OPINION

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Mexico Is Becoming a Beacon

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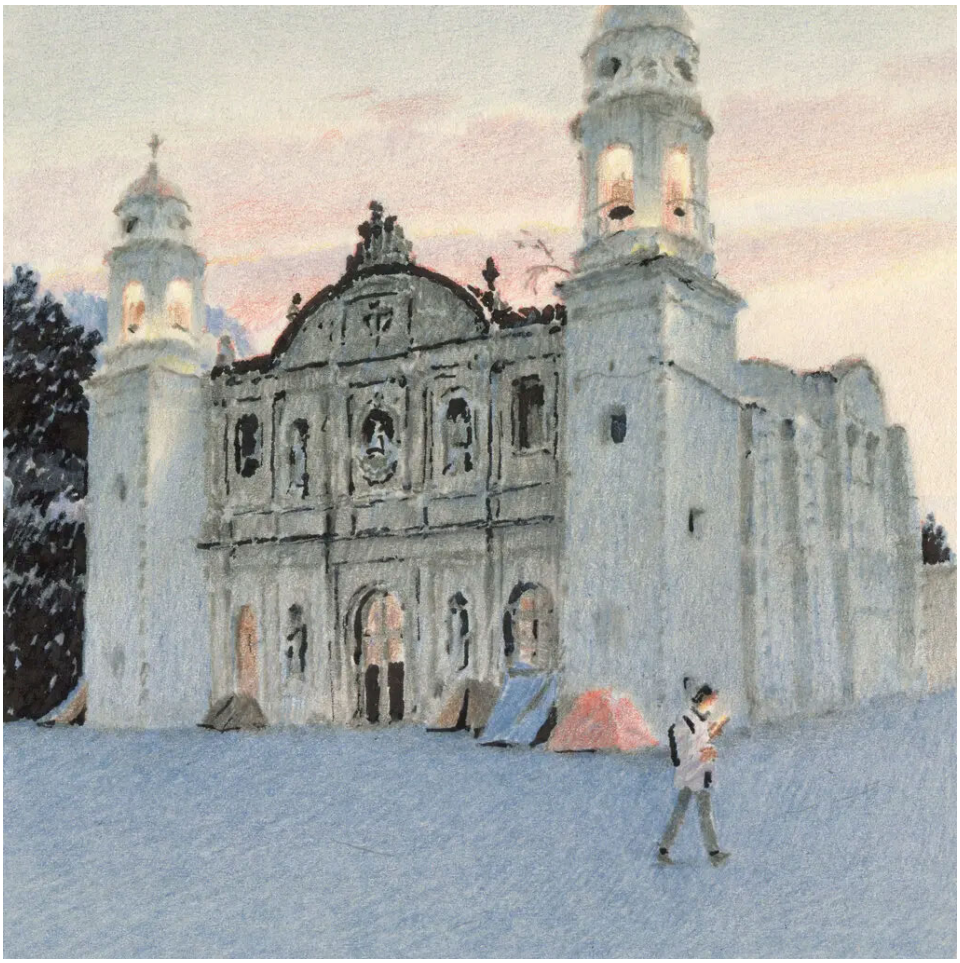

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This essay is part of The Great Migration, a series by Lydia Polgreen exploring how people are moving around the world today.

We know one type of migration well.

It's millions of people from poorer countries traveling mostly to wealthy countries — where they receive, increasingly, a hostile reception — in search of safety and opportunity. But there's another type of migration taking place the world over. Smaller, quieter yet persistent, it involves people from wealthy countries seeking new lives elsewhere, sometimes in other wealthy places but also in poorer countries that have traditionally sent rather than received migrants.

Perhaps nowhere on the globe are these two waves of migration converging more starkly than in Mexico City, a vast urban agglomeration that has been transformed over the past two decades. It was once known for violent crime, choking haze and broken infrastructure. For decades, many of its ambitious citizens sought to leave, part of a vast tide of migration across the country's northern border with the United States, a nation many Mexicans saw as a beacon of opportunity.

These days, Mexico City is itself a beacon, drawing millions of visitors from across the world. It is a pulsing center of global culture that rivals any of the great European capitals. Its historic parks and plazas have been reborn. It is a culinary juggernaut, where securing a seat at top restaurants requires ingenuity and once-obscure taco stands garner viral, TikTok-fueled fame.

The city's economy has thrived, too, driven by the growth of a wide range of businesses. There are bustling factories, high-tech start-ups, banking and insurance companies and even a rapidly expanding global film and television business, making not just Spanish-language content for Latin American audiences and art films but also big-budget streaming shows and Super Bowl commercials.

People at Parque México in La Condesa, a neighborhood in Mexico City popular with American expatriates. Luis Antonio Rojas for The New York Times

This spring I traveled to Mexico City — my first visit in more than a decade — to see these transformations up close and speak to the new arrivals drawn there. For some, this city is a consolation prize, especially to those who made the treacherous journey from distant lands hoping to cross into the United States. Now that the Trump administration has all but sealed the paths to cross that frontier, many migrants are settling down in Mexico City, some from as far afield as China even choosing it as their primary destination. They hope to build safe and prosperous lives there, even if they can only cling to the city's edges.

For others, especially young, educated Americans who went to the city when the pandemic untethered them from offices, life in Mexico City offers the classic bargain enjoyed by citizens of wealthy countries who move to poorer ones. But young Americans I spoke to also talked about a sense of dwindling opportunity at home and, with Donald Trump's return to the White House, a sense of political alienation. Offering a chance to live well for less under

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the leadership of a popular leftist president, Mexico provides a welcome antidote to both dissatisfactions.

For Mexico, a country with little history of welcoming outsiders in large numbers, these new cohorts are a challenge. The new arrivals from the south come to a nation marked by deep inequality and facing an uncertain economic future as the global trade system shudders under Trump's tariff regime. The well-heeled arrivals from the north are no easier to accommodate. They are reshaping economic and cultural life, especially in the most fashionable and historic parts of the city, sowing resentment and fraying the social fabric.

But Mexico's transformation, from a place people flee from to one they settle in, presents an opportunity, too. As the United States turns inward under Trump, Mexico — for so long in its neighbor's shadow — stands to benefit, drawing in people to power a better future. Already Mexico City, a megalopolis of around 22 million people, is a microcosm of the way our tumultuous world is changing.

For much of Michelda Supreme's life, her homeland, Haiti, has been in free fall: beset by disasters, both natural and man-made. But in 2022 the walls of the home she shared with her parents and siblings in the coastal city of Gonaives started closing in. Heavily armed gangs were battling for turf. Trained as a kindergarten teacher, she could not work — what parent would send a child out amid the open gunplay? Even leaving the house to buy food was often too dangerous.

"I would spend months inside," she told me.

She had little choice but to join the vast exodus of Haitians hoping to find safety. She had a sister working in Chile, a destination for many Haitians, but Supreme's family encouraged her to go elsewhere: north, to the United States. Like millions of other people who have sought to reach the United States by crossing its southern border, she had never really thought of Mexico as anything but another vast expanse to cross on the long, difficult journey north.

Michelda Supreme in Tláhuac, on the outskirts of Mexico City. Luis Antonio Rojas for The New York Times

“I never saw it as a destination. I saw it as a point of transit,” she said. And a difficult transit it was, from Nicaragua through Honduras and Guatemala, then to Tapachula, a lawless city that feeds off the desperation of migrants. She traveled largely on foot, moving north with a caravan of hundreds of Central Americans, Venezuelans and other Haitians.

“You don’t know how long you’re walking. You don’t know what routes you’re taking,” she told me, an edge of astonishment in her voice at having undertaken such an odyssey. One night, somewhere between Tapachula and Mexico City, she awoke to find her suitcase gone. It contained just about everything she owned but the clothes she wore.

When she got to Mexico City, she connected with a distant cousin who had made the same journey. He was renting a room in a suburb where many Haitians have settled, and he offered her a place to stay. He had encouraged her to try CBP One, the app the Biden administration used to allow migrants to apply for asylum in the United States while waiting in Mexico. He was able to secure an appointment and ultimately was able to get to the United States.

But Supreme hesitated to hit the road again. Mexico City can be vast and overwhelming, but she was surprised to find that people were quite friendly and welcoming. She found it easy to pick up Spanish. At a public Wi-Fi hot spot she often used to call her family when she felt lonely, a Mexican woman struck up a conversation.

“This woman helped me get clothes, helped me get food,” Supreme said. “It made me feel more safe and more comfortable in Mexico, that there’s good people.” She decided to stay.

She has managed to find work with the help of Casa Refugiados, an organization that placed her in a paid training program — though now that the program has ended, she is back on the hunt for a job and living off her savings. She would like to teach again. It is not hard to imagine Supreme, with an easy smile and a face framed by tidy ringlet curls, charming even the most rambunctious gaggle of kindergartners. But her diploma was among the many things she lost when her suitcase was stolen, and she has no way to prove her credentials without it. So she is trying to be flexible.

“I’m open to see what happens,” she said. “And I just need to be patient.”

Supreme is not alone in choosing Mexico ahead of its northern neighbor. Under Trump — who has terminated the CBP One app, effectively shut down the border to asylum seekers and unleashed a cruel deportation campaign — the United States is turning into something darker and uglier. Mexico City’s allure, by contrast, is only growing.

Migrant children playing in a park in Mexico City. Luis Antonio Rojas for The New York Times

In the long line to apply for asylum on the city's outskirts, I met a young couple from Cuba who hoped to turn their dashed dream of settling in the United States into a life in Mexico instead, using their degrees in two booming industries, tourism and technology. In the United States, white-collar jobs would almost certainly be out of reach for new migrants who don't speak English, and their training would almost certainly be discounted, as it is for so many migrants. Cities across the United States are full of migrant nurses, lawyers and teachers who end up working as home health aides, taxi drivers and construction laborers.

In Mexico City, on the other hand, employers are hungry for workers. Officials at the U.N. refugee agency in Mexico City told me that they cannot keep up with the demand for workers with work permits. They have placed thousands of workers, they said, such as a Congolese pharmacist at a major health care company and a Haitian migrant working at Contramar, one of the city's hottest fine dining destinations.

But standing between many migrants and jobs is the country's system for processing asylum seekers, which is creaking under the strain of rapidly rising claims. In 2013, 1,295 people applied for asylum; by 2023, the number had increased to more than 140,000. Though the number dropped by almost half last year, as many migrants vied for appointments through the CBP app, it continues to overwhelm the system. These bottlenecks leave migrants in limbo, waiting.

Until recently, the government agency that processes asylum applications was based in Colonia Juárez, a beautiful historic neighborhood near the city center. But in 2023, as the Biden administration tightened access to asylum proceedings for migrants, more people began seeking asylum in Mexico. They also started camping out in one of the neighborhood's public squares, where they lived in squalid conditions without regular access to toilets or showers. A neighborhood group formed to urge the Mexican government to move the migrants elsewhere.

I met members of the group one evening at a coffee shop a few blocks from the plaza, which the government cleared last June. The residents, who called their group The Street Is Not a Shelter, said that they were not opposed to migration but wanted the Mexican government to live up to its commitment to treat migrants humanely.

A plaza in Colonia Juárez where migrants previously formed a camp. Luis Antonio Rojas for The New York Times

"We are not xenophobes. We're not racist," said Emmanuel Ruiz, one of the group's leaders, a lawyer who described himself as a "right-wing guy." "The problem with this is that government is not protecting the human rights of the immigrants."

He had formed an unexpected alliance with one of his neighbors, a self-described leftist writer and retired professor, María Natalia Reus Anda.

"Immigration is a global problem because imperialist countries didn't understand the trajectory or the impact of their policies on other countries," she told me. "It's as if they launch a boomerang and it comes right back."

Reus Anda has lived in Colonia Juárez for most of her life, in Edificio Mascota, a sprawling landmarked building. It was built by a French tobacco merchant around 1912, taking up a whole city block, with handsome apartments originally intended mostly for company executives. The complex became popular with local

artists, and Reus Anda bought her apartment more than 40 years ago. With its tree-lined private lanes and floor-to-ceiling windows that open onto resplendent courtyards, the complex, like much of the rest of the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood, is catnip to wealthy foreigners who want to live in Mexico City.

I walked Reus Anda home after the community meeting and listened to her rail about the foreigners invading her neighborhood. She pointed out a noisy bar that had replaced a grocery store, declaring, “When I hear people speaking Spanish, I want to kiss them.” Gentrification, she said, was changing her neighborhood, driving out longtime residents and businesses with higher rents and dwindling local clientele.

María Natalia Rues Anda at her building in Colonia Juárez. Luis Antonio Rojas for The New York Times

Many people I met in Mexico City — journalists, writers, artists, scholars — complained that they had been forced to move out of neighborhoods fashionable with American global nomads because rents had skyrocketed. In conversations with middle- and upper-class Chilangos, as the residents of Mexico City are called, it often seemed that wealthy interlopers from the north were a bigger problem than poor people coming from the south.

In an elegant cafe around the corner from the Colonia Juárez plaza that had played host to a migrant squatter camp, I met one of those supposed interlopers, Chuck Muldoon. He did not come across Mexico's southern border; he flew there from California, where he is from, initially as a tourist.

Muldoon graduated from a top university in 2019 with a degree in linguistics and then taught himself to write code. The logic of programming reminded him of the complicated Latin grammatical structures that he enjoyed puzzling through in college. He got a job as a programmer but got laid off during the second year of the pandemic. Not long after, a college classmate from Mexico City invited him to visit for a few weeks. He was enchanted. In late 2021, with a new job that allowed him to work remotely, one of his new Mexican friends offered him a room to rent. He jumped at the opportunity.

Muldoon made a point of learning Spanish as quickly as possible and has made mostly Mexican friends, he said. He has a valid residency permit and pays taxes on money he earns in Mexico. "I try to live in an ethical way here," he told me. When I asked him about the impact Americans like him were having on the city's culture and economy, he said he tried to be conscious of his role as an outsider. "When you think of the word 'gentrification,' it's from the Latin word for 'people.'" A lot of his fellow Americans in Mexico City, he said, "are leaving gentrification in their own cities."

A cafe in Colonia Juárez where Chuck Muldoon often works. Luis Antonio Rojas for The New York Times

Far from gilded, Muldoon was recently laid off from his latest tech job. But the city's relatively low cost of living means it's no disaster. "Right now, I have enough saved to kind of coast for at least the rest of the year," he said. "Here, my spending is pretty low."

It isn't just cheap and stylish living that keeps Muldoon in Mexico. Strongly opposed to the Trump administration, he admires Claudia Sheinbaum, Mexico's leftist president, and her party, Morena. "Despite not being able to vote in this country, I consider myself a supporter of Morena, of what they've done for the average Mexican," he said.

"Whenever I hear her speak, I kind of wish we could have that."

Ever since the two nations were born, in elite settler struggles for independence from European imperial powers a few decades apart, Mexico and the United States have offered mirror images of what America might be. Both were born in bloody conquest and stained by genocide and chattel slavery. But the

founders of the United States saw themselves as innocent discoverers of a new world, unburdened by the past and racing toward a limitless future. Their founding documents were built on a creed of individual rights and freedom, though not for the enslaved.

The Spanish Americans to their south, by contrast, "knew that America was a stolen continent," as the Yale historian Greg Grandin writes in his new history of the Americas. The Constitutions of the nations they founded reflected this understanding of their inheritance, insisting on the well-being of all of society, not just the individual. "If you failed to protect both," Grandin writes, "you would have neither."

Both have failed to live up to the promise of their founding ideals. But until recently, history might judge the United States as the clear winner of this continental wager. It became not just the richest, most powerful nation on earth but also the unquestioned destination for the world's most ambitious migrants. Mexico has wrestled with many struggles — crime, poverty, corruption, a stagnant economy and a very long stretch of torpid, one-party rule — that have sapped its vast potential, including its people's. For so long, many millions of its citizens have voted with their feet, heading north in search of opportunity.

But the United States under Trump is abandoning longstanding alliances that gave it military and diplomatic strength, upending the global trade system that made it fantastically rich and barring migrants who made it diverse and innovative. Trump, it seems, wants to rewind history and take the United States backward. Mexico has a new chance to move forward.

It is bedeviled by myriad problems, to be sure. Its economy is highly polarized and unequal, "two Perus plus one Spain," the economist Santiago Levy quipped to me, creating "a country that in the last quarter of a century has experienced zero productivity growth." What's more, Sheinbaum's embrace of her predecessor's disastrous plans to politicize the judiciary poses serious risks to the country's political system. And while Mexico has so far evaded the most catastrophic tariff scenario, its economic future still depends on the United States, the destination of 80 percent of Mexico's exports.

Area residents in Parque México in April. Luis Antonio Rojas for The New York Times

And yet there are grounds for hope. Sheinbaum has not only moved swiftly to seek trade deals with other major partners but also responded to Trump's bluster with a blend of toughness and restraint, earning praise from many Mexicans (and even Trump himself). Her extraordinary popularity gives her leverage, should she choose to use it wisely, to transform the country into an economic powerhouse and an exemplar of the welcoming values the United States has abandoned. In my many conversations in the country, I was left with a sense of momentum and purpose.

So it is perhaps not surprising that migrants from rich and poor nations alike are looking at Mexico anew, despite its challenges, and wondering if it might be the place to pursue their dreams of a different future.

More from The Great Migration