant for the analysis of migration.⁵

The transnational social imaginary is an analytical category, placed at the intersection of theoretical contributions and transnationalism, which helps to reflect on and identify interactions and significations among members of an emerging migratory circuit that features transnational activity. One of the advantages of this approach is the use of tools from phenomenology and ethnomethodology with its interest for symbolic interactionism. Finally, it should be noted that, while there are several theories on migration, we have concentrated here on explaining the advantages of the transnational theory of migration due to its keen analysis of the conditions that go beyond the most commonly examined factors for migration, i.e. economic sphere or the labor markets.⁶

Waking up from the American dream

It is possible to verify the correct use of the notion of transnational social imaginary as one that supports the understanding of *imagined communities* (Anderson, 1991), "imagine as..." which allows the merger of alternative discourses that are not completely subordinated to the American dream. The influence of the American dream is just the combination of the most representative social imaginary significations of the symbolic universe promoted by the United States, with a capacity to resolve legitimacy constructions and spread a distinctive way of acting to the members of this nation. Thus, the American dream is a discursive tool to construct a type of legitimacy that is not restricted to the social, cultural, and economic spheres, but includes international relations, war, and migratory politics, etc. In other words, the American dream has been con-

verted into one of the main driving forces for the spread of an ideology. At the same time, it is based on a way of being, doing and living in the American way: an artful construction built upon the hope of being successful in a specific place.

Therefore, the findings of this research allow us to corroborate and argue that the American dream, as a national ideology with repeated attempts at homogenization for the whole country, has attracted migrants who, among other goals they may have, want to achieve personal stability through means of economic achievements resulting in social welfare. The answers of the interviewees are a result of the interaction that originated from the transnational migration whereby a “double consciousness and hybrid identity” emerged (Kearney, 1991). The characteristics that have been found in the members of this emerging migratory circuit as those who have emigrated and those who have not seek to make sense of community. For the case analysed here, *Tresvallenses* have faced various conditioning factors, one of which is the knowing of a migrant community that is mainly targeting the state of Kansas in the United States. This is reflected in the ways of constructing a discourse that relates them to the migratory experience. The first *Tresvallenses* who settled in Kansas began to build a migratory network. While this network was strengthened through their actions (Durand, 2004; Cassarino, 2008), its existence ensured a specific way to translate the migratory experience. This was deposited in the speech of the people who communicated from Kansas and Tres Valles, broaching matters like the way of life, customs, language, food, and all the details that emanated in the circumstance of every emigrant.

When members of an emerging migratory circuit that never migrated and that have no intention to migrate are asked how they imagine Kansas, they focus on very specific aspects and answer: ‘There is work in there,’ ‘It is safer,’ ‘There they respect your rights,’ ‘You earn more money there, therefore there is less poverty,’ ‘It looks safer than here,’ etc. This is the image of Kansas *printed* in the words of those who have not yet had the opportunity to be there. Therefore, a society is how it is, thanks to its imaginary significations, its social imaginary. Those who had the opportunity to in both Tres Valles and Kansas describe the differences between the two in these terms:

Well, in Kansas, when I have been there, from what I have seen, there is lot of work, people work a lot but have their comforts; it’s a quiet and safe place, where you can walk safely. But in our country, as said, there is work, but is badly paid, people work a lot but do not earn much. People work for eating, for living, there are no comforts (Luna, woman 51 years old, married, travels to Kansas since 2010 at least once per year to visit friends and family with a type B1/B2 visa).

How do you imagine life in Kansas?

Illegal people, from what I have been told, do not have the same freedom that we have here in our own country. Therefore, they will always have some limitations and restrictions (Patricia, woman 56 years old, retired, lives in Tres Valle, she never migrated and has no intention to migrate).

How do you think is the life of a migrant in Kansas?

I have the theory that people live well in there, nowadays we know things are not as people picture them. If you are able to go up there, you will have a limited freedom, as they are not as free as they say (Mundo, man 27 years old, lives in Tres Valles and never migrated to Kansas. He considers he lives in poverty).

There is a common denominator in these answers, especially when people are asked how they imagine migrants' lives in Kansas: the word freedom as a reference (Pollina, 2003). When leaving behind, even if momentarily, what they had set up and the knowledge of being members of a type of society (and its particularly routine practices) to enter a world they belong to, but not in an ideal way, the person from Tres Valles faces and debates the dichotomy between the abandonment of practices and deeply rooted interpretations and going towards new ways of living. Not having documentation and working in Kansas presuppose disadvantages as stated by Patricia: 'limitations and restrictions.' The references of the people from Tres Valles about Kansas are influenced by the interaction with people who had the opportunity to be on 'the other side' and went back to Tres Valles to spread their views and establish and perpetuate a type of discourse in those that still had no chance or need to migrate. Antonio says,

Well no, I have never been there. I have been told that salaries are good, that people have more freedom to buy goods and have more comforts in their lives. It's a place where people migrate to work, to get better life opportunities (Antonio, single man 28 years old, lives in Tres Valles and never migrated to Kansas. He works in the fields).

Another one, Pablo, says,

I imagine that there is money, power, but for them; but from all the stories I listened from all the people that leave and emigrate, I heard that they live well but that they are not that free, they have to be careful. I don't know, I never went there (Pablo, man, 24 years old, lives in Tres Valles, he never migrated and has no interest in migrating).

Pablo and Antonio never went to Kansas and still refer to it based on what they 'have been told' or 'heard.' These statements are indicative of the construction of social imaginary significations promoted by the transnational migration in the migratory circuit between Tres Valles and Kansas. One answer to the ques-

tion of what is the first thing that comes to mind when hearing the word Kansas was,

I feel that those lands were conquered by Europeans; those lands were Latinas. They are currently a power. I actually don't know if that is how they picture it – as I have never been there, I never had the opportunity to know how it really is; but let's say that going to the US is like going to what you have always desired, although, I imagine, you do have to struggle (Mundo, man, 27 years old, lives in Tres Valles and never migrated to Kansas).

By saying 'I don't know if this is how they picture it,' Mundo, for instance, refers to the stories he heard about Kansas. The social imaginary, somehow, promotes the ability to question the established order of social reality within people from Tres Valles. Is Kansas really how they picture it? Actually, it is not, as those who have been in both places identify marked differences. Selene and Erika, interviewed on the same occasion, say that they imagine Kansas as a place where it is possible to find work, a better life, justice, and social peace, all of which are absent in Tres Valles. From this perspective, a double identity, built by the migration exchanges brought to this circuit, becomes evident (Kearney, 1991). We also see some points that give indications of the way in which migrants who have lived or are currently living in Kansas contribute to the development of a discourse pointing out the benefits of the American way of life.

For Selene, whose father has been living in Kansas for more than fifteen years, it is a synonym of family and work. Her brother, who came back to Tres Valles in 2016 after having lived in Kansas for about 12 years, told her that it is much easier to get a car there, a cell-phone, and rent a house or an apartment with all the comforts – all of which is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve if living and working in Tres Valles. Just like Erika, Selene says she would like to see her father, but if she goes to Kansas it would just be for a few weeks. She adds that she could not get used to the rhythm of life her recently deported brother mentioned. Erika maintains that same double reaction in relation to her living in Tres Valles, although, at the same time, she established an interpretation of her relation with Kansas. Erika has no exact memories about her mother, but she has been in contact with her since she was a child, first telephonically and afterwards through social media. Erika remembers her mother telling her over the phone repeatedly when she was a teenager that she would only be in Kansas for a certain time. For her part, Selene recounts that her mother confessed that

mija (daughter), I will soon return, I only came to save money, it is not so easy to live here as people tell them in Tres Valles before coming, that of the American dream becomes increasingly difficult, but I promise that as soon as I have enough savings I will be back.

From that moment, Erika says,

I made my own image of what it meant to emigrate and be in Kansas: work, work and work, the dream of the *gringos* is that, that's why I do not think that my mother will soon return to Tres Valles, possibly I'll go there first.

The latter are the basis for the creation of an established imaginary, that is, Erika, who never visited Kansas, can objectively see how Kansas is materially (buildings, streets, neighborhoods, etc.). The way to imagine Kansas starts being an objective approximation of what happens in the city where her mother lives. Erika affirms that, in this way, she has always lived in both places. She has always wanted to go to Kansas to meet her mother, although she does not want to go and work there because

... it looks like there are many things there and people spend all their time working. Here, I do not have many things, but my mother always economically supported me, sent me money and clothes. But I also think about my mother, that I have not seen her, if it wasn't for the pictures, I would not remember her. I am here, but sometimes I feel like going there with my mother. I am always wondering how things are there.

The transnational social imaginary allows the observation and analysis of variations in the social imaginary across time, as well as the relationships present among people who are part of a migratory dynamic (Vertovec, 2006). Like Erika and Selene, Gabriel and Alex keep that double life, being connected to both places, but the great difference is that Alex had the opportunity to stay in Tres Valles and in Kansas. Nevertheless, it is peculiar to hear how familiar they are with the experiences and events that take place in Kansas. To give a few examples, the four interviewees know of the existence of a place named *tresvallitos*, located in the metropolitan area of Kansas City, they know the conditions in which many migrants are living, and they are also aware of the news and restrictions that there are currently being implemented in Kansas due to the migratory law adjustment. Another characteristic of this imaginary developed from transnational relationships is the cognitive ability to create a continuous flow of representations, intentions, affections, and desires. The social imaginary is interested in identifying the consolidation and reproduction of the society itself grounded on the institution of rules, conceptions, and values, which are distilled in the meanings of a community shared by each individual that belongs to it. Understanding and finding out the particular way migrants see the world, which Rouse (1989) called "cultural bifocality," is part of the discourse of the members of this circuit. For instance,

My father took me to Kansas when I was very young. He told us we could have a better life here...I keep my feet on earth due to my situation. When you don't have much, you learn to value (Valentín, man, 21 years old, his parents brought him to Kansas when he was 5 years old. He benefited from the DACA program).

By creating a connection between their destination in the United States and their place of origin in Mexico, the members of this circuit bring experiences with them that allow them to revive the conditions in which they lived. In this respect, Valentín says ‘when you do not have much, you learn to value.’ The fact of ‘not having’ is an inherited experience linked to his emigrant condition. In his birthplace, he suffered poverty together with his family and this was conveyed by his parents who were also interviewed. His father was the first who went to Kansas, and years later, hoping to gather the family, he sent somebody to bring his wife and two kids, among them Valentín, then 5 years old. But Valentín’s father does not forget his roots, and hopes to be able to go back to his town, although, since he feels already adapted to the way of living and the safety Kansas represents, he is unlikely to stay in Mexico. As we saw, the primary objective for Valentín’s father in emigrating was the intention to access a better quality of life, and, as in other registered cases, he had already imagined what his life would be like when he arrived in Kansas before leaving.

I had it as a picture in my head. I knew that when I arrived in Kansas I could work and earn as much money as I wanted, I had already heard from friends who were working there and how they were doing very well, they were building a house in Tres Valles; those things encouraged me, but nobody told me the other side of the coin. The first months I had a bad time because I arrived in the winter, I was not used to the cold, I was about to return, but how would they see me in Tres Valles if I returned after a few months? As a loser. I did not let myself be beaten, I missed my family so much that, years later I decided to bring everyone to Kansas, it was not a simple thing. I can tell you that things are not as they told me. On the one hand, it is true that you can live better than in Mexico, but at the same time, just as you earn more money, you spend it the same way. The American dream is different when you arrive in Kansas from what you imagine when you are in Mexico (Abel, Valentín’s father. He has lived for 17 years in Kansas).

‘Waking up’ from the American dream was a process that the *Tresvallenses* have experienced over time. A version of the American dream aligned with the own circumstances that the *Tresvallenses* can be discerned. Amongst those who have not emigrated, there is a clear dichotomy between those who defend the possibility of achieving the American dream and those who believe it to be practically a utopia. The three people who crossed the border and live in Kansas now define that dream as the perfect lure to leave Tres Valles in most cases. In essence, the American dream of the *Tresvallenses* has changed as has the migration circuit itself and the macroeconomic trends of both countries, moving away from the pure American conception of the American dream.

The shared dream: building a transnational migration circuit

The statements of the members of this migration circuit reviewed so far are evidence of constant interaction despite the geographical distance between Tres Valles and Kansas. However, social networks have not weakened among *Tresvallenses* from one side of the circuit. Quite the contrary, affective ties and exchanges, especially with regard to discourses about what they interpret as the American dream, the transnational way of living, have been strengthened over the years. When the migration began, some exaggeration of the stories brought and transmitted by the first immigrants to Kansas, who omitted some details and magnified others, was identified in Tres Valles. For the last 8 to 10 years, the migration of the *Tresvallenses* began to exhibit a circular pattern and some *Tresvallenses* could visit their relatives and friends in Kansas on tourist visas, important developments which began to demystify the experiences of emigrants and the reality of living in a place like Kansas. Besides the evolution in the flow and rhythm of the migration of *Tresvallenses* to the North, the idea of the American dream continued to create followers and detractors alongside new ways of seeing and understanding the effects of migration. For example, when asked how she feels about this double world, between Kansas and Tres Valles, Juana inhabits, she says,

as an immigrant. If I have to go to Mexico, and I have to go, I do not see it that way, as they send us for a week and then we come back. I think that, despite being Mexico our country, it would be difficult to get adapted, although we know this is not our country either (Juana, woman, 36 years old. She has been living in Kansas for more than 15 years).

Gabriela, who has lived in Tres Valles and Kansas, identifies the main differences as,

I started going in 2002. It has its pros and cons. I am there and have a more comfortable life, from an economic point of view, life is more comfortable, I like it, if working and earning well you are fine there, because you can give yourself some luxuries that you cannot have here, as for example go every weekend to the restaurant with your family. This is something you cannot do very often in here, but one is always thinking about his country. (Gabriela, woman, 61 years old, she lives 6 months in Kansas and 6 months in Tres Valles, she has a North-American residence. Emigrant since 2002).

In Kansas, the familiarity and influence of the permanent and circular emigrants is increasing. Juana says that if she would have to leave the United States, voluntarily or for repatriation reasons, she would go back to Kansas as soon as possible. The meaning of 'we are coming back' applies then in both cases: the objective and the subjective, the reality and the imaginary, the person that is in Tres Valles as repatriated and the person that stays in Kansas as an immigrant. The social imaginary of the members of this migratory circuit is

characterized by this double presence, being in both places at the same time (Vertovec, 2006), confirmed by Gabriela when she says, ‘one is always thinking about his country.’ The American dream is still longed for by people from Tres Valles and driven by the anecdotes that migrants tell from Kansas:

I have not been there, but I have seen some documentaries and movies, and I have been commented and told about experiences there. They tell about people that found work and that some prospered while others not. But it depends on the mentality people have when moving to Kansas. I think that those that went with the intention to live an experience and obtain an economic benefit, managed it (Darío, man, 48 years old, married. He never migrated to Kansas and has no interest in migrating. He has family and friends living in Kansas).

When Felipe imagines life as an immigrant in Kansas and hears about what they call American dream, he thinks,

For immigrants it is a difficult life. For the person who has no documentation is a hard life, they work but they live as criminals, as they cannot be outside in the fresh air, because if the immigration police sees them, they take them. Therefore, the problem for us, Mexicans, migration...I don’t know about the US, but what people tell me is that it is a very sad thing, because all those people that have no documents are working in fear, hiding themselves, as if they stole or killed. I think that this is how it is, I have never been to the US, but many people that go and have no documents told me that they often have to hide when immigration police arrive, when the same bosses alert them, and sometimes the bosses do not want them anymore and alert the police so that they can take them (Felipe, man, 61 years old. He tried emigrating to Kansas several times but with no success. He has family and friends living in Kansas).

Martín, another interviewee, speaks more directly about the American dream,

A fast life, a very busy life due to work. You have to be fast and work hard in order to achieve something. People say that the American dream is possible, but you have to work hard and many people cannot stand that (Martín, man, 74 years old, married, lives in Tres Valles and never emigrated. He has family and friends in Tres Valles).

None of the three interviewees has been to Kansas, but the image they have about it has been shaped by what has been recounted by those who have, by what they have observed in social media, pictures, by the stories of migrants that came back, or by the experiences of circular migrants. For instance, when Darío was asked to describe how he imagined life in Kansas, he stated ‘People go to work, some of them prospered, while others not.’ Challenging the idea of the American dream is a way to turn to the construction of a social imaginary, especially to look for an interpretation of how the idea of a faraway place that

was believed to ensure immediate economic progress became a place that also requires great effort once it is ascertained that things are not as easy as imagined initially (Bourdieu, 2005). The rhythm of life in Tres Valles is different from the one that migrants from Tres Valles have in Kansas. First, this occurs because the main reason for staying in Kansas is economic progress, making it necessary to have one or more jobs. Several migrants had up to three jobs at the same time, which puts their health and wellbeing at risk.⁷ Only through this strategy can they achieve a certain level of capital and invest it, in the best-case scenario, in their place of origin – by buying lands, building houses, establishing commercial businesses, among other things. In order to ‘achieve something,’ apart from moving several kilometres up North, it is necessary to dip into previous imaginary constructions: what they have listened to and what they themselves participated in elaborating.

The American dream has developed, more and more, as an alternative to the adverse conditions in Tres Valles, although locals do not completely consider all the problems they will encounter trying to achieve it. This tells us that the decision to emigrate does not always have a rational origin, but is also dependent on social imaginary constructions. For this reason, in the social imaginary of people from Tres Valles people, the ‘busy life,’ as Martín defined it, is the characteristic rhythm of work for migrants in Kansas, contrary to a much more anodyne rhythm of daily life in Tres Valles. This comparison made by a person that only heard that from family and friends, creates an imagination condition: why is the rhythm of life perceived as different in a different place than that of origin? Are that region’s habits? Is the daily work effort, and its accelerated rhythm the only way to reap benefits from the American dream? Can migrants from Tres Valles achieve the American dream despite their irregular migratory condition? When asking Alex about working in Kansas and in Tres Valles, he answers that the differences are big. His monthly salary is 2,500 dollars, an amount that he cannot attain in Tres Valles working with the same conditions. Once back in Tres Valles, Alex built a discourse that, among other considerations that influence his current context, always refers to the American dream, to the life in Kansas, its comforts, the access to well paid jobs, a different quality of life from that in Tres Valles.

For people from Tres Valles like Erika and Alex, to live the American dream, is a unique expression of a transnational discourse, which shares elements of a transnational lifestyle that was first heard from third parties and then integrated in order to create particular opinions in each local person. Some considerations relevant to the American dream are easy to observe in the answer given by Noel when he was asked about the decision to emigrate to Kansas and then return to Tres Valles:

Well, at that time it was not my decision. I was underage and my mother decided to go there, looking for an improvement, to ensure a better life for us, she went with this plan. I think I had this idea in my head as well, in a

certain way, but afterwards, when I got older I realized that this thing about the dream was just an attraction for those that wanted to leave, because being there is quite difficult especially for us, Mexican migrants. There, one can have many things, but does not have any spare time as is working all the time, and here, in Tres Vales one has time but no work, this is how things are (Noel, man, 27 years old, married with two kids. Currently lives in Tres Valles. He lived in Kansas for three years).

Economic improvement was Noel's parents' plan when they decided to migrate for the first time to Kansas in 2002. Yet, this was not a completely new place for them as two of Noel's brothers were already in Kansas. That might have been the means through which the stories arrived to Tres Valles and may still be reaching Noel's imaginary: 'I think I had this idea in my head as well.' Another condition for the imaginary to take hold is the heritage left for future generations as possible candidates for the migrant flow of this circuit. It can be said here, as a conclusion, that the constitution of an emerging migratory circuit could not be possible without the constant and sustained creation of a social imaginary, especially in relation to the idea of the American dream. When narrating their experiences, interviewees expose their imaginary about what Kansas means, the way to perceive and interpret the American dream, and the nostalgic feelings of those that emigrated from Tres Valles. This reflexive ability identified in the people from Tres Valles confers a role to the language (discourse) that offers an explanation about their way to act in social life, how they assign meaning and their location as individual subjects of certain historical, and social circumstances.

Conclusions

The first goal of this work was to answer several questions: How does the idea of the American dream affect the imaginary of the members of a migratory circuit? How do the migrants share their stories and experiences of the American dream with the other members of the circuit? Does this idea of the American dream drive migration from Tres Valles to Kansas? How does the idea of the American dream change once the migrant arrives at destination? And, finally, is there is a specific idea about the American dream in those *Tres-valleenses* who never experienced the emigration? First of all, we suggest that future analysis should consider the influence of the idea of the American Dream in those who arrive to the United States as migrants and in those who, without having migrated, maintain an influence in the discourse that comes from the North, in this case, from Kansas.

In the first place, the idea of the American dream is an ideology that has been built thanks to a kind of United States national marketing that builds on the principles of equality, justice, freedom, persistence, and individual effort. Nevertheless, it is worth keeping in mind that the idea of the American dream

is not homogeneous and does not apply equally to minority or immigrant groups, as in this case to *Tresvallenses*. Secondly, the American dream exists, but the migrants involved in this migratory circuit had the opportunity to judge it for themselves once they were faced with specific social imaginary significations and some turned against it. In this moment of uncertainty for Mexican migrants, the American dream is no longer a life's project that symbolizes the guaranteed achievement of success through the individual effort. Yet, in the first ten years of the creation of this circuit, the American dream was key in the formation of migration networks (Massey, 1987; Massey et al., 1993; Portes, 1995). Thus, the men who initially left for Kansas, in time began to take their families and close friendships with them and, before the restrictive immigration policies were implemented in the United States starting 2001, their migration pattern turned circular, returning to their place of origin where they scattered their experience of success in the North. Together with the economic crises in the United States since 2007, this contributed to a new orientation as the American dream increasingly became an objective that no longer applied to the *Tresvallenses* migrants. The criticism that the members of this migratory circuit have levelled against this idea in recent years should be understood in this context.

Those who had the opportunity to be in Kansas and returned to Tres Valles did so with a much clearer picture of what it means to make the American dream a reality. On the one hand, they point out that this life's project can only be achieved through hard work and that not everyone has the chance to access it. On the other hand, they indicate that the most attractive thing that the American dream offers is the comfort that migrants can reach, but this is limited to the economic aspect. In this sense, the *Tresvallenses* also criticize the way of life adopted by immigrants in Kansas who do not have enough time or freedom to dedicate themselves to other activities other than work. Based on the answers of the members of this migratory circuit and the discussion of the findings, the transnational social imaginary – as a tool for analysis – has revealed some important aspects: a) the repercussions of the social imaginary institutions of a dominant discourse (idiosyncrasy); b) the way in which these members acquired a specific way to refer to the idea of the American dream from their migratory experiences, which they then transmit to their family and friends who are still in Tres Valles; c) the idea of the American dream is powerful motivation that attracts migrants (to Kansas) although there are also driving forces acting from the point of origin (Tres Valles), such as the deficient work opportunities and; d) the creation of an alternative to the idea of the American dream among the members of this migratory circuit who still do not emigrate along with the circular migrants travelling between Tres Valles and Kansas at least once year. Therefore, this emerging migratory circuit with transnational characteristics has been created and maintained through the social imaginary significations that are built in the place of origin as something that is heard and is known about the place of destination.

In this sense, it is sufficiently well-documented that the main causes of creation of migratory flows are issues related to economic aspects, specifically the labor market that are distilled in the difference between the rate of employment and salaries in the place of origin and the place of destination, i.e. supply and demand. However, behind the purely economic reasons, the members of the Tres Valles-Kansas migratory circuit indicate that there is an attraction that is based on promises such as quick access to a higher quality of life, greater security, social mobility, which can also be read as aspects of symbolic order that have motivated their exit to the North and have increased and sustain the flow of migrants. Finally, these conclusions contribute to current studies of migration by recalibrating the conceptual analysis to consider how aspects such as national ideologies are combined with economic aspects to influence the decisions of migrants to leave, stay or move between their place of origin and the place of destination. Moreover, the American dream seems to be changing from the conception of the melting pot to an American creed that can be described as a successful way of life that is not for all those who desire to enter a space where the American dream becomes real. As such, the idea of assimilation is exchanged for the idea of selection.

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Alfredo Sánchez Carballo is PhD in Social Sciences by the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, FLACSO, México. He has written on immigration, poverty, social capital and vulnerable groups. He is currently working on a documentary on the lives of migrants in the northern border of Mexico. Address: Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez Av del Charro 450, Partido Romero, 32310 Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico.
E-mail: alfredo.sanchez@uacj.mx

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Notes

- 1 In this sense, theories that discuss the importance of networks in the formation of migratory flows indicate that, on the one hand, social networks and capital play an important role in explaining migration as a social process, where social and human elements maintain the local and international migration levels (Massey, Alarcón, Durand & González, 1987); On the other hand, this theory explains that information, beliefs, assets, and money circulate alongside people in the constant interaction between migratory communities of origin and destination. This facilitates the formation of networks that help reduce costs of the transfer and strengthens migratory flows (Durand, 2004; Cassarino, 2008).
- 2 With regard to the differentiating features between the ‘colonies’ of the North and the South of the New Continent, Robert Putnam (2000, p. 179) claims that “North Ameri-

- cans received the civic tradition legacy, while Latin Americans were receptors of the traditions of vertical dependence and exploitation”; therefore, the national identity that developed in the countries of the South is completely different when compared with those of the North.
- 3 Jeffrey Alexander (2008, p. 162) offers an argument in support of this statement: “...from its beginning, almost four hundred years ago, the United States represented not only a geographic entity but also a place for imagination. It has been the place where “anything is possible”, where apparently there are no limits to what people can achieve. It represented the land of opportunities, inventions and freedom”.
 - 4 The works of Georges (1990) and Kearney (1991) were fundamental to provide a theoretical framework for the subsequent approaches and discussions of transnationalism as a theory for the study of migration.
 - 5 To elaborate on the issue of migration and social imaginaries, see Meyer, 2005; Aliaga, 2008; García & Verdú, 2008; Salazar, 2011; Shaffer, Ferrato & Jinnah, 2017.
 - 6 See Massey et al., 1993 for an in-depth explanation of various migration theories.
 - 7 As Cannon (2003, p. 552) puts it, the American dream “teaches its believers to value ambition over satisfaction, so it is not surprising that so few are happy.”

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