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**Not from around here:
The political acculturation of Mexican migrants
in New Zealand**

by

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To the memory of
Doña Inés Rivera viuda de Merelo,
my grandmother

Abstract

This thesis aims to investigate the political acculturation of Mexican migrants in New Zealand. More specifically, it is an exploration of the processes undertaken by people to re-construct the political world in which they now live, having been brought up in a different political context. Unlike most studies on the subject which rely on positivist assumptions, this one is based on an interpretive semiotic perspective through which political acculturation is understood as a process that leads to the construction of understandings of a new political world upon which political action is taken.

Drawing on theories of acculturation and political culture, and through the analysis of the narratives of sixty members of the Mexican community in New Zealand collected over the course of three years, this study sees culture as a relevant aspect of adapting to a new political environment. From this perspective people are born and brought up not only in specific territories, but inside semiotic communities, cultural circles of shared intelligibility that guide the relationships between individuals and the state. Whenever people enter a new country they do so accompanied by a full political semiotic repertoire that they have extensively used throughout their lives.

By centring attention on acculturative processes, the study unveils a complex world of cultural re-construction to which four intertwined dimensions are crucial: perception, cognition, emotion and action. It argues that the constant interplay of these elements in a transnational political environment shapes a unique political cultural framework used to understand New Zealand political culture, its institutions and practices. It is in this context that political acculturation is neither seen as a knowledge transferring process nor as a mere product of exposure but as an intricate and long-term process of individual and group negotiations undertaken by people living simultaneously in two political worlds.

Overall the thesis shows how although cultural reconstruction is inevitable this mostly occurs based on long-held notions and positionalities guiding the interactions between individuals and the state.

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Much love and appreciation to you all.

Preface

Ideas for research have diverse origins. While many are born out of theoretical assumptions, others grow organically from life's experience¹. Such is the case in this thesis. In 2008 I was appointed Executive Director of the Electoral Service in Mexico City. The core of my new responsibility was to introduce an old generation of electoral civil servants to new democratic values, practices and institutions. Like me, most members of this group started their careers before the democratic transition took place in Mexico in 2000 and were therefore unfamiliar with what was expected of them in a new context. Topics such as citizen participation, equality, accountability, tolerance and human rights were new and abrupt additions to the vocabulary of a group of officers born and brought up within a tradition of authoritarianism and corruption.

As a recent post-graduate in public policy, I was convinced that the implementation of democratic institutions and practices in the country would require a new type of civil servant not only familiar with, but also convinced about key issues of democracy. Within this context, one of my initial challenges was to create a curricular structure through which public officers could gradually acquire new knowledge of democracy, while at the same time foster sensibility to its core issues. Little did I know that this project was going to be received with intense opposition. Indeed, the battle to convince senior public officers of the pertinence of this approach was far from easy. Every time a new programme was presented, it was normally rejected on the premise that democracy would be achieved exclusively through free elections. From this perspective, the expansion of further knowledge of democracy was expensive and unnecessary. In a similar vein, during a series of pilot courses, the vast majority of civil servants also rejected the possibility of new contents based on analogous premises. *Why do we have to learn ethics? What do human rights have to do with my job? Why are you trying to teach us about gender equality? We are here to conduct elections and that is all*, were among the comments and questions with which I was frequently confronted whenever visiting the training rooms of the Electoral Service.

Some time passed and my efforts to convince Tyrians and Trojans of the pertinence of expanding the traditional scope of democratic education were still unfruitful. One night, after an

¹ As observed by Schwartz –Shea and Yanow (2012, p.25) such differences are essential to understand the nature of inductive and deductive research.

exasperating meeting with a group of traditionally minded civil servants, a close associate of mine entered my office, tired and frustrated. ‘The problem is cultural’ he said, “not even by moving these people to countries such as New Zealand or Sweden would they be able to understand democracy beyond mere elections. It is not part of our DNA” he firmly concluded. These words stuck in my mind for months, generating all sorts of derivative questions. Are *we* Mexicans exclusively programmed to operate in authoritarian political systems? Has our historical legacy put us in a position where authoritarian practices are that deeply rooted? Do we work under constructed assumptions of politics that tend to reproduce and self-perpetuate? Is our political culture resistant to democratic change? Are all Mexicans the same, or are there many Mexicos inside one Mexico?

Such questions were hardly new. In fact most of them have been, and still are, a matter of debate, not only in Mexico but in the wider Latin American Region. Authors such as Pinkney (2003), O’Donnell (1996) and Phillip (2003) have argued that regardless of the positive influence that competitive elections have brought, ongoing pre-democratic patterns of authoritarian behaviour are considered major obstacles to the consolidation of democracy. From this perspective, Mexico currently occupies what O’Donnell (1996, p.34) describes as a ‘grey area’, where elections take place regularly, but major attributes of representative democracy are still missing. Despite the high level of responsibility that governmental actions and practices bear², Mexican political culture has traditionally been described as a complex, ambiguous and contradictory entanglement of shared understandings that guide relationships between citizens and the state. Mexico is regularly characterised as a country where progressive liberal ideals, genuinely grounded social movements and a critical political spirit towards the state coexist with elements such as political apathy, cynicism, corrupt practices, intolerance to dissent, and generalized political distrust³. These elements combine to form a rather convoluted environment, raising the question of whether Mexican citizens will ever fully embrace the values, practices and institutions of representative democracy. As Heras (2004, p.25) points out, democratic experiences in Mexico began only a couple of decades ago, whereas the history of authoritarianism has existed for over 400 years.

² This responsibility has been observed by authors such as Crespo (1996), Phillip (2003), Flores (2006) and Camp (2007).

³ The study of Mexican political culture (from a positivist perspective) formally started in 1963 with Almond & Verba’s seminal study of civic culture. From there, a plethora of analyses has been slowly grown over the past five decades. Among the most relevant are: Hansen (1970), Segovia (1975), Davis (1976), Craig & Cornelius (1980), Booth & Selligson (1984), Camp (1999, 2007).

In 2010 I met with a friend and former academic mentor, who at the time was working as a senior lecturer in political culture in one of the major universities in Mexico. My idea at the time was to further explore my above-mentioned concerns in order to determine a possible course of action to improve the delivery of educational programmes concerned with democratic practices. Such an endeavour was intended to be nothing more than a programme of collaboration between a prestigious University in Mexico and the Electoral Commission. Nonetheless, during the course of our meeting, my friend's comments made me realize that taking the original proposition more literally would be a suitable topic to use in order to pursue my goal of obtaining a PhD in Politics and International Relations.

If Mexicans were in fact culturally bound to a certain understanding of politics, studying those who migrate to consolidated democracies might contribute to a widening of knowledge about how people with no prior experience of these act and react in an environment where stable democratic institutions and practices prevail. I was aware that due to its size and historical relevance, Mexican migration to the United States had traditionally provided an avenue for this type of exploration⁴. Nonetheless, I was convinced that a series of contextual factors imposed barriers to fully appreciating the role of culture in the political integration of these populations⁵. However, little was known about the interaction of Mexican migrants with other political systems. Therefore, considering my colleagues' initial proposition, I started exploring New Zealand and Sweden as viable territories for my research.

After preliminary analysis, three fundamental advantages put New Zealand at the top of my list. First and foremost, was its migratory system and associated policies. With the adoption of a multicultural approach to migration in 1986, New Zealand recognized the importance of encouraging the participation of migrants in all aspects of social life including the political arena. Moreover, migrants are not expected to shift their traditional values and beliefs since these are perceived as essential to the construction of a new social fabric (Burke 1986). In this context, New Zealand has fostered a more welcoming approach to migration than most countries around the world. In the field of political integration, different from other multicultural nations, New Zealand is the only established democracy in the world where migrants are allowed to participate in national and local elections and become part of its Civil Service after becoming permanent

⁴ See for instance, Lamare (1982), Garcia (1987), Alvarez (1987), Portes & Curtis (1987) de la Garza & Falcon (1996), Wals (2011), Albarracin & Valeva (2011).

⁵ These include among others: the vast number of Mexican migrants without full political membership; the irregular character of migration among large sectors of the population; the nature of the American migratory system; and the specific influences and heritages that have long affected the creation of hybrid Mexican-American cultures.

residents. Considering this key factor, I could hardly think of another place to contrast the residual effects of being born and brought up in an authoritarian culture. Indeed, I remember myself saying: ‘if Mexicans do not participate politically in this country, they would hardly do so elsewhere’.

A second consideration was the character of New Zealand’s political culture, its structures and practices. Following Edelman’s remarks that ‘men try to find meaning and order when placed in a confusing or ambiguous situation’ (Edelman 1967, p.16), New Zealand can be considered to be quite a confusing place for a Mexican migrant when it comes to politics. A small and stable democracy with a unicameral parliamentary system and a unitary geographical distribution of political attributions is a contrast to the enormous political apparatus that characterises Mexico’s federal, bicameral and presidential political system. Furthermore, New Zealand has historically been considered a social laboratory driven by values such as collective action, tolerance and equality (Spoonley, Pearson & Shirley, 1994; Mein Smith, 2005). In this context it is hardly surprising to find New Zealand among the countries that lead international indexes of transparency, quality of life, electoral participation and citizen welfare.

A third and final consideration was related to the size and remoteness of the country, as well as to the limited number of Mexican migrants hosted there. With barely seven hundred individuals of Mexican origin living in different cities, towns and villages across two islands, it was somewhat normal to expect a scarcity of ethnic networks. This situation seemed ideal to isolate the study from the effects of political bargaining processes that characterize big ethnic groups in other parts of the world. If Mexicans were to become more democratic in New Zealand, this would occur without the influence of such groups, their agendas and their capacity to mobilise and integrate their members. In addition, the size of the country offered the possibility of accessing a representative number of research participants more efficiently and in a more intimate setting.

After deciding that New Zealand was indeed an ideal place for the study, in October 2011 I moved to Auckland where well renowned New Zealand political scholar at The University of Auckland, Professor Raymond Miller, had agreed to be my supervisor. My next challenge was to create a suitable research question and find a theoretical model to follow in order to conduct my study.

The many years I spent in the Department of Statistics at the Electoral Commission were by no means wasted. During that time I considered myself to be a skilful researcher, always eager to test my hypotheses with valid, reliable and replicable empirical evidence. Not surprisingly, my early approaches were embedded with similar positivist and rational choice expectations. Following this line of thought, at the beginning, I attempted to construct theoretical and empirical models that were able to deal with the *cultural problem* I was attempting to disentangle. The obvious choice at the time was to approach the subject from the classic perspective of political culture (Almond & Verba, 1963)⁶. My initial purpose was to qualitatively explore pre- and post-migratory political attitudes and behaviours to look for residual effects of authoritarianism among a considerable sample of the Mexican population in New Zealand.

With the intention of testing the field, I prepared an initial version of a questionnaire containing a variety of points mostly regarding areas such as interest in politics, voting behaviour, political partisanship, community participation and transnational political action. By the time I reached my sixth pilot interview in the Auckland region, I realised that the answers I was receiving were much more complex than those I was initially expecting. It was clear that most people were eager to talk about their experiences in the New Zealand social and political world. Nonetheless, they did not seem appreciative of being constrained by a battery of questions such as, *how do you classify yourself in terms of your political ideology?* or *how interested are you in politics?* Instead they normally elaborated on these questions by adding their own perspectives, experiences and personal histories. Far from obtaining a set of controlled answers that I could classify easily, I was confronted with a mosaic of rich narratives of political acculturation.

I concluded that if I were to contribute to my field by writing a thesis that would be innovative and meaningful, I had to find a way of articulating these types of testimonies so their richness could generate new insight into people's minds, hearts and actions. After exploring different options, I found that approaching these phenomena from an interpretive perspective could potentially help me achieve such a goal. Closely associated with the anthropological and sociological tradition of the Chicago School, social interpretivism focuses its attention on the

⁶ As it will be further explained in the theoretical framework, the concept of political culture crafted by Gabriel Almond and Sydney Verba (1963) departed from the proposition that culture is something contained in a series of attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that characterized individuals within countries. Such an approach gained popularity in the 1970s. More contemporary accounts have been developed by authors such as Ingleheart (1998), Putnam (1993) and Eckstein (1998).

key issue of *meaning*, its evolution and the underlying processes by which this is constructed by individuals and groups.

It is fair to say that in the beginning, I did not fully appreciate the implications that an epistemological turn to interpretive grounds would have, not only in my research but also in my way of thinking. But moving across the foundational hallmarks of knowledge was indeed a transformational experience. Accustomed to the deductive nature of scientific enquiry where reasoning begins with theories which lead to the development and testing of hypotheses, I started a journey into strange and new territories. This was a world where front-loaded hypotheses were to be avoided, where the construction of generalizations was replaced by the issue of contextuality and where the well-known evaluative criteria of validity, reliability and replicability were replaced by others such as reflexivity, transparency and positionality.

Moreover, this was a world with a different logic of enquiry. Interpretivism is inductive by nature and abductive by extension. This means that reasoning starts with observation of particular instances from which general laws are developed. One starts with a puzzle, a surprise or tension as encountered in the field and then seeks to explain it by identifying the conditions that would make it less perplexing. New observations, testimonies and documents are used in an iterative-recursive fashion in order to provide new insights to clarify the puzzle (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). It is most likely that because of this logic, as my research evolved I grew more curious about the world I was entering. I became intrigued by what moves people, how they interpret things, how they construct their basic notions of politics and how they verbally express such constructs.

Mine proved to be a highly interactive type of research in which at times I became a player instead of a mere passive recorder of events. For four years I did not just interview people but became an active member of their community. I attended their festivals and ceremonies; accompanied them in their protests, celebrations and mourning; witnessed their participation in sports matches, dances, and music festivals; I became a member of their groups, teams and forums. I visited their homes, offices, churches and schools. I ate from their tables, and they ate from mine. Furthermore, I provoked people to see their responses; to see how they reacted to specific symbols and how they positioned themselves when confronted with different situations, rituals and practices. My idea was to challenge them to speak about topics they would not normally reflect upon.

This thesis is the product of the above-mentioned provocations, reflections and interactions with my compatriots. In a sense, it is a product of experiences captured in theories and concepts rising from the ground upwards. Building on peoples' experiences was a challenging task that required a whole new level of abstraction in order to make sense of their stories. I learned to position myself against the information that was being imparted, to read between its lines, to establish points of contact and contrast between stories, and more importantly, to give an account of rich and diverse worlds that are constantly moving and evolving, yet connected along fine common lines. I acknowledge that my Mexican character and the processes I was experiencing as a migrant to New Zealand were of crucial advantage in this quest⁷. To most participants I was not an outsider but another member of their community, experiencing similar doubts, joys and frustrations. It was not just about being empathetic with their experiences, but being capable of joining them in a circle of mutual intelligibility. I understood their language in the broadest possible sense, and with it, their examples, symbols and specially their metaphors.

These figurative constructions were essential to create the core concepts and theories that inform this thesis. For instance, explanations framed in metaphors such as *the cross-cultural political telescope* (Chapter V), *a theory of two houses* (Chapter VII), *the transnational political space* (Chapter VI) and *a patch quilt theory of political cultural construction* (Chapter VI) were created by using participants' explanations of the world they inhabit. They are powerful arrangements of words put together in such a way that easily capture points of convergence embedded in peoples' experiences within the New Zealand political arena.

To close this section I can assert that, generally speaking, the discovery of such a fertile ground of analysis was indeed a life changing experience, one that at some point, I was resistant to. Nevertheless, at the end of this journey I can but recognize the advantages that interpretive frameworks can provide to the field of political acculturation. In a nutshell, I started this enterprise as a convinced positivist and I finished it as a committed interpretivist.

⁷ In this respect, different scholars have long suggested a series of advantages arising from the insider or native status of researchers. Among them: a good understanding of a macro-society and its daily routines, symbols and value systems. As well as cultural intimacy, easier establishment of trust with participants, and a lesser tendency for participants to try to impress an insider in order to portray a more positive image of themselves (Kempny 2012, p.43).

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 The puzzle: scope, preliminary theoretical considerations and guiding questions

The main purpose of this thesis is to provide an interpretive analysis of the political acculturation of Mexican migrants to New Zealand. More specifically, it is an exploration of the semiotic processes used by people to re-construct the political worlds they inhabit after being born and brought up in a different cultural context. While the adoption of an interpretive framework reflects my intention to expand upon traditional views of the study of culture, politics and migration through ethnographically oriented methodology, this thesis is not devoid of comparative materials, existing theories and concepts. Indeed, whenever possible, I elaborate on parallel experiences as well as on interdisciplinary models in order to shed some light on the types of phenomena experienced in the field⁸. Finally, this is also a study of the cognitive and emotional lines through which peoples of Mexican origin interpret and construct an image of New Zealand politics. As such it builds on previous attempts to reconcile interpretive methodologies with contemporary psycho-sociological approaches⁹.

In order to understand the distinctive nature of interpretivism, an appropriate starting point is its substantive concern with the issue of meaning, and its relationship with the concept of culture. In the eyes of interpretivists, cultures are articulated nets of meaning which people cue and teach to each other in order to make sense of the world around them (Geertz, 1973, p.5). Mastering these codified arrangements is in essence the key to social interaction. As argued by Chabal & Daloz (2006, p.86), without them, individuals would be confined to the realm of instinct and senses. They would not know how to act and react to the daily challenges posed by interaction with their communities. Passing on such codified arrangements across generations provides cultures with a sense of stability and security. Nevertheless, human beings are not mere receivers and recorders of meaning. Instead, the embracement of shared meaning flows naturally from experience and is the central element to understanding individual and group practices¹⁰.

⁸ Here I agree with Ross (1997, p.43) that an interpretive view of culture is not incompatible with the belief that comparison is central to the social science enterprise. Ross distances himself from what he calls radical interpretivists totally centred on the issue of contextuality. Although I agree with the basic points of Ross' argument, I still consider contextuality to be crucial to interpretivism. In that respect this study carefully uses comparative materials only when considered essential to contribute to the understanding of a phenomenon.

⁹ See for instance Shore (1996), DiMaggio (1997), D'Andrade (1995), and Ross (2007).

¹⁰ The idea of practice as fundamental to the construction and reproduction of meaning is the basis for Bourdieu's (1990) theory of practice.

Politics is an 'arena' in which human beings give shape to their experiences (Kuper, 1999, p.56)¹¹. Furthermore, it is an ambivalent and complicated one. Therefore, it is only logical to expect that interaction between individuals and the state, whatever form it may take, involves the use of meanings concerning its institutions, forms, practices, concepts and rituals. These meanings comprise countless symbolic forms, "a passing parade of abstract symbols" Edelman (1967, p.5) proposes. In other words they are semiotic in nature.

If a semiotic proposition of politics is to be used, it is essential to dig deeper to discover what a 'political symbol' is¹². Here the use of this term goes beyond those simple visual expressions of human actions, such as, images, sounds, rituals and artefacts to include any part of the political spectrum that is disengaged from its mere actuality and which is used to impose meaning upon experience (Geertz, 1973, p.45). The political world we inhabit is complex and its forms, practices, concepts, rituals and institutions symbolize what large collectives believe about the state. In other words, cultures are characterized by shared agreements of symbolic representations of the state. They can be as broad as the set of ideals about which values governments need to embrace, or as specific as the structures, goods and services encompassed in governmental action.

An important consideration to be made is that concerning political culture as the product of a unified entity in which all people act in a similar way. In this thesis I argue that the varied range of perspectives that people may have on one political symbol within a community will depend on the positions and trajectories —to use the famous Bourdieuan expression— they have occupied in the social context. In that regard, they may be different in essence. Nonetheless, such differences do not supersede the fact that contrasting views of different symbols are intelligible across members in an articulated net (Chabal & Daloz, 2006; p.152; Ross, 2007, p.19). Exploring how those types of common yet different understandings change in the face of migration, is an essential part of this study.

Migrants, like any other group of human beings, are born and brought up not only within specific geo-political boundaries but within cultural circles of understandings about politics. In other words, they have been politically socialized and have experienced politics within the confines

¹¹ In interpretive disciplinary terms, the notion of politics as an arena was originally developed by Clifford Geertz (1973). From this point onwards, any mention to this concept, unless stated differently, is to be related to this proposition.

¹² This discussion will be further developed in Chapter Three.

of original *semiotic communities* (Wedeen, 2002). Such meanings constitute the basis of the actions and reactions of migrants towards the political world. They represent not only what they know about the state but also what they expect from it. Furthermore, as I will argue in this thesis, given the schematic nature of its organization, shared meanings constitute semiotic frames through which incoming political information is to be regularly filtered. When crossing borders, these pre-constructed frames accompany migrants and are influential in the process of assigning meaning to the political symbols encountered in their new countries. Following this line, the process of political acculturation is concomitant to how newcomers position themselves within the nets of meaning pertaining to the receiving political culture.

This quest is far from being a straightforward process through which individuals become replicas of native populations. As I will argue in this thesis, in terms of processes, what is referred to as *meaning-making* can indeed reflect similarities among individuals. Nonetheless, the specific constructs resulting from these processes are far from being homogeneous. This is because interpretivism understands individuals not as objects, but as agents who actively and collaboratively construct their cultures and societies. Culture is conceived not as something held but as something lived, a dynamic system that people use to manage their daily worlds. (Edelman, 1967; Ross, 1997; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

Understanding semiotic practices requires an analysis of the way in which people use words, interpret symbols and behave in ways that foster intelligibility (Wedeen, 2002, p.720). Only recently has the study of symbolic representation of politics started capturing the attention of a small number of scholars, mainly cultural interpretivists and political semioticians¹³. Merelman (1991) is intrigued by such symbolic representations as portrayed in mass media and elaborates upon them to construct wide characterisation of British, Canadian and American political cultures; Wedeen (1999) investigates the rhetorical character of symbols that characterise Syrian political culture; Chabal & Daloz (2006) build on historical and social accounts of symbolic politics to construct their interpretations of the political systems of France, Sweden and Nigeria; and Ross (2007) explores the psycho-sociological aspects of symbols in ethnic conflict across cultural settings.

Based on an alternative notion of culture, this group of scholars has been able to explore diverse and sometimes conflicting facets of political culture to expand upon our understanding of its

¹³ Previous attempts to incorporate an interpretive view of political culture can be also found in the works of scholars such as Lucian Pye and Robert C. Tucker.

underpinning elements, its evolution and dynamics. The novelty and rarity of its character, as well as a strong tradition of positivist-oriented research have complicated its application to the study of political acculturation. As I will further argue in Chapter Three, the mainstream body of empirical literature regarding migrants and politics seems to agree that culture, as a core component is to be found in the attitudes and behaviour of individuals and not in the issue of *meaning-making*.

Without denying the obvious contribution to the field of positivist-oriented frameworks, one can say that, after three decades of empirical research, the picture has become rather monochromatic. In this regard, the addition of interpretive analyses to the study of political acculturative phenomena can help by exploring terrain that remains largely untouched. Conceiving culture as intertwined nets of meanings that people use to make sense of reality entails a new point of departure. For this reason I propose an operational definition of political acculturation as *the processes through which individuals who move between countries assign and reassign meaning to political symbols in order to generate responses to post-migratory political challenges*¹⁴.

The following series of guiding questions have helped me orientate this thesis within the framework of the interpretivist tradition:

- How do Mexican migrants make sense of the New Zealand political world?
- What underlying processes affect the interpretation of the symbols encountered in the New Zealand political arena?
- What role is played by culturally oriented, pre-migratory nets of meaning in the construction of accounts of New Zealand politics?
- What interpretations do migrants construct of key functions of New Zealand's democratic system, such as voting, protesting and community involvement?

I answer these questions through analysis of the personal stories of the political acculturation of sixty Mexican migrants in New Zealand. The use of narratives as a means to gain insights into the social world has been rapidly growing in popularity across the social sciences. Such an approach has been described by authors such as Atkinson & Delamont (2006) as 'the narrative turn'. This is probably because, as expressed by Langellier (2001, p.700), narratives are not only a form of communication but a mode of thought able to give account of how people make sense

¹⁴ A taxonomic analysis of the elements contained in this operational definition can be found in Chapter Three.

of experience, claim identities, and “get a life”. Narratives embedded in first-person accounts that are collected through direct interaction with sources are an ideal means of obtaining information concerning disruptive life events and accounts of experiences that fundamentally alter the biographies of individuals (Kohler-Riessman, 2002).

1.2 Limitations and clarifications

Before I take the discussion any further, I consider it important to clarify the basis on which this thesis was designed, as well as to acknowledge some of its limitations. First, it is worth noting that this thesis does not assert the superiority of one specific type of epistemological approach over another. The terms I have hitherto used to refer to positivist and rational choice epistemic approaches do not intend to diminish them. Having spent a number of years handling statistical information, I am no stranger to the many advantages embedded in such traditions. Consequently, my observations do not intend to be anything more than a constructive criticism of the prevalence of statistical information in the literature of political acculturation.

As observed by Welch (2013, p.38), interpretivism has traditionally been against the extension of natural sciences into the realm of human life. Gradually though, things have changed and the relationship between the positions of those scholars who are now for the extension of natural sciences into the realm of human life has reached a point of methodological contestation in which both parties mutually invalidate the others’ assumptions. I posit that by creating such contestation, both parts commit the error of conceiving themselves as an alternative to, rather than a part of political cultural analysis. Here I add my voice to those of other political scholars who have spoken of the need to build bridges between epistemic communities in order to promote mutual understanding and fruitful collaboration between them (e.g. Ross, 1997; Wedeen, 2002; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

This being said, it is important to recognize that just like positivist research, mine may indeed be seen as limited in some respects. Nonetheless, what every side sees as limitative of the other is what sometimes constitutes the essence of its opponent. As such, it is not acknowledged as limiting but as a mere product of a different logic of enquiry. Therefore, rather than speaking about limitation, it is probably more useful to speak in terms of clarification.

In this regard, I start by highlighting that the contextual nature of this thesis makes it difficult to construct broad generalizations. Although the experiences, actions and reactions collected in this study may indeed appear similar to others found in different corners of the world, it is

important to note that they have been shaped by the interaction of specific types of migrants within a specific political culture. This should not prevent other scholars from using some of the theoretical propositions contained here. Nonetheless, while doing so they should be mindful of examining the proper contextual factors in which parallels are to be drawn.

Furthermore, it would be inaccurate to state that this study is representative of all Mexicans. As I will constantly remind the reader, the migratory path between Mexico and New Zealand is typified by specific types of migrants with somewhat homogeneous socio-economic backgrounds. Coming from the middle and upper-middle economic sectors of urban Mexican society, the vast majority are highly educated individuals, with reasonably good mastery of English, and are generally well integrated into middle class sectors of New Zealand society. Far from being a problem in this study, this is probably one of its major strengths. Traditionally, people in these sectors have been described as more likely to participate politically and to integrate into host societies. Yet the stories told by participants reflected a different reality where mutual understanding of politics and integration combine to prevent people from traversing cross-cultural semiotic borders, highlighting culture as a major point of reflection in this conundrum.

It is also worth noting that regardless of its ethnographically oriented methods, this study cannot be characterised as full ethnography. Most of the information that informs this thesis comes from a series of interviews undertaken in different cities across New Zealand in 2012 and 2013. Nonetheless, over the course of my four years gathering data, I have re-entered the field again and again in order to clarify points, gather opinions of potential theories and concepts, and explore topics that affected some of the stories. Dozens of field notes were collected during the period 2013 to 2015, and although not always acknowledged, they were crucial to the construction of this thesis. Although such recurrent interaction with the field was essential to create rapport and be considered a member of participants' communities, this study is still far from being positioned as one constructed on a full ethnographic premise.

Another point worthy of attention is that, regardless of the inclusion of psycho-social exploration of participants' accounts, this study cannot be taken as a political-psychology type. Indeed the methodological differences across both epistemic communities would make such an enterprise almost impossible. That being said, and as already explained, following the efforts of some contemporary interpretivist scholars, this study is an attempt to move the discussion of political

culture and interpretivism closer towards fields that have been denied by radical interpretivists aligned with the Geertzenian tradition (Ross, 1997).

Finally, I would like to highlight my own positionality as player in the field and as interpreter of information. This thesis is in that regard, at least in part, a product of my own history, positions and trajectories in the social context. The issue of positionality has been described as a core element of interpretive research. It acknowledges the researcher's human nature and how this affects his/her interaction with participants and information¹⁵. As a white, middle class, gay man, former senior public officer and Mexican national living in New Zealand, my interpretations cannot be devoid of who I am. Of course, during the construction of the study I constantly observed different methods to conform to a trustworthy, objective study¹⁶. This does not supersede the fact that my readings in the field may differ from those of other researchers with different stories, characteristics and positions within their social context. After all, this is part of the nature of interpretive methodologies.

1.3 Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into nine chapters. Chapters Two and Three provide context by reviewing the relevant literature on political acculturation and the theoretical framework that informs this study. The discussion begins with the conceptual challenges faced by the discipline due to the lack of a cohesive nomenclature. The concept of political acculturation is offered as a more cohesive and neutrally oriented approach to the types of phenomena that will be developed in the thesis. Subsequently, I explore previous empirical works in the field of migrants and politics. In order to contextually frame different discussions, the literature has been divided according to four major geographical regions: United States, Canada, Europe and Australasia. Here I argue that the development of specific areas of enquiry among scholars has not been devoid of historical accounts, official migratory approaches and cultural responses to migration across countries. Such particularities contrast with an overwhelming tendency of researchers in all regions to explore the issue from foundationalist hallmarks of knowledge by the adoption of positivist and rational choice-oriented methodologies. Finally, I argue that the types of questions which scholars have been interested in answering so far are somewhat limited when compared with the challenges posed by current migratory influxes. In this context, it is

¹⁵ For a full discussions on positionality see Shwartz-Shea & Yanow (2012), Shenav (2015)

¹⁶ Such methods included among others, reflexivity, transparency, positionality, systematicity, and member checking. For a full review of the construction of evaluative standards in interpretive research, see Schwartz-Shea & Yanow (2012)

proposed that a new methodological viewpoint be adopted that can contribute to creating a new type of understanding of political acculturative phenomena.

Chapter Three provides an outline of the theoretical framework that informs the thesis. Departing from the exploration of how the concept of culture has evolved in political studies it is argued that the classical view of political culture —closely associated to modernization theories— has been highly influential in the way in which scholars approach cultural issues in migratory studies. Combining the insights of interpretivism, interpretive acculturation and interpretivist political culture, I come down in favour of a semiotic approach to the study of political acculturation.

Chapter Four introduces the reader to the chosen methodology by tracing its development in three different stages. In the preliminary stage, I present the major decisions made regarding the methods and overall design of the study. This is followed by a general description of my fieldwork in the middle stage. In the final stage, I give an account of experiences with coding and the interpretation of information, as well as the evaluative criteria employed to build a trustworthy study.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven explore what I consider to be the three fundamental axes of participants' constructions of political reality: perception, cognition and emotion. Chapter Five draws on the concept of perception to illustrate how Mexican migrants in New Zealand organize their priorities in the political arena. It is proposed that constant interaction between two politically different worlds —a transnational perceptual space— results in distorted images of politics. This is described as the phenomenon of the “cross-cultural political telescope”, which is characterized by a juxtaposition of elements across cultures. From this perspective, symbolic constructions such as poverty, safety, corruption, and state efficiency are constantly compared within the Mexican and New Zealand contexts. Such a process normally results in a maximization of the Mexican political world, its problems and perceived relevance, and a minimization of the importance of its New Zealand counterpart. From this perspective, the New Zealand political world is normally conceived as predictable and dull, while the Mexican one is perceived as chaotic and impossible to change. Both positions, I argue, bear the consequences of the construction of political realities i.e. how one thinks, acts and reacts in regard to politics, thereby limiting the possibilities of political participation in both countries.

Drawing on the concept of political transferability (Black 1987), Chapter Six analyses the role of cognition in the interpretation of political symbols. I argue that the interaction of migrants with New Zealand democracy follows common cognitive lines, creating bridges between pre- and post-migratory experiences. Four major narratives are identified in participants' stories, revealing a four-stage process followed by Mexican migrants after being in contact with New Zealand politics: inception, transfer, confusion and construction. In this context, migrants regularly transfer accumulated political experience—in the form of symbolic representations—that is used to interpret the new political context. Nonetheless, such a process can be both a facilitator and a barrier to the construction of participants' political realities. I conclude that the juxtaposition of elements pertaining to both contexts results in the construction of new types of political individuals, neither fully Mexican nor entirely New Zealander.

Chapter Seven focuses on the role of emotions in the interpretation of the New Zealand political world. It describes the emotional lines embedded in participants' narratives, especially in relation to the ambivalent political feelings that coexist in a transnational emotional space. Post-migratory political sentiments such as trust, gratitude and admiration contrast with others such as fear, guilt and disappointment. The variety of this emotional inventory, I argue, contributes to the construction of contested political identities in which sentiments of pride and loyalty to the Mexican political world compete with the sense of well-being associated with living in an established democracy. In the end, different types of emotional relationships are created as coping mechanisms. On the one hand, an emotional type of relationship is established with Mexico, with its political world, its rituals and symbols. On the other, a moral-transactional type of relationship is established with the New Zealand political world, where rules are respected in exchange for the benefits the country provides but further political involvement is normally rejected. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the pervasive character of culture and its implications for the construction of a shared meaning between cultures.

Chapter Eight addresses the post-migratory construction of meaning of three key political symbols of liberal democracy: protesting, voting and community participation. Each is first contextualized in terms of shared understanding across the two cultures. The analysis then explores how such meanings are re-constructed by participants in the light of their migratory experiences. Although some common elements and interpretations are found, there are also contrasting elements, which serve to illustrate how the re-construction of meanings is not homogeneous. Instead, it depends on personal interpretations that are highly influenced by the positions and trajectories that participants have occupied in two social contexts.

Chapter Nine encompasses the main conclusions of the thesis. It provides a series of reflections on the importance of culture in understanding peoples' relationships with the state. Based on the empirical evidence of this research, I argue that culture is not an unmovable concept on which people always act homogeneously, but a language used to mediate the interpretation of political concepts, institutions, rituals and practices. In this regard, the political acculturation of Mexicans in New Zealand cannot be understood without an appreciation of the continuous transformation, reinterpretation and negotiation that exist in both political worlds. The process involves constructing individual and collective intelligibility about the roles played by states and citizens in the making of a nation.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Writing a literature review on the interaction of migrants with their new political systems would have been a lonely but simple process only a couple of decades ago. Indeed, it is not until recent years that increasing attention to this phenomenon has started puzzling scholars. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of the literature in the field has been highly concentrated on countries that deal with massive numbers of newcomers arriving every day. In this context, the study of Mexicans in the United States, Turks in Germany, Middle-Easterns in Scandinavia or Russians in Israel reveals more than mere intellectual curiosity on the part of political scholars. It mirrors the increasing preoccupation of societies about how to deal with issues that increasingly affect their political agendas.

From this perspective, on top of the many problems associated with the young character of the discipline lies the fragmentation of international experiences. That is because the analysis and discussion of these types of phenomena cannot be devoid from the discourses, models and expectations that specific societies place upon newcomers. Although sometimes used randomly by scholars, terms such as assimilation, integration and acculturation reflect clear and distinctive migratory discourses over which public policy is structured and opportunities to political participation are created or denied. Regardless of such differences a common concern among researchers refers to the embracement of political attitudes, beliefs and behaviours among migrants from countries with radically different political environments.

In this vein, the processes through which people acculturate to a new political system have been of particular interest of the academic community¹⁷. Nonetheless, to date there is no consensus about how such processes should be conceptualised for academic purposes. Jones-Correa (2005) argues that the ambiguity of these conceptions has allowed a flexible accommodation of different elements, thereby clouding the eyes of the academic community. As he explains, political incorporation can be assigned one of several different meanings: the participation of migrants in formal electoral politics; living as a law abiding citizen in a new country; participating in formal and non-formal electoral activities and in forms of organizational life in

¹⁷ These have been described by scholars through the use of terms such as political acculturation, integration, assimilation and incorporation.

the receiving society; or being represented as a group in the political discourse. Similarly, Minnitte (2009) contends that the use of the concept has been so flexible that it may refer to a wide range of phenomena from simple types of political participation and its reflection on statistics, to the degree to which the political system harnesses powerful migrant groups. Similar points have been made with respect to political integration, prompting authors such as Horowitz (1982), Tillie (2004), Martinello (2005) and Tillie & Slipjer (2007) to explain how the fluid accommodation of myriad elements reflects the existence of a multidimensional concept. The level of disagreement over such key theoretical issues, along with the fragmentation of experiences, makes any literature review problematic.

Generally speaking, the study of migrants and politics can be divided into three main bodies of literature. The first is more institutionally oriented and as such focuses on how migratory policies and approaches create or limit opportunities for political membership. It normally involves theoretical discussions from the perspectives of law, human rights and political philosophy. The core principles of citizenship, the path to naturalization and the granting of political rights to alien populations are common concerns among scholars in this tradition. It also includes works on how migratory approaches travel across countries, creating inclinations towards specific types of policies.

A second approach —a theoretical one— has centred efforts on the construction of models to clarify our thinking on the transition from alien to citizen. Generally speaking, either at individual or group level, authors in this line of research attempt to construct clear paths, along which migrants are influenced by the political discourse, institutions and values of their receiving societies. From the historical accounts of Robert Dahl (1961a) explaining the assimilationist American experience, to Martinello's more recent works on political integration in Europe, it is plausible to find a common path in literature dealing with the construction of explanations of how such processes occur. Apart from a few exceptions¹⁸, scholars in this tradition mostly base their models on idealistic conceptions of the receiving society and optimistic views of migrants' capacities to fully understand and participate in their new political worlds. Such predicted paths are normally logical and incremental. In other words, they recognise that processes are gradual and require time, knowledge and resources in order to be completed.

¹⁸ A good example of such exceptions is the segregational model of the American tradition that states that migrants will encounter rejection and racism from receiving societies, preventing them from entering the political arena in equal terms. Authors in this tradition suggest that political incorporation of migrant groups will be achieved through the fight of groups against this exclusion.

A final body of literature –an empirical one- deals with the collection and analysis of evidence regarding the political participation of migrants. Methodologically speaking, this group of works, the largest of them all, is highly cohesive. By and large its construction is based on positivist and rational-choice perspectives of the phenomenon. A common point of departure is the assumption that migrants will have problems adapting to the political institutions and political practices in their new country. As a result, levels of political integration or assimilation are tested statistically by comparing the participatory outcomes of migrants with those of native-born populations. As I will argue in this chapter, voting rates are probably the favoured parameter of comparison, although other forms of political participation such as involvement in community activities, political protests and signing petitions, have also received some attention from more empirically oriented political scientists

The exploration of these forms of participation has been influenced by context. For instance, while the free nature of electoral participation in America has inclined scholars to explore differences in voting turnout among migrants and native populations, this is less significant in the case of Australia, where voting has been compulsory since 1925. Not surprisingly, Australian scholars have been puzzled by other types of questions and have turned to the phenomenon of the ethnic vote instead¹⁹. Similarly, the geographical concentration of migrants in some parts of Europe has most probably facilitated the study of community based organizations and their effects on voting behaviour in places such as Belgium and the Netherlands. In this context, with a few exceptions, the collection of empirical information regarding the political participation of migrants has been motivated by contextually grounded factors²⁰.

To provide a comprehensible view of such diverse developments within their own contexts this literature review is structured in two parts. Section 2.2 *Towards a cohesive nomenclature*, provides a basic theoretical framework to illustrate different approaches to the study of migration, as well as the strategies migrants encounter when dealing with their new social environments. It suggests the term ‘political acculturation’ as being the most suitable and neutral

¹⁹ Here I refer to the ethnic vote not in terms of the total voter turnout of ethnic communities but of the specific preferences that these may have over specific political parties and candidates. Examples of these may be found in the work of authors such as Jupp (1981) and McAllister & Kelly (1983).

²⁰ Regardless of this academic orientation in the local context, it is still possible to find some cross-country examinations. Bevelanders’ work on Canada and Sweden and McAllister examination of the Canadian and Australian experiences are two examples of such a possibility.

option to address the different phenomena resulting from the interaction of migrants with norms, practices and institutions in receiving political arenas.

Section 2.3 *An international puzzle*, reviews the main empirical findings regarding the political acculturation of migrants in four main regions: the United States of America, Canada, Europe and Australasia. These four regions have been chosen on the grounds that they are the main recipients of international migratory flows worldwide. To adequately frame such a review, the analysis of each region begins with a succinct description of its overall approach to migration. From there, the discussion turns to the main theoretical works on the consequences of political acculturation. Finally, in Section 2.4 *Conclusions*, I analyse the empirical findings from each particular case study. At the outset, it is important to understand that this is by no means an exhaustive review of the academic work written on the topic. Instead, I attempt to guide the discussion towards the most representative pieces of literature on the phenomenon of political acculturation.

2.2 Towards a cohesive nomenclature

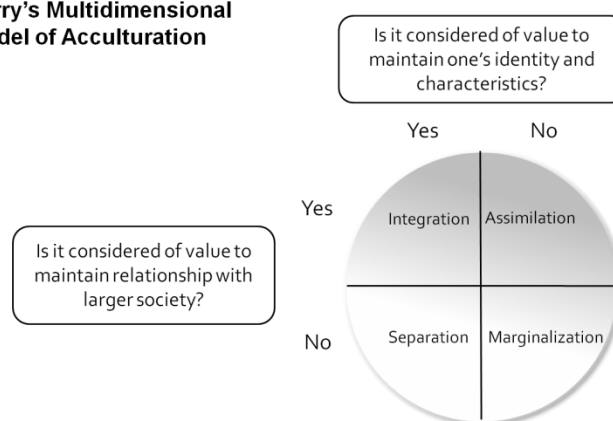
Over time, migratory studies have developed a diverse range of theoretical frameworks to investigate the way in which dominant and non-dominant groups adapt to host societies during the process of cultural contact. Sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists and political scientists normally approach the subject using the concept of acculturation. According to the classical definition coined by Redfield, Linton and Herskovits, “acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups” (1936 p.149). The study of acculturation began as a comparison of psychological similarities and differences across a broad range of cultures, and then expanded to an examination of the adaptations made by individuals when they moved between cultures (Berry 1992, 1997, 2005).

The motivation for acculturation research is essentially a desire to understand what occurs to individuals who have grown up in one cultural context when they attempt to adapt and live in a new cultural environment (Berry, 2005). Two main models of acculturation, one one-dimensional, the other multidimensional, have been created to assess the interaction between migrants and their receiving societies. The one-dimensional model of acculturation claims that an individual moves in a straight line from the original culture to the host culture. During this linear process, individuals suffer loss of cultural identity as they move towards the other culture

(Marin & Gamba, 1996). Therefore, this model assumes that it is only the acculturating individual who is affected by the process. Given its simplicity, scholars who regularly employ the model make no distinction between terms such as assimilation, incorporation, integration and acculturation.

Challenging the assumption that the only option for immigrants is to eventually assimilate and become absorbed into the dominant group, Berry (1992, 1997, 2001, 2005, and 2008) introduces a multidimensional model of acculturation. This model offers various possibilities for groups and individuals seeking some degree of acculturation. From this perspective, acculturation presents four different possibilities. First, assimilation occurs when individuals do not maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interaction with the dominant culture. Second, separation occurs when members of an ethnic group place important value on maintaining their original culture and avoiding interaction with another. Third, marginalization occurs when there is little possibility or interest in cultural maintenance and little interest in having relations with another (often for reasons of exclusion or discrimination). Fourth, integration occurs when there is interest in both maintaining one's original culture and establishing regular interaction with another. Berry's typology is briefly summarized in figure 1.

Figure 1
Berry's Multidimensional
Model of Acculturation



Source: Berry (2008:338)

Multidimensional models are highly popular among researchers because they expand the possibilities of analysing the interaction of migrants with host societies and provide clear differentiation among terms. One of this model's major achievements is the new meaning it has attributed to the word integration. In contrast to the traditional concept of assimilation (Castles & Miller, 2003), this perspective defines integration as a mutual adjustment between cultures in which groups are recognized as culturally different but interaction among them is considered important. As Berry (1997, pp.10-11) observes:

A mutual accommodation is required for integration to be attained, involving the acceptance by both groups to live as culturally different peoples. This strategy requires non-dominant groups to adopt the basic values of the larger society, while at the same time the dominant group must be prepared to adapt national institutions (e.g. education, health, labour) to better meet the needs of all groups now living together in the plural society.

From the perspective of the State, acculturation is mediated by specific immigration policies. These policies shape the conditions under which migrants are incorporated into receiving societies, and share an important number of concepts with multidimensional models of acculturation. During the 1960s and 1970s three broad governmental approaches to the incorporation of migrants prevailed: 1) the assimilation approach, which postulates the necessity to incorporate migrants through a one-sided process of adaptation until they become indistinguishable from the majority of the population; 2) the differential exclusion approach, in which migrants are temporarily incorporated into certain areas of society, above all the labour market, while access to other areas, such as citizenship and political participation, is denied; and 3) the multicultural approach, which claims that migrants should be able to participate as equals in all spheres of society without being expected to lose their own culture, religion and language (Castles & Miller, 2003).

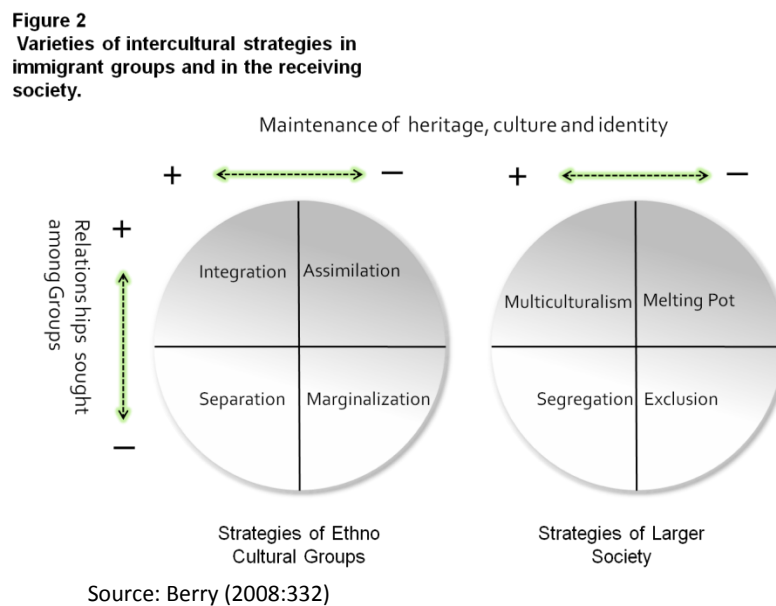
According to Brubaker (2001), negative connotations surrounding the assimilation approach during the 1980s caused many countries to adopt multicultural strategies. However, by the end of the 1990s, public support for multiculturalism had begun to show signs of exhaustion. Yurdakul (2007) observes that a combination of high unemployment levels among migrant communities and declining welfare policies in receiving countries caused them to retreat into the closed environment of their own ethnic and religious communities. This encouraged the creation of parallel societies in which migrants lacked contact with the larger population. By the late 1990s, immigration policies began to respond to this separation by stressing the need for migrants to adapt to the cultural patterns of the receiving culture.

Within the 1990s context of immigration policies, multicultural societies started to adopt the term “integration”, in an attempt to re-shape expectations about the role of immigrants in their new communities. Today, different countries recognise that integration is a two-way process of mutual accommodation between migrants and native populations. This contemporary way of

thinking about integration expects countries to create opportunities for migrants to obtain full economic, social, cultural and political participation, and in return migrants are required to play a more active role in the host society (Jopkke, 2007). Using his multidimensional model of acculturation, Berry (2008) explores the strategies deployed by governments (as a dominant force) in influencing the way acculturation takes place. According to his findings, the four strategies of migrant acculturation discussed above, namely, assimilation, separation, marginalisation and integration, adopt different names when they are examined as state policies:

Assimilation when sought by the dominant group is termed the Melting Pot. When Separation is forced by the dominant group it is Segregation. Marginalisation, when imposed by the dominant group it is Exclusion. Finally, Integration, when diversity is a widely-accepted feature of the society as a whole, including by all the various ethnocultural groups, it is called Multiculturalism (Berry, 2008, p.332).

These strategies are illustrated in Figure 2.



Following Berry (2008), integration mostly occurs in societies which are explicitly multicultural since certain preconditions i.e. widespread acceptance of the value of cultural diversity in a society and low levels of prejudice and discrimination, are essential to this strategy. This new approach to multiculturalism has encouraged the development of new policies based of the

concept of integration and re-shaping of the expectations of the role of migrants in their new communities.

During the last decade, multiculturalism policies have affected interaction between migrants and their receiving societies in a variety of fields. Therefore, it is now more common to find specific government initiatives to help migrants to become economically, culturally and socially integrated in their new countries. For instance, the New Zealand Government's adoption of the multicultural approach to immigration is reflected in a 1986 policy that highlights: "immigrants will be encouraged to participate fully in New Zealand's multicultural society while being able to maintain valued elements in their own heritage" (Burke 1986, p.11).

2.3 An International Puzzle

This section reviews the literature on migrants and politics, emphasising the attention of empirical studies related to political acculturation. In order to facilitate the discussion, the literature has been divided into four geographical regions: The United States of America, Canada, Europe and Australasia.

The American experience

For decades, the most influential paradigm to explain migrant *acculturation* into American society has been assimilation. That is, the process by which members of diverse ethnic groups come to share a common culture and gain the same access to opportunities in society as native-born Americans. This model, also referred to as the pluralist model, is originally associated with a group of American social scientists such as Robert Park, Ernest Burgess and Milton Gordon who, based on the historical experiences of American migration, propose that non-white migrants will experience initial prejudice and exclusion from the receiving society, similar to that encountered by previous generations of European settlers. Nonetheless, with time, migrants will gradually adapt to the economic, cultural and social aspects of American society, having abandoned the cultural baggage transported from their original countries. After adjusting to a new set of factors, migrants will be able to climb the socio-economic ladder, thereby increasing their political and social status in society. A crucial requisite to crystallise such an accomplishment will be the acceptance of the American cultural values of individualism, liberty, free enterprise and Protestant work ethics (Park, 1950; Gordon, 1964). Under this perspective, attention should not be paid to the *differences* between migrant groups, but rather to the necessity of assimilation.

It was Robert Dahl who in the 1960s applied this pluralist model to explain the political incorporation of European migrants in American society during the beginning of the twentieth century. Dahl suggests that the political incorporation of migrants occurs at three different stages: First, newcomers normally have limited access to the political system due to the economic limitations associated with the low position they occupy in the labour market. Here, they strengthen ties with other ethnic groups who have gained some political clout —normally migrants from groups already established in American society— using them as intermediaries between themselves and the core culture. While this practice continues, newcomers increase their awareness as outsiders, developing sentiments of common identity and solidarity expressed through voting practices. In a second stage, individuals inside an ethnic group start exhibiting economic and social differences. By this stage, many of them will have transited from the working class to more comfortable places on the socio-economic ladder. Through their new positions they obtain a more influential political status that can be put into use to challenge politicians from dominant groups of society. However, although they may retain some ethnic awareness, their electoral behaviour is mostly based on economic considerations rather than on ethnic politics. In a final stage, the ethnic group has diversified to the extent that most of its members have been assimilated into the middle and upper classes, embracing life-styles, attitudes and interests similar to those of members of dominant groups. As a consequence, many of them lose their ethnic loyalties, the result of which is even less political uniformity (Dahl, 1961a).

Despite several criticisms²¹, Dahl's pluralist analysis has been highly influential among scholars. Its assumptions have since been echoed by several American scholars, forming the basis of analyses developed under similar premises. Indeed, recent works on political incorporation of non-white immigrants have been highly influenced by Dahl's accounts (e.g. Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Skerry, 1993; Portes & Stepick, 1993; Alba & Nee, 1997).

Assimilationism has been the dominant theoretical framework in American political science since the 1960s. Nonetheless, its empirical operationalization has occurred through the field of urban politics, a concept that gained currency in America as part of the debate on the political

²¹ Dahl's pluralist framework has been the centre of several criticisms due to its lack of coherence in explaining the historical exclusion of African Americans from the political arena. Scholars have contended that race plays an important role to migrants' political incorporation and that due to racial factors, contemporary ethnic groups will not replicate the experience of previous European settlers (Pinderhughes, 1987; Hero, 1992).

participation of minorities (Browning, Marshall, & Tabb, 2003; Verba, Lehmann & Brady, 1995). Not surprisingly, the residual effects of the behavioural revolution in political science has greatly influenced forms and methods employed by American scholars to address the political assimilation of migrants. Assimilation scholars argue that there are many centres of power in American society and politics. Thus, power is mostly dispersed across different institutions and groups. Such dispersion ensures the incorporation of alien populations in an incremental manner. Just like a vacuum sucking up everything in its path, the political system will eventually reach each and every American individual with membership to participate politically in the country. Consequently, the political incorporation of migrants —crystallised in equal rates of political participation and sentiments between groups towards the state— is an inevitable stage forced by the assimilationist system, although it may take generations before this goal is reached.

Political participation has traditionally been the major indicator of acculturation in America. Over the years, dozens of studies have explored differences between native and ethnic populations in order to determine different patterns of political behaviour. Political participation is a rather complex concept though. It has various forms of expression that aim to communicate information to public authorities about specific concerns and preferences and to “put pressure on them to respond” (Verba et al., 1995). Through political participation, individuals try to influence the selection of government leaders or the decisions they make²² (Lapp, 1999).

Participating formally in American politics is not a straightforward process, however. The acquisition of political rights in the U.S. is restricted to those in possession of membership in the form of citizenship. Not surprisingly, the literature on political incorporation of migrants in the United States of America has paid a good deal of attention to the equation resulting from naturalization —as the ultimate requisite for political participation— and electoral participation —as the ultimate political right that an American citizen can exercise. In fact, for years, these two interrelated threads have been used as the sole indicator of political acculturation (Rumbaut, 1999). In her study of the United States and Canada, Bloemraad (2006) defends citizenship as the most important factor of political acculturation on the basis that, without it, migrants would have a diminished voice when it comes to defending their economic and political rights.

²² This situation has been addressed by neo-pluralist approaches to political science by the development of studies attempting to create strong connections between theory and empirical studies (e.g. Dunleavy 2014).

Nonetheless, the systematic exploration of these two dimensions across migrant groups reveals that naturalization does not occur at a similar pace. Sierra and colleagues (2000) argue that at the beginning of the 21st century, less than half the number of eligible migrants had become American citizens. While groups such as Filipinos and Chinese naturalised at high rates, others such as Latinos and Britons did so at slower rates (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Smith & Edmonston, 1997; Jasso & Rosenzweig, 1990.) Moreover, evidence suggests that not all cases of naturalisation lead to the expected outcomes in electoral participation. For instance, after bringing together data from census and survey research, DeSipio (1996) demonstrates that naturalisation has a negative impact on electoral participation among Latinos. The naturalised members of that group proved less likely to register to vote than did native born Latinos. In fact, evidence consistently shows that first generation Latino migrants score lower in electoral turnout as compared to native populations (De la Garza, Menchaca & DeSipio, 1994; DeSipio, 1996; Mollenkopf, Olson & Ross, 2001; Pachon, 1991).

While naturalization and electoral behaviour are indeed crucial dimensions of American political incorporation, political participation cannot be limited to this binary construct. Consequently, slowly but steadily, other forms of political participation have been gaining in popularity. Topics such as migrants' likelihood of signing a petition, protest politics and participation in community activities have been grouped together under the conceptual umbrella of *civic engagement*, and are now a recurrent subject of exploration in the American literature on political acculturation.

In general, research into civic engagement reveals that participation rates of ethnic minorities in non-electoral politics are lower than those of native populations. A study performed by Ramakrishnan and Baldassar (2004) analyses civic engagement among first and second generation migrants in California. It reveals important differences associated with ethnicity and also differences due to English language proficiency, economic differences and generational cohorts. Similarly, Jensen (2008) examines civic engagement among eighty first and second generation migrants from El Salvador and India. His results reveal that even though civic engagement was considered important for an overwhelming majority of participants, less than a third of the interviewees were active participants in organized community groups, most of which lacked any political orientation.

Albarracin & Valeva (2011) test the influence of social capital on the political participation of migrants. In their analysis of Mexican-Americans in Central Illinois they find that individuals

bearing stronger relations with Anglo-American populations were more likely to contact public officials and attend public meetings and demonstrations than those who felt more linked to Latino groups. Similarly, Uslander (2003) finds that strong ethnic identification is a crucial influence on civic participation among Chinese migrants in Southern California. Individuals with strong attachments to their ethnic communities are more likely to withdraw from civic organisations that are not related to their own nationality. Similarly, people with looser in-group ties are more likely to take an active role in other types of community organisations. Lopez & Barrios (2008) find that young migrants in America report lower levels of civic engagement when compared to their native counterparts. However, they also find that differences decrease radically in second generation migrants.

Recently, American scholars have started to pay closer attention to religious activities as a determining factor influencing the civic engagement of migrants. Although belonging to a religious group is a regular question in most surveys of civic engagement, most of the time correlations get lost or put aside due to the perceived relevance of other economic, political or cultural factors. Stepick, Rey & Mahler (2009) highlight the relevance of religious activities in shaping collective identities and providing social orientation in the new country. For instance, Hirschman (2004) suggests that religious activities in churches and temples have provided a learning channel for Latinos to become American. In fact, empirical evidence consistently shows strong connections between religion and the civic engagement of migrants. Scholars have demonstrated that religion serves to shape and promote civic attitudes (Stepick et al., 2009) as well as to create social capital (Stepick et al., 2009; Sikkink & Hernandez, 2003). Indeed, studies have constantly shown positive correlations between attendance at religious services and engagement in civic activities, both inside and outside the religious community (Brooks & Lewis, 2001).

The Canadian Experience

In 1971 Canada officially adopted a multicultural approach to its migration policy. Ever since, multiculturalism has become a key and distinctive element of Canadian identity, reinforcing the metaphorical construction of an ethnic mosaic that dates from Canada's origins. In accordance with its cultural pluralism, in 1988 the country moved even further in its recognition of diversity as part of Canadian national identity. This notwithstanding, during its early days Canadian multiculturalism was neither a well-developed concept nor an exhaustively designed public policy. Indeed, the adoption of multiculturalism in that country has been an evolving, incremental and ongoing process. Its evolution over four decades has thus been influenced by a

number of pressures, obstacles and support. It started with the rejection of a proposal of biculturalism —bilingually based— by the House of Commons, followed by a recommendation to implement a multicultural policy instead. In his 1971 speech, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau highlighted four elements that would guide the construction of such a policy: support for Canada's culture; assistance to members of cultural groups to overcome barriers to full participation; promotion and interchange among cultural groups; and assistance to migrants to learn French or English (Wayland, 1997).

Over and above these developments, migrant integration was conceived as a decisive element in the construction of the nation and its social fabric. As previously seen, integration implies mutual accommodation of newcomers and the mainstream culture (Diaz, 1993; Neuwirth, 1999; Weinfeld & Wilkinson, 1999). On the one hand, migrants must embrace a series of social rules and conventions relevant to the receiving society. In representative democracies these include adhering to core values —such as equality, individual freedom and participation in the decision making process— that govern relationships in society and in the polity (Neuwirth, 1999; Carens, 1995). On the other hand, the state is responsible for designing, granting and protecting an equal base of rights to participate fully in the economic, social and political life of the new country.

It is in this context that Canada has framed its efforts to design and implement a public policy that ensures equal access to institutions, as well as the removal of barriers to equal opportunity in most spheres of public life. Consequently, Canada's regime of incorporation comprises public policies designed to ease the economic, social and political incorporation of newcomers and minorities (Breton, 2005). This policy though, is not without criticism among groups of scholars. Indeed, its purposes, consequences and future are cause for debate among Canadian multicultural and constitutional scholars. Li (2003) argues that despite the desirable outcome of ideals of Canadian integration, its application in real life is often based on a rigid expectation to treat it solely in terms of the degree to which migrants mimic the average performance of native-born Canadians. In fact scholars in the field often refer to a strong expectation that migrants should blend into society by accepting a standard imposed by mainstream groups, which *per se* represents a contradiction with the spirit of integration. In this context, there is an ongoing debate between scholars on both sides of the spectrum about the expectations associated with integrative policies. The fundamental question is whether diversity and multiculturalism challenge the foundations of Canadian liberal democracy, including universal individual rights (Bibby, 1990; Bissondath, 1994).

It is clear that the Canadian integrative equation bears an important political dimension. Nonetheless, political scholars in that country have only quite recently joined the debate. The reasons for such inattention are numerous. In 1993, Wilson argued that disregard for ethnicity was common among Canadian political scientists who considered that there were more important factors affecting political discourse. Similarly, Armony, Barriga & Schugurensky (2004) attribute this attitude to the attention being given to the bi-cultural and bi-lingual debate between English- and French-speaking Canadians.

Regardless of a steady increase in the number of studies during the past 10 years, it is fair to say that the Canadian experience with the political integration of newcomers remains understudied. An important part of this body of literature concentrates on the study of representation of ethnic groups in the Canadian political system. Most studies reveal that, although some improvement has been made during past years, ethnic groups not only suffer from lack of attention, but are noticeably underrepresented in Canadian politics (Abu-Laban, 2002; Black & Lakhani, 1997; Pelletier, 1991).

Empirical analyses of migrants' political participation are perhaps the fastest growing types of academic literature in the field. In fact, similar to what occurs in the American political discourse, participation is often considered as a consequence of successful integration in Canada. However, Canadian studies on political participation also seem tainted by the same theoretical implications as those of their American counterparts, that is, an emphasis by political scientists on assimilationist expectations. In fact, it is not uncommon to find studies that merge different ethnic groups and compare them to what is perceived to be a Canadian set of expectations. As observed by Armony et al. (2004) the formula seems simple: ethnic groups different from Anglo and French Canadian are often aggregated as a single group named "other". Moreover, when addressing the issue of ethnicity and political integration, scholars normally depart from the assumption that migrants' original cultures are barriers to the achievement of full political participation. The authors point out that "[t]his situation is complicated by the lack of a clear standard for successful integration, political or otherwise; instead, the behavioural standards of native Canadians are used." (p.23).

Regardless of its methodological similarities, Canadian empirical evidence seems less consistent in its results when compared to the American experience. Indeed, while American studies suggest that migrants are less likely than their native-born counterparts to participate in traditional forms of political activities such as voting, evidence from Canada contradicts this.

While some scholars argue that there are no statistically significant differences between migrants and native born (e.g. Chui, Curtis & Lambert, 1991), others suggest that foreign-born Canadians exhibit lower rates of participation in comparison to native born (e.g. Reitz & Banerjee, 2007; Black, 1987; Bilodeau & Nevitte, 2007).

The variability of these findings has motivated scholars to explore further variables in order to complete the puzzle of Canadian political integration. Explanations have been offered as to the variability of types of participation²³ (Simard, 1999; Edington, Goldberg & Hutton, 2003); the influence of hometown associations (Owusu, 2000) and levels of residential segregation (Qadeer, 2003). Notwithstanding, the major contribution from Canadian scholars has been the debate over pre-migratory cultural and individual characteristics as a facilitator or an inhibitor to migrants' political participation. Three distinctive perspectives —exposure, transferability and resistance— have nurtured the debate over the last two decades, with important implications for the study of migrants' political learning.

First, theorists of exposure argue that the integration of migrants into a new political environment will gradually be achieved through incremental interaction with democratic practices and institutions. The more exposure they have, the more they adapt (White, Nevitte, Blais, Gindegil & Fournier, 2008). In this regard, length of stay in Canada combined with individual demographic factors such as age and income are considered to be relevant determinants in detouring the political participation of migrants. This proposition seems consistent with empirical evidence showing positive correlations between length of stay in Canada and rates of political participation (e.g. Chui, et al., 1991; Reitz & Banerjee, 2007). Again, the resemblance between this position and the one defended by American assimilationists is remarkable: when migrants arrive in their new countries their main preoccupation is finding employment and somewhere to live. Gradually they are able to allocate more attention and resources to their understanding of the underpinning elements of their new political system, thereby increasing the possibility of political participation. In time this accumulated knowledge will be passed from parents to their offspring, facilitating the process of integration through generational replacement.

²³ For instance, based on research conducted in Montreal Simard (1999), argues that the municipal sphere of politics attracts higher levels of immigrant/ethnic minority participation (as representatives) because it is more accessible to such community members than provincial or federal politics. In contrast a study of local integration in Vancouver argues that a limited commitment of authorities to multicultural ideals posits barriers to the political participation of migrants (Edington et al. 2003).

There are some studies of Canadian electoral behaviour that seem to be inconsistent with the above-mentioned proposition. For instance, based on the results of the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey, Jedwab (2007) finds that increased ethnic belonging and identity are not determinants of voting participation. Similarly, Bevelander & Pendakur (2009) explore relationships between voting behaviour and social characteristics such as ethnicity. By using the 2002 Equality Security Community survey they conclude that the impact of migration and ethnicity in voting behaviour is largely overridden. Instead they propose that factors such as age, schooling and levels of civic engagement are determining factors in electoral participation²⁴.

A second perspective can be found in theories of political transferability. Here, pre-migratory political experiences are regarded as a relevant source in facilitating the process of integration into the Canadian political environment. The claim is that political skills and knowledge obtained in the country of origin constitute a vast repertoire on which migrants can capitalise when put into action in a new place. As mentioned by Black (1987, p.739) “More important than the specific context in which political involvement takes place is the question of whether it takes place at all—that is, it is the accumulation of experience with, and interest in politics *per se* that is more important.” White and colleagues (2008) note that one empirical implication of such a theory is that migrants’ attitudes and behaviours do not differ greatly from those of native-born populations, therefore factors such as past interest in politics and their prior patterns of participation emerge as strong predictors of engagement in the new host country, regardless of country of origin (Black 1982, 1987). In fact, Black’s studies find that even those migrants from non-parliamentary political systems can still use pre-migratory notions of politics and to gain understanding and become involved in Canadian politics.

A third and final perspective is found in the work of theorists of resistance, or culturalists who argue that pre-migratory political background determines the extent of the political integration of migrants. The main point of this theory is that the acquisition of political orientation occurs early in life, therefore pre-migratory orientation constitutes cognitive frameworks through which migrants filter their incoming experiences with the new political arena. For instance, Bilodeau & Nevitt (2007) find that migrants arriving from authoritarian political systems face challenges to becoming integrated in the Canadian democratic system and are more supportive of non-democratic practices and regimes. Similarly, in a subsequent study Bilodeau (2008) proposes that migrants with an authoritarian political background abstain more from protest

²⁴ The empirical evidence on effects of political exposure to the new host country however, is not entirely consistent. See for instance Chui et al (1991); Banerjee (2007).

politics than those from non-authoritarian regimes. Such pervasive effects, he demonstrates, can last up to 30 years.

Following this line of thought, in his analysis of Lao migrants in Toronto, Harles (1997) demonstrates that levels and forms of participation among members of that community are tainted by their experience of a repressive regime. Nonetheless, his results show a more complex picture: While most fail to engage with the political world based on their own experience with authoritarianism, others construct their conceptions of the Canadian state based on the reproduction of pre-migratory power relationships. Harles argues that feelings of respect and obedience are common among his participants. Although such obedience can promote certain types of participation—for instance electoral participation—decisions about such actions remain severely limited by scarce knowledge of democracy and democratic practices.

To summarize, the quest for understanding the political integration of migrants in Canada reveals a constant debate among scholars in regard to the limits and consequences of integration. Such discourse entangles the fears and hopes with the past experiences of migrants with politics, and their willingness and ability to engage with the political system. While some authors are cautiously optimistic that migrants will eventually reach similar attitudes as native populations, others seem more cautious about making such assumptions.

The European Experience

Constructing an account of the study of the political acculturation of migrants in Europe is challenging for many reasons. Among them are: the fragmented experiences held by different countries over the migratory issue; the evolving trends in international migratory discourse and their effects in the European context, and the changes in the demographic attributes of migrants, specifically a shift from post-colonial migration to more diverse composition in terms of original nationality and cultural background.

In his opening statement about the history of migrant integration in Europe, Lucassen (2005, p.1) eloquently observes that since the arrival of non-Western migrants in the late 1940s, discussion has been dominated by a fear that migrants will turn into unassimilable segments of the population. Nonetheless, at least in public policy discourse, it is clear that since the 1990s the concept of integration has emerged as the most widely accepted by Western European

nations when it comes to framing expectations regarding migrants. As pointed out by Favell (2003, p.16):

Looking across Western Europe in the broadest possible way, it is clear that “integration” has emerged as the most widely used general concept for describing the target of post-immigration policies. This is not to say that every political figure or intellectual in every country likes or uses the term.

Joppke (2007) considers that a rise in the popularity of integrative policies mirrors post-war human rights discourses which extended rights from national citizens to all individuals irrespective of citizenship. Consequently, despite old-fashion feelings prevailing in some societies²⁵, integration is today the dominant form of conceptualizing the developing relationships between European states and their ethnic minorities (Favell, 2003). It is in this context that in 2004 the European Council sanctioned a series of basic principles contained in its ‘migrant integration policy’ that constitute a base for European countries with a view to assisting in adopting a common set of values and policies.

The concept of integration contained in the policy refers to it as ‘a dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants and residents of Member States’ (Council of the European Union 2004, p.19). The connotations of this two-part arrangement are generally stated in the document by establishing that receiving societies are responsible for creating “opportunities for the immigrants’ full economic, social, cultural, and political participation” while for newcomers, integration implies respect for the basic values of the European Union such as the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law. In order to understand the complexities of the receiving society, this policy grants special attention to the process of political re-socialization in the new context, therefore it also establishes that that “Basic knowledge of the host society’s language, history, and institutions is indispensable to integration”. Following this line, civic integration policies have flourished in countries such as the Netherlands, Finland, Austria, Germany and France. Such policies normally oblige newcomers to enrol in civic and language courses immediately after entry, and non-compliance generally leads to financial penalties or negative repercussions in the granting of residence permits.

²⁵ For instance, Freeman (2004) argues that policies on migrants’ integration in Europe are counter-intuitive considering that many newcomers in the region arrived uninvited and that national electorates are generally hostile to large scale immigration, especially of non-European provenance.

From this perspective, European migrant integration has been shaped and implemented according to two opposing but entangled influences: on the one hand, by the 1980s and 1990s discourse on multiculturalism and, on the other, by classic assimilationist approaches led by cultural conservatives. Nonetheless, scholars such as Brubaker (2001) and Vertovec and Wessendorf (2009) have warned about a recent increase in political and popular support for the latter and a steady decline in the former. European political studies of migration and integration have attempted to synthesize such dichotomous views from a theoretical perspective. For instance, Baubock (2006, p.11) argues that the concept of political integration is the subject of transitive and intransitive uses:

On the one hand, political integration can be regarded as an aspect of structural integration. In this sense it refers to access to political status, rights, opportunities and representation for immigrants and an equalisation of these conditions between native and immigrant populations. On the other hand, political integration is also about migrants' activities and participation, and it refers normatively to their acceptance of the laws, institutional framework and political values that 'integrate' a political system.

In a similar way, Martinello (2005) proposes that political integration has four dimensions: the implementation of equal rights to participate; the process of self-identification with the receiving society; the adoption of democratic values among newcomers; and finally, the exercise of political participation in the hosting society. Tillie (2004) distinguishes three types of political integration: political trust, adherence to democratic values and political participation. Horowitz (1982) establishes that the concept has two dimensions: one related to actual political participation and the other related to the attitudes held by newcomers towards political authority. Tillie & Slijper (2007) establish that the complexity of the term "political integration" is related to the concepts of democracy and nationhood. Democracy entails the extension of equal rights to participate so that immigrants can be integrated into the receiving society, while nationhood requires that immigrant populations accept core democratic values and institutions.

All the above-mentioned authors share some common beliefs: On the one hand, they endorse the relevance of the following components to the study of political integration: (1) the adoption of core political values such as equality, liberty and tolerance (Martinello, 2005; Tillie 2004; Tillie & Slijper, 2007); (2) the development of certain political attitudes such as trust (Tillie

2004); and (3) the actual participation of immigrants in the political arena (Martinello, 2005; Tillie & Slipjer, 2007; Baubock, 2006). On the other hand, they recognize that states play a vital role in the quest for political integration. On this count, governments need to open their doors to newcomers through the design of specifically targeted policies designed to enhance political participation among these groups.

In this context, a booming literature on the expansion of political rights to alien populations started to appear in Europe from the beginning of the 21st century (e.g. Brubaker, 2001; Sassen, 2006; Joppke, 2006). Nonetheless, regional studies on political participation of migrants are still scarce and notoriously difficult to compare, due to the diverse ‘country by country’ circumstances and institutional arrangements between migrants and the state. Furthermore, while attempting to identify general paths of participation among countries, fitting cases to such a path would require awkward and unverifiable counterfactual assumptions. However, such constraints have not prevented European scholars from pointing out that low levels of formal political participation constitute a trend among migrant communities in Europe (e.g. Van Londen, Phalet & Hagendoorn, 2007).

A recent cross-examination of the electoral behaviour of migrants in Europe seems to support such a claim by revealing that naturalized migrants systematically participate less than comparable native born populations. Such empirical evidence was consistent even after neutralizing the effects of differences in socio-economic characteristics, political orientation, migration experience, social capital, religiosity and the institutional context affecting both naturalized and native born groups. Although some evidence of assimilation in political participation was found, the authors acknowledge that this seems to proceed at a very slow pace (Gonzalez-Ferrer, 2011). Similar results are acknowledged by Andre, Dronkers & Need (2014) in their cross-examination of electoral turnout in 24 European countries. In their conclusions, they suggest migrants from countries with more political and socio-economic opportunities are more likely to cast their votes in their new European countries. From this perspective, the specific political and economic characteristics of the countries of origin were found to be effective in explaining the differences in electoral turnout rates among newcomers.

Most research on the political participation of migrants in Europe has occurred at the micro level by exploring specific ethnic groups in specific countries. Not surprisingly, these types of research —consciously or unconsciously— unfold a preoccupation with cultural and social attributes pertaining to ethnic groups perceived as challenging to their receiving societies. In

this context, one of the major contributions to the European literature on political integration has been the lively debate over the influence of local social networks in the construction of ethnic social capital as well as its effects on the political participation of specific migrant groups. For instance, Van Londen and colleagues (2007) study differences in electoral participation by Turks and Moroccans in Rotterdam. Their results suggest a positive relationship between participation in cross-ethnic organization and local voter turnout among members of these groups. The influence of other incentives such as trust and client-oriented practices were found different between groups. Earlier studies in the Netherlands and Belgium revealed that the degree of ethnic civic community was an important predictor to the degree of political participation of migrants (Fennema & Tillie, 1999, 2001; Tillie, 2004). As pointed out by Tillie (2004, p.531): “the greater the degrees of civic community within an ethnic group, the more individual members of this group politically participate”. Similar evidence was found in Britain where scholars demonstrate that electoral turnout among members of the South Asian ethnic community is higher in neighbourhoods where strong ethnic networks exist (Cutts, Fieldhouse, Purdam & Tranmer, 2007).

Contrasting evidence has been found in other experiences though. In a first analysis of Turkish and Lebanese migrants in Denmark, Togeby (1999) finds strong evidence of higher electoral turnout in cities with strong ethnic networks. However, in a later examination of the political participation of ex-Yugoslavs, Pakistanis and second generation migrants Turkish migrants, he concludes the impact of organisational participation varies among ethnic groups and specific variables. For instance, while organisational participation has a very strong impact on informal political participation among Pakistanis, this variable correlates weakly with formal electoral participation. At the same time, a weaker but still significant impact on both formal and informal participation exists among Turks, but there is no impact on any form of participation among ex-Yugoslavs (Togeby, 2004)

Berger, Galonska & Koopmans (2004) find that participation in organisations in Berlin does indeed promote political action. However, their results are ambiguous in regard to the effects of ethnic networks in political integration. Their findings reveal that migrants grouped in ethnic community groups are indeed more politically active, but no more interested in German politics than migrants who are not active in such organisations.

To sum up, regardless of the obvious differences between country experiences, European literature on migrants’ political integration mirrors the underlying assumptions and

preoccupations of the migratory debate in the region. Consequently, constant exploration of the interaction of the cultural backgrounds of migrants with democratic political values, beliefs and behaviours is normally the point of departure for most studies. Nonetheless, given the dynamics and expectations posed by the European concept of integration, a focus on assimilationist outcomes rather than acculturative processes normally prevails among European scholars.

The Australasian Experience

Australia's embracement of multiculturalism started only two years after Canada's. Such a step constituted a radical change from the *White Australia Policy*²⁶ and its assimilationist objective of creating an ethnically homogeneous Australian society. Jupp (2002) argues that the relatively painless integration of a large number of non-English-speaking Europeans arriving in Australia under the mass migration programs launched in 1947 was a pivotal factor in the erosion of support for *White Australia*. Here, he argues, the common belief that all Europeans share unlimited cultural commonalities, was shattered with the arrival of white migrants coming from countries unrelated to the British tradition such as Italy and Greece.

Babacan & Babacan (2007) identify three distinctive phases in the evolution of Australian multiculturalism. The first one, denominated egalitarian multiculturalism started in 1970 with the introduction of the concept of cultural pluralism as the basis of a democratic society. The policy developed in this phase enabled migrants to assert their ethnic and Australian identities, simultaneously focusing their attention on equality of opportunity within society. The influence of the Galbally report²⁷ in 1978 triggered a second phase known as liberal multiculturalism, characterised by the adoption of four principles of Australian multiculturalism: social cohesion, cultural identity, equal opportunity and access and equal responsibility for participation in society. These principles have remained the core elements of Australia's multicultural policy to this day, with only minor changes both at Commonwealth and State Government levels. Generally speaking, during this phase there was recognition of the ethnicity, culture, religion and language of non-English speaking background migrants whose voting power and contribution to Australia was becoming very significant. A third phase started in 1987 and was

²⁶ Here I employ the commonly known term for the Commonwealth Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 that excluded non-European migrants and was based on fashionable theories of racial superiority.

²⁷ In 1977 the Australian parliament instructed a committee, whose chairman, Frank Galbally, conducted a review of post-arrival programs and services to migrants. A full report was presented, accepted and fully endorsed in 1978 (Claydon, 1981).

marked by the strengthening and expansion of institutionalised forms of multiculturalism as existing in public policy and governmental action in all departments.

Regardless of its evolving character, Australian multiculturalism has not captured the same attention of political scientists, as have other regions of the world. According to Zappala (1998), despite the increasing evolution of distinctive ethnic political subcultures in the country, a traditional conception of Australian political culture based on ideas prior to the post-war mass migration programs has deviated attention from the political role of ethnic communities, to what are assumed to be more homogenously shared political values. Similarly, Jupp, York & McRobbie (1989) make a compelling argument that the dominant intellectual assimilationist traditions overwhelmingly present in the Australian context has affected the study of the political participation of different minorities, including ethnic groups.

In this context, the study of migrants and politics in Australia is often devoid of terms such as integration or acculturation. Instead, scholars directly address such phenomena in terms of the political participation of migrants. This does not necessarily mean that exploration does not attempt to shed some light on how acculturative processes take place. For instance, Zappala (1999) attempts to articulate a series of stages leading to the eventual political action of migrants according to four distinctive stages. First, migrants arrive in Australia without being familiar with the political system. During this period, they don't have the right to vote but start a process of community adherence or formation. Once the ethnic group is formed and has acquired a critical mass, it is able to shape its environment and create an ethnic space. During a second stage, political parties look for support in migrant communities and start engaging with migrants' activities and agendas. A third stage involves the formal incorporation of migrants into the internal political structures—specifically inside political parties— while in a final stage, migrants become active members of political parties. Compared to the processes proposed by other authors in different latitudes, this scheme seems limited and heavily reliant on the formation of a significant and visible community. From this perspective, the political participation of migrants can be fully achieved, exclusively through the influence of formal political discourse from positions of power within the establishment.

The lack of theoretically grounded nomenclature does not supersede the fact that efforts have been put into constructing wide characterisations of the processes migrants go through to embrace democratic practices in Australia. Indeed, regardless of its size, Australia's body of literature on the interaction between migrants and their new political arenas has been able to

produce important studies, and scholars have greatly contributed to our understanding of political acculturative phenomena. In fact, studies undertaken by authors such as Jupp, Wilson, Finifter & Finifer, and McAllister have not simply filled the shelves with academic literature but have also opened specific fields of enquiry²⁸.

The very nature of Australia's political institutions has resulted in special and sometimes different types of analyses. Probably the most striking difference in the eye of the political acculturative analyst is the absence of studies on the electoral turnout of migrants. As explained by McAllister (1981) in his literature review of migrants and Australian politics, while in most countries voter turnout is often used as a means of measuring the political participation of migrants, this is of little significance to the Australian experience since voting in that country has been compulsory since 1925. In this context, scholars have put aside such analyses and concentrated instead on other aspects of the political spectrum.

Following this line, a first body of literature during the 1960s and 1970s started focusing the attention of influences on political action and political choices such as naturalisation rates, involvement in party politics and engagement in civic activities (e.g. Jupp, 1966; Wilson, 1973; Collins, 1975). Commonly, these studies contend that non-English-speaking-background migrants (NESB)²⁹ score lower in most indicators of political participation when compared to English speaking and native born groups. Although some traces of interest in pre-migratory attributes can be found for instance in the work of Wilson (1973), according to McAllister & Makkai (1992) this literature mostly emphasizes the role of socio-economic resources and social inequality as a barrier to greater political representation.

During the 1980s, an interest in ethnicity and culture as influences on political participation started permeating Australian political literature. In his analysis of the political participation of Yugoslav migrants, Jupp (1988, p.23) advocates exploring cultural explanations to understand distinctive patterns of political behaviour. Referring to his subjects of study he points out: "they are Yugoslavs culturally though citizens of Australia legally". Many analyses including those of Marxists as well as of positivist social scientists tend to ignore the cultural dimension or to explain it away'. Such promising remarks had little echo though, and most efforts to understand

²⁸ A good example to illustrate this proposition is the concept of political transferability which, although formally originated in Canada, was produced by drawing from previous studies undertaken by Australian scholars Wilson and Finifter & Finifter.

²⁹ The acronym NESB is widely used in Australia to refer to migrants with a non-English speaking background. For a discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of using such term see Jupp (1996).

cultural differences were concentrated on the study of large ethnic groups in a quest to understand their choices of partisanship and therefore to predict their voting behaviour. Ethnic vote analyses, one of Australia's major contributions to the academic debate, received most attention during this period. Jupp (1981) explores migrants' preferences for political parties in the Melbourne area. In his conclusions he distinguishes specific electoral patterns among Mediterranean migrants. Similarly McAllister & Kelly (1983) find distinctive patterns of voting behaviour among migrants from Northern, Southern and Eastern European countries. The differences in such patterns are explained in terms of the similarities between Northern Europeans –mostly British- and the non-migrant Australian population; the incentives offered by political parties to capture the votes of Southern European migrants and the pre-migratory experiences of Eastern Europeans from communist regimes. Probably the most renowned study on the political identification of migrants in Australia is Finifter & Finifter's (1989) exploration of partisanship among American migrants. Based on evidence collected from 290 interviews, the authors argue that American party identification influences political partisanship in Australia. In this context, they conclude that the political resocialization of migrants depends heavily on attitudes and experiences acquired in the society of origin.

Cultural exploration of the political attributes of migrants was further addressed during the 1990s. For instance, McAllister & Makkai (1992) analyse the importance of cultural factors as influences on political participation. Based on social learning theories, they argue that citizens absorb specific values from the political culture within which they were socialised early in life, which in turn affects political behaviour in the new country. Results of the study show that migrants with non-democratic backgrounds exhibit greater political trust, but also display more authoritarian values. The authors also conclude that socio-economic theories and social learning theories are not opposed to, but complementary to the study of the political participation of migrants. In an exploration of Australia's political culture and its resistance to incorporate NESB migrants, Zappala (1998) argues that distinctive attributes of the original political culture of migrants, such as clientelism, can assist opportunities for mobilisation and bargaining for resource allocation. Indeed, he argues that pre- and post-migratory conceptions of clientelism have been a key factor in explaining the increased political participation of migrants in this category.

More recently, in his analysis of the political protest of migrants in Canada and Australia, Bilodeau (2008) finds compelling evidence that migrants from authoritarian regimes abstain more from protest than those from non-repressive regimes, and that the higher the levels of

repression, the more likely migrants will abstain from protest politics. A similar type of exploration leads Bilodeau, McAllister & Kanji (2010) to conclude that during their *adaptation* to Australia's democracy, migrants from authoritarian regimes lag behind the rest of the population in terms of support for democracy. Nonetheless, they also conclude that these migrants tend to participate at least as much as the rest of the population in electoral activities.

New Zealand deserves special attention, not only because it is the country where this study takes place but also because of its clearly different characteristics in relation to the other cases. Until the 1980s, New Zealand was a country inhabited by two clear predominant groups: the indigenous Maori population, and those of British origin or descent. In this context, New Zealand's encounter with assimilation started in the early colonial days and continued until the 1960s. Nonetheless, its major target was not alien populations but indigenous groups, although by extension, it also included all other small migrant groups. Before the 1980s these groups comprised individuals of different origins who entered New Zealand, encouraged by policies designed for dealing with labour shortages in the manufacturing sector. First, Pacific Islanders, later Dutch, French, Swiss, Italians and Germans started arriving in New Zealand at high rates during the 1960s and 1970s. Also, at the end of this period, the New Zealand government started accepting refugees fleeing from political upheavals in countries such as Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Chile, who contributed to the further diversification of the ethnic composition of the country, although such diversity did not have a drastic impact on the overall distribution of ethnic groups. In fact, until 1984, 94.5 percent of the New Zealand population still comprised Maori and people of British origin or descent (McMillan 2001, pp.148-162).

As McMillan (2001, p.117) observes, assimilation never gained approval, either with the Government or with Maori. In 1961, the Hunn report recommended for the first time the adoption of a policy of integration between Maori and mainstream ethnic groups. Biggs (1961, p.361) describes the report as "at once a statement of the Maori situation at present, a manifesto for future action, and a theoretical discussion on the inevitability and desirability of rapid racial integration, defined somewhat mystically as a combination but not a fusion of Maori and Pakeha elements in one nation, with Maori culture remaining distinct". Once again, attention to indigenous groups led the discussion on the construction of a new environment based on a bi-cultural paradigm, but non-British migrants were not yet considered as relevant stakeholders.

This situation was to change during the 1980s when the Ministry of Immigration introduced a series of changes in immigration policy as an integral part of a larger package of economic

reforms designed to attract foreign investment. The policy included the elimination of national origin as a relevant factor in the migrant selection process, a policy which had granted preferential treatment to migrants from North America and Northern and Western Europe. More neutral criteria based on the evaluation of skills and qualifications would be put into place in order to ensure the prevalence of the anti-racist and equalitarian values of social liberalism. This radical change to the immigration policy officially transformed New Zealand from an assimilationist oriented regime to a multicultural society (McMillan, 2001; Ongley and Pearson, 1995). Consequently, the notion of integration was considered for the first time as a crucial element of the New Zealand Government immigration policy which states: “immigrants will be encouraged to participate fully in New Zealand’s multicultural society while being able to maintain valued elements in their own heritage” (Burke, 1986 p.11).

In comparison with other multicultural countries, New Zealand did not develop a range of multicultural policies in order to encourage such integration. In fact, the reputation obtained from granting political rights to migrant populations occurred a long time before the beginning of the multicultural enterprise and probably had little to do with cultural awareness and integration efforts. Barker & McMillan (2014) suggest that although the spirit of inclusive egalitarianism played a role in the 1975 decision to extend voting rights to migrants, this was oriented more towards British migrants than ethnic minorities. Nonetheless, the authors recognise that granting national voting rights to newcomers after only one year of residence created a political community with unique characteristics.

The exploration of political acculturation in New Zealand started rather late in comparison to the other cases. Consequently, empirical evidence on migrants’ political participation during the 20th century is rather scarce. As mentioned by McMillan (2001), such lack of attention can be attributed to the increasing ethnic debate over social and political claims regarding original populations. When referring to this situation the author observes:

These claims, and governments' responses to them, became the subject of an extensive local and international literature on the subject as well as a complex and evolving jurisprudence relating to the Crown's responsibilities under the Treaty of Waitangi. Increasingly, this literature tied analysis of Maori issues into analysis of indigenous' issues internationally, with the effect that non-indigenous ethnic issues came to be understood as quite separate from and different to indigenous ones. This separation, and the much higher profile of Maori political

issues, largely explained why the political issues concerning non-Maori received so little attention from academics and policy makers. (p4)

Almost fifteen years after this statement was written a small but consistent body of literature on the interaction of migrants with the New Zealand political world became available. Studying the case of Asian New Zealanders, Park (2006) finds that this group participates at a lesser rate than original populations in activities such as voting, signing petitions and working in community activities. Regardless of these lower rates, the author finds an increasing interest in politics among Asian New Zealanders³⁰.

Similarly, in her study on young Asians (18 to 24 year olds) in New Zealand, Buck (2009) finds lower rates of participation. The qualitative nature of the study provides valuable insight into the reasons behind this phenomenon. For Buck, the low rates of political participation are more a consequence of the stage in life cycle than a reflection of cultural issues. Interestingly, she recognises that if voting is a habit acquired early in life, young Asians would be less likely to participate in the electoral realm later in life.

In a recent study of the political participation of Pacific peoples in New Zealand, Lusitini & Crothers (2013) find that, when compared to other populations sampled in the New Zealand Electoral study, migrants from the South Pacific exhibit lower levels of internal and external political efficacy, comparable rates of voting and lower levels of electoral participation. In their conclusion they highlight the importance of reinforcing the processes of political socialization of this community through governmental action and public policy regarding civic education at school.

Regardless of its small size, this inventory of academic experiences mirrors a recent attention to a promising field by a group of scholars who, like myself, attempt to generate insights into a mostly unexplored domain.

2.4 Conclusions

I close this chapter with three main reflections on the academic literature of migration and politics. The first refers to the long road walked by scholars in order to construct a more

³⁰ The author uses the term Asian New Zealander in the broadest sense. From this perspective it encompasses not only individuals who have migrated from Asian countries and their kinship but also people of Asian origin born in countries outside the Asian region. Regardless of this definition the study concentrates on the cases of Korean and Ethnic Chinese migrants in New Zealand.

articulated field of knowledge during the past two decades. Nowadays, the study of migration and politics is a field with clearer lines of enquiry and more defined research methods. What was once a series of scattered, highly contextual studies has given rise to the articulation of a more integrated discipline. The slow but steady accumulation of information has resulted in the generation of a rich database that scholars regularly use to create comparative analyses. Moreover, over the years, political researchers have been able to expand the field by adding new topics and variables into the acculturative equation. Today we know about more than just raw patterns of political participation among migrants. Topics such as the role of political trust, the influence of ethnic networks, transnational political participation or the role of pre-migratory political socialization, have expanded our views on the political acculturative phenomena.

This takes me to my second reflection, which relates to the lack of understanding that we still have of the discipline. Indeed, regardless of advances in the field, scholars are still unable to agree on basic points such as the creation of a cohesive nomenclature, theoretical underpinnings and the scope that the discussion on political acculturation should have. This may be attributed, at least in part, to the fragmentation of experiences based on attention to regional factors. The introductory discussion on acculturation is a good example of this situation. If points of connection are to be generated among researchers, clearer understanding of the main terms, concepts and theories is essential. This seems even more urgent at a time when the evolution of the discipline is generating cross-regional analyses of the political participation of migrants.

Paradoxically, my third reflection relates to what I consider to be one of the main points of agreement the discipline has reached so far. That is, its methodological underpinnings. By and large, today's examination of political acculturative phenomena has been drawn from the logic of enquiry and methodological assumptions of positivism and rational choice epistemologies. After reading this short review of the literature, one realises that scholars' approaches to their subjects of study are highly homogeneous. Generally, these studies are fed by statistical information as contained in public records or surveys. As such, different types of statistical analysis are developed to interpret their results, which normally relate to the testing of front-loaded hypotheses. Even qualitative-oriented works are embedded in this tradition. Behind these epistemological considerations lies a series of assumptions shaping our understandings of what political acculturation is, and how it should be studied.

Indeed, most studies depart from the idea that the closer individuals are to acting like native populations, the closer they are to becoming acculturated. Consequently, for many authors,

political acculturation —and all its derivatives— is seen more as a product than a process, something we can quantify in terms of how close or how far migrants are from the rest of the population. This situation has diverted attention from the complex world of interaction to the more controllable world of results. From this perspective, acculturation is the result of a learning process and, as such, is understood as the transformative effort guiding the embracement of political values and beliefs —normally close to democratic ideals— by a series of individuals with limited experience of these, due to their non-democratic backgrounds.

As mentioned earlier, the types of questions answered by this approach have widened our understanding of the interaction between migrants and politics. Nonetheless, after two decades of studies, the picture is starting to become limited. Overall, most studies, old and new, reach a point of convergence where migrants normally score lower than native populations in most of the indicators of political participation. The explanations given for such differences are limited to a series of measurable variables assumed to be general enough to sustain authors' conclusions. However, many questions remain unanswered, while others have not yet been posed. For instance, what are migrants' understandings of political integration? How do they make sense of politics? Which approaches do they take to address political challenges? How are political cross-cultural barriers created? It is here where differently oriented methodologies can contribute to enriching our understanding of political acculturative phenomena. I will develop this issue further in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the theoretical framework within which this thesis is structured. It positions my research as a study in interpretive political acculturation and, as such, is informed by two relevant theories: acculturation and political culture³¹. The chapter is divided into four parts. Section 3.1 *Culture and politics: the traditional view* seeks to identify the key components that have led the discussion on the political acculturation of migrants³². Here I critically explore the origins, evolution and effects of the positivist notion of culture in politics, departing from the seminal study of Almond & Verba (1963) *The Civic Culture*. I close the section with a reflection on what I consider to be the key contributions of positivism and political psychology to our understanding of the concept of culture in politics.

I open Section 3.2 *Changing lenses: an interpretive view of political culture and acculturation*, by arguing that, regardless of these positive contributions, the recurrent use of positivist oriented studies has limited the expansion of political acculturative studies. After exploring the common assumptions limiting such expansion I introduce the concept of interpretivism and position this as a suitable option to answer new types of political acculturative questions. Key elements of interpretivism and its relationship with the study of culture and politics are addressed in order to provide a theoretical basis to this study.

In section 3.4 *Migrants and meaning-making: an operational definition of political acculturation*, I seek to identify some basic elements of interpretivism, culture and politics to frame the political acculturative discussion. Combining traditional elements of acculturation with elements drawn from authors such as Geertz, Cohen, Kertzer, Wedeen, Ross and Chabal & Daloz I propose an operational definition of political acculturation.

³¹ Here it is worth noting that as it was essential for the understanding of the Literature Review, the discussion on acculturation was included in Chapter Two.

³² From this point onwards I use the term political acculturation to refer broadly to the study of the interaction of migrants with their new political world.

The chapter concludes with some short reflections upon how interpretive methodologies can benefit the study of political acculturation, as well as contribute to fruitful collaboration with other epistemic communities.

3.2 Culture and politics: the traditional view

While exploring the increasing amount of experimental literature on the interaction of migrants with their new political arenas, one becomes increasingly aware of the focus on whether migrant communities or individuals within these communities can embrace specific political values that are central to the receiving countries. When it comes to analysing the cultural influence of migrants on their new societies, the literature does not seem to have much to say. With some exceptions, major works in the field are normally not concerned with specific factors that migrants bring with them when they cross borders³³. Moreover, too often their samples cluster individuals from radically different political environments, due to what are perceived as common cultural characteristics, such as being brought up in non-democratic or authoritarian environments.

A comprehensive study of acculturative phenomena challenges researchers to understand the cultural factors of groups and individuals in order to examine undergoing changes resulting from contact with a new culture. Deciding what types of attributes will play a role in acculturative analysis is crucial to the type of understandings that are to be created. To this end, political scientists have opted for feeding the acculturative equation with their own conceptions of culture. As argued by Ross (1997, p.55) “Without a doubt, when most political scientists think about cultural analysis of politics, Almond & Verba’s *The Civic Culture* (1963) quickly comes to mind”. Indeed, this seminal study marked a dramatic step forward by introducing to the world the concept of political culture (Dalton, 2000, p.914)

Political culture is commonly associated with the paradigm of structural functionalism, an attempt to move the study of social sciences towards more scientific aspects of life through the collection and analysis of empirical evidence³⁴. The concept of political culture was originally proposed by Gabriel Almond in the midst of the behavioural revolution in political science. According to Dahl, such an approach represented “an attempt to improve our understanding of politics by seeking to explain the empirical aspects of political life by means of methods,

³³ These exceptions include, for instance, Morawska (2001) and Horowitz (1982).

³⁴ American Sociologist Talcott Parsons (1977) argued that rather than a specific line of thought, structural-functionalism came to describe a particular stage in the methodological development of social science.

theories, and criteria of proof that are acceptable according to the canons, conventions, and assumptions of modern empirical science” (Dahl, 1961, p.767).

This behavioural revolution constituted a means of determining the scope for comparative politics between post-colonial and non-western societies. Its origins can be traced to the early years of World War II, when a series of anthropological studies sought to contribute to generating a better understanding of allied and enemy nations. In their review of their studies of national character, Neiburg & Goldman (1998, pp.57-58) state:

First, the U.S. and the Americans, Japan and the Japanese, Germany and the Germans, Great Britain and the British, and a little later, Russia and the Russians, and Poland and the Polish, all came to be treated as cultural worlds susceptible to analysis on the basis of the same categories used in the study of the so-called simple societies, those to which, until then, the majority of anthropologists had restricted their attention.

New political challenges accompanied the post-World War II era. The dissolution of European global empires was accompanied by a series of concerns over the stability and endurance of democracy in old colonial domains and the embracement of democratic institutions in potentially new nations. Such concerns were later incorporated into the framework of modernization theory through the distinction between traditional and modern societies. As emphasized by Moody (2009, p.255), “The guiding hypothesis seemed to be that while traditional societies were certainly different from each other, these differences counted for little when juxtaposed against modern society”. From this perspective, democracy was not only a political system but a political project, one that was deeply regarded as the best possible option for the development of traditional societies. Therefore, the study of the cultural attributes of nations became increasingly relevant.

It is in this context that in 1956 Gabriel Almond wrote his famous statement “Every political system is embedded in a particular pattern of orientations to political action. I have found it useful to refer to this as the political culture” (p396). Seven years later Almond, together with Sydney Verba released to the world their seminal study *The Civic Culture*, a comparative study regarding political beliefs, attitudes and behaviours in five nations. The essence of this study contends that the functionality and stability of political institutions is directly affected by the political values embraced in the societies they govern. Consequently, elements such as trust,

political efficacy and perceived legitimacy are directly related to how societal structures – political, social and economic- operate.

Taking this into consideration, Almond & Verba construct a basic taxonomy of societies according to three different societal archetypes. Societies where citizens possess a strong sense of influence, understanding and confidence in the overall political system are labelled as ‘participants’, whereas those where members are not interested and have no knowledge of politics are named ‘parochial’. Lastly, societies and cultures where individuals are expected to participate in politics, at least in a cosmetic way to show their support for the regime, are called ‘subjects’. Political information regarding the overall composition of political values, beliefs and behaviours of individuals in The United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Mexico and the United States of America was methodically collected, codified, and interpreted using statistical methods of analysis for the first time within the political science discipline. However, over the years its results have been criticized due to its extremely American character. As Moody (2013, p.40) observes:

The results are amazingly unsurprising: the United States had a close to model civic culture; England did pretty well, but was a touch more tilted toward a “subject” culture than a civic one; the Germans were good subjects, very obedient; while Italy was a mess. The Mexican case was an anomaly, an “aspirational” culture: Mexicans had a low opinion of the actual outcome of government actions but relatively high confidence in their ability to influence the government.

The initial popularity of the study was largely due to its more rigorous methodological underpinnings. Indeed, Almond & Verba were able to create a method to show what anthropologists and sociologists had not been able to ‘prove’. This systematic, quantitative approach was clearly an alternative to what was then perceived as psycho-analytical and anthropological reductionism. By comparison, political culture was seen as a scientific concept based on the objective examination of psycho-social components in different societies. As noted by Welch (2013), the inception of political culture as an empirical research program was closely related to the invention of a particular kind of survey, the *attitude survey*.

Armed with a new type of methodology, political scientists attempted to examine the world through new lenses, and over the years several characterizations, comparisons and even

predictions have been made using the political culture framework. In 1966, Elazar proposed that American national political culture was a synthesis of three political subcultures — individualistic, moralistic, and traditionalistic—. These subcultures were based on the perceptions of individuals about politics and governments and the role they play in the overall political arena. According to Elazar (1994), immigration and subsequent migratory movements during the colonial period influenced the composition of state cultures. For instance, the precarious situation encountered by people in Louisiana —isolated due to early French colonization efforts- produced a population more driven towards individual survival than engagement in civic responsibilities. In addition, waves of migrants from significantly diverse backgrounds created multiple rivalries and divisions in the area.

By the 1970s the nature of the concept had met with criticism. The indiscriminate construction of categorical representations of the world from a highly qualitative perspective led scholars to worry about the use of the concept as a residual category that was used to explain anything that cannot be explained by other means. Furthermore, the rise of Marxist and rational choice perspectives led new theorists to argue that works on political culture contained a normative bias that tended to privilege the status quo by promoting a conservative ideology. In this context, during the 1970s the once popular concept started losing its appeal among political scientists but still remained part of the methodological repertoire especially of those studying the rise of communist nations (Formisano, 2001).

By the late 1980s, a number of scholars of political culture such as Wildavsky (1987), Eckstein (1988), and Inglehart (1988) attempted to restore the balance in the field now dominated by rational choice models. Inglehart (1990, 1997) empirically reconfirms the validity of the basic notions contained in *The Civic Culture* while refuting economic determinism and linear modernization theories. Based on the convincing argument that political culture is a relevant intervening variable in the relationship between economic development and democracy, he demonstrates how industrial societies have moved from the modernisation phase —dominated by traditional and survival cultural values— into a post-modernisation phase —dominated by self-expressionist cultural values. By examining multiple existing surveys, Inglehart is able to expand the scope of political culture analysis in an unprecedented way. Indeed, his findings cover forty three societies representing around 70 percent of the world's population.

Another prominent example of the renaissance of political culture is Putnam. In *Making Democracy Work* (1993) he demonstrates that social capital³⁵ is positively correlated with the performance of regional and local governments. He suggests that the differences between northern —rich and prosperous— and southern regions —mostly poor— exist due to cultural elements deeply embedded in the orientation of individuals. This theory argues that high levels of civic engagement found in the north have bolstered the performance of the polity and the economy; while in the south, low levels of civic engagement have been accompanied with obstacles to increasing social and economic factors.

Another significant contribution to the revival of political culture arrived after the fall of communism. Samuel Huntington (1993) argues that the most important distinctions between peoples after the Cold War era were not political or economic, but cultural. Based on this hypothesis, he proposes that after the Cold War, potential conflict would no longer arise from the division of the world into three basic groups of countries. Instead, it would be more likely to occur between seven or eight groups of countries, grouped according to their cultural roots. Despite the criticisms that this broad-brush approach, based on non-empirical evidence, brought to the academic community, it is plausible to state that, for sure, it contributed to reviving the discussion on political culture worldwide.

By the beginning of the new millenium, an impressive amount of data had been accumulated by different countries, thereby providing the study of political culture with multiple possibilities of analysis. Large international efforts such as the World Values' Survey, Eurobarometer, Latinobarómetro among others have been considered to be reliable sources of political cultural information over the past decades. More than ever, attitudes towards politics are constantly measured and examined by political and social scientists and are regularly employed to construct broad characterisations of individuals bound by cultural origin.

Bringing individuals back: a waltz between political culture and political psychology.

One of the major achievements made by proponents of political culture was the placement of the individual as a representative unit of culture. This led to the establishment of a discreet, but certainly close relationship between political culture and the field of social psychology. Recently, this relationship can be described as an open continuous dance between fields with

³⁵ Putman defines social capital as "features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions," (1993, p.67)

propositions crossing from one side to another in an attempt to put individuals at the centre of the discussion. From the beginning, Almond & Verba's (1963) conception of the term *political culture* bore important psychological connotations by encompassing components such as cognitive, affective and evaluative orientations. Moreover, political culture scholars perceive culture in terms of mental maps which provide the knowledge that guides behaviour (Pye, 1997). In his passionate defence of the stable and cumulative character of political culture Eckstein (1988, p.791) states:

The postulate of cumulative learning provides the culturalist account of how two fundamental needs of actors in societies are satisfied: the need for economy of action and the need for predictability in interaction. Life would hardly be bearable, even possible, if one had to think out every action, taking into account all pertinent information and lack of information. Orientational schemata thus save virtually all decision costs. Social life, similarly, would hardly be possible without reliable pre knowledge of others' actions and of the effect of one's own actions on those of others. Without such preknowledge social life would tend to be entropic.

Theoretically speaking, using political schemata as a means to illustrate the cumulative character of culture marked a move in the underpinning assumptions guiding the discourse of political culture. Political culture was born and flourished during the behavioural revolution of social sciences. As such, its closest encounter with psychology occurred through its proximity with psychological behaviourism, an attempt to move psychology closer to the examination of the observable behaviour of individuals (Welch, 2013). But while political culture, the proud child of political behaviourism stood still for decades, simple descriptive psychological behaviourism was being replaced by more sophisticated and precise psychological theories.

Only four years before Ecksteins' remarks, Hastie (1984) mapped the theoretical approaches used in the conceptualization of human behaviour, illustrating how political scientists had employed very basic notions of empirical research to conduct their analyses. His objective was not to exhibit the weakness of the descriptive nature of political behaviouralism —closely associated to the political cultural proposition— but to identify areas of opportunity to modernise the theoretical assumptions behind traditional approaches to the study of political behaviour. From his perspective, strict descriptive approaches could benefit from the use of theories of the mind in general, and cognitive theories in particular. One such possibility, *information*

processing theory, conceptualises the human mind in similar terms to a computer. When incoming political information flows, it is processed through hierarchically organized structures of pre-stored information named schemata.

Lau (1986, p.95) describes schemata as a “knowledge structure, based on the experience, that organizes people’s perceptions of the world”. They serve two major functions: the processing and storage of incoming information and the recall and interpretation of information in memory (Lau & Sears, 1986). Basically, the principle behind schematic thinking and information processing theories, is that human beings are by nature cognitive misers who cannot integrally process every single piece of incoming information. Instead, their minds rely on a principle of economy, which makes them filter all incoming information through these pre-existing structures in order to make many types of decisions, among them political decisions.

Eckstein’s defence of the cumulative character of culture based on schema theory is relevant not only because it reflects a clear attempt to move political culture closer to political psychology, but also because it provides political culture scholars with a new framework to understand the concept of culture at the individual level. Consequently, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours are now embedded in a hierarchically superior cognitive structure, one that generates predispositions over specific political objects and that is closely related to an old political cultural concept: political socialisation.

Even before *The Civic Culture*, Almond (1958) established the importance of political socialisation as a process of induction into political culture. However it was Eckstein who unwrapped further this proposition by giving up-bringing and education the character of ‘social carriers of culture’ responsible for the intergenerational transmission of political orientation. The origins of this idea can be tracked to Parsons who originally combined Durkheim’s theory of normative constraint and Weber’s theory of meaningful individual action. From this perspective, social order is guaranteed through the transference of norms and values which in turn generate wants among politically socialized individuals. In time, those wants become components of social explanation in all manner of subjective factors, harnessing individuals to their societies through the internalisation of these cultural components that, in the end, are responsible for showing individuals what they are supposed to do in society (Welch, 2013).

These arguments take us again to the field of political psychology and to its most systematic attempt to conceptualise the transfer of political emotions and cognitions between generations

of individuals, that is, the proposition behind the theory of Symbolic Politics³⁶. One of the key aspects of this theory is the placement of political attitudes according to their position on a continuum ranging from highly symbolic to non-symbolic. Symbolic attitudes are developed early in life and are the product of political socialisation in the immediate environment where children are brought up, resulting in positive and negative affects attached to specific political symbols (Lau, Brown & Sears, 1978; Valentino & Sears, 1998; Sears, 1993; Kinder & Sears 1981).

A variation on this theory which is based on a schematic component, was developed by Sears, Huddy & Schaffer (1986) who argue that simple affective reactions towards political symbols are too devoid of cognitive structures, and are therefore not able to fully capture the complexity of the phenomenon. The authors propose that generationally transferred political symbols are organised hierarchically in a schematic form with differing levels of abstraction, ranging in descendent order from general beliefs of the political world to specific positions of given political issues. Hence, commonly shared symbols or group symbols have potent effects among individuals regardless of their levels of political sophistication. Similar propositions regarding the stability of political attitudes, beliefs and behaviours and the role of socialisation have been studied by other scholars such as Alwin & Krosnik (1991), Krosnik (1991), Lao & Kuhn (2002) and Hooghe & Wilkenfeld (2008). Despite some opposing views on specific issues there seems to be an agreement on the fact that, at least some factors are acquired early in life through the influence of family and education.

In a nutshell the study of cultural patterns and politics has met with several ups and downs since Almond & Verba's original proposition. Regardless of the efforts made by scholars to reposition the concept of political culture at the macro-level, it is clear that its most notable evolution has occurred at the micro-level through the study of individuals as carriers of cultural orientations or predispositions. This conception has deeply affected the study of the political acculturation of migrants. Indeed, political scientists in the field of migration regularly develop their methodological frameworks based on the design and measurement of variables similar to those originally proposed by political culturalists in order to track these orientations.

Despite a number of criticisms, it would be unfair to look down on the remarkable achievements with which political culture and political psychology have provided the field of political science

³⁶ This theory needs to be differentiated from symbolic politics as understood in interpretivism and political semiotics.

in general and the field of political acculturation in particular. First is the notion that political orientation by culture is a mostly stable and cumulative phenomenon, something expected to prevail during time, but not something totally unchangeable. In fact, following Ecksteins' remarks, societies change and adapt in response to disruptive events. However, this change is slow: sometimes the more societies change the more they remain the same. Such a proposition provides the study of the political cultural patterns of migrants with a similar expectation of continuation over time, not just limited to the years immediately after migration occurs, but over a longer period, probably a lifetime.

A second point relates to the proposition that highly symbolic political norms, values, beliefs and behaviours are transmitted through early processes of political socialisation. Indeed, the stable character of all cultures depends greatly in the endoculturation of their new members. Therefore, political socialisation does not respond exclusively to the need to guide individuals contextually, but in cultural terms it is also a condition for the survival of societies. When migrants cross borders they bring with them certain values, beliefs and behaviours. Moreover, in the presence of a new set of factors it is expected that migrants meet with high levels of dissonance that can affect integration into their new societies.

A third point refers to the idea that political culture is organized in a cohesive arrangement of cognitive structures that are not based on independent values, beliefs and behaviours. Cognitive structures compound both affective and rational components and are relevant to assigning meaning to political symbols and objects. This assignation constitutes the basis of culture and provides the study of migration and politics with an expectation of interpretation based on these previously acquired structures. Finally, and probably most importantly, is the proposition that political culture can be observed and analysed through the deployment of empirical methods. Of course, methods will vary according to scholars' influences and positions, but overall these scholars have shown that the relationship between culture and politics can indeed be addressed through the observation of, and interaction with individuals.

3.3. Changing lenses: An interpretive view of political culture and acculturation

After exploring the theoretical underpinnings of political culture, it becomes clear that these have played a decisive role in the way scholars approach the study of migrants and politics. Interestingly, many studies in the field do not use the word 'culture' to start with. More often than not, scholars avoid the use of the term and replace it with others less controversial such as *pre-migratory patterns of behaviour*. Regardless of intentionality in avoiding the word culture,

the components employed in its exploration are similar to those proposed by traditional notions of political culture. These normally include, for instance, variables such as voting behaviour, civic engagement and trust.

It would be unfair therefore to suggest that political scholars have stripped the study of the political acculturation of migrants of its cultural component. Instead they have addressed the subject from deeply rooted epistemological conceptions of the relationships between culture and politics, as embedded in positivist and rational choice accounts. Regardless of the valuable insights that such foundationalist ontological underpinnings have provided to our understanding of political acculturative phenomena, this study argues that the *off-the-peg* nature of the models employed so far has resulted in a series of assumptions which currently restrain the evolution of the field and thus prevent it from moving in new directions.

First, and probably most importantly is the assumption that political acculturation is a product to measure and not a process to observe. What is important is not how the interaction between cultural elements occurs but what the final result of it is. Thus, authors regularly refer—mostly in quantitative terms—to how close individuals are to becoming similar to native populations. Following this line, acculturation is seen as a path in a continuous line between two cultures, the original one and the receiving one. As previously established, such an approach finds its major support in the unilinear models of acculturation that prevailed in the field over three decades ago and that have now been ruled out, given the limitations to understanding migrants as individuals who face several choices when they move across borders³⁷. Scholars exploring acculturation using this approach attempt to measure the residual effects of acculturative change, but do not to appreciate acculturation in terms of a process.

A second assumption is that acculturation is simply a learning process, and as such it is understood as the transformative effort guiding the embracement of political values and beliefs—normally close to democratic ideals—by a series of individuals with limited experience with these, due to their non-democratic background. Such an approach seems tainted by the same orientalist position that accompanied Almond & Verba's original proposition, that is, by its proximity to the notion of modernisation. Indeed, studies focusing on the political acculturation of alien populations coming from non-democratic countries clearly outnumber those focusing on individuals moving between established democracies. Behind them lies the underlying assumption that migrants—perceived as democratically illiterate—need to be re-educated to be

³⁷ A discussion on unilinear models of acculturation can be found in Chapter Two.

active in mostly democratically ideal societies. As seen in chapter two, the results are somehow unsurprising with migrants who come from non-democratic countries normally scoring lower in democratic indexes when compared to native populations. Acculturation and learning processes are indeed deeply entangled. However, exploring learning processes cannot depart from biased assumptions, nor can they focus their attention only on a series of limited ‘attributes’.

A third assumption is that culture is embedded in the resulting political beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of individuals after moving to a new country, and as such these factors are the subject of numerical representation and consequent conclusions even after individuals cross borders. In fact, the construction of causal arrows pointing to numerical results before and after migration experiences is a constant feature of the vast majority of analyses in the field that consider these figures as self-explanatory. If individuals coming from with an apathetic political culture start voting after moving to a more democratic society, their achievement is mostly attributed to contact with democratic practices and institutions. This represents a triumph for the process of political re-socialisation. Other possibilities —voting without knowledge of candidates and parties or simply as a consequence of fear of official repercussions based on their previous experience with authoritarianism— are normally discarded. I will not argue against the relevance of attitudes, beliefs and behaviours in cultural discourse, nonetheless, reducing culture to such variables has limited our view across a wide range of possibilities. Moreover, it has turned culture into something *held* instead of something *lived*.

Considering these limitations, this thesis approaches political acculturation through a different ontological lens. It departs from the notion that we “inhabit a world of our own making” (Onuf, 1989), therefore “people do one thing and not another due to the presence of certain social constructs, ideas, beliefs, norms, identities, or some other interpretive filter through which people perceive the world” (Parsons, 2010). From this perspective, culture is a human-made product of social interaction used by people to make sense of the world. Such an interpretive filter positions culture essentially as a meaning-making process.

Any discussion from an interpretivist perspective needs to start with Clifford Geertz and his notion of culture. The context in which this notion originated deserves further explanation: As mentioned earlier, the influence of structural functionalism in the social sciences resulted in a behavioural revolution which reached its peak in the 1950’s. However, by the 1970s its glory began to fade. The contextual factors upon which it was founded were mostly gone. As Kuper

(1999, p.80) argues, the role of the United States was less quixotic, and the cold war brought new priorities to the agenda.

At that time, Clifford Geertz, a former graduate from the Department of Social Relations at Harvard was invited to establish the School of Social Science in Princeton. It presented him with the opportunity to create a school “dedicated to an interpretive approach, dismissive of positivist social science” (Kuper 1999, p.79). Such an approach was based on critical points made by a group of academics —Geertz’s included— opposing the behavioural revolution and its expansion to the study of culture. Key scholars such as Weber, Marshall, Pareto and Durkheim had argued before in favour of moving the discussion from the tangible and concrete world of values, attitudes and behaviours to the more abstract concept of symbols and meaning. Thinking about such points of concern, Geertz (1973, p.12) observes:

There is an enormous increase in interest, not only in anthropology, but in social studies generally, in the role of symbolic forms in human life. Meaning... has now come back into the heart of our discipline

Putting symbols and meaning at the centre of the discussion Geertz (1973, p.89) was able to articulate a definition of culture as:

An historical transmitted pattern of meaning, embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.

Geertz’s position was developed by drawing upon, expanding and clarifying previous notions of culture embedded in the fundamentals of cultural structuralism, a school of thought that became popular in the works of anthropologists such as Marshal D. Sahlins and Claude Levi-Strauss³⁸. *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), a series of essays written over a period of sixteen years has played a fundamental role in the study of culture in social sciences from an interpretivist

³⁸ In the last essay of *The Interpretation of Cultures* Geertz argues that the study of culture must shift from the tradition of conceptualizing the process in terms of ‘dissecting an organism, diagnosing a symptom, deciphering a code or ordering a system... to one in general parallel with penetrating a literary text’. In this context he argues against structuralism and proposes the idea of treating the study of culture in terms of interpreting a text.

perspective ever since. Its first essay, *Thick Description* contains what is probably the most popular cultural quote in the interpretive world:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (p.5)

Following this line, in *The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man*, Geertz proposes that culture is best seen as a set of control mechanisms for governing behaviour. Drawing on an analogy, he compares culture to computer programs that give plans, recipes, rules and instructions to individuals. Geertz's notion of culture begins with the idea that human thought is both social and public and consists of a series of symbols —words for the most part although he also includes gestures and objects as part of his description— anything that is “used to impose meaning upon experience” (p.45). These symbols are found in the environments of individuals from the moment they are born, and remain stable in circulation even after their death. They act as a guide, showing humans what to do and how to find their way in life. The specific symbols that constitute a culture are the vehicles for its conception, but they do more than articulate a view of the world, they also provide guidelines for action.

Geertz's account of culture is hermeneutic. Since human actions communicate meaning, it is the work of the ethnographer to collect such meanings and read them in a similar way to written texts. *Thick descriptions* of what is found in the field are to be created not only by concentrating on actual behaviour but also on the context in which this behaviour is produced. Here the ethnographer is concerned not so much with *what* people actually do, as with the *meaning* of what they do. But ethnographers need to do more than just read meanings, they also need to interpret them. Their task is one of *explicating explications*, the results of which are *constructions of constructions* (Geertz, 1973, p.64).

Defining culture in terms of articulated nets of meaning was indeed an influential proposition for the social sciences. That is because just like culture is an interdisciplinary object of enquiry, its core conceptions have the potential —if not the obligation— to reach across disciplines. In this context, Geertz' bold proposition has traversed disciplinary fields moving from social anthropology to sociology and psychology, and only recently to the field of politics. This has not

occurred without criticism of some of his ideas and methods³⁹. Indeed, post-Geertzian accounts of culture as a meaning-making process have evolved in a variety of ways. While some still stick to the tradition of ethnography and thick descriptions, others have developed in different directions incorporating new elements of attention. Such is the case of political studies.

In their historical reviews of the term political culture Formisano (2001) and Street (1994) give clear accounts of how the battle to move the concept from its positivist origins to interpretivist grounds has been rather difficult⁴⁰. In fact, it was not until the 1980s that a cultural turn towards interpretivism began to appear in political studies, yet traditional views of positivism were still dominant. As Formisano (2001, p.407) observes:

Although a 1984 survey showed that "for the majority of political scientists the concept of political culture is used in its purely psychological sense," political science and history took a "cultural turn" toward anthropology during the 1980s. Advocacy of "symbolic analysis" and interpretivism as practiced by Geertz became common. Arguing that "political science will always need to be something more than, or other than, a science,"

Only two years after the above-mentioned survey took place, *The Western Political Quarterly* published a review by William Adams (1986) in which he urged his colleagues towards the adoption of an interpretive approach to the study of political culture. Eloquenty arguing that Geertz' formulations extend to the political world, he advocates in favour of moving the discussion of culture and politics towards more philosophical and anthropological grounds. At the centre of his argumentation was the fact that political meaning "is born not just in what individual subjects consciously think and value politically, but in cultural and intersubjective symbols, in collective meanings inscribed in the symbolic texts of the practices themselves" (p.562) Similar calls were made by other political scientists such as Dittmer (1977), Merelman (1991) and Welch (1993)⁴¹. Slowly but surely, names such as Clifford Geertz, Paul Ricoeur and Abner Cohen started appearing in political cultural works.

³⁹ For a contemporary discussion on Geertz's work see Inglis (2000).

⁴⁰ In their review, both authors mention different attempts to move the concept to new grounds. Apart from interpretivist approaches they also mention the works of scholars such as Topf (1989) and Girvin (1989).

⁴¹ It is worth noting that even though Welch's 1993 book recommended a phenomenological approach to the study of political culture heavily indebted to structural anthropology and interpretivism, he later rejects the interpretive turn to political culture and describes it in terms of a "theoretical denial" (Welch, 2013).

But how exactly has cultural interpretivism merged into the field of Political Science? Probably the most obvious consequence has been the acceptance of the fundamental notion that culture is a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms; and that such symbolic forms affect and are affected by the political world. As observed by Chabal & Daloz (2006, p.25), Geertz understands politics as an 'arena' rather than a 'black box'. From this perspective, what becomes relevant to political scholars is 'not so much the study of functional equivalents within the body of politics, but the translation of meanings, the symbols, of what is political in a particular society'. To see just what is involved here requires reshaping old assumptions of what culture is and how it should be studied. Values, behaviour, institutions and social structures cannot be understood thus as culture but as culturally constituted phenomena (Ross, 2007, p.18).

Elaborating on Geertz' words, Adams (1986, p.558) argues that the symbolic dimension of politics is not an indefinite world of excrescences, mysteries, fictions and decorations. Instead, political institutions and political practices configure and articulate meaning, and must therefore be approached as structures of thought. Whatever differences between political societies may exist, they all construct and reconstruct a sense of *who we are* in an effort to clarify the fundamental notions of membership within a political community. He concludes by saying that "meaning in this particular sense, is clearly not an ornament of political community and practice, but one of its essential conditions".

The notion that the state can be approached from the perspective of the symbolic is not exactly new. In his book, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, Murray Edelman (1967, p.1) asserts that "the symbolic side of politics calls for attention, for men cannot know themselves until they know what surrounds them and nurtures them". Politics is a passing parade of abstract symbols to which we react at two levels: cognitive and affective. The cognitive involves information that the symbol communicates while the affective consists of the feelings that political symbols comprise. Political forms thus symbolise what large collectives believe about the state and can be as broad as the set of ideals about which values governments need to embrace, or as specific as the structures, goods and services they need to deploy in the name of such ideals. Based on such conceptions, in 1977 Lowell Dittmer proposed that political culture "best be understood as a semiological system" (p.566), and in line with this idea he proposes that this nests within a more inclusive system of political communication.

Although Edelman and Dittmer's propositions of symbolic culture were structured quite distinct from the Geertzian tradition, the parallels between both theoretical propositions are remarkable.

In this context, it is hardly surprising to find their works constantly cited among political semioticians and cultural interpretivists. Nonetheless, they both fail to provide explanations of one fundamental element: the role of individuals in the construction of meaning. Both authors conceive people more as passive recorders and users of given symbolic forms, than as builders of the worlds they live in. Agency and structure should therefore be one of the major issues of examination within more contemporary accounts of semiotic politics.

Nowadays, most political cultural interpretivists view individuals as people continuously working on the creation of the world they inhabit. Far from just recording events, people are choice-makers, operating in dynamic and continuously changing worlds. Yet culture is recognized as a unified guiding force, framing peoples' thoughts and actions. Lisa Wedeen (2002, p.720) argues that culture designates a way of looking at the world, which requires an account of how symbols operate in practice. Nonetheless, this system is internally varied and conflicting, a merger between systems of signification and action as experienced in daily life⁴². Together, systems of signification, and practice in the field entail both structure and agency.

The word 'systems' of course implies structures, but the language and symbols constitutive of any "system of signification" are created, reproduced and subverted by agents speaking and acting in the world... We nevertheless reproduce ourselves as agents or "subjects" within the confines of institutional and semiotic "structures," what game theorists call "choice under cultural constraint" (p.720)

There are different readings among political cultural interpretivists about the issue of agency. Nonetheless, they all converge on the notion of diversity being structured within fine lines of signification built over symbolic forms. The complex amalgamation of individual choice and the social contextualization of symbolic forms has been explained in term of peoples' *positions and trajectories* within different fields of interaction. Borrowing the idea from Pierre Bourdieu, Thompson (1990, pp.147-152) proposes that fields of interaction are understood synchronically as a space of positions, and diachronically as a set of trajectories. Throughout their lives, individuals move between positions by drawing from different types of resources or *capital* (economic, cultural and symbolic). The use of this capital is based on people's particular aims and intentions. As a result, people within a culture may bear different views of particular

⁴² Here it is worth noticing that systems of signification refer to the interrelated structures of meaning posited over a variety of symbols within a semiotic community.

phenomena based on their own *accumulated experience* in the field (a combination of their individual aims and their positions and trajectories). Yet they are regularly guided by given cultural knowledge, rules, traditions, practices and institutions and the shared conceptions that exist within the community.

Probably influenced by Bourdieu's (1990, pp. 52-65) characterization of the *habitus*, Thompson argues that a great deal of this given knowledge is schematic and individuals not so much draw upon it but implement it in everyday life⁴³. Different from Bourdieu's though, Thompson's conception of schematic thinking is flexible when he proposes:

[Schemata] are socially inculcated and socially differentiated conditions of action and interaction, conditions which are, to some extent, fulfilled and reproduced every time an individual acts... But in implementing schemata, and in drawing upon rules and conventions of various kinds, individuals also extend and adapt these schemata and rules (Thomson 1990, p. 148).

In this context, although symbolic forms are normally received through schematic arrangements, the process of reception is not one of mere assimilation. Rather, individuals' social characteristics mould the ways in which symbols are received, understood, and valued. Furthermore, the interpretation of symbols is a creative process of evaluation in which meaning is actively constituted and reconstituted. "Individuals do not passively absorb symbolic forms but creatively and actively make sense of them, and thereby produce meaning in the very process of reception" (Thompson, 1990, p. 153).

Based on such assumptions is the fact that that culture is not seen as a force that makes people necessarily behave homogeneously, or share unified ideologies —although to some extent, both could actually occur—, but as one constitutive of mutual intelligibility. Indeed, culture can be conceptualized in terms of *semiotic communities* (Sewell, 1999, p. 49) where "people can recognize the same set of contrasts and therefore are able to engage in mutually comprehensible symbolic action". On such premises Wedeen (2002, pp. 720-721) observes that understanding semiotic practices requires an analysis of how people foster intelligibility through using words, interpreting symbols and engaging in specific practices. From this perspective, political scientists

⁴³ To Bourdieu, the *habitus* is a system of durable transposable dispositions, structured structures created by a kind of interplay between practice and shared knowledge. In that sense it is created and reproduced unconsciously through the combination of past events and structures and current practices and structures, as well as through the very perceptions that individuals hold of these (Bourdieu, 1990, p.53).

must be able to show that their interpretations are based on a grasp of native intelligibility; to see how practices actually work, how they are negotiated and who participates in them. As such, it is not a quest for finding full agreements but a way of understanding how people within a given cultural group understand, but do not always agree with one another (Ross, 2007, p. 19).

This is not the same as arguing that inside the borders of any given country, semiotic practices are never correlated. In regard to this, Wedeen (2002, p. 721) highlights the way in which the idea of culture associated with the geographical borders of a country has, most of the time been the product of exaggeration; “Something always “constructed” in the minds of cartographers” she argues. Nonetheless, drawing from Sewell (1999, pp. 49-50) she brings the concept of *thin coherence* to refer to the “variable, contested, incompletely integrated way in which inhabitants of one specific territory share a set of semiotic practices”.

Whether thick or thin, something important about this coherence is its local character. What makes sense within the borders of one semiotic community does not necessarily entail its intelligibility in another. This can be illustrated with reference to the concept of re-election as encountered during the fieldwork in this research. From a purely semantic perspective, “re-election” describes a similar action in both Mexico and New Zealand i.e. the continuous holding of an elected position. However, whereas in New Zealand the process is a normal and expected part of the parliamentary system —and by extension a feature of a healthy democratic state—, in Mexico it is interpreted as a negative feature of politics that is regularly associated with dictatorships. Indeed, for almost a century, the slogan “effective suffrage no-re-election”, a principle hailing from the Mexican Revolution, has constituted a common understanding of how the political system should work.

Building on this example, the meanings people attach to the term re-election may vary across contexts. These are embedded within given political cultures and as such are dependent upon historical and social factors. Consequently, the considerations that political scholars should give to the study of people’s cultures require a contextual analysis of their living environments in the *longue durée* (diachronically) and not just mere attention to concrete habits and behaviours (Chabal & Daloz, 2006, p. 23).

This takes me to one last element commonly embedded in the discussion of political cultural analysis: the idea of stability in culture. Indeed, a common criticism among non-cultural scholars across epistemic communities is the notion that cultural analysis departs from monolithic and

almost unchangeable concepts of culture. This may be true but only up to a certain degree. As Ross (1997, pp. 54-65) explains, political cultural theories are not superior to other theories in comparative politics. In this sense, there are some phenomena for which each is most powerful, but some aspects of change do not lend themselves to explanation in simply cultural terms. Indeed, political change forced by the disruption of the economy, revolutionary movements or other non-cultural factors in the processes of nation-building would be difficult to predict exclusively from the cultural perspective. In this context, based on such limitations, it would be unfair to disqualify the discipline.

This does not supersede the fact that political cultural interpretivists have actually acknowledged change as a real issue that affects cultures. For instance, Chabal & Daloz (2006, p.55) reject claims of the fixed conception of culture on the basis that if it is true that interpretivists concentrate on the analysis of long time phenomena, they are equally interested in the dynamics of historical change. This argument is consistent with Merelman's (1991, p. 239) proposition that a number of theories of culture and politics propose change as a central feature⁴⁴. In a similar vein, Ross (1997, p. 65) observes the way in which culture can play a significant role in political change, and regardless of its relatively stable character, it is still a valuable method through which political scholars can structure their work.

A more articulate explanation of the dynamics of the stable yet changing nature of culture is proposed by Wedeen (2002, pp. 720-721). After pointing out that the influence of Geertz' works in constructing the idea of culture as a "seamless system of meaning resistant to change", she advocates a dialectical approach. Such an approach departs from the exploration of those practices through which people's practices and material realities operate in a dialectical relationship with their systems of signification. These practices are both stable and changeable, both a single system which is at the same time varied and conflicting. Such conceptualization, she argues, connotes dynamism rather than stasis, shifting the conceptualization of culture away from the idea of a fixed system.

It is through the elements comprised in this short review of the relationship between semiotics and political culture that a small group of scholars have been able to articulate new types of empirical analyses. Some are centred on broad explorations and characterizations of politics as the product of socio historical processes (e.g. Chabal & Daloz, 2006). Others are more concrete

⁴⁴ Merelman illustrates such a proposition by using the work of authors such as Namerith and Weber, Todd and Manheim.

with exploration of the use of words, symbols and their underpinning processes in the construction of cultures (e.g. Wedeen, 1998; 1999; 2002; 2015). Finally, there are those that are more inclined towards the cognitive exploration of the dynamics of culture as used in narratives or mass media symbols (e.g. Merelman, 1991; Ross, 2007). Through different approaches, they all represent different ways of seeing the world of culture in the interpretivist tradition.

3.4 Migrants and meaning-making: an operational definition of political acculturation

Up to this point, everything connects and feeds the case for an interpretive proposition of political acculturation. Here it is worth noting that just as political interpretivists have pushed the boundaries of their discipline, a similar situation has occurred in the field of acculturative studies⁴⁵. In 2009 a group of scholars led by Valery Chirkov positioned themselves against the realistic tradition that has infiltrated the study of the discipline. In a special issue of the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* the group defend this idea by stating:

Acculturation researchers should find their epistemological underpinning in various forms of interpretative social science, including but not limited to interpretative ethnography, phenomenology, and symbolic interactionism (Chirkov, 2009, p. 179).

It is in considering both proposals of change towards a more interpretive approach that this thesis was constructed. It attempts to make a modest contribution to both fields by analysing the processes through which the interaction of migrants with a new political system takes place. A good initial point for an interpretive discussion of political acculturation starts with Wittgenstein and his famous quote used by Geertz:

We ... say of some people that they are transparent to us. It is, however important as regards this observation, that one human being can be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even given a mastery of the country's language. We do not understand the people. (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves.) We cannot find our feet with them.

⁴⁵ Here acculturative studies are to be understood in terms of cross-cultural psychology. Most studies reviewed and analysed in Chapter One, including Berry's, have been developed in this discipline.

Migrants, like any other human beings, are people born and brought up within the borders of a semiotic community. When moving across countries, intricate nets of meaning travel with them. This is a complex codification of symbols that they have always used to interpret events and act accordingly. It represents what they know about the world, its conventions, rituals and practices. Moreover, such organised arrangement is, at least to a certain extent, only intelligible within the limits of the country of origin. To “find their feet” with locals, migrants first need to make sense of a series of symbolic arrangements, most of which are new to them. These include symbolic representations of politics, the State, its institutions, actors and conflicts.

A newly encountered political symbol may thus be both a fresh seed sown on the ground of interpretation and an intimidating experience reminding us how oblivious people are to the meanings of a new country. Whether migrants participate politically or not is from this perspective, not as relevant as understanding how they assign meaning to such symbols in order to make sense of them. Migrants may indeed participate politically in their new countries, especially if this is perceived as a prerequisite for acquiring further rights such as the granting of nationality. Nonetheless, the meanings attached to these acts are probably worthier of examination than their actual behaviour. In their exemplification of the acculturation of migrants’ Chabal & Daloz (2006, p. 153) observe:

We are primarily interested in identifying, understanding and discussing the ways in which the people concerned make sense of the changes they witness or undergo; how they explain what they do, in the ways in which they do it. It is that aspect of perception, as it were, which requires an analysis, for it is that which provides an insight into their (individual as well as collective) behaviour.

Such an exploration requires close attention to the processes through which meaning is created. If culture is a frame or a way of looking at the world (Ross, 1997 p.46; Wedeen 2002, p.720), the study of acculturation should be concerned with the reconstruction or realignment of such. In this context, acculturation is looked at more in terms of a process than in terms of what it is perceived as being its concrete results or residual effects. Scrutinizing these processes involves paying attention to the cognitive and emotional lines affecting migrants’ lives in their new countries.

Considering the cognitive and emotional components of culture is not only normal but inevitable. Indeed, with some variations, renowned interpretivists in cultural and political

cultural analysis acknowledge that stability in the interpretation of symbols depends on the use of cognitive and emotional structures. From Thompson's malleable conception of *flexible schemata*, to Ross' *psychocultural interpretations*, different political studies scholars agree that the interpretation of symbols cannot be devoid from their cognitive and emotional components. In fact, the idea that people continuously draw from accumulated experiences with politics is not strange to the cultural anthropological tradition. In this respect Cohen (1969, p.221) observes:

Subjects do not start their lives every morning by examining the dispositions of power in their society to see whether the regime is still backed by the same amount of power as before, or whether that power has diminished and the regime can therefore be overthrown. The stability and continuity of the regime are made possible through a complex system of symbolism that gives it legitimacy by representing it ultimately as a 'natural' part of the celestial order.

In this context, political systems of symbols, from which emotional attachments are created, are processed through cognitive structures. That is because symbols need to be systematised together within more concrete frameworks to make them operational in real life. Whatever denomination is imposed upon them (maps, schemata, frames), they serve a similar purpose: guiding individuals through nets of previously assigned meaning in order to make their decision-making process more efficient⁴⁶. That is because this accumulated information constitutes the symbolic representation of experience, whether lived or perceived, and as such it is the footprint in which people find their way in society. Culture here is not simply an inventory of collected information but a beacon of light influencing what people consider to be the right way to think, feel and behave. In these terms, as Kertzer (1988, p.69) observes, regardless of how they are interpreted, symbols bear a strong emotional impact on people.

Migration though is a disruptive experience, one that involves a collision of nets of meaning. Based on the cognitive assumptions of individuals and culture, trying to understand the new based on the old is only logical. Nevertheless, it can be an exhausting and frustrating process with unclear results. Considering Edelmann's remarks, making sense of the massive amount of political symbols *parading* in front of the average migrant, would require a full and perfectly synchronised rearrangement of the inventory of meanings. Moreover, as cultures are not static

⁴⁶ In a review of the concept of cognition and schemata in cultural anthropology, Kertner (1984, p.84) traced the concept to 1932.

nor are individuals' processes of constructing reality, political acculturation is a fertile ground for creativity and differentiation. Yet it is also rational to expect that people who are connected even through the thinnest of coherences maintain, to some extent, some in-group connections. All these expectations, propositions, doubts and questions are the subject of this thesis.

Figure 3 provides a graphic representation of the elements explored in this and the preceding sections and can be used as a starting point to articulate a definition of political acculturation for the purposes of this research. As observed, the major difference in the way in which epistemologies deal with the subject of political culture and acculturation can be broadly divided in to two separate fields of interest. While positivist accounts are concerned with specific political traits (values, attitudes and behaviours) and the proximity of these among two separate groups (native and non-native), their interpretivist counterparts focus the attention on meaning making and cultural reconstruction. In other words, they are concern in the processes leading people to make sense and create understandings of politics in a new political environment. In that regard, just like attitudes are an essential component of the positivist tradition, symbols and meanings are crucial parts of the interpretive domain.

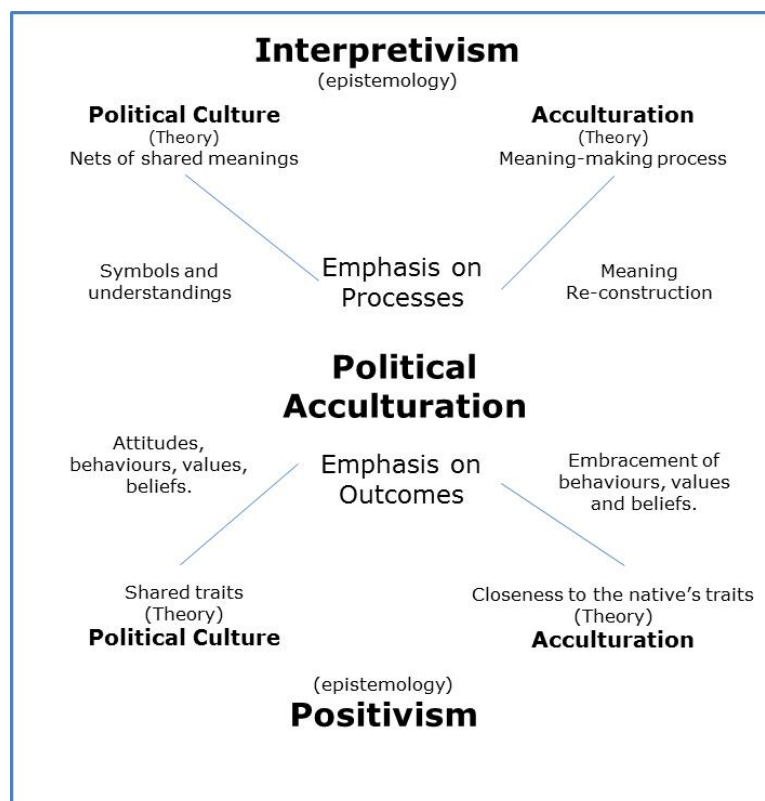


Figure 3
Theoretical Distinctions

It is in this context that I can now attempt to merge such elements into an operational definition of political acculturation to facilitate my object of enquiry. After proposing a definition, I will deconstruct its components in order to elaborate on the reasons that have led me to propose each of them in one combined form. From this perspective,

I consider political acculturation to be a long term process through which individuals moving between countries assign meaning to political symbols in order to generate responses to post-migratory political challenges.

A simple taxonomy of this definition reveals three basic components. I will start with the most obvious one: acculturation is a process, a series of actions or events that take place when individuals come into contact with a new cultural context. Moreover, acculturation is a complex process, one that can vary according to the individual characteristics of peoples, their personalities, their personal histories, and their previous knowledge, just to mention a few. Acculturation is also a long-term and probably endless process, therefore it is impossible to restrict its effects to a limited period of time. The interaction between old and new symbols and objects requires continuous reinterpretation of contextual elements, and the expectation of continuity that characterises culture is expected to occur almost unconsciously. This should be especially vivid among migrants whose processes of political socialisation have been crystallised in the Motherland, and who therefore may have preconceived notions of significant political objects and symbols.

A second component in the construction of a definition of political acculturation refers to the idea that this process involves the assignment —and reassignment— of meaning to political symbols in a new social context. In other words, for the purposes of this research I propose viewing acculturation as a semiotic process, one that is concentrated on peoples' reconstructions of reality, as expressed through symbolic forms. This consideration places meaning-making at the core of the definition. In metaphorical terms it implies not only the observation of the nets in which the Weberian animal is suspended, but also the positioning of individuals in relation to those nets. Even the most politically apathetic individuals have to assign some meaning to political symbols even if it is only to reject any further interaction with politics.

A third and final component refers to the fact that political acculturation serves a purpose. That is to say, it is not a meaningless and spontaneously originated process. On the contrary, it aims

to help individuals navigate through new and unknown social domains. It can be seen in anthropological terms as the individuals' need to generate a source of illumination to find his bearings in a new world, or in its psychological counterpart as a guide in the interaction with elements in the new environment. The disruptive nature of migration posits several challenges, but probably the clearest and most immediate one is that of making sense of the world one enters. Among the many components of such a world, there is a political one.

3.5 Conclusions

If acculturation involves the continuous first hand contact of individuals bearing two different cultures, then it is clear that culture is a decisive element of its study. That being said, there are different ways of looking at the concept of culture across disciplines in the social sciences. To date, the most influential approach to the study of culture and politics has been Almond & Verba's positivist proposal. For decades, the underlying assumptions of such a proposal have created an almost homogeneous perspective of how the binomial of political cultural should be understood and studied. Such consistency of agreement has, up to a certain point been detrimental to the development of alternative views in the field.

Interpretive accounts of political culture offer researchers the possibility of exploring such binomials using a different type of lens. Indeed, the core conception of culture as a meaning-making process is a powerful one. It is one that entails the possibility of unveiling the way in which people make sense of the world of politics, how they attach significance to symbols, and how such processes are able or not to result in political action. Here the term "symbols" moves beyond the visual expressions of human action to encompass abstract representations of the world that are significant and intelligible within the borders of the semiotic community.

There are several potential benefits to the study of the political acculturation of migrants that this epistemological perspective can provide. As argued in the previous chapter, today we know a great deal about the political behaviour of migrants through the exploration of their changing or unchanging attitudes. However, little do we know about some of the reasons that govern such behaviour; about the beliefs migrants bring to the acculturative arena; about the creation of nets of political significance or about the prioritisation of political events in a new setting. In other words our understanding of how people come to terms with their new political worlds is still profoundly limited.

The methodological contestation between positivism and interpretivism has resulted in recurrent mutual disqualification among the two epistemic communities. Regardless of the obvious unsolvable differences between ontological positions, there still exist important concomitant points between them. At the top of the list is the fundamental notion that culture is a relevant theoretical subject, able to provide explanations to the world of politics. Through such common ground, conceiving the exploration of culture and politics as a unifying front between epistemic communities can result in fruitful collaboration to expand our understanding of a number of topics, among them, the political acculturation of migrant populations.

Chapter Four: Research Methods

4.1 Introduction

Talking about research methods is referring to the choices one makes and the reasons behind such choices (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p.2). In interpretive research, the process accompanying the acquisition of knowledge is quintessentially inductive⁴⁷ and as such, exposing such decisions is at the core of its reflexive nature⁴⁸. Interpretive research methods are varied and flexible⁴⁹. They allow scholars to mix and match the range of tools (approaches, analyses and techniques) they use to guide them when solving puzzles and answering their research questions. Interpretive methods are thus grounded in the specific ontological and epistemological arguments that researchers put into practice.

Asking questions about what constitutes meaning amounts to looking at symbols and their expression in life. It is concerned with context-specific meaning instead of searching for universal truths. From this perspective, there are multiple experienced realities waiting to be unveiled, and it is the duty of the researcher to find a consistent and reliable way to do this. As Wedeen (2009, p.79) accurately notes, interpretive methods are rarely taught in political science qualitative methods seminars, so their underpinnings are still unknown among a large group of political scientists. Nonetheless, recent interest in interpretive methodologies has produced a small but consistent body of literature upon which political interpretivists can draw. There, authors constantly refer to the demands, challenges and decisions encountered when adopting this particular methodology.

This Chapter sets out to provide the reader with a retrospective view of my research design and its application. To this end it reviews the process according to three different moments: Section *4.1 the initial phase: designing, mapping and getting going*. This gives an account of the central methodological considerations affecting the study. It discusses how the study's ethnographic oriented/narrative approach was developed and what the criteria for mapping informational

⁴⁷ A general description of inductive and abductive research can be found in Chapter One.

⁴⁸ Reflexivity refers to the researcher's active consideration of and engagement with the ways in which his own sense-making and the particular circumstance that might have affected it, during the entire research project process, relate to the knowledge that has been created (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p.100).

⁴⁹ It is important to make a distinction between interpretive methods and qualitative methods. According to Yanow (2003), interpretivist methods should be conceived as a third option in the traditional qualitative-quantitative binomial.

sources, accessing informants, and designing instruments to collect information, were. In section 4.2 *the middle stage: fieldwork*, I provide a general picture of my meetings in the field, as well as of some of the challenges experienced there. Finally, in section 4.3 *The final stage: coding, interpreting and writing*, I provide the reader with information about my coding protocols as well as about the processes behind the construction of theoretical explanations. Although there are no conclusions at the end of the chapter, a brief evaluation of my research methods will take place in the final chapter.

4.2 The initial stage: deskwork

Adopting an interpretive approach to the study of political acculturation came with several methodological challenges. For me, the biggest of all the questions at the design stage was, which specific methods are appropriate to collect and reconstruct personal narratives in an abductive logic of enquiry? As seen in Chapter One, interpretive research is abductive, with new questions appearing after old ones have been answered⁵⁰. Such a recurrent and reiterative fashion posits a peculiar type of relationship between the researcher and the field. In this context, long periods of exposure to participants, settings, and materials are crucial to the success of interpretive research.

Following this, it was obvious that the types of narratives I was attempting to collect would require more than one single interview with a pre-determined number of participants. Moreover, at the core of this study was the idea of meaning i.e. the meanings individuals attach to political symbols in order to make sense of politics. Such symbolic representations are constructed through interaction with concepts, practices, rituals and institutions pertaining to the world they inhabit. Getting a grasp on people's personal narratives was, in this context, a process of digging, uncovering, and actively pursuing not only the stories people tell about their lives, but the contexts in which such stories were built. This *excavation process* would involve not only the interpretation of what people say but also interaction in the field where I needed to actively seek for pieces of information to enlighten the interpretive process (Krizek, 2003; Robinson, 1981).

Another key consideration affecting my choice of methodology was my self-predicted positionality⁵¹. Being a Mexican migrant in New Zealand myself I expected to be situated in a

⁵⁰ For a discussion on the abductive nature of interpretive research see Schwartz-Shea & Yanow (2012, p.27-34)

⁵¹ The idea behind positionality is that any study represents a space, shaped by both researcher and participant in which the identities of both have the potential to impact upon the research process (Bourke, 2014, p.1)

privileged position not only to observe but also to interact with members of the Mexican community. Furthermore, considering that this project would take years to complete, I also expected my own processes of acculturation to be a determinant in the making of my interpretations. Becoming a situational participant (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Gans, 1976; Fenno, 1986) of my own research was thus an attractive proposition. Conceiving myself as player would put me in the midst of data generation, easing access to, and understanding of peoples' stories.

These considerations combined in such a way that the ethnographic approach upon which this study was structured was the most logical of all possible choices, even more so considering that there is almost a natural relationship between interpretivism and ethnography. Geertz himself was a dedicated ethnographer, as were many of those following his tradition. Ethnography can be understood as a repertoire of approaches and techniques through which direct interaction is obtained with members of an observed population (Willis, 2000). It normally involves the interplay between methods such as interviews, continued interaction and participant observation (Fernandez-Kelly, 2003 p.497). As Kubik (2009, p.36-37) observes, combining ethnography and interpretivism allows for the reconstruction of "how culture (the meaning creating machine) operates in practice"⁵². Indeed, as proposed by Goodall (2003, p.60) when the adjective 'interpretive' modifies the noun 'ethnography' one gets pulled into a different way of reading clues to a culture. In this context, the term interpretive ethnography has come to represent a specific movement with promising connotations to the study of human action.

Mapping for exposure

A key concept of interpretive research methods is mapping for exposure. As observed by Schwartz- Shea & Yanow (2012, p.85) the concept of exposure relies on the idea that the researcher wants to encounter a wide variety of meanings made by research-relevant participants. Consequently, "the goal of mapping is to maximize research-relevant variety in the researchers' exposure to different understandings of what is being studied". Broadly speaking, it involves the identification of the different types of potential participants, locations, and sources that may be available in the community under study.

⁵² Although Kubik proposes several points of relation between ethnography and interpretivism, he clearly establishes that not all ethnography is interpretive and that, in fact, ethnographically-oriented research can indeed be undertaken from positivist perspectives.

Determining the size, distribution, and socio-economic characteristics of the Mexican community was an essential part of this mapping process. According to official data, the Mexican community in New Zealand is a small group comprising approximately seven hundred individuals, equally balanced between men and women. It is shaped mostly by middle- and lower-middle class migrants, most of whom originate from urban areas of Mexico. Its median age is 27 years, and 94% of those aged 15 and over have formal educational qualifications. In terms of their geographical distribution in New Zealand, 80% live in the North Island, mostly in the urban centres of Auckland and Wellington, although a significant portion (11%) is located on the Canterbury region in the South Island. Approximately a third of the total number of Mexicans in New Zealand is under the age of 18; this means that roughly 460 Mexicans are adults (Statistics New Zealand, 2013, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2014).

In order to map interactions between members of the community, I contacted the Mexican Embassy in New Zealand, the Centre for Latin American Studies at The University of Auckland, and a series of migrants' associations in order to gain insights into ethnic oriented events and sources. Based on both their recommendations and logistical and budgetary restrictions, I constructed a preliminary long-term calendar of events in the Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington regions. These included national celebrations, political demonstrations, ethnically oriented religious services as well as places of gathering such as restaurants and shops, which had the potential of showing in-group dynamics. At the same time, I identified a number of ethnic on-line groups created by and for Mexican migrants in New Zealand such as: *El Carnal Mexico*, *Mexicanos en Nueva Zelanda*, and *Mexicanos en Christchurch*. My decision to follow such groups was based on their high popularity among Mexican migrants, and on the fact that they often include discussions revolving around politics in both Mexico and New Zealand.

Given the size of its population and its relatively young character, archival materials on Mexican migration to New Zealand are scant. Nonetheless, during the course of my research I worked with two databases: one contained in the 2013 New Zealand Census, and a second related to the Statistical Information of Mexican Migrants provided by the *Instituto para los Mexicanos en el Exterior (IME)*. Additional sources on Latin American migration were identified through the Centre of Latin American Studies at The University of Auckland.

Interview design and participant selection

In-depth interviews are one of the most common methods of data collection in ethnographic research. Traditionally they have been referred to as a form of conversation with a purpose (Webb & Webb, 1932, p.25). Among their strengths are the detailed contextual data they produce and their flexible nature, which allows researchers to explore and reflect on participants' emotions, experiences and beliefs (Neale, 2008). In-depth interviews have been described as a suitable method to capture the process of construction of the social world through human interaction (Rorty, 1980). In the ethnographic tradition, in-depth interviews are used in combination with participant observation and recurrent interaction with the field. The role of the researcher thus, is not to settle the matter after the interview is done, but to open doors to the subsequent interplay of such methods over an extended period of time (Fernandez-Kelly, 2013 p.497).

In March 2012 I designed a preliminary set of questions, flexible enough to collect people's stories and generate further meetings with them. As mentioned in the introduction, previous attempts to test the field with a highly structured battery of questions resulted in participants feeling constrained and uncomfortable. As a result, the decision was made to allow migrants to speak freely about their past events within a more flexible sequence of thematic lines expressed in potential questions⁵³. Looking for possible topics to guide these conversations, in May 2012, I conducted a second pilot test in the Auckland area for which I drew up a list of twenty-five potential questions, grouped in four broad thematic lines: (1) the meaning of politics and its historical construct; (2) politics and Mexico; (3) politics and New Zealand and (4) reflections on change and transfer. In this context, interviews were to be conceived as a space of reflection, an excuse to engage in personal accounts of politics, its symbolic representations and reconstructions after the migratory experience. Regardless of minor inconsistencies in the phrasing of some of the questions, the list of topics proved to be appropriate to connect with participants' past and current experiences and served to produce strong emotional and cognitive reactions in the vast majority of them.

Three major decisions regarding participants were made at the initial stage. These were: (1) the criteria for recruiting participants; (2) the number of initial in-depth interviews to be performed and (3) the methods through which participants were to be reached.

⁵³ Talking about the collection of narratives Riessman (2004, p.4) observes that in the collection of personal narratives, the researcher needs to provide some setting to orientate the information he/she aims to collect.

My decision on participation parameters was made based on a combination of the experiences with the two pilot tests conducted in the Auckland region over the course of four months⁵⁴ and thorough analysis of the literature. Up to that point, most participants had been mostly Mexican students in New Zealand with whom I was in contact through my position as researcher at the University. Although their overall level of interest in Mexican politics was high, a contrasting situation occurred towards the New Zealand political realm. As later observed by some, their position as temporary migrants in New Zealand affected the potential development of political interest in a country in which they had no intention of living after finishing their programmes of study. Similarly, those of recent arrival were not familiar enough to provide even basic information about New Zealand politics. This being the case, I realized that the study should be constructed around narratives of real *stakeholders* (Baubock, 2006-2007) in the New Zealand political arena. Furthermore, if an exploration of cultural meaning was to take place, it was important to recruit people with at least some experience of political realms in both Mexico and New Zealand. In this regard, after considering the structure of similar studies, I came to the decision that informants should meet at least three criteria: (1) they needed to be first generation migrants⁵⁵ (2) who had lived in New Zealand for at least a period of one year, and (3) had the intention of residing there permanently.

Determining the number and geographic locations of participants was not an easy task. In fact, there seems to be a non-common point among researchers when it comes to making such a decision in qualitative studies. While authors such as Morse (1994) estimate that the ideal number of participants for ethnographic and grounded theory-oriented studies ranges between thirty and fifty, others such as Bernard (2000) observe that most of these studies are based on the collection of data from an average of thirty-seven participants. Based on the concept of saturation, Guest, Bunce & Johnson (2006) determine that 92% of thematic codes can be created with the information contained in the first twelve interviews, and thereafter the emergence of new themes becomes progressively infrequent⁵⁶. This situation led me to explore several studies based on the tradition of Strauss & Corbin (1990) and Charmaz (2000; 2014), since I intended to code my information based on their premises. I came to the initial conclusion of basing my

⁵⁴ These include the original pilot to test positivist-oriented questions and one to decide on which thematic lines to consider in the interpretive approach.

⁵⁵ For the purposes of this research, the term first generation migrants encompasses individuals who were born and brought up in Mexico, and who migrated to New Zealand as adults, therefore their processes of political socialization were completed in the native country.

⁵⁶ In qualitative research, saturation refers to the point where no new information is likely to appear in the data.

research design on thirty-five interviews. However, in accordance with the recommendation of the doctoral committee, I later increased this number to sixty.

Given the small size and geographical dispersion of the Mexican population in New Zealand, participants were reached through snowballing sampling (Coleman, 1958). This is a recruitment method that has been widely used in sociological research to reach hidden populations. It is based on the proposition that ‘already reached’ participants can refer new ones who, in turn would do the same in a reiterative fashion. “This process is, by necessity, repetitive: informants refer the researcher to other informants, who are contacted by the researcher and then refer her or him to yet other informants, and so on. Hence the evolving ‘snowball’ effect, captured in a metaphor that touches on the central quality of this sampling procedure: its accumulative (diachronic and dynamic) dimension” (Noy, 2008, p.230). Coleman (1958) argues that this method is particularly useful for social research because it allows for the sampling of natural interaction units. In order to encompass the wide geographical dispersion of the population, I rolled three different snowballs with participants located in the Canterbury, Auckland and Wellington regions. Initial participants were contacted through academic acquaintances and migrant organisations.

4.3 The middle stage: fieldwork

Although interviews formally started in November 2012, fieldwork began several months before. In June I had already made contact with different ethnic organisations and I was being invited to different public gatherings such as religious services, demonstrations and ethnic celebrations, including a *Cinco de Mayo* party in Auckland⁵⁷. Having become more familiar with the field, in November I started the formal process of interviewing. From September 2012 to September 2015 my interaction with most of my informants was recurring and incremental. The more I interacted with them, the more invitations I received to attend their events, which on some occasions were also mine since I was also a member of the community.

The transition from being a member to a *well-known* member occurred through word of mouth about my research. To some Mexicans in New Zealand I was not simply another member, but a member researching life in the community. Given the political nature of the study however, this aspect came with positive and negative consequences. While most doors were opened, others were closed forever. As I argue in this thesis, broadly speaking, Mexicans are extremely

⁵⁷ *Cinco de Mayo* is a traditional Mexican patriotic celebration which commemorates the Mexican army's unlikely victory over French forces at the Battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862.

distrustful of the word 'politics', so asking about it is sometimes received with suspicion, scepticism and even anger. Rumours and conspiracy theories are fundamental aspects of the Mexican psyche and eventually these affected my access to some parts of the community. For instance, at one point, a group of migrants rejected any interaction with me based on the idea that I was a spy of the Mexican government trying to get information from them.

As I was based in Auckland, most of my research interviews and exposure to the field took place in that city. During the period November 2012 to March 2013 I carried out a total of thirty in-depth interviews. Although the first were short and fragmented, over time they became increasingly longer and more structured. By December 2012, after having completed the first fifteen interviews, I had received several requests to join the study. This provided me with the opportunity to be more selective in terms of my participants' profiles. From that point onwards, I prioritized to meet the longest residing members of the community, those experienced in politics and activism, who showed a more open attitude to subsequent encounters. Although I received several offers to interview new participants in February 2013, I had completed the thirty interviews programmed for the Auckland region. During that period I also received several invitations to attend ethnic-oriented public events, which were of great value to contextualize most of the narratives.

I visited Christchurch in March 2013, and although I had plans for a short trip, I ended up staying for a period of six weeks. During that time I had the support of a group of women known as the *book club* who were decisive players in the construction of this thesis. They did not simply invite me to their organisations' weekly meetings, but also to other events such as ethnic festivals, informal gatherings and children's' clubs. The level of rapport reached with members of this group was probably the highest in the whole process. This eased further contact for later follow-up interviews and member-checking activities; it also opened the door to future ethnographic fieldwork trips in 2013 and 2014. Again, regardless of several petitions to join the study, only twelve interviews were performed in Christchurch. This decision was based on the increasing number of requests I had received to interview participants in other cities around the country.

My first trip to Wellington took place in June 2013. There I conducted eight interviews over a ten-day period. I received invitations to protest, join political causes, affiliate to political parties and participate in political debates. It was also a good opportunity to see Mexicans joining political causes outside their ethnic group. In the period between 2013 and 2015 I returned to Wellington on four occasions to conduct follow-up interviews and observe participants further

in different ethnic-oriented events. Ten additional interviews were performed in Hamilton, Coromandel, Dunedin and Taupo from November 2012 to July 2013.

In the end, the sixty in-depth interviews were distributed as follows: 30 in the Auckland region, 12 in Canterbury, 8 in Wellington, 4 in Coromandel, 2 in Otago, 1 in Taupo, and 3 in Hamilton. The mean age among participants was 30 years, within an age range of 24 to 79. Levels of education were high among all interviewees, with 8% holding a post-graduate degree, 43% a Bachelor's degree, 41% some university education, and 7% with high school education only. In terms of length of stay in New Zealand, the mean length of residency was 7 years, within a range of 2 to 43 years. 44% of participants were men, while 56% were women. English language proficiency among participants was high overall.

Talking to people through in-depth interviews was a fundamental component of this study. Yet participants were not simply conceived as 'informational sources' but as story-tellers. It was in *their* stories that I sought the theories they constructed about culture, society and the world around them. During the course of the initial interviews, I encouraged people to elaborate on their examples, explain their metaphors and clarify their use of expressions. During the initial sixty interviews my rapport with some participants developed almost naturally and resulted in several repeated interactions with them. But while some interviewees became permanent participants in my research, others declined the possibility. However, this does not mean that their information was not used during the course of my research. Indeed, the vast majority of the materials included in this study came from the initial interviews.

The manifold interaction that I had with some participants over the course of the years was crucial to my research. I observed some lengthy debates on politics and acculturation and as my fieldwork evolved, these conversations increasingly turned into critical dialogues. I challenged people on certain ideas they considered to be fundamental to their acculturative experience. Often we ended up speaking not only about their individual experiences but about the overall dynamics of the community. I deliberately confronted them with what I perceived to be contradictions between testimonials and actions. I provoked them to position themselves in the face of a series of political issues in the New Zealand political agenda. Their reactions to my questions, provocations and theories resulted in a wealth of material to develop further my understanding of acculturative phenomena.

Towards the end of my fieldwork I was actively involved in the life of the community. Such active participation came almost naturally, given the years I had spent there. The resulting strong links significantly facilitated the final task of undertaking a series of member-checking sessions in which informers were presented with the results of the study. There I was able to see how my explanations to political acculturative phenomena were able to capture participants' real-life experiences at individual and group levels. The feedback received in these sessions was also essential to the completion of the study.

Interviewing, protocols, choices and lengths

My strategy to earn participants' trust relied heavily on following a series of protocols and procedures approved for my research by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. Before every interview started all participants were informed about the project. They had the opportunity to ask questions and were provided with my contact details as well as those of my supervisor and Head of Department. The use of business cards and other documents containing The University of Auckland logo was a key element in showing participants the significance of both the project and my role as researcher.

Every participant was asked to sign a consent form containing their personal and contact details. Participants who disagreed on the terms or who were reluctant to sign were courteously thanked for their time and eliminated shortly afterwards. All participants in this research agreed to be recorded and were given the choice of having their interview either in English or Spanish. In all cases participants opted for the latter. Such decisions created a very productive environment in which participants exhibited their emotions more vividly and structured their beliefs in a clearer and deeper manner. They were also asked about the possibility of being contacted for follow-up interviews and presented with the option of obtaining a transcription of their narrative. Forty eight participants agreed to the follow-up interviews and only two requested to see a transcription of these⁵⁸.

Following this protocol, participants were also informed that their information was confidential, that their real names were not to be revealed, and that no third party was to be involved in the transcription or handling of their materials. Before starting the interviews, participants filled in a form with information about their socio-economic and migratory information such as gender,

⁵⁸ In both cases the transcriptions were sent to participants, and were sent back to me without further comment on their content.

age, place of origin in Mexico, annual income, migratory status and length of stay in New Zealand. At the end of every interview I encouraged them to refer others. However, following the procedure approved by the ethics committee, I was careful not to contact them directly. Instead, I provided my contact details so these could be passed on to other potential research participants.

On average, the initial in-depth interviews lasted for forty seven minutes, with the shortest being twenty minutes long and the longest one hour and thirty two minutes. During the course of the interviews I wrote copious field notes giving further details of the personal and environmental factors surrounding the meeting. I specified factors such as mood, tone, gesture and any other information relevant to the narrative interpretation. Additional field notes regarding the overall characteristics of the interview were normally made straight afterwards.

4.4 The final stage: coding, interpreting and writing.

Although my middle and final stages are divided in two separate sections, it is worth noting that they mostly took place simultaneously. This is because the rhythm of interpretive research demands the continuous review of collected materials in order to clarify arising issues by re-entering the field (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2009, pp.78-90). This *vis a vis* relationship between deskwork and fieldwork, although extremely demanding, provided me with the opportunity of generating permanent links between collected materials, arising explanations, and the field as a clarifying ground.

Narratives translate knowing into telling, so analysis of them looks at telling as a means of going back to the ways of knowing and ways of experience (Cortazzi, 2001, p.7). Elucidating understanding of what participants said and did involved an ethnographic exploration of practices and language (Schaffer, 2016, p.39).⁵⁹ As materials were being transcribed, recurrent and ambiguous words and expressions were detected. This effort demanded more than a simple grammatical or prosodic exploration of words but a cultural immersion into the world of meanings. For instance, the regular use of words such as *I* and *we* denoted different positions regarding issues within the community. Recurrent expressions relating to the New Zealand social and political world were also the subject of elucidation in terms of their contextuality. A good example of this would be the use of the word *naïve* as the main term to describe New Zealanders and their relationships with trust. The recurrent appearance of the term involved a

⁵⁹ Schaffer's model of ethnographic exploration of knowledge includes the identification of key words, accessing the field in face to face interaction and confirming understandings in the text.

series of follow-up explorations to contextually determine what people understood by naïve and what its cross-cultural connotations were⁶⁰.

The reconstruction of participants' narratives into coherent descriptions of life events and practices was in this context a core process of the deskwork. It involved the interpretation of words, gestures, silences, pauses and expressions used during the interviews. But it also required the analysis of informants' positions, career paths, hierarchical relations, as well as, group and individual dynamics. The continuous interplay of elements and sources resulted in the need for a suitable process of codifying information. Indeed, among the key decisions I faced from the design stage onwards, was that related to my coding methods.

Coming from a positivist background I felt uncomfortable with what I perceived as ambiguities in the coding methods contained in most ethnographic handbooks. As observed by Charmaz & Mitchell (2001, p.6), a common problem with ethnographic research is that data is seeing "everywhere and nowhere, gathering everything and nothing". Furthermore, most of the time ethnographic oriented methods of collecting and interpreting information result in the construction of descriptive accounts of reality. Although not impossible, such descriptive material can be problematic for generating theoretical explanations of phenomena⁶¹.

After careful consideration I decided to use *constructivist grounding theory* (Charmaz, 2014) as the basis of the coding process. Grounded theory consists of a series of flexible methods for collecting and analysing data. Its main objective is the creation of theories from the ground up. For Strauss & Corbin (1990), a theory is a set of relationships that offers explanation to the phenomenon under study. The roots of grounded theory can be traced to symbolic interactionism and, as such, language, expressions and actions occupy a central role in the interpretative process. Although in its original version, grounded theory paid scant attention to researchers' relationships with participants who were seen exclusively as a source of data, the discipline has since evolved across epistemological positions. Recently a group of grounded theorists attempted to move the discipline from its positivist origins to more constructivist grounds. By

⁶⁰ Other example of recurrent issues subject to contextual and ethnic elucidations were the use of expressions such as *they say, I heard, in my country, and, I forgot* which may be read differently based on cultural tradition.

⁶¹ Scholars such as Richardson (1994) and Charmaz & Mitchell (2001) have argued over the extremely descriptive nature of ethnographic research.

doing so they placed the issue of meaning at the center of their enterprise, and this became known as constructivist grounded theory⁶².

Given its flexible nature, techniques of constructivist grounded theory allow for the analysis of multiple types of data including interviews, narratives, fieldnotes and participant observation. Moreover, such flexibility, also allows grounded theory to be used in combination with different interpretative methods such as situational and narrative analysis⁶³.

The Coding Process

Grounded theorists rely on a strong systematic process of coding information according to a set of predetermined criteria. Overall this systematic, methodic and constant exercise involves the constant comparison between data and then moves progressively to comparisons between codes and categories and more data. Such a multi-staged process of coding provides some sort of control mechanism in which codes are tested to ensure their strength and position in the overall theoretical construction.

Following this logic, I started my data interpretation through an exhaustive process of *open coding*. At this initial stage I was interested in a *line-by-line* exploration of the materials in order to construct as many codes as possible (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001, pp.14-17). Initial codes were integrated with all information I considered as relevant to answer my research questions. In the course of the open coding work I broke down, analyzed, compared and labelled hundreds of potential thematic lines. Most of the time, open coding occurred during the process of transcribing the interviews. While typing participants' narratives I was able to move between fieldnotes and recording materials in order to generate an extensive inventory of preliminary codes.

Initial codes were later organized into main categories during a second stage called *axial coding* which refers to the appreciation of concepts in terms of their dynamic interrelationships. Relevant concepts were tested by constant comparison between the codes. Here my main objective was to reduce the number of open codes by the creation of core concepts able to

⁶² The relationships between constructivist grounded theory and ethnography are best described in Paul Atkinson's (2001) *Handbook of Ethnography*. There Charmaz & Mitchell argue that grounded theory can sharpen the analytic edge and theoretical sophistication of ethnographically oriented research.

⁶³ See for instance, Floersch, Longhofer, Kranke & Thownsead (2010) *Integrating thematic, grounded theory, and narrative analysis*.

accommodate them. At this stage the abductive character of my methodology contributed to strengthening the testing process in the field, either by emphasizing certain topics in the initial interviews or by clarifying issues in follow-up interviews. By doing this I was able to expand the density of the categories, detailing their dimensions and properties, as well as exploring variations between phenomena. At the end of this process, sixty-four categories were created.

With all the information organized in specific categories, my final stage in the process was what grounded theorists refer as *selective coding* which is best described as the process through which categories are related to *core categories* and these, in time, become the basis for the creation of a theory (Goulding, 1999, p.9) ⁶⁴. Three fundamental steps were followed in the construction of the theories. First, it was a comprehensive demonstration of how, why and where they were derived from early concepts, categories and codes. In other words, this was a process of tracing back the theory to its data roots. Second, potential theories were comparatively contrasted with existing sources of explanation. Here, consideration was given to warrant an extensive evaluation of the academic literature in order to create parallels and strengthen the theoretical relevance of the proposition. Finally, grounded and academic concepts were integrated in such a way that they were embedded with the explanatory power of the phenomena they look to describe in the context of the research.

The methodical observance of such processes resulted in the initial creation of three categories from which theories were developed. Such categories were denominated think, feel and act. The complexity of the first one though later required division into two separate theories, one regarding perception and the other one cognition. In the end, it was following these extensive processes of coding and testing that this thesis came to be organized. The four subsequent chapters are, in this respect, the product of a combination of codes, carefully arranged to generate insights and explanations of acculturative phenomena.

The writing process

The process of writing in general and of writing interpretive research in particular, involves many decisions, doubts and frustrations during the crafting of the text. One of the major challenges I faced was the selection of materials to illustrate the four empirically based chapters. The amount of recordings, fieldnotes, memos and documents I had collected over the course of

⁶⁴ As Goulding explains, a core category synthesises all strands in order to provide an explanation for the behaviour that is the subject of study.

three years needed to be compressed in an efficient yet clear way. Favours original narrative structure, I opted for mostly including data from the original in-depth interviews. When additional context was necessary, I complemented stories with information included in the fieldnotes and follow-up interviews⁶⁵.

One of the most difficult decisions during the writing process was determining when to speak in terms of broad generalisations and when to let in the diversity of social life; when to talk in the form of a summary and when to let the reader decide from the richness of the selected materials. Some things may look obvious to the eye of the observer, yet they need to be complemented with the interpretations, obvious as they may be, of the researcher. Explaining what is obvious in the materials may lead the reader to think of the document as repetitive but not explaining would lead to the idea of the researcher being unprofessional. I finally opted for using a balanced approach between stories and interpretations. When things needed to be explained in terms of shared interpretations or similar behavior I normally used expressions such as 'to the average participant' or 'to the vast majority of participants'. Normally these are followed by examples to illustrate ideas, positions or behavior.

Another important aspect of the writing process was the selection of comparative materials to create parallels between academic literature and participants' stories. Here it is worth noting that the combination of two factors significantly reduced this possibility: First is the contextual character of the study. As mentioned in the introduction, given its interpretive nature it is impossible to construct vast generalisations of the phenomena it contains.⁶⁶ Second is the scarcity of literature written under similar premises as this thesis. In this regard, only when it was considered essential, and when relevant information was available, did I opt for including comparative materials relating to the study of Mexican migrants in other parts of the world. This does not supersede the fact that relevant theoretical materials were indeed included in the thesis, and some of them were the basis for the development of specific grounded theories.

A fourth observation relates to the translation of narrative fragments and quotes. As all interviews were carried out in Spanish, I was responsible for selecting and translating into English the data that illustrates this thesis. In doing so I aimed to select key data, from which theories were structured. Nonetheless, there were times when participants' specific expressions

⁶⁵ Such criteria varied, although not significantly, in Chapter eight, where the dynamics of interpretation required a more balanced relationship between sources.

⁶⁶ For further explanation on the issue of contextuality see Schwartz-Shea & Yanow (2002).

were difficult to contextualise in English. In those cases I was assisted by a professional translator and, only on rare occasions, was the decision made not to include data, the meaning of which was extremely difficult to grasp in English.

A fifth consideration dealt with protecting the identities of participants. In order to address this challenge, from the beginning participants were made aware that their names were to be replaced in this thesis. Additional considerations involved the removal of information which, in some cases, could clearly lead to the identification of the person, so in order to maintain an acceptable standard of confidentiality additional data such as age, occupation and family details was adapted to fit the stories in the most accurate while still protecting the source.

A sixth and final consideration was the use of the first person throughout the thesis. This aims to make clear my presence as a writer and the subjectivity of my interpretations. As argued by Schwartz-Shea & Yanow (2012, p.104) this is not an exercise of vanity or self-indulgence but a reflexive act of accountability and transparency of the decisions I made during the course of my research. That being said, in order to observe disciplinary protocols, most of the time I use a less personal tone. That does not alter the fact that occasionally the use of first person reappears only to remind the reader about my position.

Chapter Five: Transnational perceptual spaces and the cross cultural political telescope⁶⁷

5.1 Introduction

Oh kiwis, you take for granted the peaceful country you have, where instead of killings and executions you have news of cows stuck in holes on the newspaper's front page.

This opening line was found on the public internet site of a group of Mexican migrants in New Zealand. It reveals a complex dualistic process of crafting understandings of two simultaneously inhabited social and political environments. What is conceived as the triviality of New Zealand life as portrayed in a newspaper article, contrasts with the violent environment of the home country where organized crime, especially that organised by drug-cartels, serves as a vivid reminder of suffering in the Motherland. Such contrasting impressions are a product of perception. Moreover, the follow up comments of members of the Mexican community to the same posting reveal not only agreement with this interpretation, but the existence of commonly held perceptions resulting from holding similar transnational experiences shaped in antithetical social and political environments.

Perception refers to the organization, identification and interpretation of information in order to represent and understand the environment (Schacter, Gilbert & Wegner, 2011, p.159). In other words, it is a data-driven, bottom-up process through which people collect and organize symbolic information to make sense of the world around them (Bennett, 1981, p.92). In that regard it is useful to think about perception as a process that starts with the selection of symbols—objects, concepts or ideas— over which individuals create impressions or make inferences about a social context. Perception is thus fundamental to the political acculturative process and its meaning-making machinery.

When talking about the social and political contexts, social psychologists refer four distinctive characteristics of perception. First, perception serves as an adaptive function and as such is

⁶⁷ Parts of this chapter have been published in the *Journal of International Migration and Integration* under the title: Neither here nor there, "I do not vote and I do not care: the external electoral participation of Mexican migrants in New Zealand," Merelo (2016).

dependent on the external world that provides information which guides socially functional behaviour. In other words, it involves the discovery and adjustment of utilitarian properties in the environment in order to provide a social guideline. Secondly, this information is revealed through events. In other words, it relies upon dynamic complex stimuli as opposed to a static phenomenon. A third characteristic is the proposition that perception is not concerned with just any information, but with the collection of useful or meaningful information. Such usefulness depends upon its relevance to the actions and goals of individuals. Finally, there is the notion of *perceptual attunes*, that is, the fact that perception requires certain compatibility between the perceiver and perceived and that such capabilities may vary across cultures (McArthur & Baron, 1983)

Beyond the discussion on social constructivism undertaken by social psychologists over the past decades⁶⁸, it is fair to say that the topic of social perception has been a regular feature of the work of sociologists, anthropologists and, generally speaking, socio-cultural analysts. For instance, Thompson argues that when analysing culture we engage in unravelling numerous layers of meaning, and as such these layers are influenced by the perception of social phenomena that individuals gather in order to make sense of the world (Thompson, 1990 p.131). Regardless of its emphasis on the individual, Thompson's statement cannot supersede the collective nature of common schemes of perception embedded in contextual structures that are widely given to individuals as a product of living under similar conditions.

As argued in Chapter Three, Thompson borrowed a great deal of his theory from Bourdieu's *logic of practice* (1990), according to which, these common schemes of perception are rooted in the *habitus*, the *structuring structure*. For Bourdieu, perception is mostly unconscious and broadly shaped by social interaction. Moreover, it serves the purpose of reinforcing information rather than transforming it. Symbols which are perceived as significant are, to some extent, consistently shared within a semiotic community and, as such, are the subject of shared interpretations. This selective process safeguards the continuity of social practices. This is because interpretation and perception of reality are symbiotically tightened through a cyclical process in which widely shared interpretations are regularly reproduced to generate new perceptions. Consequently, regardless of individual differences encountered during the process

⁶⁸ A clear account of such differences can be found in Jussim (1991, 2012), according to whom, social constructivism in social psychology has been divided by contrasting views of strong and weak versions of the subject of perception. Strong social constructivists implicitly or explicitly emphasize the inaccuracy of perception in grasping social beliefs. However, weak social constructivists in social psychology argue that even though inaccuracies in perception exist, peoples' perceptions may often accurately reflect social reality.

of transforming external phenomena into inner constructions, a common path of perception of the external is widely established by cultural interaction. Furthermore, different common practices and environments encourage culturally specific patterns of perception. That is, through the stable character of the *habitus*, practices and contexts contribute to the construction of perceptual schemes calibrated to deal with a given contextual reality. In a nutshell, people do not only share common perceptual constructions but they also share a common means of perception.

It is in this context that migration posits a challenge to the perceptual and interpretative process. If any political symbol—a system, procedure, institution, ritual, situation or any other form of political expression—is to become significant, firstly it needs to enter the minds of individuals by means of simple perception. Nonetheless, individuals do not cross borders empty handed, therefore assuming the possibility of a *tabula rasa* over which migrants start their relationships with the state, is, to say the least, inaccurate. Using Wals' (2011, p.601) figurative construction, when crossing borders migrants carry with them political suitcases. From an interpretive perspective, these are not only full of given meanings but also specific *perceptual attunes* (McArthur & Baron, 1983), thereby calibrating systems adjusted to the contextual factors pertaining to countries of origin. Given the strength of habitual practices and cognitive schemes, it is only logical to expect that in making sense of their new political world, migrants will attempt to construct their interpretations through the use of existing and stable nets of meaning and perceptual arrangements.

Following this line of thought, a major point of concern in this research was to identify participants' narratives involving the use of perceptual processes in the political space. This means, metaphorically speaking, to analyse not only how participants open the windows to understanding New Zealand politics but also the exploration of such understanding as a means of framing meaningful political phenomena.

This chapter is organized into three further sections. In 5.2 *The passing parade of political symbols*, I explore major post-migratory sources of political information that affect participants' constructions of meaning. I argue that the interaction between migrants and politics occurs simultaneously in two political settings, New Zealand and Mexico. The effects of such interaction are developed in Section 5.3 *The transnational perceptual space*. Drawing on participants' stories, I introduce the concept of the *transnational political telescope*, a perceptual effect through which participants build distorted representations of politics similar to the one

contained in the opening testimony. This occurs through the constant juxtaposition of perceptual elements that occur in a transnational political space, and results in catastrophic images of politics in the homeland and perceptions of relative unimportance, even irrelevance, in relation to New Zealand. In section 5.4 *Conclusions*, I close with some short remarks relating to the possible consequences of perception in the process of political acculturation of Mexican migrants in New Zealand.

5.2 The passing parade of political symbols

For meaning to exist, symbols first need to manifest themselves in the eyes and minds of individuals. Over the years, political scholars have mentioned family, school and media as relevant means of gaining political information⁶⁹. Accordingly, from their early years and throughout their lives, citizens of a country are exposed to continuous political abstractions to which they attach meaning; meaning that is intelligible and shared by members of their semiotic communities. Edelman (1967, p.5) refers to such a process in terms of “a passing parade of abstract symbols”. But how do people manage to arrive late for this parade? Are they exposed or do they expose themselves to political information? Participants’ narratives suggest a little of both.

Away from family and mature enough to be exposed to the influences of school education, members of the Mexican community start their process of induction into New Zealand politics from an unusual position, when compared to the native population. As I will argue in the next chapter, this does not imply that they are devoid of information or that they are alone in the process. It just means that their symbolic interactions with politics are different and diverse. Furthermore, gaining knowledge of politics in a new country does not involve forgetting about politics in the old one. This is even more so in a more globalized and technologically advanced world where means of contact with the Motherland are easier than ever.

The New Zealand political parade

As I entered the field, I became increasingly aware that, although at first sight politics may not be seen as a relevant component of the acculturative equation, participants’ stories revealed at least some basic knowledge of New Zealand politics and state organization. Entrenched in their narratives were constant attempts at making sense of this new world they inhabit. As stated by one participant, “interest in politics is not real interest in politics but one of the things you need

⁶⁹ See for instance Greenstein (1965), Beck and Jennings (1975), Chaffee, Xinshu & Glenn (1994), and, Chaffee & Kanihan (1997).

to do to find out what the hell is going on”. This sense of awareness does not always materialize in the form of a concrete idea of politics or the state. Indeed, participants rarely addressed such concepts directly and instead used more de-centred notions of power such as *el gobierno* (the government), *los que gobiernan* (people in power), and *la burocracia* (bureaucracy). All these alternatives reflect a shared belief in the existence of a centre of control, a symbolic representation of power.

For most members of the Mexican community, contact with New Zealand political institutions starts at the intersection of three factors: continuous contact with governmental agencies; consumption of New Zealand mass media; and social interaction with New Zealanders.

Contact with governmental agencies almost unequivocally starts with completing governmental migratory procedures. Immigration New Zealand (INZ) was thus recurrently mentioned in participants’ stories as an entity of State power they come in contact with. As this participant observes:

They [INZ] are the first face of the New Zealand government you get to see. Not a nice one though. They have a lot of power over you, and their decisions are bureaucratic and far from being transparent.

Similar accounts also describe in negative terms the interaction with government agencies in general, and Immigration New Zealand in particular. Although participants normally recognized that governmental procedures were far less complex and more reliable than in Mexico, a shared sense of vulnerability prevailed in most narratives⁷⁰. This is based on such a sense of vulnerability that participants gained some knowledge of the New Zealand government, its procedures and organization. In the words of this participant:

There are no second chances in this country. You need to be on your guard otherwise they [the government] can screw you. Whether it is parking ticket, enrolling to vote, or getting your IRD number, you get to know that the New Zealand government is out there and you better know how it works.

⁷⁰ This acknowledgement normally excluded INZ, fundamentally seen with fear and scepticism of its practices and decisions.

Indeed, a common narrative line was oriented towards the punishing character of the New Zealand government, its taxation laws, its “excessive” bureaucratic practices, and its “extremely expensive” penalties. Public agencies and their regulations are therefore perceived as political entities and not as administrative bodies. Such differences are indeed difficult to understand on the part of the average participant, who still thinks of the public sector as a territory of appointees where public officers are considered to be extensions of politicians (based on the idea that they represent the interests of those who put them in office). From this perspective, participants often expressed the need to be informed about “politics” in order to “avoid nasty surprises from politicians”.

Although constant and menacing, interaction with New Zealand agencies provided Mexicans with only a limited view of the state. Instead, mass media was found to be a crucial asset that assisted in decoding the significance of New Zealand political concepts, institutions, values, rituals and practices. During the immediate period following their arrival, mass media consumption not only played an essential role in the process of political socialization, but also in easing the disruptive character of the migratory experience. This is better illustrated in a fragment from this participant’s narrative:

When I just arrived I neither have any friends, nor job, or anything concrete to do, so I used to spend a lot of time watching television or reading kiwi newspapers and magazines... I think that was good because it helped me learned many things about how this country works.

Similar testimonies reflect that during the early stages in the migratory process, Mexican migrants start gathering political information through mass media in an attempt to shape basic understandings, and become socially aware in their new world. Among all types of media, television was perceived by participants as the most relevant in constructing a basic political picture of the country. When speaking about this process, participants described how television was essential to obtaining initial facts and data such as politicians’ names and roles, major political parties’ names and ideologies, as well as understanding some basic governmental and legislative procedures⁷¹. Some participants also stated that television helped them understand underlying values of New Zealand culture such as trust, accountability and community participation. A participant from Wellington stated that in getting a television he also got “a

⁷¹ Among the most commonly cited types of television programme were news and current affairs such as Seven Sharp and Campbell Live.

window into kiwiland” while another from Otago emphasized that “television is always an easy way to learn who is who in your new country”. The strong link between television and political meaning-making is illustrated in a comment from a participant in Auckland. When asked about how she learned about politics in New Zealand she emphatically stated:

Television, television, television. You want to know something about a country, watch its programs. There you have names, positions, scandals and whatever information you want, for politics or for anything else.

Indeed, stories told by participants revealed that almost unanimously, during the period immediately after their arrival, television worked as facilitator in shaping understandings of politics. It created a bridge between social contexts and constituted an effective way to reduce uncertainty about social practices in a strange land. Through television, the average interviewee started allotting meaning to newly encountered political symbols. It contributed to their understanding of basic structures of authority, common political values and behaviours and introduced them to major political issues on the New Zealand political agenda.

Although these findings are consistent with previous research on migration and mass media (e.g. Chafee, Nass & Yang, 1990; Moon & Park, 2007), the pervasive character of television viewing over the years came as a surprise. Indeed, beyond their initial bridging function, participants’ stories revealed a lengthy and stable pattern of exposure to these types of media, even decades after arriving in New Zealand. They also revealed that what is portrayed on New Zealand television is seen as a true representation of reality in the new country. Television is thus perceived as a window to the world, and as such is profoundly influential on the construction of New Zealand social and political realities⁷².

It would be inaccurate though to state that the pervasive effect of television was homogeneously found among participants. Indeed, stories disclosed an overwhelming preference for this type of media. Nonetheless, complex patterns of diverse mass media consumption were present in the testimonies of other participants. These variations seem to be related to the specific positions and trajectories occupied by participants in the social context which in time have resulted in the

⁷² Similar propositions regarding media consumption among Mexican migrants have been made by scholars such as Valenzuela (1985); Orozco (2001); Moon & Park (2007).

accumulation of political knowledge decoded by more sophisticated means of analysis⁷³. For instance, people accustomed to reading newspapers or listening current affairs programs on Mexican radio Mexico have been shown to be keen consumers of these same news sources in New Zealand.

But being familiar with the messenger does not necessarily involve simplicity in decoding the message. Sitting in front of a television in New Zealand does not make the perceptive effort automatically clear in the eyes of individuals (Bellman & Bennetta, 1977). The nature of the contents and its materialization in specific flows and rhythms are an essential part of engaging people with the messenger. Following Merelman's (1991) proposition that symbols portrayed in mass media involve collective representations of what lies within a culture, it is only logical to expect that the decoding of such representations implies at least a certain degree of familiarity with the contextual arrangements of that culture. Consequently, speaking about transposition is not as simple as it may appear.

This proposition was echoed in the stories told by Mexican migrants in New Zealand. Regardless of the strong commitment to following New Zealand mass media as a means of grasping social and political reality, narratives disclosed that Mexican migrants often face severe difficulties in decoding messages delivered in this way. As one participant stated: "It is not that I cannot understand what they are saying but why they are saying it". In this context, the coded arrangements through which issues in the New Zealand political agenda are delivered seem to challenge participants. In the words of participant I will refer to as Jorge:

In the beginning you think that it is just a matter of translation, or that you don't understand something because you are new to this country; but after some time here, you realize that, what moves people here is so different that what moves people there. The way folks in television speak means something to these guys that will never mean to you. Here news presenters are so serious, formal and politically correct. We are such a gossipy culture, always driven by scandals and.... how to say it?... a morbid fascination for watching people fall, even humiliated... it is bad.

⁷³ From this point onwards I will use the terms position and trajectory based on both Thompson's and Bourdieu's propositions. From this perspective, individuals interact in a social context, synchronically in a space of positions and diachronically in a set of trajectories which in turn shape their different experiences with politics. For a thorough discussion on the subject see Chapter Three.

There are many reasons behind the relevance of Jorge's testimony. Probably the most important is that it denotes a persistent effort to understand the New Zealand political world beyond its simple structures and functions. For this participant, his new political context is something worthy of exploration, something by which he expects to be driven. Nonetheless, after spending more than a decade in New Zealand he is still struggling with connecting to "what moves people here". In this respect, his meaning-making process is still connected to the circle of intelligibility of his original semiotic community. It is a coded net of understandings and priorities through which symbolic representations of the world are articulated.

If this testimony is representative of participants' feelings towards the New Zealand political world, then a new question arises: why don't migrants simply give up trying to make sense of such an alien world? Selecting comments to answer this question proved difficult since testimonies were diverse, contradictory, or sometimes overlapping. Nevertheless, the richness of such entangled contradictions is worthy of attention. When elaborating on his testimony Jorge continues:

Sometimes I say, I give up, I simply don't have what it takes to connect with politics in New Zealand. That is ok, politics is not something we all need to connect with. But then... again... in the rare occasion a kiwi wants to talk politics with one, one needs to understand why they think this is important, or this other thing is important, and you simply don't connect with them, with their priorities, with their way of thinking.

This testimony illustrates the influence of social interaction in maintaining links with the New Zealand political arena. At the time this interview was carried out, I felt a special need to explore further this issue since evidence seemed to be contradictory. People normally stated that they did not gain political knowledge from locals. Yet testimonies revealed social interaction as a major means of continuing the search for political information on New Zealand. Further enquiries among participants revealed that indeed, generally speaking Mexican migrants are reluctant to publicly discuss New Zealand politics, yet they perceive political conversations as a major means of gaining social acceptance. Interestingly, within Jorge's story, the use of the words "in the rare occasion a kiwi wants to talk politics with one" reveals a sense of exclusion which motivates his further exploration of New Zealand politics. Similarly, other stories revealed how feeling alienated or embarrassed on the grounds of ignorance of simple political

facts works as a powerful motivator to gather basic information of New Zealand politics. As stated by a participant in Auckland:

It is not that I like politics but I didn't want to be seen as the stupid Mexican who doesn't know who John Key is [referring to the current Prime Minister of New Zealand].

Other participants stated that learning about basic New Zealand political facts and current affairs facilitated social interaction with peers whom they described as "very well informed" or "very interested in what is happening in their country". For instance, the testimony of a participant from Auckland refers to this situation:

In my office, during lunch breaks, we [referring to co-workers] normally share a meal together. When I just arrived it was very difficult to me to follow the conversation because they were always talking about what happened in Campbell Live [a current affairs TV show] the previous night; so I decided to start watching the damn show because I didn't want to look stupid.

Other testimonies follow similar lines, illustrating how the collection of political information was perceived as a social facilitator among participants. However, participants also revealed that when political information reached a level for them to operate socially, further exploration of the New Zealand political world was less likely to be pursued. In that regard, it was observed that only participants with strong preferences and accumulated experience with politics were those who continue exploration.

To summarize, collecting New Zealand political information is a complex process fed by the continuous interaction of multiple sources. Its motives seem oriented towards facilitating social interaction with locals and the creation of a sense of security towards the state and its power. Nonetheless, it is not a straightforward process. Instead, it demands Mexican migrants to recalibrate the *perceptual attunes* through which intelligibility has traditionally been forged in order to make sense of their new political environment. Stories revealed that that effort is continuous across time. Even after years in New Zealand, those with a better-developed political cultural inventory still struggle to grasp local meanings.

A crucial point that is mostly ignored by theories of exposure and political re-socialisation of migrants is that contact with a new political context does not occur in a vacuum. People who cross borders cannot simply forget their past. Indeed, even after many years, most of them still think of themselves as legitimate stakeholders in their original countries. Enduring ties to the Motherland are multiple and diverse in nature. Although in some cases these derive from legitimate preoccupations about their loved ones, evidence suggests that they also provide reassurance to individuals as members of a community that migrants know and understand. In other words, ties to the Motherland make individuals feel safe in the presence of adverse and changing circumstances. Transnational ties are thus not mere refutations of the new but serve the greater purpose of stabilizing oneself in the face of the unknown. They are as enduring as culture itself. Individuals may not totally grasp the meanings of a new environment but they will feel secure in the warm settings provided by the semiotic community in which they were born and brought up.

Storylines seem consistent with this proposition. They suggest that the disruptive character of migration involves the loss of symbolic and social capital and that such loss is deeply felt by participants. Nostalgia and romanticism impregnate participants' stories of Mexico. Remarkably, they encompass not simply sentimental narratives of the past but accurate observations of the current social and political situation affecting the Motherland. Participants indicate that, even after years of living in New Zealand, they find ways of keeping an open window to the *reality* (italics are mine) of their native land. Narratives of participants arriving in New Zealand several decades ago reveal intense struggles to maintain such ties. Letters, telegrams and telephone calls were deeply cherished by most of them. Nonetheless, such adversity was uncommon to the majority of participants who have made their journeys to New Zealand during the electronic media and communication revolution that started at the turn of the new millennium. To them, the type, frequency and intensity of their interaction with Mexico occurs at a radically different pace. Internet based access to Mexican radio, television, newspapers and magazines as well as direct communication with their original social circles through text messenger services and video chats repeatedly appear in participants' testimonies, positioning electronic communication as a critical element in migrants' transnational communication.

Along with its coping function, access to the continuous parade of Mexican symbols entails the reinforcement of the distinctive categories that are structured along axes such as gender, age, class and education. After six years of living in New Zealand, a participant I will refer to as Julia explained her continued watching of *telenovelas* [Mexican soap operas] and gender oriented news programmes, in these terms:

I can't help it, Mexican women need their *telenovelas* to survive; we also watch Lolita Ayala's [Mexican female journalist] news show because is a lady's program, something you can see with your kids while having a daily meal. I see those shows because I want my children to keep in contact with their heritage and get informed about their country, I don't want them to forget about Mexico.

A simple taxonomy of this statement uncovers three crucial conceptions influencing the decision behind watching these types of programme after moving to New Zealand. The first one being the deployment of roles and rituals assigned in the original culture. Regardless of time spent in New Zealand, Julia recognizes herself not only as a woman, but as a Mexican woman, and as such she considers herself subject of a series of dispositions ruling her actions as a member of community with social conventions, among which are the fact that women watch *telenovelas* and particular news programmes. No male participant mentioned such needs (although they mentioned others), but Julia's views were commonly shared by other female participants.

A second conception is the conviction that involving her family in the process will increase their awareness of social reality in Mexico. By doing this she is passing along nets of social meaning to her children, hoping that these in turn will help them understand their positions in an imaginary social space. Like her, members of the Mexican community recurrently speak about exposing their children to ethnic media in order to "make sure they remember where they came from" or "to learn a bit of who we are". Both mothers and fathers spoke harshly about witnessing the loss of the cultural heritage of their kinship, which seems to be caused by the reluctance to speak Spanish, or perhaps the adoption of social practices considered to be opposed to the Mexican tradition⁷⁴.

⁷⁴ Such practices are varied and heterogeneous in informants' stories. From simple practices such as preferring to play rugby to soccer, to the more complex dynamics of sexuality in a different society, parents regularly exhibited a sense of fear of their kinship losing Mexican cultural attributes.

A third conception is the ritualistic aspect of Julia's behaviour. Mimicking the practices held in Mexico, from Monday to Friday at specific times of the day, she sits in front of the television with her family and watches ethnic media. Just like Julia's, other stories disclosed how access to ethnic media involved the reconstruction of daily rituals as experienced in Mexico⁷⁵. Performed as periodic *tableaux* constructed on the basis of experiences such rituals, represents a continuation of the past. Reading Mexican newspapers on a Sunday morning, watching a Mexican current affairs programme before going to bed or, like Julia, sitting at a table along with the family watching Mexican news programmes and *telenovelas*, are common rituals in the life of individuals of Mexican origin. Furthermore, they are indispensable elements in the assembly of the self within the community.

Although these types of cultural concerns were common in participants' narratives, stories also revealed yet another, more pragmatic side of maintaining ties with the Motherland. To the average member of the community, Mexico is not only the place they were born and brought up but also the country still inhabited by close circles of friends and family. Interacting with them is thus a continuous and expected part of being human. Narratives suggested that more often than not, such encounters were embedded with social and political contents. Whether talking about political campaigns, scandals, or current affairs, Mexicans in New Zealand are not just quiet receivers of social or political events but active participants in discussions about Mexican political reality. Here it is worth noting that the relationship that most participants have with the Mexican political system is complicated and contradictory. As I will describe further in the following chapters, the Mexican political system is seen as admirable in terms of its design, values and purposes, but in other instances, the state is seen as a violent and corrupt entity that is greatly feared and deeply distrusted.

Leaving loved ones at the mercy of such a system makes the consumption and discussion of social and political information essential to understanding the world they inhabit and the risks they face. Nonetheless, it would be naïve to think that such awareness is the product of interaction between rationally positioned actors and accurate flows of political information. Instead, the fieldwork revealed the interplay of roles, sources and rituals deeply rooted inside circles of intelligibility. Mass and social media consumption, electronic communication with friends and relatives and holidays in the Motherland, all seem to play a part in constructing different views of Mexico, views that are mainly seen through the eyes of the group in which

⁷⁵ Wolin & Bennett (1984, p.401) view family rituals as "a symbolic form of communication that, owing to the satisfaction that family members experience through its repetition, is acted out in a systematic fashion over time".

one was born and brought up. Consequently, decoding information inside this net seems to occur almost unconsciously, like speaking a language only spoken by a group of people born and brought up together. Yet different languages meet in the *thin coherence* (Sewell 1999) binding together a Mexican semiotic community.

In this context, images of evil politicians fighting against the oppressed intersect with factual depictions of political reality, and given rumours and conspiracy theories affecting diverse sectors of the Mexican population in a synchronized way⁷⁶. It is a world of myth, reality and drama crystalized in unique representations of the political world. No other means can be as representative of this situation as the world of social media. Indeed, simply visiting the forums and groups frequented by Mexican migrants reveals a large volume of contradictory information, group interpretations, defended positions and above all, political aggressiveness covered under the umbrella of one unified message: the Mexican political regime is not worthy of trust.

5.3 Transnational Perceptual Spaces: The cross-cultural political telescope

Exposure to informational sources originating in two different countries is a phenomenon that cannot be explored in isolation from migratory literature. Over two decades ago a number of authors (e.g. Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Kearney, 1995; Rouse, 1992) developed the concept of transnationalism which encompasses “the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton, 1992, p.1). The inclusive character of the concept provides a strong basis to explain the reasons behind successful integration into a host society without losing some of the social capital previously earned in the original one. In this regard, instead of understanding the maintenance of ties to the country of origin as a gesture of resistance, transnational practices are seen as strategies that complement migrants’ efforts to integrate into their new countries (Levitt & Waters, 2002; Portes 2003)

Having a heart in two countries is therefore a powerful reason to keep an open flow of social and political information pertaining to two different and radically opposed settings. In this same context, it is somewhat natural to assume that such constant contact can indeed benefit migrants

⁷⁶ The influence of rumour and conspiracy theories in the construction of an idea of the state among Mexicans has been observed by a number of political sociologists and anthropologists. There seems to be consistent agreement that rumour is a consequence to the tight controls historically implemented by the Mexican regime towards the flow of political information in the public sphere (e.g. Lomnitz 1995; Nuijten, 2003, 2004; Gutmann, 2002).

by helping them to gain a perspective of political issues and even promote their integration into a new society. Indeed, stories told by participants can be broadly classified as successful accounts of integration narrated by individuals who are economically productive and socially active in New Zealand, without losing core features of their cultural heritage. Nonetheless, my fieldwork also showed that interaction between both flows of information comes with distortive consequences to the process of perception and interpretation of political realities.

Narrative accounts show how, most of the time what is brought by these radically opposed streams is not processed in separated and well-organized compartments of participants' minds. Citing the words of one young participant from Auckland, people "do not have a switch to say this is for New Zealand and this is for Mexico", instead the features of both political realities are stored in a *transnational perceptual space*, in which information pertaining to both worlds is constantly juxtaposed. Scaling political symbols across cultures is an unavoidable consequence of this perceptual exercise. Indeed, constant comparison between symbolic representations of politics regularly guided the opinions that participants had of both countries. In this regard the Mexican political world is continually evaluated against what is perceived as a New Zealand standard and vice versa. Although such exercises were normally referred to as helpful or beneficial to enrich political opinions, I observed that cross-cultural comparisons constantly resulted in a perceptual disruption of reality. Indeed, testimonies unveiled that juxtaposing political information affects the level of significance assigned to political phenomena. In this context, distorted images of politics in both countries were overwhelmingly present. In an attempt to explain this phenomenon, a participant I will refer to as Maria, who has lived in New Zealand for over forty years, argued:

To me, New Zealand has provided some sort of a telescope, and I regularly use it to examine the current political situation in Mexico from a very comfortable place and a totally different reality. From here, the ugly looks uglier.

Maria's testimony was key to understanding how transnational ties affect political perception. In fact, such a powerful analogy reveals that living transnational lives does not come without transnational perceptual effects. In the light of Maria's analogy I have found it useful to refer to the phenomenon as *the transnational political telescope effect*. That is, a distorted scaling process regarding both political contexts characterized by the perceived maximization of social reality in Mexico and the perceived minimisation of its New Zealand counterpart. This telescope reflects neither a simple state of mind, still less an arbitrary way of perceiving the world, but an

organised cognitive process in which individuals attempt to assign value to political symbols based on incoming and accumulated information. Thus the simplicity of the proposition behind theories of exposure proved inconsistent in explaining the perceptual effects of being in contact with democratic institutions, their outcomes, and shared understandings. Instead, the dynamics observed among members of the Mexican community reveal complex schemes of perception crafted by two simultaneous stories. But this does not imply a more accurate perception of reality. This is because what is naturally understood by means of simple perception inside an original semiotic community can vary drastically when an inadequate cultural framework is used to understand a political reality.

Elaborating on Maria's metaphor, yes, participants see political life through a transnational telescope. However, there is not a uniquely integrated—and to some extent more powerful—lens through which such processes occur. Instead, their reality is constructed through a series of superimposed lenses resulting in particular views of social and political phenomena. In the end, such a perceptual scheme is attuned with neither a purely transposed version of migrants' old world, nor with the nets of meanings encompassed in their new one. It is under such challenging conditions that participants start shaping understandings of politics in a new political arena. Consequently, most of them undertake such process under two equally negative premises: politics in Mexico are hopeless and politics in New Zealand are unworthy of attention.

Maximising Mexico

Exacerbated feelings towards the political situation of the Motherland begin with a natural preoccupation for those who remain there. Family and friends are not simple cultural diffusers but cultural unifiers upon whom sentiments of loyalty and empathy are developed. Consequently, the geographical distance imposed by migration—particularly to a more peaceful and stable environment—generates emotional costs through which images of social and political life are created. Constant contextual comparisons give way to the re-assignment of values previously posited by political symbols. Participants' stories reveal that more often than not, Mexican migrants in New Zealand perceive the political arena in terms of a line where a stable and peaceful democratic country stands at one end, and a highly conflicted, violent, corrupt and authoritarian country stands at the other. In the words of a participant I will refer to as Ruben:

When you live in New Zealand you realize that this is a completely different world. Everything works perfectly, services run in time, there is no poverty, no corruption, people don't need to be checking if this person is going to rob you or if this other is going to kidnap you... I get depressed every time I speak to my mom in Mexico, or when I see what my friends are posting of Facebook. Most Mexican sugar-coat what is happening there because they have no other option, because they like to think one can live like that. But really, once you are here you re-do your scale of what is good and what is bad.

These types of comments were pervasive during the interviews, unveiling a pattern in which perceptions of New Zealand social and political realities were regularly used as a point of reference to dislocate the social and political situation in Mexico. From this perspective, the effects of inadequate income, poor living conditions and institutional inefficiency in Mexico were most of the time felt dramatically.

Rescaling political symbols through the lenses of the cross-cultural telescope creates unique types of images of Mexico. A broad classification of testimonies reveals the existence of three distinctive narrative lines: stories of fear, stories of anger and stories of hopelessness. For the purposes of this research, it is not my intention to explore such lines in detail, nonetheless a general characterization of these codified themes seems necessary in order to provide the reader with a more comprehensive view of the phenomena proposed in this section.

Stories of fear are created through violent images of the Mexican social world and are normally associated with inefficacy of the political regime in bringing safety to its people. Here, a sense of preoccupation with the vulnerable condition of those who remain is deeply felt by participants. Constant references to abductions, burglaries and mass executions perpetuated in the home country give way to the perceived possibility of such criminal activities endangering the lives of their loved ones. It is unclear though if such events are likely to occur since none of the testimonies give account of any such situation affecting those who are perceived as vulnerable. Indeed, regardless of the veracity of the violent images portrayed in the Mexican media, most of the time participants' observations were based on a combination of elements including pieces of factual information, rumours spread in the communities of origin and conspiracy theories.

Stories of anger are highly political and mostly originate from opposition to the perceived performance of the Mexican political system. Ideally speaking, it is in such stories where the

real possibility of creating *democratic remittances*⁷⁷ lies. Indeed, after being in contact with democratic practices and institutions, participants are angry actors, able to vividly denounce the perceived unfairness of the Mexican political regime. Here interviewees positioned themselves as experienced individuals whose contact with better conditions of life has “opened their eyes to what is really happening in Mexico”. It is in this context that Ruben’s testimony is framed. To him, Mexicans “sugar-coat” reality in order to deal with it. As an external actor he does not have to do this. Instead, he faces the possibility of becoming vocal and denouncing what he considers to be bad in order to bring about change in his country.

Like Ruben, other participants were highly sensitive to the unfairness experienced by others in the Motherland. Nonetheless, responses to such feelings seemed to follow different patterns according to experiences with politics accumulated during the course of every personal life history. While some participants —particularly those previously involved in political action— expressed a need for transnational political action —mostly through external voting⁷⁸ and political protest— others simply did not see the point in getting involved in such activities based on the perceived impossibility of being able to change the situation in the Motherland, which leads me to the third line of narrative.

Stories of the hopelessness of the political situation in Mexico are pervasive in participants’ testimonies. Despite the importance placed by the average participant on awareness created in the transnational political space, they do not normally see transnational political action as a real possibility since such an option is conceived as a “waste of time” or “nonsense”. Such conclusions were regularly based on the perception that reaching a standard similar to the one experienced in New Zealand is impossible, since the situation in Mexico is far worse than they thought before their migratory experience. For instance, talking about his decision not to cast his external vote during the 2012 Mexican presidential election, a participant from Auckland stated:

To me New Zealand democracy is like dining in a fine class restaurant. After the experience, who wants to eat in a dumpster again. I know that I can vote from here, but that is not such a big deal, when I found who the candidates

⁷⁷ Political sociologists and anthropologists define 'social remittances' or 'democratic remittances', as the ideas, behaviours, identities and social capital that flow from receiving to sending countries communities (Levitt, 1998).

⁷⁸ By external voting I mean the possibility Mexican migrants have of casting their votes in Mexican elections from overseas.

were I realized that there were no real options of change. If I voted I would have been supporting a system that is pure garbage.

This was not an isolated testimony. Similar to this participant, a vast majority decided not to participate in the 2012 presidential election regardless of the fact that they were aware of the necessary mechanisms to cast their external vote. Furthermore, narratives revealed that during the course of the 2006 and 2012 Mexican presidential elections, while participants were eager consumers of political information regarding candidates' profiles and names and political parties' platforms, less than ten percent cast their votes. When speaking about the reasons behind their non-engagement, some participants responded using expressions involving the acceptance of the impossibility of improvement in the Mexican political environment. Moreover, phrases such as "New Zealand reality was a big fat reality check" or "New Zealand was an eye opener" were not uncommon in these stories.

Minimising New Zealand

But just as these lenses are used to measure the Mexican political situation from a New Zealand perspective, the New Zealand political world is regularly examined from a Mexican one. As argued earlier, in contrast with the exacerbated feelings of pessimism and negativity that characterise opinions of the Mexican regime, New Zealand politics seem irrelevant to most participants when scaled to a Mexican standard. Compared to the complex and chaotic dynamics of Mexico, the New Zealand political world is seen by participants as unexciting and unworthy of attention.

Broadly speaking, participants' stories revealed three distinctive narrative lines involving the assignation of meaning to New Zealand politics. These were codified as: the unimportant New Zealand, the exaggerated New Zealand, and the boring New Zealand. I will briefly attempt to explain the essence of all three.

Stories about the unimportance of New Zealand politics contribute to the idea that what occurs in the Motherland is of importance while what takes place in the new one is not. Here, the symbolic manipulations created through the divisions and hierarchies generated in the transnational perceptual space impose a binary classification of perceived political reality. If fear and preoccupation turn what happens in Mexico into an important matter, one that is worthy of concern, peace and stable social progress turn New Zealand politics into an unimportant

world. These stories were by far the most common in revealing a minimisation of New Zealand's political relevance. Talking about the frustration encountered when trying to understand what is 'of importance' in New Zealand, a participant I will refer to as Carlos stated:

In Mexico newspapers tell you stories about thousands and thousands of murders every year, here in New Zealand they tell you about penguins hit by trucks.

This statement gives account of a dual and opposed assignation of value to symbolic representations of the world, based on the distorted images filtered through the telescope. Carlos' testimony combines transnationally encountered elements —collected by means of perception— to construct his personal interpretation of reality. To him the perceived representation of New Zealand's sense of care of animals' wellbeing —symbolised through the information in a news article— is the epitome of unimportance when compared to Mexico's violent images.

A second narrative line directly correlates to the previous one, moving the discussion from the general to the specific. To the average member of the community, the word politics has long being associated with a chaotic and negative environment, a world where poverty and social injustice prevail. Distinguishing the relevant from the irrelevant in such a world occurs at least in part through shared understandings of reality. The products of such understandings come to be long held markers of specific issues affecting political discourse. Answers to simply framed questions such as, *what does it mean to be poor? what can be considered as an act corruption?* or, *what should be the priorities of a government?* have different connotations when filtered through the lenses of the telescope. As expressed by this participant:

Kiwis see things differently than Mexicans. If you really examine in detail what their politicians fight for you will find that they exaggerate things most of the times. In Mexico being poor is not having money to survive, here you listen to politicians talking about the astonishing levels of poverty and in the end what they are saying is that parents don't have enough money to send their kids school camping. I think it is a matter of perspectives.

By reaching this conclusion —almost an explicit principle for him— this participant makes a statement about the symbols rooted in his new social context. What poverty means to a New Zealander is not poverty in his eyes. From this perspective, describing New Zealand levels of

poverty as “astonishing” is an exaggerated diagnosis on which public policy is designed and governmental action taken. Furthermore, such action will also be considered to be a transmuted product of such exaggeration and thus symbolically conceived as irrationally generated. When asked about their opinions of what constitutes a fair or just situation, many participants indicated that they felt dissatisfaction with specific norms they consider “exaggerated”, “absurd” or even, “unfair”, revealing strong criticism of New Zealand politicians and NGOs. For instance, when talking about the amendment to section 59 of the New Zealand Crimes Act that prohibits parents from “smacking” their children, a participant I will refer to as Carolina, mother of two stated:

I smack my children, of course I do. In my opinion it is an effective disciplinary measure to establish limits. New Zealanders exaggerate everything of course. That is the problem when you have no real problems; three or four hippies supported by politicians start a movement convincing everyone about absurd things and everybody follow them saying that if things don’t change it will be the end of New Zealand. That is how we end up with laws that wouldn’t make sense anywhere else.

Similar points were common during the fieldwork, revealing a tendency to visualise aspects of the New Zealand legal system as the result of exaggerated ethical conceptions lobbied by political and social groups in an attempt to gain votes or support through generation of a sense of crisis in relation to minor issues. Interestingly, stories indicated that transferring evaluative scales could also affect perceptions of what people consider to be ‘relevant’ violations of a norm. For instance, when analysed from a Mexican perspective, opinions of political scandals in New Zealand were also considered as exaggerated reactions to minor misbehaviour. After being a former political activist in Mexico, this next participant arrived in Wellington with the conviction that he would carry on with the fight for his political ideology. However, after a couple of months collaborating with political activists in New Zealand, he decided to concentrate only on Mexican politics. When recalling the events that motivated his decision he stated:

Politics in Mexico are dirty business, something we all know is wrong, corrupt, violent... but at the same time is something that keep us together as victims. All Mexicans know that our governments are crap and we like to talk about it because we all relate at some point with the idea. Here is different, people trust each other, politics are not as shitty as in Mexico. So you come here ready to condemn

governments and politicians for atrocities, you bring the heavy weapons from Mexico and you end up fighting over keeping a tree or demanding politicians to apologize over how they mistreated a waiter⁷⁹.

Examining this participant's story, it is clear that whatever conscious or unconscious efforts he utilises to make sense of the word activism, he holds a radically different perspective of it in his new country. This new perspective is not based on simple semantic connotations –the semantic meaning of activism remains stable- but the symbolic production of images he associates with the word –what is considered to be an atrocity– is in the end what moves him to assign value. In a similar way, participants normally create understandings of terms such as corruption, malfeasance and public misconduct based on long held conceptions of the state as experienced within their original semiotic communities. Moved by such transposed understandings – filtered through the telescope– participants tend to see disciplinary action in New Zealand as an exaggerated reaction to minor political misconduct.

A third and final narrative line relates to the position of the self as a spectator of the political arena in the context one inhabits. Here, the binary conception of the important and the unimportant gives way to the conception of what is exciting and what is unexciting. For many Mexicans, more than being just a window on the political world, mass media is conceived as an entertaining one. Probably one of the major achievements of Mexican mass media is being able to target different segments of the population through the delivery of simple and entertaining political contents. This creates the illusion of living in a world of excitement and entertainment which can be accessed through multiple entry points. Not surprisingly, expectations posited of New Zealand mass media follow a similar logic among members of the community. Nonetheless, confronted with different conceptions of what political contents in mass media should be, participants describe the New Zealand political world as 'plain and boring'. In the words of Jorge:

In Mexico there are shows for everyone. Programs come in all colours and flavours. If you don't understand politics, it doesn't matter you can watch shows like *la parodia* o *el privilegio de mandar*⁸⁰ and have a good laugh over corrupt

⁷⁹ The last part of this testimony makes reference to Aaron Gilmore, a former MP who resigned from the New Zealand parliament in 2013 after allegations of mistreating and insulting a waiter who refused to serve him alcohol. It was suggested that Mr. Gilmore told the waiter he would use his influence to get him fired.

⁸⁰ *La Parodia* (The Parody) and *El Privilegio de Mandar* (The Privilege to Rule) were popular Mexican television comedies broadcast by Mexican television network Televisa. These shows parodied Mexican politicians and political events.

politicians fighting each other. New Zealand Television is really basic, mostly American shows or plain and boring news-shows that don't connect in the same way.

Similar to Jorge, some participants stated that New Zealand television news and current affairs programmes do not portray as interesting and engaging a world as those offered by Mexican television. Some even mentioned that a more aggressive approach to political journalism in New Zealand would be necessary in order to increase the levels of interest in political events. When speaking about his favourite news programme in Mexico, a participant from Auckland pointed out:

To me the most honest presenter I have come across is Brozo, he has some guts to tell the true and confront bad politicians. He is ruthless; his language is just like ours, he is not afraid to swear when he sees that something unfair is happening. That is why he is so popular in Mexico, because he connects with ordinary people. Here all television presenters are bland. Even the guy from Campbell Live who thinks he is tough is just a nice lady when compared to Brozo.

These comments refer to Victor Trujillo, a satirical television news presenter who, dressed as a clown, discusses and comments on current political events in Mexico every morning. Brozo's television format includes satirical, humorous communication and subversion of the authority of the political elite. According to Ruggiero (2007, p.8) Brozo's unique style of delivering political news has contributed to the development of a shared sense of critique of power in the Mexican authoritarian political realm. Not surprisingly, Brozo was mentioned by other participants as a relevant, trusted source of political information in their mother country. In contrast, developing a sense of engagement with New Zealand political news presenters proved to be difficult for some participants who found the New Zealand political news environment less exciting than its Mexican counterpart. When exploring further, phrases such as "New Zealand politics are boring" or "politics here are bland" reflect a widely held criticism of the format through which political information is delivered. However, the overall tone of the political discussion in New Zealand was also mentioned by others who perceived the New Zealand political world as relatively peaceful and civilised, particularly when compared to Mexico's.

5.4 Conclusions

Throughout this chapter I have stressed the importance of perception to the process of political acculturation among members of the Mexican community in New Zealand. In my view, the construction of a new political world in the minds of participants does not simply depend on accumulated images of the past or simple readings of the present but on a complex process of interpretation of political symbols affecting people living transnational lives to which perception is essential. From this perspective, members of the Mexican community in New Zealand are not passive recorders of political data but active builders of their own political worlds. Despite the exacerbated and sometimes unrealistic nature of their accounts, the underlying message challenges the stereotypical image of the apathetic migrant coming from an uncivilized society. Instead, they depict a community of worried migrants who are, sometimes even afraid of the consequences of not making sense of the political world around them.

Mainstream positivist approaches to acculturation argue that exposure to a new country results in the incremental adoption of political values and behaviours pertaining to the new country. The main assumption behind this proposition is that over time, migrants will reduce the intensity of their cultural heritage and become more similar to the native population. However, this chapter shows that relationships between individuals and their new political environment remain complex and deeply entrenched in Mexican political reality. This complex relationship is not one that eases with time. On the contrary, evidence in this study suggests that it remains quite stable even after decades. It is through such convoluted circumstances that meaning-making takes place.

Central to participants' stories of political acculturation is the construction of distorted versions of social reality achieved by means of simple perception. These conflicting images show how the symbolic organization of the social space is a central element in the construction of the idea of politics⁸¹. The significance of these symbolic representations has relevant implications for the discussion of governability, citizenship and transnational political action. Whether people minimize or maximize the positive or negative features of a political culture, such action will necessarily come with consequences to the position they adopt.

⁸¹ This proposition is consistent with previous works on political anthropology (e.g. Abrams, 1988; Alonso, 1994; Rubin, 2002; Nuijten 2003)

It is clear that thinking of a newly encountered political world as boring, unimportant or exaggerated has consequences on the processes of political acculturation and engagement. Indeed, as I will argue in the following chapters, to some extent a large group of Mexican migrants are reluctant to become fully involved in New Zealand politics based on these impressions. Of course, while this is not universally the case, it is a strikingly common finding among participants.

Similarly, perceiving Mexico as a failed state involves a series of decisions about the relationships that members of the migrant community maintain with the political arena in the Motherland. While some may be active players in the construction of critical nets of opposition to the political establishment, the vast majority simply become disengaged, yet remain worried about the state of Mexican politics.

Chapter Six: Political Déjà vu. Cognition, symbols, and political meaning-making

6.1 Introduction

I know that a good government must have three separate powers; that whoever is in charge let's say the president, or in the case of New Zealand, the Prime Minister is the ultimate responsible for the future of the nation and should not stay in power forever; I know that education should be free, secular and mandatory; I know that natural resources should belong to the nation. I know all that stuff because I learned it when I was a kid. It is all I know but I think it is correct, it is fair. New Zealand does not follow all this rules because it is a very young country; people here have not learned many lessons yet.

This opening testimony came from a participant I will refer to as Alejandro, a Mexican migrant who arrived in New Zealand almost twenty years ago. To him, as to many of his compatriots politics is a term that carries extremely negative connotations, a world he prefers to stay away from in order to avoid trouble. Nonetheless, this quiescent approach to politics does not stop him from having an opinion about politics in his new country. This opinion is based on what he considers to be positive attributes of politics, what politics should be like and what he assumes to be fair.

Alejandro's understandings are far from being randomly given thoughts about politics; instead they reveal a complex and well-articulated system of signification, a semiotic framework, through which politics is understood. The original shaping of such a system occurred through life experience within the borders of the semiotic community in which he was born and brought up. Indeed, the meanings posited upon concepts such as privatization, non re-election, and free secular public education are not simply individual stances taken by Alejandro, but core components of the Mexican political culture deeply entrenched in the institutions, discourses and rituals inherited from the 1910s Mexican Revolution.

It is in this context that Alejandro's words uncover a great sense of pride in what he considers to be his heritage; the lessons he learnt from his family and school teachers when still living in

the Motherland. To him these are not just ‘some’ understandings but ‘the’ understandings over which every state should be articulated. In that sense they also reflect a commonly shared political mythology, a world of heroes and battles, victories and defeats, over which Mexican political institutions have been historically presented to the eyes of most Mexicans. It is hardly surprising thus that, regardless of the appreciation Alejandro shows for certain aspects of social and political life in New Zealand (as is revealed later in the interview), he clings tenaciously to what he considers to be elements of his national identity, the upholding of historical symbols that distinguish his original culture from others.

Nonetheless, when applying this semiotic framework to the New Zealand political arena, he also reveals an attempt to make sense of his new world based on previously acquired symbolic constructions. In other words, he attempts to connect the dots between two radically opposed political systems, cultures and realities, on the basis of deduction. The premise behind such equation seems to be: if something works in *x*, then it would be perfectly applicable to *y*. As described in Chapter Two, a similar proposition is the cornerstone of recent theory in the field of migrant political socialisation. Indeed, different scholars have explored the idea that during the process of acculturation, migrants can capitalise on previous political information developed in their country of origin. Black (1987) refers to this phenomenon as *political transferability*, and based on his research in the Canadian context, he proposes that even in the presence of radically different political systems, migrants can still use their understanding of certain basic political elements that are found in all regimes. Similar propositions have been articulated in the works of scholars in Australia (Wilson, 1973; Finifter & Finifter, 1989) and the United States (Wals, 2011), providing valuable insights into the enduring character of political concepts and choices.

The proposition that migrants can transfer political knowledge is indeed a powerful one. Nonetheless, my stance is that, due to the particular approaches dominating the mainstream literature on political acculturation, its exploration has been rather limited. So far, what we know about the subject is based on statistical information suggesting some correlations between previous political preferences and their repercussions in post-migratory political outcomes such as voting and partisanship. Again, the emphasis posited on outcomes seems to deviate the attention from the exploration of processes. A gap that qualitative analysis can help to fill.

This chapter aims to provide a new approach to understand transferability by treating it not as a conclusive and determinant phenomenon but as a part of a series of stages migrants face during

the process of reshaping their semiotic frameworks. In other words, it proposes conceptualising transferability as a fundamental part of semiotic practices through which people structure the systems of signification that guide their understandings of politics in a new country. By doing so, it is possible to broaden the scope of analysis and enter domains that remain mostly unexplored. Among these are the challenges and confusions produced by such transfer and the conditions and negotiations over which new views of politics in a new system are crafted.

As such, this chapter is neither an exhaustive examination of all symbols and meanings transferred during the process of acculturation, nor a thorough analysis of the New Zealand and Mexican political institutions over which these are articulated. Instead it is an exploration of how people cognitively reshape their semiotic frameworks after being in contact with a new political culture. Here the use of the term ‘cognitively’ is given as a means of recognition of the symbiosis between cognitive structures and semiotic frameworks. And that is because semiotic frameworks require an efficient net of cognitive structures through which relevant political information is constantly fed, processed and interpreted.

As argued in Chapter Three, cognitive structures and information processing have been recurrent topics in interpretive literature. In his early works Geertz compared cultural systems to computer programs (control mechanisms) with flows of significant symbols illuminating the path humans follow (Geertz, 1963 p.45). Although Geertz later rejected most attempts to reconcile the emotional and cognitive components of cultural construction there has been a renewed effort from contemporary cultural interpretivists to make amends with the fields of social and political psychology⁸². From Thompsons’ (1990, p.149) flexible schemata to Ross’s psychocultural interpretations (1997, p.68), a number of scholars have made attempts to conceive individuals as builders of their own worlds who make decisions based on shared nets of meaning processed in the mind. The endurance of the information processed through cognitive structures provides the security humans need to carry on with their daily lives and also helps configuring much of the *thin coherence* Sewell (1999) argues about.

The remainder of this chapter is organized according to four coded narrative lines embedded in participants’ stories. They have been arranged in a way that reveals a simple four-step path that participants encounter during their political acculturation. *Section 4.2 Stories of inception*, comprises narratives of the original political meaning-making process as experienced in the

⁸² A thorough explanation of these and other bridges between political psychology and interpretivism please see Chapter Three.

Motherland. Here it is possible to appreciate a collage of vivid experiences originating mostly through family and school education, from which participants establish common points of direction in the political world. *Section 4.3 Stories of transference*, gives account of testimonies regarding the use of these common points to construct an understanding of the New Zealand political arena. *Section 4.4, Stories of confusion*, comprises stories of participants who, regardless of the reasons, experienced dissonance between transferred political symbols across cultures. In *section 4.5 Stories of construction*, I propose that participants' diverse and heterogeneous application of previously stored political information results in the shaping of a unique semiotic framework that is neither fully Mexican nor fully New Zealand, but a hybrid construction carefully tailored by the synthesis of shared and individual experiences shaped in two political cultures. I close the chapter in *section 4.6 Conclusions*, with a series of reflections on cognitive structures, culture and their relevance to the process of acculturation among members of the Mexican community.

6.2 Stories of Inception

Politics involves the presence of clusters of political symbols that exist in relation to each other. Nonetheless, the fundamental relationship between political signs and signifiers is not randomly given but crafted through inculcation and practice. A legitimate national culture—a true civic religion— write Bourdieu and colleagues (1994, p.8), is universally imposed by the state through the school system. Hence school education is regularly seen as crucial to the accumulation of political symbols in the first place. Stories told by participants are not devoid of such influence. In fact, when interviewees gave account of their original sources of political knowledge, school and family education occupied a crucial position, revealing that their processes of political socialisation started early in life. Often testimonies included vivid representations of politics embedded in rituals, notions and myths that were part of the Mexican primary and secondary school curricula. In this context, the Mexican political system is perceived as a reward for a long process of fighting against oppression and social inequality. Understanding such conceptions requires context though.

At the beginning of the 20th century, with the pronouncement of an extremely progressive constitution in the country, the Mexican revolutionaries had successfully articulated the footprints of a national project embedded with social and political rights designed to reduce inequality and foster economic progress (Yllanes, 1967). These included a massive program of nationalization of private industries in key economic sectors, an advanced system of labour rights to protect and organize workers, a series of strict measures to ensure the secular character

of the state, a massive program of expropriation and redistribution of land to poor farmers, and an ambitious educational program to reach all corners of the country.

This project was not only endorsed but actively fed by intellectuals, academics, and artists who joined the ideals and values of the revolutionary cause and contributed to the construction of a new idea of *lo mexicano* (what is Mexican). An official political discourse gave way to an official version of history articulated in a commonly shared political mythology⁸³, a romantic world of heroes and enemies, battles and victories, a collective memory of how the country fought against injustice and tyranny. From this perspective, the Mexican state is commonly seen as an omnipotent and generous father rewarding his children for years of suffering and oppression. Every new president was to become the latest *caudillo* (military leader) in charge of defending the values and ideals contained in such mythology. When talking about this official version of Mexican history Pansters (2005, pp.74-83) describes this in terms of “the ideological adhesive of the Mexican political system”, which guided the relationships between Mexicans and their government for most of the 20th Century.

A key factor to the success of the project was the brand new educational system. Indeed, the massive literacy campaigns implemented in Mexico through the course of the century brought not only better educated people but ideologically well-rounded citizens able to reproduce the core components of such dogma. Certainly, at its different levels the education system was structured through the idea of integral, nationalistic education. The political orientation of the Mexican curriculum has been explored by several authors⁸⁴ whose coincidental findings indicate that during primary and secondary school, the average Mexican student is exposed to numerous and intense political messages, purposely designed to make him feel a proud heir of Mexican culture, “a fusion between the glorious indigenous past and the best of the Western culture” (Zuniga & Hamman, 2008, p. 69). In this context, Mexican political education starts at some point between the age of eight and nine, with basic notions of division and distribution of political powers, governmental structures and federalism. These are later expanded in secondary school with more detailed information on legislative processes, governmental functions, and the political organisation of Mexico’s states.

⁸³ I use the term political mythology based on the political anthropological tradition. For a comprehensive review of the term see Tănăsioiu (2005).

⁸⁴ See for instance Segovia (1975); Zuniga (1998); Rippberger & Staudt, (2002), and Zuniga & Hamman (2008).

The effectiveness of this strategy in creating specific political orientations and behaviours has been referred to by scholars as an essential component in maintaining the stability of the presidential system for almost a century (Segovia, 1975). In order to ensure a homogeneous standard in the application of the curriculum, the Mexican educational system has historically relied on the distribution of free and mandatory textbooks. Indeed, for decades Mexico was the only nation outside the communist block to provide these types of educational materials for its people (Hodges & Gandy, 2002, p.101). The influence of these textbooks was clear in participants' stories. When remembering his primary school days a participant I will refer to as Juan Manuel stated:

We used to have this textbook that I remember really well because it was about social sciences; I think it was on sixth grade but I am not sure; definitely in primary school, for sure. There, in the cover, was the picture of a woman, *la patria* [the Motherland], who had a very generous bosom to nurture every Mexican. And really, those books taught you everything you needed to know about Mexico, how the country was organized, all its history, and how to be a good citizen. I think they were great to teach you a little bit of love for your country.

Similar to Juan Manuel, during their childhood all participants were exposed to the contents of textbooks as well as to periodic nationalistic rituals that reinforced allegiance to the ideals of the 1910 Mexican Revolution⁸⁵. The progressive connotations of some of these texts can be better illustrated in Macias' (1990, pp.302-303) translation of some of their passages. Among them is this next statement found in the sixth-grade social studies textbook, probably the one referred by Juan Manuel:

This domination of some countries by others is called colonialism, and the economic and political system that makes it possible, imperialism. The capitalists (of Britain, France and the United States) sometimes joined the Mexican capitalists, exploited our resources, but the situation hardly improved, because they were not interested in solving the problems of the country but rather only in doing business

⁸⁵ It is important to note that this system started to be modified after the Mexican democratic transition that started in the year 2000. Nonetheless, all participants were educated under the old system.

Entrenched in this passage are a series of meanings to justify the national character of key industries in Mexico. A shared agreement that the nationalisation needs to be undertaken to prevent unfairness and exploitation is structured through an almost romantic conception of its genesis. This is a good example of the simple characterisations of goodness and badness that shape most Mexican nationalistic history where the system is presented as a reward after years of injustice and oppression. It is in this context that the gross constituent unit, the *mytheme*, of such history is justice and not democracy—at least not as currently understood. It is not surprising to see how such idea of fairness in a political system is articulated in many of the stories told by participants. For a vast majority, the political system they know, at least in its dogmatic dimension, represents the goodness in society, or in the words of Alejandro, *what is fair*. Indeed, regardless of the differences given by specific ideological positions, most participants seem to uphold clear and unified positions that take the form of ideals, the most important of which is justice.

Such clear principles from which an ideal image of the political system is created and meaning deposited, contrast with the negative perceptions that all participants exhibit towards the Mexican political regime. Going back through my field notes I found the following question: *How can Mexican migrants be simultaneously so secure about the goodness of their political ideals and structures and so disappointed in their achieved results?* Exploring the field further I found that the answer seems to lie in the division made by participants between the Mexican political system and its political actors. After a couple of decades of living in New Zealand, a participant from Wellington stated:

I think the Mexican system is very good. My father was a lawyer and he used to say that our laws were perfect; and at least when I was living there, they were. The problem is not that, the problem is in our politicians. They are the ones twisting, ignoring or violating the rules our grandparents fought for. The rules are still there but no one obeys them.

How the Mexican political culture has been affected by these opposing conceptions has been the centre of attention of a number of political cultural analyses. When referring to some of these, political historian Alan Knight (1996, p.10) uses the word “schizoid” to describe in general terms how such culture has normally been portrayed. On the one hand, a set of aspirational and idealistic components based on the principles of the Revolution seems to drive the pride Mexicans feel for their political institutions; but on the other, embodied practices with

the state lead to constant disappointment based on accusations of corruption, clientelism or simply inefficiency to achieve such high expectations.

The amalgamation of such dissimilar conceptions into the Mexican semiotic framework helps explain how a culture with such a high regard for its political system is also one where political apathy, extreme distrust in politicians and institutions, intolerance towards dissent, and generally speaking, discontent towards state action have been stable components of the Mexican psyche for decades⁸⁶. Moreover, it suggests that beyond this nationalistic discourse, lies a series of culturally developed understandings about how to endure such a corrupt system⁸⁷. Some of these were captured in many of participants' stories and will be used in the following sections to illustrate their application to the New Zealand political arena.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that in a globalised era several new symbols have started permeating Mexican political culture. At a slow but steady pace, a number of new components such as democracy, human rights, gender equality, and transparency of the state, just to mention a few, are becoming more present in the discourses of the Mexican semiotic community. There is no doubt that this situation has provided new sets of meaning to most Mexicans. Nonetheless, the stability of the results provided by a number of studies on political culture suggests that such meanings cannot be understood in isolation from the complex arrangements of a semiotic system that has been shaped over decades. In that regard they have been incrustated in a complex system of signification, and as such their results are sometimes not as optimistic as could be expected⁸⁸.

6.3 Stories of Transference

When talking about their experiences of making sense of a new political environment, participants unveiled the first traces of transferring previous understandings of politics that originated in the Motherland. Indeed, by following participants' narratives, a rich field of interaction between the past and the present appears. Interestingly, most of the times such

⁸⁶ This stability can be fully appreciated in the analysis of different studies on Mexican Political Culture conducted since the 1960s. Although most of them were developed in the midst of the behavioural revolution, political interpretivists and cultural anthropologists seem to have arrived to similar conclusions. See for instance (Hansen, 1970; Gonzalez-Casanova, 1970; Segovia, 1975; Craig & Cornelius, 1980; Tejera, 1996; McCann and Dominguez, 1998; Gutmann 2002; Camp, 2007).

⁸⁷ These include understandings about how to deal with structures of power and authority in daily life. From this perspective shared understandings and hidden meanings about corruption, contestation and bureaucratic practices just to mention some, have been developed in an almost unique way.

⁸⁸ Apart from the above mentioned studies, a number of new empirical analyses reveal that after the beginning of what is commonly referred as the *Mexican democratic transition* most Mexicans have expressed overwhelming dissatisfaction with many of the components of liberal-democracy making this one of the least supportive countries for democracy in the overall Latin American region (Corporación Latinobarómetro, 2014).

transfer seems to occur almost unconsciously. Like using an impeccably oiled cognitive machine participants appear to decode political information in a perfectly synchronized manner. Meaning making, in short, starts with simple transpositions of what is familiar in order to establish points of reference through which participants make sense of their worlds. In so doing, the disruptive character of migration in their social world is partially reduced and efficiently managed.

Similar to what occurs with ordinary meanings which are unchallenged by the mind and therefore simply transposed across cultures—for instance the meaning posited upon concepts such as bank or restaurant—a collection of previously known political notions and conceptions are imposed by participants as a set of footprints that guide their understandings of the New Zealand political world. The interaction between the old and the new owes its form thus to the objective structures that have produced such notions and conceptions regardless of their compatibility with the contextual arrangements of the new country. This is understandable since migrants' lists of priorities will rarely include political topics. As stated by this participant from Christchurch:

When you start understanding this world [New Zealand politics] you need to look back to what you know. There is no real science in politics, every society is organized in a similar way. It is just a matter of looking for the specific points and then you realize, this is like a *déjà vu*.

Indeed, the term *déjà vu*—a feeling of certainty that a current experience is a repetition of something already lived, where actions that are about to happen, can be predicted—is a useful construct to synthesize the sentiment encountered by migrants when attempting to assign meaning to New Zealand political symbols. In this context, participants' quest of making sense of the New Zealand political world did not depart from zero. For instance, when speaking about the process she undertook to understand New Zealand politics, a participant I will refer to as Sara mentioned:

Obviously, I didn't start from zero; there is a Mexican ABC of politics that you learn at school... you know... the executive, legislative and judiciary, the kind of things that are going to work kind of similarly wherever you go.

This testimony fits perfectly into Black's (1987) proposition of political transferability. Nonetheless it is necessary to explore further how this "Mexican ABC" is structured and transferred if light is to be shed over transferability as a semiotic process. Considering that the definition of political symbols from which this thesis departs is broad enough to accommodate any part of the political spectrum, talking about symbolic transference is in fact a proposition of enormous magnitude. Furthermore, such a notion is wide enough to accommodate a range of diverse elements that may be seen as overlapping from the traditional political science perspective. This is because political concepts, institutions and practices, (elements traditionally belonging to different classical taxonomies) all come to symbolize something in the mind of the average citizen. Constructing classifications of symbolic transferability is thus not an easy task since the effort may be seen as a disruptor of semiotic inventories, coexisting harmoniously in abstract terms. Nonetheless, the stories told by participants reveal notorious distinctions in the types of transferred symbols assisting the interpretation of New Zealand politics.

In his classic work, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, Murray Edelman (1967, p.6) distinguishes between two types of symbolic arrangements that individuals use to posit meaning upon experience: *referential symbols* and *condensation symbols*. The former are described as "economical ways of referring to the objective elements in objects or situations: the elements identified in the same way by different people"; the latter are symbols that evoke emotions associated with "patriotic pride, anxieties, remembrances of past glories or humiliations, promises of future greatness". Similarly, in this section I suggest that participants' political transferability occurs mostly through two different types of constructs: what I call *references* and what I call *positions*.

Transferring references

References are the most basic symbolic forms that assist migrants' processes of political acculturation. They can be broadly characterised as unchallenged notions or conceptions, assumed to be universal organisational principles, through which political systems are articulated. Their transference provides participants with core notions about how politics works in the broadest possible sense. In other words, references are symbolic constructs that help migrants make sense of their new world by identifying similar categories across systems. Participants' stories include a plethora of successfully transferred references that are employed to understand New Zealand politics.

Migrants do not need to re-learn many aspects of the political spectrum such as what is understood by political parties, public offices or taxes. These are concepts already stored in the semiotic repertoire of most Mexicans. Consequently, whenever participants aim to understand and discuss a political topic, they can safely rely on such concepts since their meanings, at least in part, seem to be shared across semiotic communities. Interestingly, the transfer of these types of references occurs almost unconsciously, like a word naturally bound to appear in the structure of a translated sentence, the type of flexible schemata proposed by cognitive and interpretivist theorists. A shortcut of the mind grounded from live experience through which a piece of knowledge is structured and later used consistently in such a way that its meaning is no longer challenged⁸⁹.

This cognitive process, a cornerstone of the migratory experience, constitutes the point of departure in the shaping of a new semiotic framework. If people are to build new political knowledge, it is obvious that first they will dig into their semiotic repertoires to find referential categories to illuminate the path to follow. It is fair to say that most of the time, pairing referential categories is a successful enterprise that provides people with the information needed to build a basic picture of New Zealand politics. Moreover, even when paired categories are not exactly accurate, their construction proved to give most participants the type of operational knowledge they needed to respond to the basic challenges posited by the environment, as seen in the following fragments from different participants' stories:

Governments are not that different, I mean the New Zealand President is just like in Mexico the guy you need to know if you want to make it in the public sector.

I mean it is the same, in Mexico have our deputies and senators, here [in New Zealand] they have their deputies and senators.

I see the difference between Auckland and other states like Waikato where opening and keeping a business running is more complicated. Here in Auckland is easier. I think this Len Brown is one of the best governors Auckland has ever had.

⁸⁹ A review of schematic thinking and structures in positive and interpretive tradition can be found in Chapter Three.

By deductively constructing analogies between points of reference, each and every one of these participants attempts to make a statement regarding the New Zealand political world. Although part of the transferred reference is most of the time inaccurate —New Zealand does not have a president, there are no deputies and Senators in the New Zealand Parliament, and Len Brown was not the governor but the mayor of Auckland— they all serve the purpose of shedding some light and helping people make sense of the political world they now inhabit. They are helpful in illustrating the “Mexican ABC” stated by Sara in her earlier testimony.

Regardless of this positive facet, it was found that referential transferability does not occur without some negative consequences. Probably the most obvious relates to how plain and simple transference of political categories can prevent people from crafting their own understandings of politically related concepts as experienced in New Zealand. Indeed, fieldwork in this research reveals that most of the time, transferring political inventories serves the purpose of operating socially, so once a number of referential categories have been successfully transposed, further exploration of the New Zealand political arena is less likely to occur.

For instance, when a female participant referred to the Mexican Congress and the New Zealand Parliament in terms of two institutions “baking the same cake with a different recipe”, she acknowledged that differences between systems were not her concern. “In the end what is important is the cake” she mentioned shortly afterwards. “Moreover if we consider that people don’t care much about processes but outcomes” she later continued. “I learnt what I need to know about the subject in Mexico and I am not going to do it again” she concluded.

The level of self-confidence embedded in these comments makes one wonder about the types and dimensions of political knowledge countries expect newcomers to absorb. This participant is indeed a politically educated person with a clear notion of political structures and procedures. In fact, her recipe analogy is clear and adequate considering the type of political information she requires to function socially and respond to the challenges posited by contact with the state. Moreover, as she observes in the conversation, it would be difficult to know if all New Zealanders “know by heart”, as she allegedly does, the details surrounding legislative functions and procedures within their semiotic community.

But what is probably more important in this testimony is the open acknowledgement that detailed political information regarding the new country is not relevant, and that the construction of inferences based in one’s semiotic repertoire is enough to make sense of the New Zealand

political arena. Stories collected in the field consistently revealed that, most of the time, people prefer to think about politics using unaltered transferred references that are not always a good match between systems. For instance, it was found that by simply transferring the geographical distribution of local powers in Mexico, a number of participants believe they inhabit a Federal system with states, governors and even municipalities. This transference reaches beyond the simple nomenclatural imprecisions explored in an early testimony and enters the more complex world of transposed cultural meaning.

Here is worth noting that the complex nets of brokerage and clientelism that characterise the Mexican political system has posited upon local governments, especially local executives, a complex system of signification (Bartra, Borge, Calvo & Gutierrez, 2009) . From this perspective the transference of a referential category does not occur in a vacuum. Instead, a series of culturally related meanings attached to referential categories such as “governor” or ‘state’ come with a series of misleading conceptions and expectations. Some of the misunderstandings created by such transfer will be further developed in the next section. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that simple referential transferability can sometimes lead to confusing or imprecise judgements of the state and its various entities.

Another good example of misleading information flowing from unaltered referential categories is the construction of an image of the New Zealand Prime Minister based on the conception of the Mexican President. Indeed, regardless of the initial effectiveness that such transference can provide in shaping basic understandings of executive power across systems, there are obvious consequences of following such a reference in its literal form. First and foremost, the Westminster structure of New Zealand democracy, which is based on the collective decision-making powers of cabinet rather than those of an all-powerful Prime Minister, contrasts with the strong presidential regime that characterises the Mexican Government. Not surprisingly, many participants referred to the New Zealand Prime Minister as “the boss” or as the person “who cuts the cheese” in the country.

Following this line of thought, a common misconception among participants relates to the composition and functions of the New Zealand cabinet, the bureaucratic New Zealand apparatus and its civil service. To most participants, an important prerogative of the President is the discretionary appointment and removal of officers in charge of public portfolios where members of the cabinet are simply extensions of the presidential power in specific issues. In this context,

it was found that participants normally think about the New Zealand Cabinet in the same way as its Mexican counterpart. In the words of a participant from Auckland:

I don't see much difference between the President and the Prime Minister, to me both are the same thing. They are both powerful individuals who can decide alone whatever they think is best for the country, they can both appoint whoever they want to work in the government and the only limit they have to their power is the balance between the other two powers. The only difference between New Zealand and Mexico is that here the Prime Minister normally appoints people who are less corrupt and more capable to perform their duties, but obviously they do that because they know that kiwis are watching them all the time.

Similar to this testimony, other stories reveal that often participants think that all members of the New Zealand Cabinet, as well as all public officials are freely appointed by the Prime Minister, that the decisions they make are based on the Prime Minister's wishes, and that what they perceive as effectiveness in the New Zealand Government is attributed to vigilant citizenry and not to an efficient governmental system. While there may be some truth in these perceptions, they clearly overstate the power of the New Zealand Prime Minister, who is legally bound to obey the decisions made by members of the cabinet. Moreover, in the tradition of a parliamentary system, such a cabinet is exclusively composed of Members of Parliament who have been elected through popular suffrage. It is also important to note that in appointing cabinet members, the New Zealand Prime Minister is most of the time constrained by the rules imposed by his or her own party, and that the vast majority of public officers working in each ministry are not directly appointed but recruited, trained and promoted through an efficient system of civil service (a concept mostly unknown in the Mexican tradition).

Within participants' stories lies a rich inventory of misconceptions of this kind, all product of the transfer of references in its purest form. They touch on subjects as delicate as political representation, corruption, taxation, public services and the welfare system. Although they can vary from case to case, it is worth noting that they are overwhelmingly present in all stories, even those of the most politically experienced. In the end they all reveal two sides of referential transferability. One proves to be valuable and almost inevitable to the political acculturative experience, providing it with core information crucial to shaping a basic picture of the New Zealand politics. The other, less optimistic, prevent people from gathering further political information and can mislead their interactions with the state.

People may grasp the meaning of a reference symbol such as voting, public office, or legislative power without developing any sort of special bond with it. But there are certain aspects of the political parade that can be perceived as important enough to shape emotional bonds and therefore posit significant meanings upon them. Such special meanings are structured in the shape of a position that people hold towards that symbol. For instance, individuals who openly identify themselves to be at the extremes of a right or left oriented ideology, usually, although not always, reveal a set commonly shared positions developed around topics such as abortion, the economy or homosexuality. In other words, such a cluster of symbols is relevant enough to take specific stances on which strong conceptions and emotional ties are articulated. In this context, positions can be conceived as presupposed sets of preferences that individuals produce towards state constructs, as originally experienced in the semiotic community. To put it simply, they are meanings attached to political symbols that are considered to be relevant.

Interestingly, when applying the strict categories that distinguish left and right political ideologies, it is plausible to state that, broadly speaking, most participants do not seem to bear a particularly well-rounded political ideology. In fact, most of the time they seem to struggle whenever applying this commonly known taxonomy to their semiotic frameworks. It is unclear though whether such uncertainty was grounded on the lack of interest in politics that characterise the average participant, or on the limited contact with clear-cut political ideologies that characterised Mexican political culture for decades (Garrido, 2005). Following this line, many participants' positions revealed more exposure to a commonly shared nationalistic discourse than adherence to any of the classifications traditional employed in mainstream political science⁹⁰.

A well-condensed example of such nationalistic discourse can be found in this chapter's opening testimony where Alejandro successfully synthesises what he considers to be core principles upon which governments should be designed. Based on the semiotic anthropological tradition, I have previously referred to such discourses in terms of a political mythology, a world of heroes, battles and enemies through which an idea of the state and its political system has been presented to the eyes of many Mexicans. It is clear that Alejandro's remarks could hardly be understood outside such mythology. Similarly, several components of this nationalistic arrangement have

⁹⁰ For further information regarding the connections between semiotics and the formation of political ideology see Voloshinov (1930); Merelman (1969); Nadin (1981) and Noth (2004)

shaped some of the political opinions held by members of the Mexican community in New Zealand. This collage of fragments from different participants' stories illustrates this proposition:

The government has the obligation to provide free education at all levels. I simply don't get why in New Zealand politicians cannot understand that simple principle. In Mexico...

Sometimes I feel like there is not a clear division between state and religion in New Zealand. I am not sure but someone told me the government is funding religious schools. That it is totally wrong. In Mexico...

Privatisation is always a bad idea, I am not sure what they want to privatize here but it is obvious that there should be a principle protecting what belong to all kiwis. In Mexico...

These fragments reveal how in shaping understanding of New Zealand politics, people can capitalise on previously held positions that were developed in their country of origin. The ellipses, intentionally posited at the end of each sentence, highlight the connections between past and present. Of course they are also there for reasons of economy since each and every one of the remaining words leads to long and detailed explanations that are embedded in the Mexican political cultural tradition. To further illustrate this proposition let us take a look at the complete version of the third testimony:

Privatisation is always a bad idea, I am not sure what they want to privatise here but it is obvious that there should be a principle protecting what belong to all kiwis. In Mexico we needed to suffer many years of exploitation and fight many battles to understand that. New Zealand does not have so much history so they don't have these kinds of memories. Nonetheless, I think they have too much to lose if they follow this path. I know that the Mexican government is now trying to privatise PEMEX [the national oil producer] but let's face that is not going to happen, Mexicans would never allow such a thing, kiwis should be more like us.

A simple taxonomy of this testimony reveals clear transference of meaning based on accumulated experience with politics which is drawn upon to form an opinion of the issue of

privatisation. Regardless of the differences between contexts and the acknowledged lack of information on the situation in New Zealand, the meaning given to the term privatisation is strong enough to provide a beacon of light through which a response is articulated. Privatisation thus, is abstractly considered in its symbolic terms as an instrument of unfairness and a vehicle for inequality and exploitation.

But not all positions flowing from this mythology are posited upon clear ideological structures. As observed in the fieldwork, there are also strong meanings attached even to mere components of the democratic process. Such is the case of the symbolic meaning attached to the idea of re-election. Here, it is worth noting that to the average participant, the referential transferences regarding the notion of a Presidential system to the New Zealand context results in a series of misconceptions regarding the Westminster Parliamentary System. Mexican migrants rarely distinguish between the process of electing a President and a Prime Minister. From this perspective, they interpret the constant stay in office of a Prime Minister after an election not as a party victory, but as a President being re-elected.

As a political symbol, the re-election of a President is probably one of the most controversial items in the semiotic repertoire of many Mexicans (Barbadillo, 2009). This is because, since the end of the Mexican Revolution, the principle of non re-election has been officially articulated in Mexican political discourse as a symbol of justice –the only way to prevent presidents from becoming dictators. Indeed, the origins of the Mexican Revolution can be synthesised in its more widely known slogan *sufragio efectivo no reelección* (effective suffrage, no re-election). Until recently, all governmental communications in Mexico —ranging from internal memos to public written statements and even bank notes— were embossed with this phrase. In this context, observing what is perceived as the recurrent re-election of the person in charge of the executive power was most of the times received harshly by participants.

But it would be absurd to think that all transferred positions are embedded in a commonly held nationalistic discourse. Indeed, as previously mentioned, at the turn of the century Mexico started a democratic transition over which new political symbols have started to emerge, such is the case of topics such as: same-sex marriage, indigenous rights, gender equality and human rights. Evidence of this research shows how exposure to these newly encountered symbols either directly in Mexico or through transnational practices has also affected the meaning-making process by means of transposed positions. I will attempt to illustrate this through the following new set of story fragments from different narratives:

I don't know exactly about their [Maori] rights but for sure I know that the government is doing a good job. I have always being in favour of indigenous rights because in Mexico our indigenous people are constantly being mistreated and they have literally no rights.

I don't feel totally comfortable with the idea of two guys getting married to each other. I don't know much about the topic here but in Mexico, at least in my hometown, we don't believe in this kind of nonsense.

Well, I don't know about that here, but let's face it in Mexico this idea of human rights has served the purpose of protecting thieves and murderers. In my opinion human rights are meant to be for humans not for rats.

All of the above reveal the use of transposed positions flowing from embodied practices with the Mexican state. Different from previous cases, these positions were far less cohesive in participants' stories. Indeed people proved to hold radically different opinions over specific subjects that were not bounded by nationalistic ties. Such heterogeneity does not detach these positions from their cultural character. As already mentioned, a semiotic conception of culture and politics does not necessarily reflect the existence of a group of identically minded individuals. Instead it relies on the creation of circles of intelligibility where people understand the differences between positions and therefore engage in comprehensible action (Sewel 1999; Wedeen 2002). From this perspective, the genesis of all these testimonies can be traced to a series of more current political discourses that feed Mexican political culture with new streams. Although some of these claims may indeed find parallels in the New Zealand political context, they were all crafted almost exclusively in the context of a radically different political arena. Probably the best example to illustrate this is the statement talking about human rights: the slogan "human rights are for humans not for rats" has been part of the contemporary campaign slogans of some Mexican politicians, allegedly as an expression of discontent with the constant release of convicted prisoners on the grounds of violation of their human rights. As such, regardless of the position people may take over the issue, this understanding makes sense

exclusively within the confines of the original semiotic community. Its transposition to the New Zealand context is in that regard almost unintelligible⁹¹.

The final issue to discuss regarding positional transference refers to the fact that, similar to what it occurs with referential transferability, transposed information in its purest form frequently seems to take over participants' understandings of New Zealand politics. Certainly, the vast majority of stories explored so far shows people acknowledging how little they know about the topics that they are about to explain in the New Zealand context. In this context, participants' accounts of positional transference seem to follow a similar structure. They normally start with a couple of sentences regarding their position on an issue found in the New Zealand political arena. This is later followed by the acknowledged lack of contextual information surrounding the problem, and finally they compensate such shortage by purely transposing the contextual arrangements upon which the position was constructed in Mexico. Once again the well-oiled cognitive machine seems to work efficiently, providing answers to the challenges posited by the environment based on previously stored information⁹². Although this efficiency may look positive in the eyes of some, it is clear that it often has pernicious consequences to the process of political acculturation. Not wishing to repeat the points already made in the previous section, it is suffice to say that, in similar terms, the simple transposition of long held positions created in a different contextual arrangement prevents people from exploring further their new political arenas and regularly results in confusing and misleading conceptions of the state and its institutions.

6.4 Stories of Confusion

When individuals are left in a new land and a different parallel with no proper tools to guide their orientation to it, they can rely on the position of the sun to distinguish between north and south. The sun then becomes a symbol, a beacon lighting the path. One becomes so reliant on that symbol that one will follow it regardless of the real direction one is taking. Moreover, since one may be unfamiliar with the new land and have no idea of what is to be found and where, let's say south, one may end up east or west without realizing one's true position. Something

⁹¹ Here is worth noting that the testimony was made in the context of discussing New Zealand prisons. According to this participant's views when compared to Mexico, New Zealand "pampers" most prisoners by being worried about their "human rights". This piece of information, he mentioned, was obtained through watching a TV News report on prisoners' rehabilitation.

⁹² Not only social and political interpretivists but also political psychologists have long argued in favour of understanding these types of previously stored constructs as being schematically organized (Sears, Huddie & Schaffer, 1985).

similar to this was found in participants' testimonies. Indeed, after decades of living in a parliamentary, unitary system guided by values of equality and political participation, many interviewees believe that the New Zealand political system operates within the same concepts they know from the homeland. As already established, for many, New Zealand is seen as a republic, its regions as states and its mayors as governors. Similarly, testimonies revealed that some participants see no difference between the attributes of the New Zealand prime minister and the Mexican president. Legislative functions and procedures are regularly seen as "baking the same cake with a different recipe" and participants refer to Members of Parliament as Deputies or Senators. Such knowledge may not be accurate but it is perceived as enough to "operate socially" or "avoid being seen as stupid".

But while some explanations of New Zealand politics can remain dormant for years, evidence of this research shows that different interactions with the New Zealand social and political environments force individuals to confront others and face a state of confusion. Although confusion is normally seen in negative terms there is considerable theoretical justification to suggest that it plays an important role in the creation of meaning (D'Mello, Lehmand, Pekrun & Graesser, 2014). Following this train of thought, confusion can be seen as a state of mind created through the observed dissonance between understandings of a symbol. This normally leads to a lack of clarity about a possible course of action over which solutions need to be taken. Inside these newly crafted solutions lies a new set of understandings that, in turn will affect the composition of a semiotic framework.

From this perspective, confusion is a necessary product of acculturative practices. Without being confronted with perplexing situations, migrants —especially those with low levels of political interest— would rather remain tied to the comfort provided by transposed meanings in their purest forms. Confusion has thus been described as a motivational force affecting learning (Dweck, 1986, p.1040).

Additionally, an important feature of this notion of confusion is the fact that the production of understandings that it triggers, occurs in real life. In other words, it is meaning that come from embodied practices in social and political arenas. Within participants' stories lies a rich inventory that illustrates this type of confusion. However, it is worth noting that often these stories also show how the construction of meaning does not necessarily involve aligning one's thoughts with those shared in a new circle of intelligibility. In other words, confusion can force meaning production but such a process can result in a number of interpretations different than

those contextually crafted by the average New Zealander. This section illustrates confusion and meaning-making through the examination of four stories from different participants' narratives.

In this first story, a participant from Otago expressed the confusion he encountered after discovering that there was no 'governor' of his 'state' who could help him solve an issue with his landlord:

I remember that once, we had a problem with our landlord and we wanted to send a letter to the Governor of Otago asking for his help, however we were shocked when I found out that there was no such governor. We didn't want to go to the council because in Mexico that is a pretty minor office in comparison to the governor, a governor can solve problems, a council I am not so sure. In the end we went to the bloody council but they told us that that was a private matter and there was nothing they could do to help. It was a lesson to learn how things work in New Zealand.

Beyond the obvious simple nomenclatural dissonance, this story reveals a degree of confusion over what the state should be and how it should operate. Based on culturally given understandings this participant thinks of politicians, especially governors, as omnipotent mediators able to solve all sorts of problems⁹³. Although the paternalistic nature of such views has been explained in previous sections it is worth adding that Mexican political sociologists and anthropologists have previously described the search for this sort of intermediaries, especially at the local level, as "expressions of the magical and meaningful aspects of the power of the state" (Nuijten, 2003, p.3). As such, different than in New Zealand where politicians at the local level may be seen as accessible to citizens, this participant thinks about governors not in terms of approachable representatives but of people occupying a high position in a hierarchy of power. It is in this context that he minimises the role of local councils (thought to be municipalities) based on the strict observance of governmental roles and positions existing in his community of origin. Put it differently, what he needs is not someone approachable but someone imagined as powerful.

⁹³ Lomnitz (1995; 1999) makes a compelling argument about the construction of structures of brokerage in Mexico by linking them to historically rooted compositions of the relationships between peasants, landlords and the Mexican state.

Once he is aware of the discrepancies between systems he is utterly confused, even “shocked”. Moreover, he is uncertain about a suitable course of action. In a single moment, a simple stimulus originated in necessity disrupts the imaginary structural arrangement of the political world. An expected reality has turned out differently and the predicted responses to it are no longer valid. Interestingly there is some sort of bittersweet ending to this story, where the participant acknowledged having gained an understanding of “how things work in New Zealand”; nonetheless he is not totally convinced about the effectiveness of the system in solving a problem that was private in nature.

But not all stories of confusion depart from interaction with the New Zealand state and its forms. In this second story a male participant tells how, when discussing the issue of same-sex marriage with his “kiwi team mates” he got utterly confused by the response they had to his comments:

There were six of us and we were mucking around in the changing room when someone started talking about this idea of gays getting married. As a Mexican guy my reaction was start making a couple of jocks and play with some *albures* (jokes involving double meaning)⁹⁴, the kind of things we do in Mexico to make fun of gay guys. But my mates went ballistic about my comments, told me that they were unacceptable and even accused me of being some sort of a bully. Honestly it was super awkward because I didn’t know what to do... I think I will never feel totally comfortable with the idea of two dudes getting married, but now I know that there are ways of being politically correct when expressing an opinion about same sex-marriages.

Once again, live experience in the social world creates a state of confusion, resulting in the crafting of new understanding. In this case, understanding is not posited upon a specific political challenge but upon the correct way of expressing an idea about it. Similar to the previous story, the encountered dissonance between social reality in both worlds results in a new way of seeing how New Zealanders deal with social issues that affect their political context. Also, in a similar way this participant expressed that his original notion of the issue —in this case same-sex marriage remains mostly stable, nonetheless he acknowledges having learnt an acculturative lesson from the experience.

⁹⁴ Albures can be described as double entendres used to jokingly insult an individual. Their content is normally sexual, demeaning and crude. Sharing these types of insults (in the form of jokes) is common practice in different sectors of the Mexican society, especially inside small circles of friends

But some of the symbolic manipulations that the mind exercises to adapt its structures to a new symbolically arranged political context come with the crafting of less positive understandings. Indeed it was not rare to find stories with crude negative meanings resulting from the perceived discrepancy across systems. For instance, in this next story a female participant storms into his recently elected MP's office demanding the provision of free school uniforms for her children in exchange for the vote given to him as a candidate:

I visited my local MP's office to try to get some assistance as I used to do in Mexico. But after many visits it was clear that these guys are more interested in signing petitions to save birds than in working for the electorate. I voted for the guy and what do I get in return? Nothing, not even what is fair to everyone.

Based on her accumulated experience in Mexico, this participant finds it unacceptable that an elected Member of Parliament he supported with her vote was unable to reciprocate by helping her obtain something she considers to be fair. To her this is more than clientelist practice but a relevant social issue. Earlier in the conversation she expressed harsh comments about the high prices parents need to pay for school uniforms in New Zealand: "with a tight budget and more than one child it is almost impossible to pay one hundred dollar just for a school sweater" she mentioned. It is in this context that she made the decision to visit her MP's office to ask for help.

Again it is important to say that, for decades, deputies at the local and federal levels in Mexico have traditionally exchanged goods and services as part of clientelist practices surrounding electoral campaigns. In this regard, the delivery of school uniforms and materials is common practice in several Mexican states. In fact, in many cases deputies have been provided with permanent offices in their constituencies where these practices have since been turned into a permanent arrangements —disguised in the form of public brokerage— between voters and elected officials. Later in her story this participant revealed that when living in Mexico she regularly looked for this kind of '*apoyo*' (supporting help) whenever she knew it was available.

It is following that logic that she decided to follow in the footprints of the procedure she knows. But in this case something different happens since the MP's office refuses to give her what she considers to be morally hers. Confusion arrives and a new understanding of the political system is crafted. However, this time it is not a positive one. On the contrary, based on embodied practices and transposed meaning she condemns and disregards a system she considers to be

unfair and inefficient, a system concentrated on “*signing petitions to save birds*” and not on what she considers to be the real demands of the electorate. Here, fairness is understood in terms of the historical reasons that gave birth to the practice of clientelist mediation in Mexico and not to the contextual elements on which parliamentary practices were founded in New Zealand.

But transposing culturally acquired symbols can lead to confusion, not only from the symbol itself but from the position people occupy in relation to it. Moving *in crescendo* this final story from a young mother living in Auckland with her two daughters and her extended family seem to be a vivid example of the confusion regarding such positions:

I was in the back seat of the car with my one year old daughter; we did not have a proper chair for her so she was sitting in my lap. My brother-in-law was driving. All of a sudden a police car pulled us over and two police officers asked for my brother-in-law’s driver’s licence. He did not have one but he had been in that situation before and he knew what to do. So instead of handing over a license he handed over his Mexican electoral ID because it was in Spanish and the police officer could not know if it was a drivers’ license. But these guys were cheeky so they started asking about the word electoral which is similar in Spanish and in English. So we got caught and they issued a ticket for 600 dollars, for the lack of proper chair and for lying to the police. I found that extremely abusive and unfair. I really believe that the New Zealand government is abusive to its citizens. In Mexico I would have never received such an expensive ticket for something that stupid. Moreover, in Mexico police officers have a real sense of social justice and you can bargain with them according to your situation. Here it is just rubbish.

Law does no more than symbolically sanction the relationships of power between individuals and the state (Edelman, 1967; Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu et al. 1994). Nonetheless, such relationships operate socially through concrete contextual arrangements pertaining to each semiotic community, its meanings and dynamics. Through inculcation and practice, relationships become embedded in peoples’ minds and their reproduction is key to the preservation of political order. Stability and continuity are achieved through the symbolism of authority as embedded in peoples’ semiotic frames. These do not only contain the meaning assigned to a symbol but the positions and reactions considered to be valid within the relationship. Such validation occurs within the limits of intelligibility that is granted by the

semiotic community. In this context, actions, thoughts or feelings that make sense within a society, may only be intelligible within the confines of the community.

The narrative of this young mother seems consistent with this proposition. In places where the law is not always on the side of the person, a bribe can become a symbol of transactional nature guiding the relationships between individuals and the state. In this context the ‘illegality’ of certain actions may remain negative in peoples’ eyes but understandable within the community as a means of interaction with the state. In time, continued practices lead to the development of codes guiding these relationships, thus limits are established to guide the degree of unfairness considered to be acceptable by individuals – how much it is expected one should pay every time someone gets pulled over by a police car, is a good example. Here the mother is incapable of understanding the associational relationship between an action and its consequence in New Zealand. Such misunderstanding occurs through the transposition of a semiotic framework that is deeply rooted in her mind.

The dissonance created by such simple transference is encountered with confusion and anger. The shaping of a new understanding is thus based not on the act of transgression of the norm *per se*, but on what is perceived as an excessive punishment and a diminishment of her capacity to negotiate what is considered to be “fair” treatment. In a nutshell, such cognitive arrangement reveals a particular way of conceptualising the position between the individual and the state. Although such a position may be condemnable for some, it is understood within the limits of a community where similar practices are sometimes the only option to survive under a corrupt regime. Transposition to New Zealand reality perplexes the mother who concludes then that the New Zealand system is abusive to its citizens.

The extent to which the transferred meaning leads participants to confusion, varies greatly between stories. However, it is plausible to say that a constant struggle to understand the present based on culturally acquired frameworks seems clear in most participants’ testimonies. In this context, a continuous process of concession and negotiation between the past and the present takes place, leading to a decisive moment in the political acculturative process of individuals, that being the more integral reconstruction of the semiotic framework used to interpret politics in the mind of individuals.

6.5 Stories of construction

The resulting effects of transposition and confusion lead to the construction of a new semiotic framework through which politics are interpreted. From a semiotic point of view, cultural frameworks are created in the interaction among meanings that come from previous semiotic processes, and the creative interpretation through which such meanings are incorporated, used, and at times, strategically manipulated by subjects in continual confrontation with living practice (Vestel 2009; Holland & Leander 2004). Living transnational lives in a new country logically results in the multiplication of the points of entry that characterise such a process. As such it relies on countless negotiations between the old and the new, the meaningful and the irrelevant and what one understands and what others do not.

As participants' stories reveal, this is far from being a 'one in a lifetime' type of process. Instead it is a never-ending quest to synthesise different sets of meanings in order to comprehend political phenomena. The product of such endless cultural negotiations is a hybrid semiotic framework; an intricate amalgamation of culturally acquired elements based on live experience and accumulated knowledge. For instance, when thinking about the processes undertaken to create such a framework, a participant I will refer to as Ramón observed:

It is like a patch quilt with contending parts of my Mexican me and parts of my New Zealand me. Obviously my Mexican me normally wins, especially since understanding these kiwis is far from easy. But with time and after understanding some things I can say I started sewing some kiwi patches to my quilt as well.

During the past couple of decades there has been an intense academic debate in the social sciences on the subject of hybridity⁹⁵. In general terms, hybridisation has been described as "the processes through which cultural forms become separated from already existing practices and recombine with new forms into new expressions, identities and practices" (Vestel, 2009, p.466). Such an agreed description seems to fit perfectly the above mentioned patchwork-quilt analogy. To Ramón, moving into a new political system has resulted in contact with different understandings of politics through which old understandings are reformulated. This does not mean that all parts of his semiotic repertoire have radically changed. Indeed, as he clearly acknowledges during this intricate process, his "old me" frequently wins. But within his words

⁹⁵ See for instance Garcia-Canclini (2001), Vestel (2009) and Linger (2005)

there is also the open recognition that time and experience have also helped him attach new pieces to his semiotic framework.

Building on Ramón's analogy it is possible to state that every participant of this thesis has his or her own quilt with intertwined transferred and transmuted patches carefully arranged in such a way that uncertainty over the political world is reduced. These arrangements of course will vary greatly according to participants' individuals' motivations to understand politics, the deployment of acculturative strategies, and the positions and trajectories occupied in two different social and political contexts. In this regard, while some participants' quilts are more homogeneous in terms of their transferred patches—a Mexican oriented quilt, one could say—others display more marbled patterns revealing numerous syntheses of meanings.

Despite the multiple outcomes that such processes can provide, evidence of this research shows how many of them are still bound by old and new forms of group intelligibility. This is more obvious in the case of political symbols that are bound by nationalistic conceptions. Certainly Sewell's argument of thin coherence can be fully appreciated in the coincidental points held by most Mexicans over issues such as re-election, the secular character of the state, free education, land tenure, privatisation of public assets and many others already mentioned in previous sections of this Chapter. Following Ramon's analogy, these types of meanings seem to be very well sewn patches that are extremely difficult to remove from most participants' quilts.

But just as some meanings seem non-negotiable, others are indeed reconstructed in the presence of a new political system. Hybridisation as a semiotic practice therefore occurs on the edge between cultural reproduction and recomposition. This is because the process necessarily requires entangled forces to pull in opposite directions. Several of the stories explored so far illustrate this struggle. They are examples of a number of interpretations created through the interaction between critical events and nets of signification. The results have not always been as positive as some scholars in hybridity would expect, however. Indeed, examples such as the young mother in the car and the person demanding school uniforms based on clientelist conceptions of the state are unflattering examples—at least from the perspective of liberal democracy—of such synthesis. But that does not prevent a number of other cases illustrating such processes in more positive terms.

Certainly, moving to a new cultural setting has forced participants to come into contact with new political institutions and practices that they appreciate, cherish and embrace. Newly

encountered political symbols such as transparency, collective decision making and accountability seem to have marked many participants; furthermore when such encounters have occurred after years of experience with a highly authoritarian regime such as Mexico's. For instance when talking about her life in New Zealand, this next participant mentioned:

There are many things I like about the way [political] things work in New Zealand. The fact that the council sends me different letters to inform me about things in my community is fantastic. That would have never happen in Mexico. Furthermore, the fact that they ask me my opinion about things such as bus-stops or building development in my area is amazing... Mexico is such a corrupt country that most of us would sometimes prefer to put some distance with it, but that is impossible. Our relationship is complicate and we love it and hate it at the same time.

That does not mean that everything about New Zealand is perfect. There are things I am never going to like. For instance the fact that there are no real public universities where I can send my children to have a free education is clearly a flaw in their system; the fact that they don't have good public transport like we have in Mexico is another one... I mean, I can go on and on but I think I made my point clear. This system has good and bad things just like any other system.

This passage offers a glimpse into an inventory of reflections regarding the Mexican and New Zealand political arenas. It is a complex collection of points about politics upon which a framework is reshaped. Change and ambivalence seem to be at the core of such exercise as the participant balances between two worlds. Based on the recollection of past and present elements, new symbols are certainly processed, embraced and added to this participants' semiotic framework. In this line, these may be seen as successfully amalgamated new additions. But as is also seen, meaning-making can also result in new understandings crafted mostly from the perspective of what is considered to be correct or fair, based on embodied political practices in the Motherland. From this perspective cultural mediation is at the centre of cross-cultural hybridity.

I would like to close this section with a point that is rarely made about cultural hybridity. That is, the way in which this can reduce migrants' circles of intelligibility. Just like the understandings Mexican-Americans may have about politics could be confusing to the eye of

either Mexicans or Americans, but not to the Mexican-American group as a whole, participants' stories reveal how constructing a new semiotic framework is not devoid from feelings of isolation and frustration resulting from their positions not being understood in either of the two cultures. It is in this context that this participant stated:

Thinking back in time, I realize I am no longer the person I used to be in Mexico. I see things differently now. I don't think I can call myself a New Zealander even though I have a New Zealand passport, but neither I reason like most Mexicans do these days. I am more sensitive to all the garbage I see in politics there, I don't allow myself to get tricked by politicians so easily. Is like being trapped in a whole new dimension.

Of course that is something that comes with consequences. Most people in Mexico don't want to get any type of criticism from people living abroad. They think we are judgmental and pretentious because we live a better life now. But here I cannot help but thinking that people look at me as a savage, a strange guy coming from the third world, and as such what I say does not make much sense to them either. So you end up like la India Maria [A Mexican television and film character] neither from here nor from there but from somewhere no one fully understands.

I found this testimony to be a clear example of the shrunk-intelligibility that characterises semiotic reconstruction. Such a paradox was commonly found in the stories of participants who regularly talked about how "knowing more" often results in "speaking less" since people can "get sensitive over things they don't understand because they haven't lived what I have". It is in this context that many of the harsh comments made about New Zealand and Mexico are circumscribed. To the average participant, New Zealanders are unable to understand many of the conceived positive features of the Mexican political culture because "they haven't suffered" or "struggled" in the way that Mexicans have. Similarly, Mexicans are conceived as unable to understand what "democracy really is" since they have not experienced the positive features of living in New Zealand. As mentioned by one participant: "all they [Mexicans] know is corruption and injustice".

Of course, this does not mean that participants' stories are unhappy ones since the main purpose of semiotic reconstruction is precisely to help people adapt to their new settings. But that does

not supersede the feelings of isolation and frustration that sometimes arise from the perceived impossibility of being understood in a new land that one is incapable of fully understanding. This is one of the notions that will be developed in the next Chapter.

6.6 Conclusions

This chapter began with the argument that culturally acquired political symbols are enduring constructs that guide Mexican migrants' interpretations of the New Zealand political world. The ethnographically oriented exploration of the field revealed the pervasive character of meanings which are, to some extent, facilitators to understanding New Zealand political institutions, practices and concepts. Although this proposition seems consistent with the underpinning assumptions of theories of exposure and transferability (White et al., 2008; Black, 1987), treating pre-migratory political capital in terms of cultural frames embedded in cognitive structures reveals new dimensions to the study of political transferability.

By exploring semiotic reconstruction as presented in participants' stories it is possible to appreciate how, broadly speaking, political acculturation operates according to a series of commonly observed stages. This is just a simple model constructed on the basis of people's experiences with new social and power structures; nonetheless it was found to be more than adequate to gain insights into new types of phenomena normally unexplored in the political acculturative literature. In enunciating the continuous transferences of meaning and elaborating on the rupture of an inherited culture it was possible to appreciate the complexity of meaning-making processes among migrants. As has been shown, participants' stories of acculturation are intricate and heterogeneous. Yet they consistently show how people normally build new understandings of the world based on accumulated knowledge and experience. This process is mostly deductively subconscious and as such is linked to the reproduction of habitual practices. Here, Bourdieu's (1990, p.53) *habitus* reproduces itself in participants' accounts to perpetuate the symbolic order in which their political world has traditionally operated in Mexico. What is assumed to be shared political reality results in the transposition of old conceptions of the political world, capable of providing some operational understanding of politics, a safety net of political knowledge preventing people from making basic mistakes.

But as shown in this chapter, migrants are not just recorders and reproducers of meanings but active builders of their own worlds. Moreover, it demonstrated how live experiences within a social and political context confront people with their misconceptions and force them to constantly reshape their semiotic frameworks. The hybrid nature of cultural reconstruction

proposed in this chapter is not only in synchrony with similar studies undertaken in the other disciplines across the social sciences (e.g. Garcia-Canclini, 2001; Ewing, 2004; Friedman, 1999) but with those held by some scholars arguing in favour of understand hybridity as a product of semiotic practices (e.g. Ipsen, 2001; Vestel, 2009). From this perspective hybridization is understood as a process through which meanings separate and recombine into new sets of understandings of the social world in general and politics in particular. In this regard, the political worlds constructed are varied and sometimes contradictory. Moreover, as constantly argued along this Chapter they are not necessarily positive accounts of reality, at least not in terms of what is understood by native populations. They are true products of amalgamation and negotiation between concepts, resulting in unique ways of seeing politics.

Chapter Seven: Matters of the Heart. Emotions, Politics and Meaning Making

7.1 Introduction

I was at this nice hall with other three hundred immigrants singing the New Zealand national anthem, but while I was doing so I felt like I was betraying my real country... It made me feel terrible, I was actually crying I remember; shortly afterwards I spoke to my husband about it and he simply said: of course you have to feel remorse for what you did otherwise you would not be Mexican.

In this narrative, a participant I will refer to as Sonia remembers the ceremony where she became a New Zealand citizen, an event that occurred only recently despite her long stay in the country. To her, the decision to become a “kiwi” was not an easy one. Far from it, it was an extremely complex choice influenced by a number of ambivalent and sometimes opposing emotions; a constant battle between two conflicting systems of signification upon which meanings are shaped. It is in this context that getting a new nationality is interpreted as a sign of social transmutation with which she does not feel totally comfortable. To her, the process symbolically represents a threat to losing a series of elements upon which her identity is crafted. This is because being Mexican is in itself a category of symbolic connotation, a conceptual representation of group membership through which individuals forge common understandings of the world based on their experiences in the social and political contexts.

As such, this symbolic construction condenses the knowledge, emotions, history and memories associated with one’s nation; the stories that one has collectively lived, shared and reproduced within the confines of a semiotic community. It is in this context that regardless of her newly adopted nationality, Sonia feels more like a Mexican than a New Zealander: ‘a Mexican with a New Zealand passport’, as she later referred to herself. This does not mean that Sonia dislikes her new country. Far from it, during the course of her story, she often referred to New Zealand using vivid emotional terms. Her testimony is one of a happy and grateful alien living in a land that is not her own. She may not know much about New Zealand politics but recognizes that New Zealand has a fair and honest system in which individuals are treated equally by the state. “So different than the corrupted regime we have in Mexico” she says. Yet she still has room to

accommodate a number of elements that she considers work better in Mexico. “Some things are really good here but others not so much” she timidly states, “I mean in comparison, some things in Mexico are not that bad”, she continues. Based on this distinction between worlds she lists a number of components of the Mexican political system that she still holds in high regard. In so doing she positions herself as a “proud Mexican”.

These types of conflicting emotions are not exclusive to Sonia’s story. In fact, many narratives are embedded with ambivalent, emotional remarks derived from the interaction of two distinctive sets of political-cultural constructs and their associated nets of meaning. This is hardly surprising if we consider that migration is a highly emotional experience, marked by interaction between the old and the new. Furthermore, it is a process that requires people to disentangle nets of meaning in order to make sense of what is going on around them. We cannot simply pretend that while doing this, migrants are purely rational creatures, simply mixing and matching pre- and post-migratory symbols. Instead, their endeavour is a convoluted and highly emotional one. This is because crafting understandings of a new political system involves challenging long-held assumptions that sustain relationships between individuals and the state.

Emotions play an obvious and ubiquitous role in the world of politics. Nonetheless, as Arkes (1993, p.15) argues, the study of these has been commonly underestimated by most political scientists, on the basis that understanding politics requires less emotion and more reason. Consequently, the emotional side of politics has traditionally been treated more in terms of a factor that needs to be contained rather than an object of exploration in itself (Engelken, 2011). It is true that certain emotions such as political trust in, and satisfaction with democracy, have been cornerstones of political analyses. Nonetheless, it is also true that beyond these notions, exploration of further emotional components of politics is still rare in political science literature.⁹⁶

It is hardly surprising thus, that the study of emotions in the field of political acculturation has been structured upon similar bases. Following this argument, trust seems to be the most recurrently, and almost exclusively, explored emotional variable in political acculturative studies. There are obvious consequences of putting all the eggs in one basket, probably the most notorious one being the limited picture that we still have of what in other disciplines have been

⁹⁶ Notwithstanding this position, increasing interest in exploring feelings, sentiments and emotions has started to permeate the work of some contemporary political scholars. For a full review see on the topic see Marcus (2000) and Elster (1999).

described as a highly emotional process⁹⁷. Certainly, emotions play a pivotal role in the process of political cultural reconstruction. They connect migrants with their new political environments, shaping their engagement, ideology, or simply their conceptions of state and power. Emotions can thus interfere as well as stimulate the construction of semiotic frameworks and be determinant influences in how people position themselves in relation to their new political system.

To understand this process it is useful to take a multi-layered approach, examining not only how people broadly define their overall conceptions of the state in emotional terms, but also how an idea of the state is emotionally shaped by social interaction and embodied practices with its institutions. Most of the stories included in previous chapters are not just examples of cognitive practices but also emotional expressions of cultural reconstruction. They illustrate how live experience with politics results in cognitive and emotional arrangements. This is because emotion and cognition are two deeply intertwined components resulting from acculturative phenomena.

This chapter explores the intricate relationship between emotions and meaning-making. As well as its introduction and conclusions, the chapter has three main sections. In *Ambivalent feelings: the transnational emotional space*, I explore emotional accounts embedded in narratives of acculturation. Here I make three propositions: first, that ambivalent and contradictory feelings are the product of specific encounters with multiple centers of power and not with a monolithic idea of the state; second, that ambivalent feelings are also related to the transnational lives led by most members of the Mexican community; finally I argue that ambivalent emotions flow from the evaluations of the migratory experience, against imaginary constructions of life in New Zealand.

In the second section, *Identity, conflict and emotion*, I propose that the major source of emotive reaction to reshaping the nets of political meaning is the perceived threat of losing one's identity. Such a threat derives from a series of historic and culturally rooted factors, and is reinforced by transnational encounters. Moreover I argue that, historically, the construction of a Mexican national identity has been articulated as a means of differentiation from what is considered to

⁹⁷ Scholars from other disciplines have explored for instance, the connection between acculturation and happiness (Wright, 2010); the construction of transnational emotional bridges and its consequences to incorporation (Aranda, 2006); and the role of sentiments of shame and humiliation in migrants' construction of the self (Wettergren, 2015).

be a foreigner, a person with no saying in the political arena of a semiotic community that he or she does not belong to. This situation posits a challenging scenario to the meaning making process, since participants normally feel both traitors and intruders whenever exploring the New Zealand political world. In *Coping mechanisms: reshaping the meaning of the political self*, I argue that the turmoil of living in such a complex emotional space and the sense of threat to one's identity, results in the construction of hybrid political identities able to reconcile opposing components of the semiotic process. From this perspective most participants develop what I term moral transactional agreements with the New Zealand political arena.

7.2 Ambivalent feelings: the transnational emotional space

A common claim among scholars who research the emotive character of migration refers to the coexistence of ambivalent and sometimes contradictory clusters of feelings affecting migrants' construct of their new social spaces. For instance, elaborating on Anderson & Smith's (2001) notion of 'emotional geographies', Zembylas (2012, p.166) illustrates how human mobility is normally associated with a complex range of feelings such as happiness, sadness and frustration. Similarly, Timotijevic & Breakwell's (2000, p.363) empirical research in Britain found coexistent contradictory emotions such as pride, sadness, disbelief and guilt in the narratives of their participants. Svaesk (2010, pp.872-77) explains how migrants' emotions such as fear, anger and annoyance can cohabit in a similar space with others such as love, desire and admiration. It is in this context that Bathia & Ram (2004, p.229) warn that emotions resulting from the migratory process should be explored carefully since most of the time they are not harmonious with each other.

Participants' stories seem to be consistent with these propositions. Indeed, most of the times they reveal a complex and contradictory mélange of sentiments involving their conceptions of politics and the state. Based on such contending emotions, they often hesitate to construct an overall evaluation of their experiences with the New Zealand government. Expressions such as "it is a bittersweet experience"; "it feels good and bad at the same time" and "some things make me happy and others don't" were not uncommon in participants' stories. In this context, narratives of happiness, satisfaction or gratitude, coexist with others such as disappointment, anger or guilt whenever participants talk about their experiences with the New Zealand political system. The sources of such ambivalence seem to be related to three underlying factors that affect participants' processes of acculturation.

First and foremost, is the fact that participants' construction of a new semiotic framework occurs through a number of different and varied interactions with the state. As argued in Chapter Five, members of the Mexican community do not rely on an overall conception of what the New Zealand state is and does in order to inform their impressions of politics in their new country. In most stories, the notion of an organized polity is absent, and it is mostly through the interaction people have with state-bureaucracy or news media that the interpretation of political symbols occurs. Consequently participants' stories are commonly integrated through a series of diverse and contending narratives that appear whenever notions of power become part of the story. From this perspective opposing emotions coexist in a long inventory of encounters with the state. Let me illustrate this proposition by going through a series of snapshots drawn from one participant's narrative:

I really trust this government because I know that if I start any sort of official paperwork or conduct any business with them the results will be fair and pretty straightforward.

(...)

I think in Auckland the Government exercises extreme surveillance on its citizens. It is like they intentionally want you to do something wrong and use you as example so the others behave correctly. That makes me really afraid.

(...)

I don't fully believe in what the census says. I mean, it is obvious that there are more Asians living in New Zealand than what the Government would dare to admit. They obviously fabricated those figures.

Different scholars have warned about the problems that arise from constructing monolithic conceptions of the state. Abrams (1988, pp.73-74) points out that by positioning a mystifying separation between the political and the social, academics have objectified and personified the state. "A misplaced concreteness" that becomes "commonsensical" he observes. Following this line, authors such as Corrigan & Sayer (1985) argue that the relationships between individuals and the state —rules and forms of discipline— are constructed in everyday practices. Rubin (2002) invites scholars to conceptualize the state as a subject —as opposed to an object— in order to open its analysis to multiple territorial levels, cultural meanings, and internal fragmentations. Similarly, more flexible notions of the state have been proposed by political anthropologists such as Alonso (1994) and Nuijten (2003) who approach the concept through embodied practices and encounters between individuals and structures of power. The latter

propose the term ‘culture of the state’ to refer to “the practices of representation and interpretation that characterize the relations between people and the state bureaucracy and through which the idea of the state is constructed” (p.17).

Nuijten’s proposition provides a plausible explanation to understand the ambivalent nature of most participants’ stories. From this perspective, the New Zealand state is not seen as a unifying entity from which participants construct conclusive and cohesive opinions of its political system, but a polysemic one with multiple points of entry. Contending emotions are in this context not only logical but also expected, since they are shaped by a number of different interactions between participants and diverse expressions of power and authority. It is in this context that they can be trustful over certain components of the New Zealand political system, yet still be fearful of a number of its elements and even sometimes distrustful of the information that is presented to them by official sources. All these possibilities flow from embodied experience, a derivative product of life, and the processes of perception and interpretation (Svaesk, 2010, p.869).

This does not supersede the fact that at a different level, several participants construct a more general opinion of New Zealand politics. Nonetheless, stories reveal that such overall impressions are commonly articulated by drawing up a comprehensive balance sheet of their interactions with authority. Moreover, as argued in previous chapters, participants’ meaning-making processes are generally guided by limited information and are always culturally reconstructed. In that respect, resulting feelings, at specific or general levels, cannot be devoid from the complex process of cultural mediation. For instance, it would be difficult to fully grasp the meaning of the last story fragment without framing it in the myths, distrusts and conspiracy theories that characterise Mexican political culture.

Digging further into the complexity of participants’ emotional inventories, a second source of ambivalence is associated with the transnational character of the lives they live. Different scholars have argued in favor of understanding emotions as shaped by the cultural contexts in which they emerge (Lutz, 1988; Rosado, 1980; Escandell & Tapias, 2010). As argued in Chapter Four, participants in this study shape their impressions of New Zealand based on transnational perspectives of social and political phenomena. A transnational framework thus clarifies how members of the community constantly draw from different cultural codes and symbols to construct the political world they inhabit. As mentioned by Wolf (2002, p.257), “they go beyond

the simple idea of the nation-state and also multiple locations of ‘home’ that may exist not only geographically but ideologically and emotionally as well”.

Strictu sensu, most members of the Mexican community in New Zealand live transnational lives and belong to transnational families⁹⁸. The vast majority of them arrived alone in the country as a consequence of being recruited by a New Zealand company, joining a New Zealand partner, or obtaining a working holiday visa⁹⁹ which later allowed permanent residence. Those who have migrated with their nuclear families have left behind parents, siblings, uncles and cousins, all of them pivotal components of the Mexican cultural representation of family (Falicov, 2005, p.234). The emotional toll of migrating to New Zealand is therefore especially pronounced among most members of the community. Some have made extraordinary efforts to be reunited with their closer relatives (parents and siblings normally) in New Zealand. Nonetheless, in most cases, the stipulations of immigration laws have prevented many from achieving that goal¹⁰⁰.

As described in Chapter Four, having a mind and heart in two countries comes with consequences, this time of an emotional nature. An overabundance of contradictory feelings arises from inhabiting two political arenas of a contrasting nature. The constant comparisons I have already spoken about are in this sense a detonator of sentiments that grow almost organically from accumulated experiences with politics. A series of fragments from this participant’s story can help illustrate this proposition:

I know I can trust this government because, unlike Mexico, here no one asks for *mordidas* (bribes) when I need a public service I paid for with my taxes.

(...)

Of course I am grateful to this system, especially when knowing what is going on in Mexico. Here I can take my kids to the park and I know they won’t be kidnapped or shoot in the middle of the street.

(...)

⁹⁸ Escandell & Tapias (2010, p.411) define transnational families as one formed by at least two generations, originally from the Motherland, which has one or more members residing in a foreign country, and engage periodically (at least weekly) in phone or internet communication.

⁹⁹ The Working Holiday Visa scheme is a temporary entry permit given by the New Zealand Government to young adults of certain nationalities allowing them work and visit the country for up to a one year period.

¹⁰⁰ According to the New Zealand immigration act, residents or nationals attempting to bring members of their family permanently to New Zealand need to give proof of earning at least sixty-five thousand dollars individually, or a combined income of ninety thousand dollars a year as couple (Immigration New Zealand, 2013).

I cannot help but feeling guilty about being happy. I mean my parents are still there, so are my sisters and I know that the reality they face is completely different than mine. It is like a little thorn in the foot preventing me from enjoying this one hundred percent.

In this story, ambivalent emotions appear as a consequence of simultaneously inhabiting two different political spaces. An almost symbiotic relationship between trust, gratitude and guilt prevail in this and in many other stories as a consequence of transnationalism. Trust here does not simply grow from the positive evaluations of a new political system, but from the accumulated experience with another which is considered to be bad. Nor does gratitude, which is not understood simply in terms of the virtuous relationship between citizens and state action¹⁰¹, but as a reaction to improved social factors in one political setting compared with another. Guilt logically arises when remembering those who stayed and cannot experience the bright side of the transnational arrangement, or merely by seeing the situation faced by the country one loves compared to the one in which one lives. Happiness and satisfaction with a political regime are thus overshadowed and cannot be fully embraced due to feelings of remorse.

Baldassar (2015) argues that guilt is the epitome of all emotions felt by migrants¹⁰². Migration, by causing physical separation, absence and longing, normally results in migrants 'feeling guilty' about not being physically present to fulfil their moral obligations to their families (p.83). Similarly, Noble & Tabar (2002, p.34) argue that to leave the group to which one is indebted is precisely to refrain from paying debts. Although people may feel indebted to their host nation, they mostly feel indebted to their families. Adding the transnational and political dimensions to such propositions puts them into a different perspective, embedding them with the sort of ambivalence I have aimed to describe.

A final source of emotional ambivalence seems to be related to fulfilled and unfulfilled expectations of migration. As argued by Brown (1961, p.10), "migration entails readjustment of outlook in the face of reality at the destination". Although this may be seen as a phenomenon occurring mostly at individual level, scholars have argued that expectations of migration are mostly rooted in collective constructs of imaginary lands. When including the state within such

¹⁰¹ Joseph William Hewitt describes gratitude as 'a virtue which meets the whole-hearted approval of all sorts and conditions of men... this is particularly apparent when it is introduced into matters of the state' (Hewitt, 1924, p.35).

¹⁰² Similar conclusions have been reached by migration scholars such as Baldassar, Badlock & Lange (1999), Turnbull (1996), Badlock (1999) and Ward & Styles (2012).

imaginaries, a complex scenario of emotional ambivalence appears. This is more obvious whenever participants make *expectation-outcome* types of evaluations. This can be better understood through a series of fragments from this participant:

I can say that, at least in terms of institutions this place is admirable. Before coming to this country I did not know what things such as accountability were... Here the government asks you for your opinion on many things. That is also amazing. In fact it is more than what I was expecting.

[...]

In Mexico everybody think people who migrate to another country are rich, that we all have big houses and that we can buy loads of amazing products we don't have in Mexico. Here you learn that moving to an established democracy, as you called it, is simply moving to something different in terms of government. Yes there can be good things like being safe, but there are other things that are not that nice such as high prices and shitty services.

[...]

Talking about money and things I could buy, Mexico is much better than New Zealand. When I see where I live here, the car I drive and the services I can access I cannot help but acknowledging that I was doing much, much, much better in Mexico.

For this participant, as for many others, the social and political system encountered in New Zealand has come with a variety of surprises of many kinds. While there is obvious room for admiring some of its key institutions, still there are parts where dissatisfaction and disappointment are pervasive. Approaching these types of appraisals necessarily involves the exploration of the 'imaginaries' (Appadurai, 1996; Anderson, 1983) underlying people's expectations of migration¹⁰³.

The imaginary construct of New Zealand as a land of opportunity and of its government as a central element to its crystallisation, is clear among the stories told by members of the Mexican

¹⁰³ The concept of social imaginaries has been extensively researched in Social Sciences. Although the notion was previously studied in different accounts of social anthropology, it became particularly popular after Appadurai (1996) borrowed and expanded the notion of imagined communities originally proposed by Anderson (1983). In this context Appadurai proposes, 'I would like to call 'imagined worlds'... the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imagination of persons and groups around the globe' (p33). An overview of previous conceptions of imaginaries in social anthropology can be found in Strauss (2006).

community. As some mentioned, “before moving here there is a whole different conception of the first world”, or “we always think so highly of these rich countries”. Broadly speaking, participants’ stories showed three core components of this picture. First and foremost is the idea that the New Zealand political system would be able to provide a safe and peaceful social environment in which people can function in society. Second, it is the idea that it would boost individuals’ socio-economic growth allowing them to move up the social ladder. Finally, there is the conviction that once formal members of New Zealand society, participants would have access to high-quality public services.

Although such expectations may seem normal, it is worth noting that the construction of such imaginaries is not random, but culturally mediated. The real extent of these needs to be pondered against the discourses, myths, and collective narratives affecting participants’ perceptions of the role of the state in bringing progress to its members, and the shared images of the West not as a geographically located region but as a shared construct and synonym among other things, of good government and development. Once again, this requires some context though.

As previously described, Mexican revolutionary nationalism gave great expectations of improvement in people’s lives. Many promises were largely fulfilled during the period of fifty years starting in the 1940s through the development of infrastructure projects, land-tenure redistribution policies, a massive educational program, and the implementation of public policies targeting vulnerable segments of the population¹⁰⁴. Indeed, scholars seem to agree that for many years, the stability of the Mexican regime was not so much a result of its authoritarian nature, but of its high popularity across sectors of Mexican society. The hegemonic party was in fact responsible for bringing progress to people with an acceptable margin of incorporation for incoming demands, in an efficient and institutionalised way. Moreover, its paternalistic character transformed the government into a philanthropic entity, always looking to add supporters to its cause. Such paternalistic connotations are best reflected in the colloquial Mexican expression *papá gobierno* (daddy government) (Dieterlen, 1988).

If it is true that the performance of the Mexican government over the past three decades has been far from successful in reducing inequality and poverty, this has not necessarily reduced the expectations that Mexicans place on governmental action. Political anthropological accounts developed over the past decades have demonstrated to a great extent the type of support, loyalty

¹⁰⁴ A comprehensive review of such policies can be found in the works of authors such as Vaughn (1997), Knight (1994) and Cornelius, Craig & Fox (1994).

and especially hope that the clientelist and paternalistic Mexican regime is still able to instill among its citizens. It is in this context that it has been suggested that for many Mexicans, the government is still conceived as a gigantic ‘hope generating machine’ (Nuijten, 2003).

In regard to the second cultural construct, it is worth noting that a number of social sciences studies have demonstrated the almost mythological conceptions of the West as the epitome of economic progress, fairness and stability, and the role that such imaginaries bear in the migratory decision. In his study of Tanzanian migration, Salazar (2010) shows how the decision to migrate is affected by a series of culturally mediated discourses to which an idyllic construction of the West is fundamental. In *American Dreaming*, Mahler (1995) takes us into a world of disappointment with post-migratory life among Latinos in New York, based on pre-migratory imaginary conceptions of an almost idealistic reality. In a less extreme juxtaposition of socio-economic factors, Fujita (2008) proposes the construction of a cultural imagery of the West influencing the decision of Japanese migrants to move to cosmopolitan centers around the globe. In all of them lies a series of fantastic and unrealistic notions of the social and political worlds upon which decisions to migrate are articulated.

Based on these two elements, it is plausible to state that prior to their migratory experience, many participants thought of New Zealand as the ultimate ‘hope generating machine’, a country with an almost utopic official apparatus able to promote peace and stability, provide high quality goods and services, and help people move up the social ladder. However, the combination of high hopes and grounded realities provided most participants with a variety of contending emotions. While some elements of democratic practices are openly admired others such as the role of the government in controlling prices, creating jobs, and providing some public services are stated in negative terms.

This situation seems to be reinforced by the historical positions and trajectories occupied by most members of the Mexican community before their migratory experience. Coming from the middle- and upper-middle segments of Mexican society, many participants were accustomed to a series of markers of class and status that they long for after moving to New Zealand¹⁰⁵. The absence of these directly affects the meaning-making process, creating the impression that, regardless of the peace and stability encountered in New Zealand, the migratory experience has

¹⁰⁵ A common thread is the longing for certain aspects of class distinction such as hiring domestic help, changing the family car every two years, and access a wide variety of branded good and services at affordable prices.

represented regression in socio-economic terms. Moreover, based on such markers, many members of the Mexican community had rarely accessed public services such as school education, transport, housing and healthcare, so their expectation of these in New Zealand constantly come from over-idealized conceptions of the private services they used to access in Mexico¹⁰⁶. It is not surprising then that participants recurrently blamed the New Zealand government for not meeting sometimes unrealistic expectations.

The coexistence of these three sources of ambivalence shows a multi-layered emotional environment simultaneously affecting and being affected by contact with new sets of political institutions, practices and rituals. Since political acculturation occurs through life experience in two settings, it can hardly be understood simply in terms of rational contending meanings. Instead it is a convoluted emotional process affected by multiple components such as myths, aspirations, class and hierarchies that are found in both cultures. It is thus at the intersection between rationality and emotion that meaning making takes place.

When talking about semiotic practices, Vestel (2009) observes how migrants' emotional reactions to cultural synthesis are best represented in terms of two streams pulling in opposing directions. In this context, all participants' emotive reactions to the New Zealand political system can be best understood as a series of struggles to reconcile core components of the two political arenas they interact with regularly. In other words, sentiments such as happiness, sadness, pride, nostalgia, guilt and satisfaction are expressions of the negotiations involved in cultural mediation and the cultural reconstruction of one's world.

Entrenched in this quest is the underlying assumption that changing semiotic inventories comes with consequences to the reconstruction of the self. Indeed, processing conflictive meanings of two very different cultures must serve the purpose of constructing a steady and viable personality to function socially. As I will argue in the next section, such reconstruction constitutes the epitome of all emotional reactions experienced during the process of acculturation.

¹⁰⁶ Constantly during the interviews, participants talked about how they used to access private services of this nature as a replacement for the 'terrible services' provided by the Mexican government. From this perspective, a common claim is that they expected New Zealand public services to be as good as those they were forced to pay for, given the inefficiency of a 'corrupt government'.

7.3 National identity, conflict and emotions

Meaning-making processes in a transnational emotional space are clearly complex and polyvalent. Nonetheless, there seems to be a primal emotion underlying migratory experiences which crosses different arenas before reaching the political one. Here I refer to the threat of losing one's national identity. According to Smith (1991, p.14), a nation is a "named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members". Connor (1978; 1993) highlights another crucial component, the psychological tie that binds fellow nationals together. National identity refers therefore to the subjective feelings or sentiments of attachment or loyalty individuals possess for an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983; Morris, 1999).

National identities are entrenched semiotic systems that are produced, reproduced, transformed and destroyed by official and non-official discourses and disseminated through systems of education, mass communication, and militarization (De Cillia, et al., 1999, p.153). Among the elements of a nationalistic doctrine is the idea that every individual belongs to a nation and that allegiance to the nation overrides all other loyalties (Triandafylidou 1998, p.595). In this context, making sense of a new political environment does not simply involve the replacement of old symbols with new ones but can indeed be an emotional battle between competing symbols and meanings. This is because an important part of the semiotic connotations of national identity do not flow simply from what binds people together, but from its inclusive-exclusive nature. Myths, traditions, rituals and other collective imaginaries of the state are, from this perspective, an integral part of the distinction between *us* and *them*.

Triandafylidou (1998) makes a compelling case when arguing that national identity cannot be understood properly without opposition between nationals and aliens (foreigners). In this regard, feelings of belonging are seen as a way of unifying members of a community through their differentiation with those outside the community. The symbol of foreigners, their cultures and practices is thus seen as a threat to the cohesive elements of the nation. As Morris (1999, p.371) observes, the articulation of Mexican national identity relies heavily on the existence of the foreigner: "in many ways being Mexican means not being gringo". The construction of Americans as the obvious enemy of Mexico is unsurprising considering the consequences of the 1848 *Tratado de Guadalupe Hidalgo* through which Mexico lost half of its territory to the

United States¹⁰⁷. It occurred at a crucial time between independence from Spain (1810-1821) and the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917), and as such had a tremendous impact in different nationalistic discourses in Mexico. But beyond this antagonistic historical relationship, the Mexican Revolution was far more extensive in terms of interaction between Mexicans and foreigners. Indeed, authors have long discussed the xenophobic connotations of Mexican Revolutionary discourse and how these permeated the daily practices of a society recovering from war¹⁰⁸. National pride was thus articulated through the continuous reassurance that Mexican historical and political symbols were superior, and that any attempt to embrace foreign ones would represent an act of disloyalty and even treason.

In their study of Yugoslav migrants to Britain, Timotijevic & Breakwell (2000) find that being a migrant requires dealing with two opposing but equally derogatory symbolic representations: that of being a traitor (in relation to the home country) and an intruder (in relation to the host country). This proposition seems strikingly consistent with participants' stories which position their narrators not simply as *Mexicans* but as *Proud Mexicans*. Differences between both constructs may seem simple. Nonetheless, they involve radically different connotations when it comes to interacting within a new social space. For a *proud Mexican* living in a land that is not his or her own implicates a tough process of negotiation based on the idea that accepting a new set of meanings posited by political symbols implies taking sides. Broadly speaking, the process is seen as pledging allegiance to the political system of a foreign country.

Moreover, the historical relationships between Mexico and foreigners have turned these people into apolitical beings who are expected to do no more than respect the dispositions established by the rules and regulations of the host country. Indeed, at the top of the xenophobic legacies of Mexican revolutionary nationalism lies Article 33 of the Mexican Constitution, which explicitly prevents foreigners from participating in any aspect of political life (Becerra, 2005; Carbonell, 2006). Moving to a new country has thus paradoxically transformed participants into foreigners, and as such there are a series of associated meanings related to their potential political participation. It is from this perspective that political action is most of the time conceived as intruding in the internal affairs of a foreign land. In short, the political acculturative experience

¹⁰⁷ A complete monograph of the consequences of this treaty in the construction of political ideology can be found in Hale (1957), *The War with the United States and the Crisis in Mexican Thought*.

¹⁰⁸ These xenophobic connotations have been argued by scholars such as Knight (1974), Jaques (1974), Illades (1991), and Perez Vejo (2001).

necessarily involves a radical realignment of notions of power, allegiance and citizenship that perplexes most members of the Mexican community in New Zealand.

When traditional notions become altered, or whenever new ones threaten to take their place, people are put in a stressful position. Here the clash between meanings is intensely felt by most participants who perceived the process in terms of losing the safe and familiar ground provided by the original semiotic community. The traffic of contending symbols is emotionally far reaching in participants' stories, making the adoption of a sense of belonging to New Zealand more than challenging. As argued by one participant, "it is like your grandmas' soup, no one makes it better, and even if it is better you will never accept that". Here, not even the good balance of life improvements obtained through the New Zealand political system makes this participant connect with New Zealand political institutions, concepts and rituals in the same way she does with the Mexican ones. On the contrary, throughout her story constant differentiation between *our* political culture and *their* political culture prevails. Most participants' stories follow a similar line. Interestingly, when confronted with the differences between the performance of both regimes and their impact on quality of life, responses normally attempted to restore some balance in favour of Mexico. "New Zealand is efficient because is too small", "This place may be good but has zero history", "New Zealand hasn't suffered as much as Mexico", and "they don't have a constitution to begin with" are typical answers.

Interestingly, some participants highlighted having witnessed increasing exacerbation of nationalistic feeling among most members of the community, following their migratory experience. In the words of one informant: "It is like Mexicans become more Mexican when they are outside Mexico". These types of nationalistic manifestations normally reach their highest during patriotic commemorations of Mexican historical events. Throughout the course of my research I attended many of these celebrations in my three major points of contact with the Mexican community (Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch). Distinctions were drawn between *us* and *them*, *our values* and *their values*, and *our history* and *their history*. Examples of topics of discussion in such gatherings are: the rural nature of New Zealand society as opposed to the glorious historical past of Mexico; the coldness of New Zealand people contrasting with the warm character of Mexicans; the emphasis that Mexicans place upon family values and traditions versus the sense of detachment and independence of New Zealand families, just to mention a few. In this context, a young participant emphatically mentioned "we will always be better in terms of culture, history and traditions and we better not forget that". All

these statements involve differentiation, moved by imaginary and nostalgic constructs of the past, and are in this sense highly nationalistic.

The idea that migration can enhance nationalistic feelings is far from new. In fact, it has been the subject of analysis and theorisation by different scholars of what has been referred to as “long-distance nationalisms” (Anderson, 1994; Schiller, 2005). Bock-Luna (2007, p.23) observes:

One needs to consider the multifaceted nature of nationalisms and the sense in which they are always a part of a broader symbolic field. Nowhere is this heterogeneous nature more obvious than in the study of migrants who the spatial and temporal distance they acquired have the freedom to assemble an image of the ‘lost land’ independent of the physical reality of living there.

Following participants’ narratives, it is clear that the idea of a “lost land” is indeed deeply felt and the collective imagery of its myths, symbols and practices reflect the types of relationships they pursue with the New Zealand state. I will develop this argument further in the next section but for now it is worth noting that in some extreme cases it was found that nationalistic feelings border on collective narcissistic reactions towards the new political regime, which is not only perceived as minor but as extremely threatening to one’s national identity¹⁰⁹. For instance in this next story a participant remembers her partner’s reactions when he found out that his son was to attend a New Zealand national commemoration:

He was furious because I said yes [to the invitation to attend the ANZAC day service]; he said that he did not want our son to lose his Mexican identity and that New Zealand traditions were a joke compared to the things we have endured and fought for in Mexico.

It is in this context that adopting a new nationality is an extremely difficult decision for many participants. For instance, after almost 10 years in New Zealand this next participant still hesitates to become a naturalized New Zealander based on strong emotional ties held with the Motherland.

¹⁰⁹ By collective narcissism I mean the individual’s emotional investment in an unrealistic belief in the exaggerated greatness of an in-group (Golec de Zavala, 2011).

When I was in primary school I really fought for being the flag-bearer in the pledging allegiance ceremony. Only outstanding students were conferred with such an honor, and it was something that I really wanted. I wanted to be an outstanding citizen.

[...]

My dad was really sad when I moved here but he knew I was really in love with [spouse's name] and that was the best thing for me. In fact, it was not easy for anyone around me since I was just seventeen years old. The night before I moved here I remember that my dad came to my room and said to me: I only want you to promise me that even though your will be there you will never resign to your Mexican nationality.

[...]

In the beginning people thought I just married [spouse's name] in order to get a New Zealand passport. In fact, once I got my residency I remember how these girls [work colleagues] were teasing me about leaving [spouse's name]. To them it was very surprising that I was staying in a relationship after being granted such status.

[...]

I think that most people till this very day are really surprised that I have decided not to become a Kiwi. They simply don't understand that to me being a good Mexican is important and that I respect kiwis but they are them and I am me.

Interestingly, throughout her narrative this participant uses the concepts of *citizen* and *national* interchangeably. To her “being a good Mexican” and “being an outstanding citizen” are intertwined concepts associated with almost romantic notions of the Motherland¹¹⁰. Moreover, adopting another nationality is seen as an act of treason to the country of origin and to the citizenship she still bears. While there are ample grounds to succumb to the temptation of becoming naturalized —bearing two nationalities is something legally admissible in both countries— the option is rejected based on what is considered to be morally correct according to the nationalistic reading of what being a good Mexican citizen entails. Consequently, becoming a New Zealander is not an option based on the notions of *who one should be* and *who the others are*.

¹¹⁰ According to the Mexican Constitution, the difference between a national and a citizen is incremental. Mexicans are considered to be whoever is born in the country or who is the descendant of a Mexican national. Mexican citizens are all nationals with an ‘honest way of living’. Similar provisions apply to naturalised Mexicans.

Here, culture acts as the gatekeeper of what this participant holds dear and close to her heart. It is an emotional construct that prevents her from losing the core of her national identity, creating a fortification against change. Like her, other participants normally associate the concept of being Mexican—or a good or proud Mexican as most say—with the notion of maintaining the bond given by keeping the original nationality. Adopting New Zealand citizenship is therefore considered to be an act of betrayal towards the Motherland. In the words of a different participant, “Mexicans think that adopting another nationality makes you a traitor”.

The reluctance of Mexican migrants to become nationals of their new countries has long been demonstrated. In 1987 Portes & Curtis showed that Mexicans who were legal residents in the United States had the lowest proportion of citizenship acquisition when compared to other nationalities. They argue that the number one factor behind such rates was correlated with ‘having roots’ in the country of origin. Similar results were found years later by Liang (1992; 1994), and Portes & Rumbaut (1996). In Europe similar arguments have been suggested by Leitner & Ehrkamp (2006). Although such evidence is far from conclusive in terms of underlying factors, it is still important to consider the pattern in comparison to that which I have found in my fieldwork in New Zealand.

7.4 Coping mechanisms: re-shaping the meaning of the political self

The main assumption on which theories of resistance are articulated is that migrants’ political actions—or inactions—are based on the simple continuation of historically acquired preferences developed in the society of origin. This assumption is therefore articulated according to the myth that culture is ageless and impossible to change. Nonetheless, it is clear that participants in this research do not simply become paralysed by the emotional threat to their identities through contact with new political symbols. If culture is to be understood as the symbolic world that gives meaning to our lives, it is clear that these people are capable individuals, able to purposely cope with these feelings in order to make sense of a new symbolic world, and to deal with the changes posited by a new type of life. This does not entail that they do not feel the change, but that the intense feelings associated with such experiences result in a constant realignment of their nets of meanings in order to live successfully in two semiotic communities.

In this section I explore the complex network of social and individual strategies through which members of the Mexican community cope with the emotional ambivalence produced by the

political acculturative process¹¹¹. Talking about citizenship, Baubock (2003, p.72) argues that migration creates a mismatch between the territorial and personal boundaries of politics. It is in this vein that migrants need to renegotiate and find new compromises between the emotional components of citizenship —feelings of belonging to a new society, pride in one's nation— and its statutory aspects —rights and duties of the citizen (Ruget & Usmanalieva, 2008). Defining what is to be kept and what is to be changed is far from easy since it involves a total repositioning of one's self in regard to structures of power.

Despite their strongly held national pride, participants maintained a close connection with New Zealand. These are clear in many of the stories, where participants give account of numerous situations leading to feelings of love and respect for their new country. Such affective components are crucial to understanding the realignment of contending identities and negotiation of belonging (Skrbis, Baldassar & Poynting, 2007). This next story fragment may well illustrate this proposition:

In my heart, I know, there is enough room to love another country. It is just that I cannot do it in the same way as I love Mexico. But there are other ways in which I demonstrate my love for New Zealand. I respect its laws, I don't make a mess of this society, I don't abuse the system, I vote, etc. I may never be a kiwi but I am a good citizen of this country and that comes out of love. I think most Mexicans would agree with me. That is why we try to move from the stereotypical image of the lazy and violent macho and prove that we are worthy of this country.

The emotional struggle contained in this testimony reveals how people hold simultaneous geographical affections through which compromises are made. These can hardly be considered as maladaptive phenomena but as rational reactions to structurally conditioned problems. And that is because the assumption that people can naturally strip the core meanings that shape their national identities and re-grow a new set in a different society is far too ambitious, to say the least. Of course this does not mean that people cannot feel emotionally bound to their new societies; that they cannot be grateful and that they don't want to be perceived in positive terms. As this story reveals, members of the Mexican community are constantly looking for acceptance

¹¹¹ By coping strategies I mean focusing on the numerous ways in which people handle challenges, risk factors and stress due to the presence of change (Spencer, Fegley & Harpalani, 2003). Breakwell (1986, p.7) observes that 'any activity, in thought or deed, which has as its goal the removal or modification of a threat to identity may be regarded as a coping strategy.'

and validation in New Zealand. In fact, a common concern in the community is to avoid being seen in stereotypical terms as “drug-dealers”, “lazy people” or “trouble-makers”. It is mostly in these terms that the construction of a code of respect for New Zealand is articulated in rational and emotional terms.

Such arrangement starts by recognizing the perceived impossibility of becoming a ‘true’ New Zealander, based on strong nationalistic feelings. Nevertheless, love and respect for New Zealand are demonstrated in emotional terms through the renewed compromise of ‘being good’ in its society. Such a code is thus seen as a virtuous contract through which people have the opportunity to repay the benefits of living in a safe and stable social environment. This symbolic arrangement also serves the purpose of differentiation from other migrant groups, perceived as “unproductive” or “abusive of the system”. Moreover, as I will argue in next chapter, the reinforcement of such a code occurs through a series of in-group dynamics through which members of the Mexican community protect their image as grateful and productive migrants.

Going back to Baubock (2003), the mismatch between the territorial and personal boundaries of politics results in a type of citizenship that is *moral-transactional* in nature. The emotional components of citizenship such as full belonging, loyalty and allegiance to the country are partially put aside. At the same time, its statutory aspects become more relevant since observing them thoroughly is seen as compensation for the partially unfulfilled emotional alternative. This proposition is consistent with previous research undertaken in America where it was found that often migrants separate both dimensions of citizenship —emotional and statutory— in order to articulate better responses to their new states (Brettel, 2006)¹¹².

It is on these premises that some participants do indeed feel able to obtain New Zealand citizenship without emotional conflict. In fact, a common claim among members of the community is that gaining New Zealand citizenship is a right they are entitled to, given their strict observance of the pact. Nonetheless, they clearly establish that such action is taken only for practical reasons such as not being separated from their families when traveling abroad, giving their kinship better opportunities to study in certain countries, or pursuing the possibility of working in Australia sometime in the future. Consider for instance this quote from a participant I will refer to as Pedro:

¹¹² It is worth noting that Brettel (2006) refers to the emotional components of citizenship in terms of identity components, while the statutory are referred to in terms of rights and obligations.

I resisted so many years the idea of getting New Zealand nationality. Actually my wife was always making fun of my Mexican stubbornness. I remember how every time we were travelling overseas my wife and the kids used to do a different line in every passport control point. Since they are all kiwis their inspections were normally really fast, but in my case, due to my Mexican passport, my inspection process was really harsh, sometimes involving endless questions and even dogs sniffing me around to see if I was carrying drugs. Over the years I simply gave up because I did not want to make my family wait. In the end, as my wife always insisted getting a kiwi passport is just a mere bureaucratic procedure. It does not mean I am kiwi, kiwi... I mean I pay my taxes here and obey the laws but I am still Mexican to the core.

Here there are two specific lines worthy of exploration: first, of course, is the idea that changing one's migratory status does not imply a full rearrangement of the self in terms of where one belongs, so a clear line of separation between *us* and *them* prevails even after the process is completed; second is the idea that the moral obligations imposed by adopting a new nationality are limited to the fulfilment of economic and legal aspects and not to full reconstruction of one's identity in order to match a new political culture. Through these two interrelated premises, Pedro is able to separate the decision of becoming naturalized, from the emotional realm associated with the idea of losing his Mexicanity. From this perspective, it is by drawing a comprehensive line of symbolic meaning —considering the differentiated nature of the attachments to both countries— that it becomes possible to adopt a new nationality without fully realigning his national identity. In other words, by separating the practical from the emotional, Pedro is able to become a New Zealand citizen without embracing the associated sentiments that fully pertain to a new semiotic community.

The notion of continuously transformed identities and belongings underlying the relationships between states and their citizens has been of special academic interest during the past decades. As Benedict Anderson (1992, p.4) argues, the goal of the classic nation-state to encompass culture, attachments, social habits and political participation has been unrivaled by modern communication and nomadism. As a consequence, the granting of citizenship and the obtaining of passports are becoming “less and less attestations of citizenship, let alone of loyalty to a protective nation state”. Transnational mobility means that there are new modes of constructing identities, as well as new modes of subjectification cutting across political borders (Ong, 1999).

In this context, scholars have described the types of relationships citizens establish with their new countries using terms such as *flexible citizenship* (Ong 1999), *instrumental citizenship* (Ip, Inglis & Wu, 1997), *cultural citizenship* (Rosado 1994), and *cosmopolitan citizenship* (Linklater 1998). These new concepts involve the traditional components of citizenship —membership, rights and responsibilities— being disaggregated, decoupled or disentangled (Ruget & Usmanalieva, 2008). Nonetheless, they normally ignore the emotional link between people and their new societies. This is particularly obvious in the notions of *flexible* and *instrumental citizenships* where migrants are portrayed mostly in terms of opportunistic individuals following the logic of capitalist accumulation¹¹³. For instance, in their study of Asian migrants to Australia, Ip and colleagues (1997) find that the most frequently cited reasons behind the acquisition of citizenship are instrumental ones. These refer mostly to obtaining rights and perceived benefits from the Australian state. By conceiving the types of relationships which members of the Mexican community construct with the New Zealand state in terms of moral-transactional, I aim to highlight a component that is missed in the notion of instrumental citizenship. That is the idea that people can feel deeply about a country, be morally bounded to it, and want to repay it for the benefits enjoyed. Indeed, the literature on migration is full of examples of individuals attempting to make a good life as productive and respectful members of their new societies. From this perspective, a moral-transactional type of relationship is not devoid of emotion but made of it, and results in the construct of alternative identities in which multiple types of belonging are interplayed, although full allegiance is reserved only to the Motherland.

In this regard, national identities may have an enduring character. Nonetheless, the constant and continuous negotiations of the self result in more flexible approaches of belonging through the concept of citizenship. This may look minor to those expecting migrants' full realignment of peoples' loyalties, but given the strong character of national identity, it is indeed a remarkable achievement that appears to be motivated by an emotional response or a coping mechanism. In his study of nine migrant groups in Texas, Bretell (2006, p.96) tells the story of a fifty year old Nigerian migrant: "Being an American to me means being a good citizen, knowing how to do things". The striking similarities between this statement and those collected in this research, point in the direction of migrants generating new types of emotional responses, links and identities to hold them close to their new social and political systems.

¹¹³ Referring to the case of the Chinese diaspora, Ong (1999, p.7) uses the term flexible citizenship referring 'to the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions.'

Talking about migrants' identities, Brah (2001, p.183) highlights the way in which these are constituted "within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively". This proposition is majorly reflected in participants' stories of political acculturation. Indeed, participants' endless negotiations in two political settings result in different interpretations of politics in their new country. Yet they all converge on the idea of being exemplary citizens of New Zealand, a place they can't yet call their nation but one that is referred to in deeply emotional terms. I will close this section with the testimony of a participant who has lived for more than three decades in New Zealand:

As I always tell all my friends I have two houses the house where I live and the house that I love. They are totally different... the one I love is my family, my traditions, my values as a Mexican. The one that I live... and I love it as well... but differently... is New Zealand where I am a good citizen... If tomorrow there is a war between New Zealand and Mexico I will fight for Mexico; but if the fight is against Australia I will put my kiwi helmet; bear no doubt about it.

7.5 Conclusions

Throughout this chapter I have stressed the importance of understanding different layers in the complex relationship between individuals and the state in order to comprehend peoples' emotional accounts of politics. I have moved from the micro-level of embodied practices and encounters with individuals and the state to the macro-construct of nationalism and political identity. Three main conclusions can be drawn:

First is the proposition that emotions are shaped by the cultural contexts in which they emerge, but are mediated through individuals' semiotic inventories. Participants construct diverse and ambivalent semiotic repertoires based on their experiences with different centers of power in New Zealand, nonetheless they are also the product of specific discourses, myths, imaginaries and traditions that make sense to most members of the community. The proposition of understanding the state in more flexible terms is consistent with many theoretical accounts which call for new angles of examination of the relationships between individuals and the state (e.g. Abrams, 1988; Alonso, 1994; Rubin, 2002; Nuijten 2003). Understanding the state in terms of its more decentralized notions can help understand peoples' fragmented experiences in a more cohesive way.

The second conclusion relates to the pervasive character of culture as an articulated system of meaning posited upon symbolic representations of the world. If culture is indeed the fabric of meaning, it is clear that the goods it produces bear long lasting emotional connotations. Whenever individuals are put into a situation of change, deeply rooted political constructs have a way of surviving and reproducing. Continuity of these political constructs is not only rational but emotional and provides a sense of safety in the way things are and should be. In politics, they provide clarity on the positions individuals and communities take towards the state. Whenever the disruptive character of migration forces readjustment in a significant net of meaning, emotional responses occur. These may be either positive or negative. Nonetheless, major readjustment normally involves reconstruction of the self, which is deeply felt as a threat to identity.

The third conclusion relates to the ability of migrants to construct emotional responses in order to adapt to a new political environment. As this exploration suggests, participants are not mere blockers of the newly encountered political symbols. Far from this, they have revealed almost chameleonic capacities to transform and build new types of relationships with the New Zealand state. Many political theorists have argued in favour of understanding citizenship beyond the mere concept of legal status, and more as a self-constructed category through which individuals interact with the state. The proposition that individuals can construct multiple identities is in that regard consistent with contemporary theories about the political impact of transnational phenomena (Vertovec, 2001; Beck, 2002; Baubock, 2003, 2006; Fitzgerald, 2000). Indeed, most of these theories have tested prior assumptions of the nation state as an exclusive container of social, economic and political processes as the only *legitimate* claimer of allegiance and nationalism.

Chapter Eight: Rituals of integration. From symbolic construction to political action

8.1 Introduction

What I feel and what I think are of course important but it is quite obvious that I am not a machine simply responding logically to everything in my mind. I wish I was but I am not. Being a Mexican in New Zealand is easy because we are not as stigmatized as other races, but anyway we need to fight for a place in this society, break all sorts of stereotypes, and demonstrate that we are good citizens just like everybody else. That is why I always vote.

This opening testimony came from a follow-up interview with a participant in Auckland. The information was given while debating some of the findings of this study. It reveals a series of entrenched negotiations between the cognitive and emotional components of social life as experienced at the core of a migrant community; a complex arrangement of mediated reasons and feelings upon which political action is structured. To this participant, New Zealand politics is an arena that bears little appeal. As he later observes in his story, it is a world he does not know well and one in which he is not truly interested. Yet based on individual and group perceptions, concessions and decisions, he highlights the importance of regularly taking part in New Zealand elections.

In 1948 Harold D. Lasswell argued that democracy and its institutions refer to both symbols and practice¹¹⁴. From this perspective he observes that our knowledge of democracy requires detailed records of how people move from such symbolic representations into concrete actions. Nevertheless, as political interpretivists Chabal & Daloz (2006, p.110) claim, political science has been constrained by prevailing forms of understanding causality. Whether this is because we assume individuals to be rational decision-makers (Downs, 1957) or creatures trapped in the reproduction of cultural traits (Almond & Verba, 1963), most political scholars seem to depart from similar premises to understand the genesis of political action. To say that people have

¹¹⁴ It is worth noting that Lasswell (1948, p.8) made this statement in the context of his book on morals and political behaviour. As such there are important differences between his proposition and those of political interpretivists which were to be made several years after. There he mentions, for instance, that the moral prescription that the majority of people need to take part in elections is highly symbolic.

reasons for their actions means that there are connections between the actions and peoples' goals (Simon 1995, p.43). Nonetheless, in many situations such reasons are not seamlessly aligned or clearly distinguishable. Indeed, often people's goals, sentiments, experiences and rationality cohere in such unique ways that their products are not as consistent as they may appear at first sight.

Similarly, the prevailing idea that culture is an immovable phenomenon where people always do one thing and not the other in a cohesive manner fails to mirror the complex and evolving character of culture¹¹⁵. Given their undoubted relevance, both views have enormously affected our ways of understanding the political acculturation of migrants. As earlier observed, mainstream studies on the political behaviour of migrants normally assume a linear relationship between a number of variables (cultural or non-cultural) and specific forms of political action¹¹⁶. Moreover, after nearly three decades, exploring political acculturation is still mostly a quantitative measuring enterprise in which behavioural patterns between newcomers and natives are contrasted.

Lasswell's proposition of creating a detailed record between the construction of political symbols and their transformation into political actions seems to be more than relevant here. And that is because as in the case of our opening testimony, making sense of a new political world is far from being a straightforward process of decoding and aligning native and alien understandings. On the contrary similar political behaviour can indeed arise from different understandings of people, power and democracy from which individuals create distinctive and even contrasting interpretations. In other words, what moves people in a homogeneous way is not always a set of homogeneously constructed traits about what is good for society.

This proposition is strikingly consistent with the stories told by members of the Mexican community in New Zealand, which are at times as diverse and contradictory as their narrators, yet to some extent surprisingly cohesive. Interestingly, such cohesion seems to be even more obvious when it comes to the forged understanding of specific political symbols such as elections and political protest. Edelman (1967, p.6) asserts that certain political actions regarded as highly relevant are likely to constitute political symbols of significant importance. Following this line, it is clear that members of the Mexican community consistently observe a series of

¹¹⁵ A discussion on the evolving nature of culture and its relationships to agency from an interpretivist perspective can be found in Chapter Three.

¹¹⁶ As mentioned in Chapter Two, these normally refer to electoral behaviour but can also include protesting, signing petitions, community participation and partisanship.

shared behavioural protocols and rituals with respect to certain political acts that are considered to be meaningful. As I will argue in this chapter, such meaningfulness does not entail shared intelligibility about the particularities of each symbol but shared understandings of their relevance to the community in the broadest possible sense. As argued by Ross (2007, p.19), shared intelligibility offers agreement about symbols but not necessarily about substance.

How people and groups construct such shared meanings and how they act around them is a core concern of political interpretivism. An analysis of how these are created, negotiated and reshaped at the individual and group levels posits a different type of responsibility among researchers, that being the exploration of the long-term contextual and historical factors that affect peoples' political behaviour. It is in such largely ignored factors that the complex world of meaning reveals itself, allowing the researcher to understand political behaviour from a different perspective. Accessing such a world requires a thorough understanding of both cultures in order to identify individual and in-group interpretations of political action based on people's cultural repertoires.

This chapter comprises all these considerations and theoretical assumptions and uses them to explore political action among members of the Mexican community in New Zealand. In order to provide a broad perspective, it is organized across three significant institutions of contemporary liberal democracy: political demonstrations, elections, and community action. Every section follows a similar structure; they all depart from a brief, cross-cultural semiotic analysis in which meanings attached to these political institutions are explored in both countries, New Zealand and Mexico. This is followed by the exploration of common threads of reinterpretation in the light of migratory experiences. Here, individual and in-group interpretations are evaluated against the moral-transactional types of relationships built with the New Zealand state. Finally, shared interpretations are contrasted with individual cases in which members of the Mexican community followed a different path from the majority. This is articulated through selected ethnographies in which both individual and in-group patterns are juxtaposed in order to provide intertextuality. The chapter finishes with a series of conclusions highlighting the relevance of interpretivism in crafting new understandings of migrants' political action and acculturative phenomena.

8.2 The worst in us: protest politics among Mexicans

The right to participate in organized demonstrations is considered to be an essential component of contemporary liberal democracy. Public demonstrations serve the purposes of indicating public concern, raising awareness of specific issues in the political agenda, and highlighting perceived failings in administrative practices (O'Brien, 2012). In this context, rather than being seen as a threat to the stability of political regimes, protest politics is nowadays considered a symbol of a lively civil society (Quaranta, 2015; Meyer & Tarrow, 1998). In established democracies such as those that operate in Sweden, France and Belgium, at least a third of all citizens have attended a demonstration at some stage in their lives (Norris, 2006, p.6).

New Zealand has a long and proud history of political protest. From the early movements in favour of giving women the right to vote and union rights in the 19th century, to recent public action against the privatisation of public assets, the Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) and mining of protected land, political protest in New Zealand has served the purpose of building a sense of concern among citizens about sensitive issues. Whilst it is not my intention to review the history of social movements and political protest in New Zealand, it is essential to highlight the fact that a vast majority of New Zealanders see protest politics as a viable form of political action (Rose et al., 2005), and that one in five New Zealanders has attended at least one political demonstration during the course of their lives (Vowles, 2004, p.10). It is in this context that the meaning New Zealanders attach to political protest can be described in general terms as a positive form of expressing dissent and fostering governmental accountability.

The picture is less clear in the case of Mexico. Similar to New Zealand, one in five Mexicans has attended at least one political demonstration (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2012). However, the meanings people attach to such acts follow a different logic. For decades, public demonstrations were considered more as public performances of bargaining and support for the regime than real instruments for contesting malpractice in governmental action. In this regard, scholars have long explored the dynamics of power and negotiation of the Mexican state and all seem to agree that for almost seventy years the hegemonic regime functioned as an efficient structure of political negotiation that was organized in a clientelist manner (Adler-Lomnitz, Salazar & Adler, 2010; Garrido, 2005; Cordova, 1974).

An essential element of the structure was what Leal and Woldenberg (1976) denominate *official unionism* through which the hegemonic party controlled all workers' unions with the idea of

achieving 'national unity'. As affiliated members of the hegemonic party, all unions played a part in the continuity of the regime by pledging alliance to it. Also, following the spirit of unionism, public demonstrations where workers presented their yearly demands served the purpose of enhancing the image of the presidency as an effective negotiator and a noble entity that was worried about the wellbeing of all workers. For instance, for decades during the month of May the streets of Mexico City were taken by members of the teachers' union demanding not only an annual increase in their salaries but also a series of concessions of a clientelist nature¹¹⁷. The event repeatedly occurred in a perfectly synchronized way, always ending with the official announcement on May 15 (teacher's day) that most demands had been met. In exchange for the positive response, the teachers' union, like many others,, expressed its allegiance to the political regime by marching during official ceremonies and parades.

This does not mean that during the period of hegemonic government there were not authentic movements of defiance and dissent¹¹⁸. Indeed, both the 1968 student movement and the 1994 Zapatista movement occurred during the PRI regime. Nonetheless, such events were notorious exceptions of historical connotations that have long served as examples of the authoritarian character of the Mexican regime. Alongside them, other social movements have coexisted and demonstrated that in Mexico this situation is particularly evident in urban centers across the country. However, it is also worth noting that most of the time such movements were not interpreted as a real threat to the government and therefore allowed to exist without either major consequences to the regime or clear results of their demands (Ramirez-Sainz, 1984; Perló & Schteingar, 1984).

With the erosion of the hegemonic party at the end of the 20th century, its traditional networks of power-bargaining were recomposed and redistributed across new political players (Street, 1991; Cruces 1998). Organized protests increasingly became a weapon used to defy and reaffirm power among rival factions. But they also gradually became a means to impose pressure on governments in order to respond to the demands of a more complex and less obedient society. Although this last observation may resemble the spirit of political protest in democratic societies, it is worth observing that often such acts are oriented to the resolution of individual demands and provision of goods and services of a clientelist nature.

¹¹⁷ A full review of the corporatist dynamics of the Mexican regime can be found in Arrieta (2001), *Las perspectivas de la relación de las organizaciones sindicales con el Estado Mexicano: el futuro del corporativismo*.

¹¹⁸ Alan Knight (1990, p.87) illustrates the linkages between social movements and protests in Mexico during the hegemonic period and contends the idea of full control of the hegemonic party over dissident unions and other social movements.

In this context, it is difficult to speak about a unified view of political demonstrations in the country. While for some groups protesting may be considered to be a political game, for others it is probably the only way to channel what they consider to be legitimate demands. Others may even see it is a vicious act, detrimental to the economy, public order and quality of life in urban centers. This last view seems to prevail among the middle- and upper-middle economic segments of Mexican society, from which most participants in this research come.

Such conviction is constantly reinforced by media discourses which criminalises political protest and portrays it as an act perpetrated by troublemakers challenging the stability of the nation (Cortez, 2008; Mondonessi et al., 2011). In the context of such public narratives, a recent survey shows that fifty eight percent of Mexicans consider most public demonstrations as a criminal act, the participants of which are offenders who should therefore be prosecuted (GCE, 2015).

Don't rock the boat: protest politics after migration

The cross-cultural clash of meanings surrounding protest politics became evident from the moment I started my fieldwork. Indeed, from early meetings with members of the Mexican community, people started aligning their opinions in a strikingly cohesive way. Drawing from their negative experiences in Mexico, categorical rejection of protesting started to impregnate the vast majority of participants' stories. Clearly the peaceful manifestation of dissent that characterises New Zealand's political culture has done little to modify the negative impressions associated with protest politics. I illustrate this situation through these short fragments taken from different participants' stories:

No way. Under no circumstance I would do such a thing [demonstrating]. I came to this country to show the good things about Mexico, not to bring the worst in us.

In Mexico we are really barbaric. If we don't like something we block a street and no one moves until I get what I want. Why would I like to do such a mess in here?

Coming from Mexico City I had so many bad experiences with demonstrations that I would never, not for one minute, consider to do such a thing to this country.

Throughout the course of my research, these types of opinions slowly but steadily grew, showing not only coincidental agreement but important symbolic constructs through which in-group responses were articulated. Broadly speaking, exercising this fundamental democratic right is seen as a condemnable act breaching the moral-transactional pact established with New Zealand. As such, members of the community who participate in political demonstrations are constantly described as ungrateful *rijosos* (trouble-makers), bringing the “worst of us” to their new country. Here the concept of New Zealand as a peaceful democracy that is vulnerable to malicious people who challenge the status quo, is evident in some stories. “In Mexico we are constantly rocking the boat and we make a mess of everything. That is not cool when you are in a country that feeds you well”, observed a participant from Otago.

This basic observation reveals how protest politics can be perceived as a violent act of destabilisation, targeting the reputation of a community that is morally bound to a good political system. Moreover, there is fear that such action contributes to perpetuating negative stereotypes that affect participants’ integration into New Zealand society. “People have a really negative image of Mexicans, they think we are always looking for trouble” he continues in the conversation. Fighting such negative stereotypes is a common concern among most members of the community whose stories reveal an in-group type of compromise to avoid actions that may lead to their reinforcement.

I didn’t know we had a reputation for being violent troublemakers. But as a migrant I deal with that every day. It is in the movies, cartoons, everywhere. I mean, not everyone is like that but people think we are all the same. I am very careful of what I do and don’t do here because that affects how people think not only about me but about Mexicans in general.

The proposition that there are a series of collective representations of Mexicans as troublemakers is not an unfair one. Indeed, Latinos have been commonly represented in different discourses as greasers or bandits, gang members, violent guerrillas and from the 1970s onwards, drug dealers and traffickers (Shaw, 2005, p.1). Interestingly, the oldest piece of information I was able to find regarding Mexican migration to New Zealand, was aligned with this proposition. This next fragment comes from Te Ara, a publicly funded project to promote New Zealand history:

One account of a mid-19th century South Island sheep run tells of a ‘very hot-blooded’ Mexican worker who sometimes had to be restrained, ‘in case he “got his knife into someone” literally instead of figuratively (Wilson, 2014, p.1).

In this respect, protecting the image of a community sometimes requires fighting and restraining this imaginary Mexican in order to avoid perpetuating the stereotype. Under such circumstances, people think twice before engaging in any type of activity that challenges their individual and group reputation as law-abiding citizens unwilling to challenge their stable political environment. Being morally bound to New Zealand involves in this context, the compromise of not challenging its political system.

Not one of us: the narrative of a political outcast

On 2015, a Mexican migrant whom I will refer to as Marcos, was charged with assault against a New Zealand radio host during a protest against the parliamentary approval of the Budget. The police prosecutor described the alleged assault as ‘pushing and spitting’. The case received wide range coverage by New Zealand media, both print and electronic. Within minutes, several postings appeared from members of the Mexican community in different online forums. Dozens of responses quickly plagued these internet groups, revealing a series of in-group dynamics towards the issue.

Marcos’ activism was not a new topic. Indeed, in previous months a robust debate was held over other protests in which he was presumably involved. The latest revolved around a short video posted by Marcos on Facebook groups for Mexican migrants in New Zealand. The video showed a group of at least two protesters spray-painting a wall and burning a Mexican flag outside the Mexican consulate in Auckland. The act was in response to the disappearance and alleged murder by local authorities of 43 students in Ayotzinapa, Mexico. Despite the low quality images of the video and the fact that both individuals were wearing masks, there was common agreement that Marcos was the perpetrator. Although he constantly denied any involvement in the protest, Marcos was banned from these groups on the basis of promoting a negative image of Mexicans in New Zealand.

The comments that were publicly made at the time of the decision, as well as some of those related to Marcos’ subsequent activities are crucial elements in the discussion. They are testimony to the dynamics of the way Mexicans fight to construct a positive image of themselves

and their community. Furthermore, they illustrate how challenging authority, which is at the core of protest politics, is perceived negatively by most members of the Mexican community. Here is a series of snapshots from the above-mentioned Facebook groups:

This case is an example of incongruence and hypocrisy perpetuated by a guy who hates the country and people who have supported him.

I believe in free speech but I am also a firm believer of the popular saying: never bite the hand who feeds you. We always need to be grateful and give only positive things to this country.

This guy is ruining the name of Mexico and, by extension, the reputation of all us. We should all prove that we are grateful citizens to this country and not get involved into politics.

These three fragments are connected through coincidental narrative lines. First, the aspirational intention of being regarded as a respectful, obedient and peaceful community underlies these opinions. Second, the concept of the grateful citizen as the basis of the transactional relationship established with the New Zealand Government where a pact of respect is offered and strict adherence of the pact is asked of others. Third is the idea of the traitor, the one who dares to break the pact and, as such, is labelled as ungrateful, a troublemaker and perpetuator of stereotypes. Expelling this individual from the community is then seen not only as a normal reaction but as a symbol to other members of the consequences of similar behaviour. “Let’s get rid of him” said one member. For others, that is not enough, he should be reported to the authorities and sent back to Mexico. “I already reported him to the police” claimed an indignant member. The point is to prevent such behaviour from being repeated. The creation of an outcast is the more obvious consequence.

While this controversy arose, I had the opportunity to meet with some members of the community who sympathized with Marco’s points of views and knew him personally. In their stories they describe a politically integrated person, with good knowledge of the New Zealand political system and a genuine desire to participate in the decisions of his community. According to most of these accounts he is a “honest” and “decent” guy “always eager to give a hand to those in need”. In the words of this participant:

I know him and I know that he is not very well regarded by other Mexicans but really, he is a decent person and has enough motivation to go the extra mile for what he considers to be a good cause. I think that is a good thing.

According to public stories, originally a political refugee, Marcos left Mexico after being involved in a series of protests against the potential increase of the fees paid by university students. For some, such was an action that revealed a great level of commitment, ‘a remarkable risk not everyone is willing to take’. Indeed, while regarded by most Mexicans in negative terms, Marcos’ political past and current political activism seem to be highly appreciated by some others —a vast minority it is fair to say. Whenever talking about him, the memories shared by this small group of participants seem to restore at least some balance to the bad impressions held in the community. Indeed, although most of them recognize Marcos as “radical” they also highlight a number of positive attributes they see on him such as engagement, solidarity and social and political awareness. For instance, when remembering the unfruitful efforts to call for people to participate in a transnational protest this participant mentioned:

He is always one of the very few who come every time we make a call. People bitch about him all the time, but honestly he has the guts to go out and fight for what he believes. Most Mexicans here are extremely obedient and careful about what they say and do all the time. You call them to participate and they never come, they live in a bubble and if you dare to challenge that bubble you are an *apestado* (stinky one) just like him.

Political activists encountered during the fieldwork coincidentally agreed that getting his residency marked a milestone in Marcos’ political activism “after getting his residency we started seeing more and more of him in political demonstrations” mentioned a participant from Auckland. Interestingly people who spoke in his defence regularly observed how his political activism does not exclusively involved Mexican causes: “he is into all sorts of social causes from unions to environmental protest” and “he has a broad spectrum of causes” were comments made when describing his activism. In this context, a participants observed:

It is somehow ironic that most people see him as someone who does not fit. I mean, the guy knows more about New Zealand politics than any other Mexican, fight for what he thinks is good in his new country like any other Mexican. He is

not just worry about Mexico but also about his new home, our new home, and he defends this conviction with passion and dignity like no other Mexican.

In the end, Marcos' story reveals a person reconstructed based on the positions and trajectories he has occupied in the social context. His activism seems to be the result of long-held beliefs about the state and the position one should occupy in front of the state. As mentioned by one participant "if tomorrow he moves to India he will be fighting social injustice in the streets of Delhi". But more importantly, his story illustrates vividly the dynamics of the community, its negotiations and shared agreements towards protest and activism.

Spaces of pride: witnessing dissent in Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington

Like Marcos, a small group of participants shared similar positions and trajectories and therefore their stories seem closely related. Most of the time they were political activists or simply people who have traditionally been politically concerned and therefore follow political events closely. They were normally well informed about the political agendas of major events in both Mexico and New Zealand. I did not want to leave aside these narratives since they also represent the reconstruction of meaning drawing from accumulated experience.

Not surprisingly, most of the protests I was invited to were related to the political situation in Mexico. Indeed, during the course of my research several political events attracted the attention of transnational political agents. Among the most relevant were: the return of former hegemonic power to the presidency; rumours of privatisation of the national oil industry and the already mentioned disappearance and presumed murder of 43 students in Ayotnizapa. This does not supersede the fact that, similar to Marcos, most members of this small group regularly joined different New Zealand causes and demonstrations as well.

It is important to mention that these events regularly followed similar lines. Invitations were normally made through *Facebook Events* and also posted in the different groups targeting Mexican migrants in New Zealand. A short explanation of the motives behind the protest and a reminder of the importance of joining others in collective action were commonly included. Events were carefully planned to occur at weekends or after work hours in order to eliminate barriers to participation. Often Mexican migrants posted harsh comments about such invitations. One of the participants mentioned:

People can tell you mean things when you extend these types of invitations. They think that we protest because we have nothing better to do, or simply because we want to get into trouble

These types of comments did not seem to have deflated the spirit of the organizers who normally exhibited a sense of pride in what they did. Comments such as “we are here because it is important to talk, to do something”; “political participation is vital to any democracy” and “it is our moral obligation to speak up”, were collected in the context of different protests in Auckland and Wellington.

Despite the cautious planning process, most of the time the number of people attending these events is rather small, normally less than a dozen, but sometimes as low as three or four. Probably because of these limited numbers, organizers carefully plan how to generate a better impact. Emotive practices targeting small audiences aim thus to capture the attention of passers by rather than relying on massive concentrations of people. Dance, music, candles, photographs and flags are used to capture attention and get people engaged with different causes. For instance, during a demonstration for Ayotzinapa in Wellington, protesters participated in a religious ceremony in which the front-seats of the church were reserved for the missing students. Each empty space had a picture of every one of the 43 missing students as a reminder of the void they had left in their parents’ hearts. During communion, a Mexican duo sang a nostalgic song remembering those who are no longer in this world. “If you sing for me I will always be alive” was the chorus of the song. Similar symbols were used in other protests in Auckland and Christchurch. In his narrative, one of the organisers of these events remembered:

Impact is key to a demonstration. We know it is only a few of us but we can still deliver strong and moving messages. In the end, it is not about us, but about generating awareness of the political situation that millions of people live everyday in Mexico.

Educating others about the consequences of political action and the role that migrants should play within their new communities is a recurrent element in these participants’ narratives. Some of them are vigorous disseminators of all sorts of political messages on the Internet. Such is the case of a participant I will refer to as Mayela, who invited me to join her in several protests during the course of my research. To her, moving to New Zealand came with a sense of responsibility to share political information among members of the Mexican community. “I like

politics, I like to participate, I like to know that my voice is being heard” she mentioned in her narrative. Her story is one of a concerned individual, worried about helping others to become fully integrated in New Zealand society.

We paid a price for being here... I think it was like five thousand dollars. From there you need to earn a place in the country you now live in. You need to earn the respect of others, demonstrate your capacities. Put it simply you need to earn your place... When people arrive from a different country they should integrate to the new society and respond to the country which has given them the opportunity of living a new life.

To help others find their place in New Zealand, Mayela has worked as a volunteer for refugee education. She has also been politically involved in the Labour Party through its Young Labour branch. But more importantly, she is an active member of different online transnational political movements and is enthusiastic about disseminating political information among members of the Mexican community. The scant attention most of her messages receive in the Mexican community does not seem to affect her spirit. ‘I have taken the time to get to know the Mexican community here, I know not all of them want to talk about politics but it is important to be united’ she says proudly. In 2013 I joined Mayela in a demonstration in Auckland over the potential privatization of PEMEX, Mexico’s giant state-owned oil producer. The invitation was extended to all members of the Mexican community in Auckland through a wide network of online groups and forums. Regardless of such an extensive invitation, only three people arrived at Aotea Square that day. “This is not unusual” commented one of the participants “Mexicans here are mostly conformist middle-class people” he continued. After a few minutes of waiting Mayela arrived equipped with a Mexican flag and a video camera. That is all she needed to make her small protest grow global.

“Let’s make a semi-circle” she asked the three participants. The Mexican flag was being used here as a symbol of unity and pride among demonstrators. Mayela asked them to record a message about the reasons behind the protest. By doing so, the attention moved from the number of attendees to the core reasons for protest. One by one, every participant delivered strong political messages, not only exhibiting their knowledge of politics but also a sense of pride in joining a cause. Although I was there only as an observer, the small number of participants forced me to join the semi-circle around the flag. At the end everybody left with satisfaction. Although it was not clear where the video was to be posted, participants seemed convinced that it

would help create awareness of the issue. Moreover, they knew that their voice would join others in a transnational effort from the Mexican diaspora to speak up about the political situation in Mexico. Mayela is regarded as a respected international player with the right contacts to make this act grow stronger.

All these different expressions of dissent are clear examples of how some people reconstruct and reposition themselves after moving to a new country. They represent a different way of approaching the transactional relationships established with the New Zealand state. Moreover, they are expressions of concern about politics in two settings. As mentioned earlier, these participants not only create space to express dissent of the Mexican situation, they are also active players in demonstrations for different causes. Just as in the case of other participants, who these people were before migrating, their accumulated experience with politics and their obvious interest in politics appear to be relevant factors in understanding peoples' reshaping of their new social world.

8.3 Electoral participation: the ultimate ritual of integration

Differences in the meaning posited of the concept of elections could hardly be more pronounced than in the cases of New Zealand and Mexico. After exploring the impressive body of literature on elections in New Zealand, one becomes increasingly aware of the many positive connotations historically associated with the act of voting. For most of the 20th Century New Zealand was considered a social laboratory, a mixture of civic virtue, fairness and social progress achieved through a political system close to the heart of its citizens. Indeed, at the height of the mass party era, an impressive number of New Zealanders (one in four) were not simply voters, but active members of a political party (Marsh & Miller, 2012, p.213). At the heart of such a virtuous system lies the shared agreement on the importance of free, fair and inclusive elections (Miller, 2015, p.52).

Broadly speaking, it is plausible to state that there are three dimensions underlying these positive connotations. First there is an instrumental one, through which most New Zealanders conceive elections as a means of keeping Governments accountable for their actions. A high sense of political efficacy is thus often described by authors as a fundamental component making people believe in the importance of elections (Vowles, 1995; 2004; 2010). A second dimension is efficient-representational, and is articulated through the idea that New Zealand elections are able to bring real representatives to power. Decades of strong links between political parties and partisans still make New Zealanders perceive that their political institutions are evocative of

their society as a whole. For years the average New Zealander has not conceived their elected officers as being distant people living a life diametrically different from their own. On the contrary, a sense of closeness to politicians and political institutions has traditionally characterized the New Zealand political scene¹¹⁹. Finally, there is an allegoric dimension based on the agreement that elections are not only the ultimate proof of civic duty but also an enjoyable act performed by responsible citizens. This has been historically reflected in some of the highest electoral turnouts in the world (Miller, 2015, Vowles 2004, Mulgan, 2004, Karp & Banducci, 1999).

If it is true that New Zealand has recently experienced increasing levels of political distrust and a decline in electoral participation, it is also true that regardless of this decline, the country is still considered among the strongest consolidated democracies in the world. As observed by Miller (2015, p.13) New Zealand consistently appears on the lists of the strongest democracies in the world, only topped by the Scandinavian countries. According to official data, more than 80% of New Zealanders still believe in voting as a civic duty; 72% believe that their vote really counts and overall levels of satisfaction with democracy reached close to 70% in 2014.

For most of the 20th century, elections in Mexico bore radically opposite connotations. In the years following the revolution, elections did not serve as a means of fostering accountability or representation, but of reaffirming commitment to the ideals of the revolution and peoples' allegiance to the hegemonic party as its core articulator (Gomez-Tagle, 1986). Such shared meanings turned Mexico into the perfect dictatorship where elections took place regularly but lacked any real sense of representation or political efficacy¹²⁰. Although different sectors of society were to find representation in Congress through affiliation to organizations linked to the PRI, candidates were decided mostly through bargaining processes and clientelist practices (Hernandez-Muñoz, 2006; Anguiano, 1975). Little opposition existed and when this grew strong it was either absorbed or crushed by the system. For over eight decades voting in Mexico was seen more as a ritual of continuation than a democratic practice.

¹¹⁹ Miller (2015, pp.14-16) makes a compelling argument when analysing the small and remote character of New Zealand as a more intimate setting for politics in which politicians are more accessible to the public. From this perspective, he illustrates how historically, New Zealand politicians have been driven to live ordinary lives in order to identify themselves with the electorate.

¹²⁰ The term 'the perfect dictatorship' is in common use in Mexico to refer to the PRI regime. It was coined by Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa during a public interview held in 1990. When talking about the tradition of Latin American dictatorships Vargas Llosa pointed out that the Mexican regime could not be excluded from the group of authoritarian regimes.

During the 1980s a series of economic crises and poor governmental decisions made Mexicans increasingly critical of their political regime (Remmer, 1991; Cole and Kehoe, 1996). The erosion of trust in the hegemonic party made room for the opposition to gain support and challenge the establishment during the 1988 presidential election (Dominguez & McCann, 1995). This historical moment was to be a determining factor in the future of elections in the country because of accusations of fraud surrounding the event. Indeed, from that moment onwards Mexico started a transition to democracy conceived mostly in terms of restoring trust in elections. From 1988 to 1998 different electoral reforms were undertaken. Among these were broadening the spectrum for MMP members of Congress, forming an independent electoral commission, and passing a complex system of electoral logistics, severely reducing the possibilities for committing electoral fraud (Becerra, Salazar & Woldenberg 2000; Mendez de Hoyos, 2006) . A resulting positive image of elections characterised most of the 1990s and reached its peak during the 1994 Presidential election with a historically high 77.2% voter turnout (Peschard, 1994). Once again, the defeat of the opposition in this election made Mexicans extremely suspicious and openly critical of elections. Nonetheless, a renewed democratic spirit prevailed in the country until the 2000 election in which the hegemonic party was finally defeated.

Two decades after this democratic transition started, Mexicans have grown sceptical about democracy in general and elections in particular. Data shows a constant decline in support for most democratic institutions in the country. For instance, only 26% of the population believes in elections, more than 80% believe that they are not fairly represented by their Congress members and support for democracy dropped to an astonishing 19% during 2015 (Cooperación Latinobarómetro, 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015). It is clear then that the expectations people had of the electoral realm have not been delivered. In this context, the meaning of voting among Mexicans is difficult to grasp. While there are large groups of regular voters who still support democratic institutions, these have been slowly decreasing because of what is perceived as extreme political cynicism, corruption scandals and open attempts to buy voters through clientelist practices.

Different and complex typologies have been constructed to classify Mexican voters. They normally include different possibilities along a continuous line, with traditional voters on the one side and traditional non-voters on the other. Simple as it may sound, most taxonomies include culturally entrenched constructs that are difficult to understand under traditional voter classifications. Such is the case of the traditional clientelist voter, who will always vote but only

according to the exchange of goods and services delivered by vote-buying practices, or the forced non-voter, a traditional voter who decides to restrain from the political arena as a form of protest against the system (Aparicio & Corrochano, 2005; Onate, 2005; Camargo-Gonzalez, 2009; Hughes & Guerrero, 2009). In this context, talking about shared meanings of elections in Mexico is difficult to say the least. Instead, it is obvious that meanings are numerous, diverse and sometimes opposed in an increasingly complex society. While voting can be seen as a civic virtue among some sectors, it can also be received with scepticism and disappointment among others. It can even be interpreted as a commodity to trade and even survive.

The ritual of voting through the eyes of Mexican migrants

In the early stages of my research design I opted for including a small questionnaire to collect participants' socio-statistical information in order to gain insight into different aspects of their pre-migratory characteristics. Among these I included questions regarding patterns of electoral behaviour both in Mexico and in New Zealand. Somewhat surprisingly, I found that an impressive eighty-four percent of participants who were entitled to vote in New Zealand were post-migratory regular voters¹²¹. Moreover, in terms of pre-migratory electoral behaviour, less than twenty five percent of participants were regular voters who cast their votes in every Mexican election. The larger segment (around 55%) comprised occasional voters who participated in elections according to the circumstances surrounding each event. The rest (approximately 20%) were traditional non-voters who had never participated in elections in Mexico.

Considering the content of most stories, these numbers were particularly puzzling. If Mexicans do not feel politically inclined towards New Zealand; if they consider its political problems as irrelevant; if they are not familiar with its system and if there is clear agreement on establishing a "healthy distance" from political institutions, how come most people changed their original patterns of electoral behaviour and cast their votes in New Zealand elections in an almost religious way?

Answers from the field were consistent in showing that for the vast majority of members of the community, voting was the quintessential form of reciprocating for the benefits of living in New Zealand. In that regard, several participants consistently went to the polls in an almost ritualistic

¹²¹ By post-migratory regular voters I mean individuals who, regardless of the circumstances surrounding every election, will always cast their vote in New Zealand.

way. Of course, the act of voting is in itself a political ritual. Lukes (1975, p.304) calls it “the most important form of political ritual in liberal democratic societies”¹²². Nonetheless, the essence of the ritual bears different cross-cultural connotations. While for New Zealanders voting is essentially a ritual of civic duty or a form of fostering accountability of governments, for members of the Mexican community it is basically a ritual to demonstrate their integration into New Zealand society.

In his ethnography of the Punjabi community in Sussex, Baumann (1992) highlights the relevance of joining rituals—including political rituals—to demonstrate migrants’ integration into British communities. He suggests that rituals cannot only be performed by native communities but also by competing constituencies looking to demonstrate cultural change. Baringhorst (2001, p.294) makes a compelling argument by establishing that political rituals can serve the function of providing individuals with feelings of belonging to a wider community. In fact it has been long argued that taking part in public rituals invokes vivid emotional reactions and can foster a sense of cohesion among participants (Cassier 1955, p.24; Assayag 1998, p.125).

Such seems to be the case among members of the Mexican community in New Zealand who proudly talk about voting as a means of achieving recognition as respectful and law abiding members of New Zealand. Voting is in this sense perceived as joining a ritual through which one becomes a part of the society. Interestingly, a common thread in participants’ narratives is the idea of differentiation from other migrant communities that are perceived as being less participatory or less committed to becoming integrated. This can be better illustrated in the words of a participant I will refer to as Blanca:

Voting is the least I can do if I want to demonstrate that I am serious about living in this country. Many migrants come from other countries and they don’t want to integrate into New Zealand. I do, and I think this is a way of saying I am part of this, I am part of New Zealand.

The story of Blanca is relevant since she stated she had never voted before in Mexico. To her, voting was conceived as a way of “dancing at the tune imposed by unscrupulous political actors”. In this context, the conviction with which she speaks about elections in New Zealand

¹²² Lukes defines a ritual as a “rule-governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance (p.291)

may be seen—at first sight—as a relevant indicator of her political integration into the country. Nonetheless, as her story unfolded it was clear that to Blanca, voting may be seen as an act of integration but not necessarily as an informed decision articulated from the shared meaning that drives New Zealanders to the polls.

I did not know much about the candidate I voted for. Actually I did not know anything about any of the candidates. But I think it is the action what counts.

Blanca's story is not an isolated one. Many participants shared similar stories regarding candidates, political parties and electoral choices. In many cases participants stated that although they had little knowledge of the political system, specific problems, candidates' platforms, or even names, they voted for the ruling party in order to demonstrate their loyalty to and appreciation of New Zealand. Similarities with the ritualistic forms of voting in Mexico are obvious here. For many participants, supporting a political party is not as important as supporting the regime through which they obtain life-satisfaction. Indeed, whenever people were asked why they voted for the National Party in the 2011 general election, the overwhelming response was "because we are happy in New Zealand". How much of that happiness directly correlates to the actions of the National Government or simply to the overall design of the political regime is uncertain. To clarify this point, during the follow-up interviews I met with members of the Mexican community with the longest lengths of stay in New Zealand. My intention was to analyse the situation from the perspective of people who had lived under the government of different political parties. Interestingly, under similar premises, many participants had consistently voted for the ruling party.

Collective perceptions of integration are at the core of the transactional-moral type of relationship observed by members of the Mexican community. From this perspective, promoting and monitoring electoral participation in the community is a task undertaken by some of its members. Similar to what occurs with joining political protest, the ritualistic connotations of voting seem to be reinforced by a series of unwritten rules that are largely shared within the group. In the words of a participant from Wellington:

Mexicans in New Zealand are very aware of what other Mexicans do or don't do. I have seen how they ask questions about voting every time an election comes. If you say you didn't vote they can make you feel as an ungrateful savage who does not deserve to live here. That is why you need to be careful when people tells you

that they all always vote in New Zealand. In the end you need to understand that some may feel judged and may not be telling you the truth.

Peer pressure was found in a number of stories where people described the many ways in which some members of the Mexican community ensured that the moral pact is respected. Whether this is achieved by informal means such as talking about it in gatherings and club reunions, or through more articulated measures such as posting invitations or pictures on Facebook groups, there are different ways in which people inside the community pressure others to participate in elections. Although such measures are consistent in delivering good results, this does not imply that meanings attached to the act move beyond its integrative ritualistic connotations.

Neither does it mean that for many members of the community, elections cannot bear additional connotations. As Baringhorst (2001) observes, rituals are heterogeneous constructions whose meanings can be cohesive yet fragmented across different cleavages. In this regard, apart from its integrative-ritualistic meanings, elections are perceived as a bundle of symbolic attributes mostly aligned to participants' accumulated experiences with politics. While for some voting is just a façade to demonstrate integration into a country, for others it is a true continuation of civic spirit acquired early in life. There are also those for whom elections represent the reaffirmation of ingrained feelings of fear and anger towards the political arena.

Cultures of marginality: Doña Juana and her family

I met Renato, Doña Juana's eldest son while catching a bus in the Auckland region. After a little chat about both our lives in New Zealand he volunteered to participate in the study. Since that day, he and two other members of his family became permanent participants in this research. Doña Juana arrived in Auckland approximately eight years ago. She was brought to New Zealand by Renato who moved three years before her after obtaining a resident visa through a partner he broke up with shortly afterwards. In the first years after her arrival she took advantage of a series of loopholes in immigration law to stay in the country. Shortly after her second year, she obtained sponsorship from the company where she worked as a cleaner, to stay. Over the course of the years, Doña Juana has been joined by several members of her family. First her husband, and later her two other sons, two daughters in law, two grandchildren, and a nephew. All of them have managed to stay in the country by using the same loopholes which allowed Doña Juana to enter New Zealand in the first place. Regardless of being a large family, all its members, except Renato and his cousin who live with their New Zealand partners, share a small

unit in the Auckland area. All of them come from a poor neighbourhood in Mexico City, their levels of education are lower than most members of the Mexican community, and their patterns of political socialisation denote extremely negative experiences with the structures of power. When remembering her early days in her neighbourhood, Doña Juana mentioned:

It was really hard because we did not have electricity, and my mother's house lacked proper flooring. It was a really poor neighbourhood, almost a *ciudad perdida* (shantytown) in the outskirts of Mexico City. We didn't hear much from the government except during election times when busses arrived to take my parents and brothers to the polling stations to vote for the PRI. They did it because they were afraid the government could claim our house because it was built on irregular land; there was also always the hope that if they supported the PRI we would get electricity in our block. Of course that happened eventually but it took several years... I saw with my own eyes how the government used to take people to electoral related events as *relleno* (filling material) to pack stadiums. They did not go voluntarily, they did it because they were hungry and by going there their families received a *torta* and a *refresco* (a sandwich and softdrink); sometimes they got some money too, not much but enough to survive the week. I pull it off with that shit for many years, but I promised myself that I would do my best to give my children a better education so they did not have to experience what I had.

The study of marginality and its relationship with structures of power has been of interest among a number of Mexican political sociologists and anthropologists. Adler-Lomnitz, et al. (2010) and Lomnitz (1977) argue that although some authors tend to shy away from the term 'marginality' because of its pejorative connotations, it is widely used in the Latin American tradition as an effective way of describing cleavages in the working class based on exclusion. In his ethnography of politics and cultural change in a poor area of Mexico City, Velez-Ibañez (1992) talks about *marginality politics* and *rituals of marginality* to describe the series of arrangements people in the lowest economic strata of the urban Mexican society need to employ in order to channel their demands and negotiate the structures of government. Such rituals are well represented in Doña Juana's narrative. Having spent her entire childhood in a poor neighbourhood, her relationship with the state was one of recurrent abuse and exclusion. As she later confirms in her story, most of the public services she accessed were negotiated with communal leaders —linked to the hegemonic government— and often involved corrupt

practices and different sorts of bargaining processes, including the exchange of goods and services for electoral support.

Based on these experiences, Doña Juana and her family have constructed an extremely negative, almost indelible, image of politics. After spending time with the family it was clear to me that they managed to move up in the Mexican social ladder through hard work and academic commitment. All of Doña Juana's sons attended high school and one of them even spent a couple of semesters at a public University in Mexico. But not even achieving a higher education and experiencing a better life has persuaded members of the family to change their relationship with the state, which is still regarded with fear and scepticism, even after migrating to New Zealand.

When they first answered the questionnaire, all three members of the family manifested having voted in elections both in Mexico and in New Zealand. Through different follow-up sessions and direct interaction, I ascertained that they had never actually cast a vote. When asked about the reasons behind their initial answers, they mentioned they felt embarrassed to admit they had never voted since they had felt judged in the past by other members of the Mexican community. In his exploration of voters' narratives in the United Kingdom, Coleman (2013) observes how feelings of shame and exclusion were felt by non-voters when members of their community do participate in elections. Interestingly, in this case shame and exclusion did not result in behavioural change but in masking reality in the eyes of the others. As mentioned by one member of the family: "Sometimes you just need to lie and tell them what they want to hear". Those who still do not have the right to vote see it as a 'relief' because of the perceived social conventions they have difficulty following. In this context, I asked Doña Juana's daughter-in-law if she would vote once she obtained her permanent residency:

I could say yes, but really when it comes to politics I am like this (signalling her thumb down). I feel that politics is pure *tranza* (a world of swindlers) and whatever happens and wherever I am that is my idea of politics.

It is worth noting that the overall acculturative strategies followed by Doña Juana and her family lean towards Berry's (2001) notion of separation. Indeed, they constantly reject contact with New Zealanders and recurrently recreate family rituals as if they were in Mexico. They regularly attend religious services in Spanish and socialise exclusively with their large network of contacts in the Latino community in Auckland. All members of the family are avid consumers of Mexican television programmes that they devoutly watch together every weeknight. In fact,

conversations with the family often occurred while simultaneously watching sports programmes and Mexican soap operas. Symbols of separation are clearly found in the use of word *pollos* (chickens) to refer to white New Zealanders. According to one member of the family, the term was coined to refer not only to the colour of their skin but to the “colour of their soul”. Not even having two family members of a different ethnicity makes Doña Juana change her acculturative strategy. “They are them and we are we”, she emphatically mentioned. It is in this context that the social pressure from the Mexican community to honour the symbolic agreement with New Zealand is deeply felt by the family.

Broadly speaking, the family lives a modest life in which economic pressures are obvious not only in their housing arrangements but also in other symbolic actions. In order to save money, Renato and his brother made arrangements with the landlord to clean the common areas of the building every week in exchange for a rent reduction. This action is deeply felt by both men for whom doing manual labour is perceived as a regression in the social ladder and a threat to their masculinity. Doña Juana started her career in New Zealand as a cleaner, now she is a supervisor and as such is regarded as an example to follow. Most of the family work in the retail sector earning the minimum wage. The family lives on a tight budget that is religiously administrated by Doña Juana. She makes all payments for food, services and other expenses such as school supplies for the grandchildren, clothing when this is necessary and occasional entertainment expenses.

For Doña Juana’s family, moving to New Zealand has giving them safety, but reality is still perceived as difficult and unfair. In many ways, their pre-migratory stories have found several parallels in New Zealand reality. “We lived pay check after pay check in Mexico and now we do the same in New Zealand” the daughter in law observes. In this context the reproduction of the negative ideas of the state are constantly reinforced. “I pay my taxes but have no medical protection for me or my daughter” she highlights. “The government is very good at charging you when you do something wrong but what about helping people like us to survive”, another member observes. From this perspective an imaginary construct of the New Zealand government as abusive and controlling prevails in the family narratives. High prices for basic goods and services, difficulties in getting a permanent job and a perceived impossibility of changing their migratory status, are seen as symbols of unfairness.

The history of Doña Juana and her family reveals the complexity of cultural mediation in the process of political acculturation. It moves the discussion on migrants’ electoral participation

beyond the simplicity of the civic and uncivic dichotomy, and positions collective decisions of political participation as a product of intricate relationships with the state. Doña Juana's is a story of a politically marginalized family which decided to marginalize itself further after years of abuse and exclusion.

This is just one of several other interpretations people make of elections, nonetheless I consider it to be illustrative of at least two of the propositions I have illustrated in this section: first and foremost is the idea that voting is perceived by members of the Mexican community as a ritual of integration. Whether this perceived ritual is able to drive people to the polling stations or simply feel the pressure to do so, it is clear that a code of honour among Mexicans exists, and this is used to construct a positive image of the community. Second is the idea that shared meanings of specific rituals coexist with individual interpretations of them. From this perspective, culturally mediated symbols can be interpreted cohesively yet differently among people from an original semiotic community.

8.4 Imagined non-political communities: post-migratory civic engagement

Even before Robert Putnam published his influential (1995) study *Bowling Alone*, a number of political scientists stressed the importance of community participation as a crucial component of democracy¹²³. It has been argued that active involvement with the community encourages citizens to participate further, boosts their knowledge of society and its issues, and makes them more tolerant of and attached to their fellow citizens (Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005). Understood as collective action, civic engagement, assumes that collaboration to improve societal conditions results in increased levels of social capital. From this perspective, community problem solving, volunteer work, and membership of associations, are seen as indicators of a healthy democracy.

Historically New Zealand has been considered a model country driven by values of collective action and egalitarianism (Spoonley et al., 1994; Mein Smith, 2005). In his study *Politics and People in New Zealand* Mitchell (1969, p.179) finds that in 1966 an impressive seventy one percent of New Zealanders were members of community associations, and based on such results declares the country to be a "nation of joiners". Miller (2015, p.12) describes the way in which the remoteness and smallness of New Zealand have played a vital role in the construction of a

¹²³ Different works on democracy and civic engagement have stressed the importance of community participation and civic involvement in promoting civic cultures (Almond & Verba, 1963; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et. al., 1995).

more intimate sense of community. Regardless of the steady decline in the rates of civic engagement mentioned in the preceding section, it is still possible to state that community participation is still a core component of New Zealand democracy, and that New Zealanders regard community participation as one of the most important dimensions of citizenship (Humpage, 2008, p.123).

Since the publication of the *Civic Culture* (Almond & Verba, 1963) Mexico has been characterised by positivist political scientists as a country with low levels of community involvement and participation¹²⁴. Indeed, when it comes to the traditional variables used to measure civic and community engagement, Mexicans have regularly scored lower than other nationalities. In this context, political sociologists have warned against using these types of indexes when aiming to understand community participation in a society with different cultural constructs of the issue (Krotz & Winocur, 2007).

In this context, capturing the meanings of community participation in Mexico requires understanding of the complex dynamics of association across different sectors of the population. For instance, Adler-Lomnitz, et al. (2010) contend the idea that Mexicans are not engaged with their communities by demonstrating the existence of a series of intricate networks of brokerage and collaboration that underlies communities across the country. In that regard, if it is true that western symbolic constructions of community engagement are not at the heart of many Mexicans, there are other types of associative forums in which Mexicans participate, to foster a sense of community. Nuijten's (2003) ethnographic work shows how people in the *ejido* (rural public community) work together to channel their demands to the Mexican government. Similarly, Castro, Kloster & Torregrosa (2004) have illustrated the different forms of associative action resulting from the lack of running water in different parts of the country. Other authors have explored the networks created in urban centers to negotiate the provision of services and infrastructure (e.g. Ramirez-Sainz, 1984; Perló & Schteingar 1984). It is in this context that the idea of Mexico as a place with poor associative capital, is not entirely accurate.

In fact, by wording questions differently, recent studies have revealed surprising results, even in terms of traditional indexes of civic participation. For instance, it has been argued that 36%

¹²⁴ Different works on democracy and civic engagement have stressed the importance of community participation and civic involvement in promoting civic cultures (Greeley, 1997; Verba et al., 1995; Weil, 1994; Verba & Nie, 1972). These ideas can be traced back to the Federalist Papers, Adam Smith, John Locke, and earlier. They probably come together most fully in the first empirical and theoretical accounts of modern democratic society by Alexis de Tocqueville (de Tocqueville, 2001, 2000).

of the adult population in Mexico has indeed acted as a volunteer at least once in their lives. This percentage is higher than countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark and Belgium (Butcher, 2010, p.139). It has also been proposed that 38% of Mexicans attend at least one type of community-oriented meeting every year (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2012). Despite these promising results, it is worth noting the formation of an influential civil society is still a work in progress that faces several structural barriers. Butcher (2010) observes that when compared with other nations such as the United States and Sweden, the non-profit sector is extremely small and vulnerable.

All these elements combine in such a way that the meanings Mexicans attach to the term 'community participation' are heterogeneous, fragmented but positive overall. It is clear that among certain groups, particularly in the lowest economic strata, working together is the only way to negotiate the provision of public goods and services. In other groups, collaborating is associated with symbolic constructs of solidarity and cohesion, yet sometimes people may still see community participation as an unpleasant activity based on the dynamics of corruption and clientelism surrounding some of the brokerage practices described earlier in this section.

Collaboration within limits: non-political civic engagement

Migration involves rebuilding the notion of community as well as the role one desires to play within it. Based on the empirical evidence of this research, in this section I make three propositions: first that the idea of community among Mexican migrants is largely symbolic and as such encompasses the construction of multiple boundaries across New Zealand society; second, that civic engagement inside the different types of communities is widely dependent on perceptions of need and responses of solidarity and, finally, that limits to community participation are shaped by the types of relationships established with New Zealand society.

Sense of community is normally correlated to the interaction of four elements: (a) membership or sense of belonging, (b) influencing or mattering, (c) reinforcement of shared needs, and (d) shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.9). So far I have used the term 'Mexican community' to refer to a series of symbolic constituents that hold people together on the basis of ethnicity and culture. However, it is clear in participants' stories that this is not the only type of community they think of when talking about their lives in New Zealand. Neighbourhoods, religious congregations, clubs, associations, and even sports teams, are

indiscriminately used in participants' stories to refer to different *ensembles* they feel bound to and in which they participate in a variety of ways.

Indeed, participants' accounts of political acculturation revealed that community boundaries are highly symbolic and the meaning people attach to these can vary greatly. Regardless of semiotic variety, narrative lines point to a hierarchical organisation of the concept of community at the top of which lies the Mexican community. It is worth noting that although widely present in people's narratives, the Mexican community is mostly an imaginary construct with no formal organisational structures through which people can develop specific group activities. Instead, based on cultural ties, people interact in different interlinked social groups in which an idea of ethnic community is built. For instance, groups formed by Mexican families, Mexican students, or Mexican professionals constitute distinctive sub-communities linked together by ties of culture and ethnicity. Inter-group awareness is overall high since most members belong to more than one sub-group and since these communicate through different informal mechanisms and mutual adjustment¹²⁵. As one participant in Auckland put, "there are many Mexicos in New Zealand but somehow they are all connected through gossip and rumour".

At a second level lies the neighbourhood, which is considered by participants as an important geographical boundary of belonging, shared faith, and togetherness. Indeed, in participants' stories the notion of the vicinity as the immediate geographical unit is a common thread. To most participants, neighbourhoods are spaces of common life binding people together. "When you move to a new country you first need to worry about who are your neighbours" observed a participant in the Waikato region. Interestingly, a common complaint among some participants is the lack of contact among neighbours in New Zealand. In fact, based on imaginary conceptions of Western societies, people can sometimes feel deflated when confronted with contrasting cultural realities¹²⁶. As this participant argues, "In American TV shows there is always a neighbour welcoming newcomers with a basket of muffins, here none came knocking on my door".

At a third level lies a series of different communities based on religious beliefs, leisure activities, and specific interests. It is worth noting that membership in these groups does not necessarily involve developing a sense of belonging. Nonetheless, there are relevant cases in which some

¹²⁵ Here it is important to consider the relevance of online communities, forums and groups in creating awareness of activities developed by different sub-groups in the Mexican community.

¹²⁶ NB. The use of the term Western societies does not relate to the geographical connotation of the term but to the imaginary conception of a first world as observed in Chapter Seven.

of the identities developed in these *ensembles* can be even more relevant than the ethnic community or the neighbourhood. For instance, in the case of Doña Juana and her family, the church is a more important referent of community than the neighbourhood. Similarly, for some people like Marcos, belonging to an organized group of activists is even more relevant than the idea of belonging to the Mexican community. Although such cases seem to be exceptional, they illustrate how hierarchies of belonging are not always strictly shared.

Although people recognize that there are multiple opportunities for participation at the three levels, they also acknowledge that most of the time they remain inactive and prefer only to be “observers” or “give opinions” when they are asked for them. This takes us to the second proposition: that community participation is to a great extent determined by the development of perceptions of need and feelings of solidarity. This is particularly relevant given the fact that, regardless of participants’ sense of belonging to different communities, their active participation in these is rather scarce. Whenever asked about community participation, people normally answer that they would be more than willing to “give a hand”, “work with others”, or “volunteer” as long as their work is “genuinely” or “truly” needed. Such responses reflect that civic duty—at least in its communitarian facet—depends mostly on subjective evaluations of the social context.

As argued in Chapter Five, a common perception among participants is the idea that social problems in New Zealand are irrelevant when compared to the harsh reality of social life in Mexico. From this perspective it was hardly surprising to find that on multiple occasions, members of the Mexican community did not feel enthusiastic about collaborating in communal projects that were perceived as minor. Although this telescope effect may help understand the reluctance to participate in certain types of activities, there are also a series of semiotic differences affecting the perceived significance of others. A number of activities such as joining formal associations has not been historically grounded as part of Mexican political culture. Similarly, others such as organising rallies, signing petitions, and fund raising bear different cross-cultural connotations. I will illustrate this proposition with a fragment from the story of a participant in Auckland:

I don’t care if it is for the fairest cause in the world; I am not going to stand in the middle of the street with a can asking people to give me money. Kiwis like to do that, we don’t.

This testimony is embedded with a number of markers of culture and class. To this participant, street fundraising activities are disregarded since they are considered as inadequate in terms of the positions and trajectories traditionally occupied in the social context. As later argued in the story, to him, asking strangers for money is associated with the symbolic construct of a beggar. Here, although need is acknowledged “the fairest cause in the world”, means are rejected. Of course that does not supersede the fact that responses to perceptions of need cannot be channelled through alternative forms of participation. In fact, numerous stories give account of participants’ extraordinary efforts to contribute to improving life in their communities. When talking about the reasons why he decided to stop attending the monthly meetings of his neighbours’ association, this participant observed:

To me, being a good member of my community is not about joining clubs or go to charity events to show off how much I care about this or that; it is about being willing and able to respond when you see that someone has a real need for help.

In this context, civic duty is experienced not as a recurrent performative ritual but as the latent capacity to respond whenever it is needed. From this perspective, it is plausible to state that the role individuals assign to themselves within their communities is mostly inclined to moral associational components (Mason, 2000, p.27) such as solidarity and mutual concern¹²⁷. Bhattacharyya (1995) highlights these moral components proposing that communities are better understood in terms of networks of solidarity, felt needs and consequent participation. For instance, in her ethnographic work with Mexican migrants in California, Ochoa (2004) finds that the notion of a neighbourhood spirit depends on intricate networks of solidarity and mutual concern¹²⁸. In this context, responses of solidarity are perceived as the ultimate civic obligation one needs to fulfil in the complex nets of moral-transactional relationships.

A final proposition is that the limit *par excellence* to community participation is the perception that the activity to be developed bears political connotations or may be used politically. Such a limit is clearly established by many participants who constantly distinguish between political and non-political activities. Working with neighbours to solve a problem, collaborating with parents and teachers to improve schooling services, volunteering for charities and working

¹²⁷ Mason (2000) differentiates between the ordinary and moral conceptions of community. The ordinary sense involves elements such as sharing values, identifying as part of a group, and following group practices. The moral sense refers to the sentiments of solidarity and mutual concern that hold communities together.

¹²⁸ Although broadly speaking Ochoa’s explanation refers to relationships between migrants as members of an ethnic community, it may well be extended to other types of community.

together to promote Mexican culture are normally conceived as non-political activities. Interestingly, a series of activities such as environmental protection that may be considered political are sometimes considered to be non-political. In these cases, participation is determined mostly by individuals' interpretation of the activity and the role they want to play in the community. No sense of restriction from the community seems to operate here either in favour or against such types of action. As mentioned by a participant in Wellington, "this is some sort of a free zone". In this regard, people can and have acted in different types of community activities based on their pre- and post-migratory positions and trajectories in the social context, and on the acculturative strategies they observe.

Interestingly, most participants mentioned that their reluctance in joining formal associations is grounded on the idea that organised movement can be easily turned into corrupted entities serving political purposes. In that regard, members of the Mexican community normally feel vulnerable towards how their work in the community would be used by others, so they prefer more informal types of arrangements. The perceived risk of getting involved in political activities seems to be more a self-imposed sanitation than a real threat based on experience. As observed by this participant:

In Mexico I immediately knew when someone was asking my help for political motives; here I don't, and honestly I don't want to find out. So I rather say no to everything that looks very well organized.

Based on these types of concerns, many Mexicans prefer joining informal organizations or causes they feel more familiar with. Not surprisingly, ethnic oriented activities are highly regarded among members of the community who eagerly collaborate during celebrations and festivities. For instance, in Christchurch members of the Mexican community have created an informal organization to promote Mexican culture in New Zealand. They hold regular activities and participate constantly in ethnic and multicultural festivals in the Canterbury region. They also serve as a means to facilitate integration among newcomers. As explained by one of its members, apart from promoting a good image of Mexico, the association aims to provide guidance on how to adapt to New Zealand society. During one of my first meetings with one of the leaders of the community she explained:

We want to create awareness about Mexico and generate a sense of community among Mexicans in Christchurch. The only limit we have is political. We really

don't want to get involved in things with political parties or politicians. We want to be one hundred percent an association for the community and that is all. No one is going to use us.

Again, the idea that community participation may be the subject of political use appears in this participant's narrative and based upon this, clear borders are established. During the follow up interviews with some members of the community I had the chance to talk about these limits and perceived risks. There, people recurrently spoke about how joining political causes was interpreted as challenging the regime, and as such constituted a breach of the moral-transactional agreement they held with New Zealand. From this perspective, although there was freedom of interpretation of what community action was, based on certain assumptions, there were borders people decided not to cross. Politically oriented community activities such as joining a cause to demand state intervention, or signing a petition in the name of the community are thus normally not supported by most members of the community, since doing so would affect the reputation of its members as grateful, obedient individuals. For instance, when remembering how he was invited to participate in an association this participant mentioned:

My friend told me it would be good to join [name of the association] because together we could work to stop the mining thing that was allegedly going to hurt the community. In the beginning I said yes but later, talking to my wife we decided that it was not a good idea. I mean, we are happy here and we don't want to give the wrong impression. It is better to stay away from politics.

Although this is the prevailing spirit, some participants —the vast minority— particularly those with more political cultural capital, are indeed active participants in politically oriented community activities. Earlier in this chapter we explored the story of Marcos, a political activist involved in different movements linking politics and community. Like him, other members of the community have capitalised on their cultural experiences with politics and put them to work in favour of improving their different types of communities.

Linda in Christchurch: a story of non-political community solidarity

I made contact with a participant I will refer to as Linda during my first visit to Christchurch in March 2013. At that time she had been living in New Zealand for approximately eight years, six of which she had spent in the Canterbury region. After several unfruitful attempts to get a job in

New Zealand, she is still unemployed and dedicates most of her time to housework. “Without kiwi experience no one hires you here”, she asserts in an almost resentful tone. Linda does not like the idea of joining clubs or associations and not even the Mexican association in Christchurch has been able to attract her attention. “I am kind of a loner”, she observed during our first meeting.

As our first interview evolved I asked Linda about her experiences doing community work in New Zealand. Her initial answer was rather shy and insecure: “Well although I know other Mexicans here I am not really into going to their meetings or anything like that” she replied; “I also don’t like to snoop around my neighbours so I preferred to keep a healthy distance” she continued. Her hesitation to respond made me realize that she had problems conceiving the concepts of community and community work, so I explained these further. With a clearer idea of what I was asking for, she suddenly said: “If that is the case, I need to tell you about the earthquake”. The following narrative then unfolded:

After the earthquake hit the first thing I did was checking that my house and everyone around were ok. Shortly afterwards I started watching on the news how massive it was and couldn’t help jumping into my car and drive downtown to try to help. I couldn’t do much since most of the affected areas had been closed by the police, and they didn’t seem appreciative of my help; although I offered it. I felt really deflated at that moment. A few hours later I was contacted by a kiwi friend of mine who laughed at me when I told her what I did... She explained to me that in this country you cannot just run to a disaster and expected to be taken as a volunteer... she suggested I should join a proper organization if I really wanted to help... I don’t like organizations, I mean I can work with them if I need to, but I prefer not to... so what I did was to offer my help [instead] by telling them I had three unoccupied bedrooms and was able to accommodate people who lost their houses... I received a total of eight victims of the earthquake who stayed with me for about two weeks. My husband kind of hated me for that at the time. He did not like strangers in our place, but as I explained our job then was to make people in need feel welcome and make sure they were ok... I am convinced that when an opportunity to help others arrives at your door you need to do what is right because what goes around comes around.

There are several reasons why this story is relevant to understanding culturally mediated conceptions of community and community work. The concepts are difficult to grasp in the story and it is not until a detailed explanation is provided that Linda can place her experience in the framework of community participation and civic duty. Cohen (1985, p.73) observes that although the mere concept of community may seem symbolically simple, its internal discourse is symbolically complex. Within a semiotic community people may use similar structures yet they may think about them in quite different ways. Although Linda's initial concept of community referred to her neighbourhood and the Mexican community, when confronted with a natural disaster she is able to conceive herself as part of a bigger local community. A number of authors have explored the creation of a sense of community based on emergency responses to natural disasters (e.g. Patterson, Well & Patel, 2010; Smit & Wandel, 2006; Cutter & Emrich, 2006). A common thread among these studies is that perceptions of need and risk can indeed spark an awareness of community membership through which responses of solidarity are articulated.

But probably more important than this suddenly-awakened sense of community is the idea that responses of solidarity can indeed be constructed from past experience. Having being born and brought up in Mexico City, Linda underwent a series of events and responses that she capitalised upon when confronted with a similar situation in New Zealand. In 1985 a series of earthquakes destroyed a number of areas of Mexico City killing thousands of people, while many others got trapped inside hundreds of collapsed buildings. Citizens' responses to such a crisis have been the centre of different studies in the realms of sociology and politics¹²⁹. Without being recruited by any formal organization, thousands of citizens joined forces and organized themselves to perform rescue tasks that the government was not able to undertake given the magnitude of the event. Following this line, Linda remembers her early days in Mexico:

The dimension of that monster earthquake surpassed the capacities of any government. I was rather young but I remember people working together, desperate to rescue survivors. Everyone, including my dad, collaborated to make

¹²⁹ It has been long argued that community responses to the 1985 Mexican earthquake were crucial to the conformation of a civil society in Mexico. During that period several informal groups of volunteers recruited thousands of citizens who helped as rescuers. It has also been proposed that the social capital generated by such groups was determinant to the political future of the Mexican capital. For instance, after the earthquake, organised citizens were able to pressure the Mexican government to create proper legislative representation and elected officers to deal with the problems of the city (Leal-Martinez, 2014; Massolo & Schteingart, 1987).

the best of the worst. People were doing everything they could to help others. I remember that as if it was yesterday.

Linda's former experiences of community response were used then as an accumulated resource to react to a similar situation, and to position herself as a member of the local community. Unaware of cross-cultural differences in volunteer work, Linda's first reactions were strikingly similar to those experienced in Mexico: "I couldn't help jumping into my car and drive downtown to try to help". The frustration experienced with the results of such a decision did not stop her determination to help others. Although she does not like joining formal organisations, she decided she could collaborate on her own terms. "I felt more comfortable that way", she observed in a follow up interview. For a period of fifteen days, Linda and her husband did not only take care of several victims in their house, but also invested in buying extra food, blankets and other items to make them feel comfortable. The use of the phrase "our job then was to help people in need" reflects an enormous sense of civic duty and locates the individual within the faith and circumstances surrounding the community.

These reactions may seem surprising to some, but they are consistent with similar responses of help and solidarity articulated by Mexican migrants in the United States. For instance Aptekar (1990) finds that during the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, Mexican migrants in Watsonville California used their previous experiences with the 1985 earthquakes in Mexico City to structure their individual and communal perceptions of risk.

Like Linda's, other stories regarding the Christchurch earthquakes revealed how people capitalised on past experience to interpret risk and respond positively to a community in need of help. It is somehow surprising though that when these participants were initially asked about community participation, they usually responded that apart from their membership of the Mexican association, they "had not done much" or "nothing at all". From this perspective, ideas of community participation were normally restrictively associated to fundraising, community-driven programs, and joining non-political causes through NGOs. Moreover, a sense of distance between these forms of participation and cultural practices prevailed in some stories. From this perspective it is logical to expect some reluctance to adopt such practices, particularly when people are under the impression that problems in their new country are not that relevant, that their participation can be used politically (such as in the case of NGOs), or that it can be interpreted as confrontational towards the government (such as in the case of community-driven programs).

But when perceptions of relevance and risk arise, stories like Linda's provide vivid examples of civic duty. Migrants' responses of solidarity during the 2011 Christchurch earthquake were multiple and well documented¹³⁰. In the case of participants in this research, these included actions such as collaboration with the NZ army to distribute food and water; offering shelter to people who had lost their houses; volunteering in fire brigades, and signing up for groups helping to clear silt. Furthermore, such responses were most of the time culturally mediated. Just like in Linda's case, references to the earthquakes in Mexico were in fact a common thread among participants. All these responses are consistent with the notion of *community resilience*, understood as the capacity of the community to adapt positively to adversity and risk (Norris et al., 2008). The ways in which people contribute to such resilience were diverse, but they all also converge in a common sense of belonging to the community and having a moral obligation to it.

8.5 Conclusions

In this chapter I have stressed the complex relationships between the emotional and cognitive components of political acculturation and political action. Clear differences between conceptions of politics and political action suggest that people do not always act according to basic cognitive or emotional reactions. Instead, individual and group negotiations have consistently appeared in stories, revealing how political behaviour is affected not only by peoples' accumulated experiences with politics, but also by a series of shared agreements and unwritten rules.

Semiotic analyses reveal how people reconstruct their notions of political action through culturally mediated interpretations of political phenomena, institutions and practices. Such reconstruction involves a series of shared intelligible agreements that are culturally given, but it is also affected by other factors such as class and education. While shared agreements create a first layer of meaning for political action, people can indeed attach different complimentary connotations to acting politically. In this context, striking behavioural similarities coexist with individual meanings of political action.

An aspirational component of political acculturation is revealed at the centre of such shared agreements, that being the conviction of being perceived in positive terms as functional

¹³⁰ See Thorney et al. (2013)

individuals, respectful of the laws, and integrated into New Zealand society. This bundle of attributes can be condensed in the expression *being a good citizen*. Nonetheless, most ethnographic vignettes in this chapter suggest that the semiotic implications of such constructs can vary deeply across members of a community. While for the vast majority, shared agreements of *good citizenship* point in the direction of obedience and gratitude (a code of honour), there is still room for more proactive interpretation of the term.

Interestingly, most stories of political action revealed lines of continuity between pre- and post-migratory political action. This would suggest that while interpreting their new political world, people reconstruct themselves as a new version of the political persons they were in the past. This is not just obvious in cases such as Marcos, Julia or Doña Juana but on the stories of most participants who feel, think and act based on their traditional conceptions of politics. Of course, this does not entail that culture is simply a repetition of the past, but a determinant influence in the constant reconstruction of the future.

The findings in this chapter are aligned with most semiotic propositions that symbolic representations and shared intelligibility of politics are relevant to fostering political action (Wedeen, 2002; Ross, 2007; Chabal & Daloz, 2006). But they are also consistent with other non-semiotic analyses revealing how the complexity of migrants' political action can sometimes be misunderstood by narrowing the scope of analysis using big categorisations. For instance, Sanchez-Jankowsky (2002) warns scholars about using panethnic categorisations and invites them to explore contextual and historical factors rooted in ethnicity, shared experiences and concepts of class and social order.

Following this line, authors such as Harles (1997) and Gioioso (2010) have arrived at somewhat similar conclusions using different epistemological approaches. For instance, in his analysis of migrants' civic and political engagement in Little Havana, Florida, Gioioso (2010) finds extremely low levels of community participation coexisting with impressively high levels of electoral participation. Through detailed qualitative analysis, he concludes that both figures were not necessarily related to either a lack of community spirit, or political conviction among voters. Instead, he argues that low community participation was related to cultural constructs of the issue embedded in the Latino tradition. From this perspective, Latino migrants simply prefer informal collective action to joining formal organisations which are disregarded on the basis that they can become corrupt or extremely controlling. Similarly, high electoral participation was grounded in the shared agreements of a community that wants to be perceived as

participative, regardless of the fact that most of the time electoral decisions were not well informed.

On a similar note, Harles (1997) finds that the high electoral turnout among Lao migrants to Canada was based not on genuine political integration but on the image they wanted to provide to their new country as law abiding citizens. However, when asked about how they decided who to vote for they overwhelmingly manifested a lack of knowledge of candidates and political parties. This situation leads Harles to argue that unless it is contextually and culturally grounded, observing simple political behaviour can lead to false assumptions of political integration¹³¹.

The similarities between these cases and the findings presented are clear. They both illustrate alternative forms of exploration of acculturative phenomena. In that regard, semiotic analyses of political action are also positioned as a viable alternative to understanding political action away from mainstream types of analyses. In the end, as demonstrated in this chapter, exploring individuals and collective meaning-making processes can indeed reveal in-depth factors behind peoples' political behaviour.

All three political institutions that have been analysed (protest, voting and community participation) reveal similar levels of complexity. They are all mixtures of superimposed elements of analysis articulated in such a way that they become intelligible at individual and group levels. History, social class, individual experience, perceptions of the world, to mention just a few, all play a part in the way people behave politically.

Both examples constitute important parallels with the evidence shown in this chapter. Indeed, the quotes extracted from participants' stories are sometimes appallingly similar. In the end, they all reveal that when one explores the political action of migrants from different perspectives, new windows are opened and new types of questions can be posited.

¹³¹ Here it is worth noting that following the American tradition, Harles refers to these phenomena in terms of integration before assimilation. From his perspective he asserts that observable political behaviour may result in a false idea of migrants' assimilation in the receiving society.

Chapter Nine: Conclusions

This thesis began with the argument that culture is a crucial component of migrants' interaction with a newly encountered political system. The ethnographic exploration of the semiotic repertoires brought, deployed and transformed by members of the Mexican community in New Zealand has shown the dynamic character of political acculturative processes and its intricate relations across groups and individuals. It has demonstrated the way in which deeply entrenched discourses, accumulated experiences and contact with a new political environment cohere around and lead to new forms of order through which the political arena is understood and political action is rationalised. The three main conclusions that emerge from this thesis concern the impact of culture on the construct of a new political setting in which individuals act and react towards state action, governmental policies, political concepts, institutional rituals and democratic practices. A fourth and final conclusion is more a reflection on its methodology.

1) Political culture is a language, a frame of reference through which people construct understandings of the world.

The first and most obvious conclusion of this thesis is that culture and politics are symbiotically tightened notions without which our understandings of political phenomena would be severely limited. Exploring the contexts in which people are born and brought up is therefore crucial to widening our notions of how groups of individuals think, feel and act towards the political world. Such a conclusion is aligned with a number of propositions made by political scholars over the past sixty years (e.g. Almond & Verba, 1963; Pye & Verba, 1965; Widalisky, 1987; Inglehart, 1988; Almond, 1990; Putnam, 1993; Huntington 1993). Nonetheless, culture is much more complex than its residual behavioural effects (attitudes and behaviours) and as such is better understood as a language through which people communicate, comprehend and act accordingly in a given political arena (Adler-Lomnitz et al., 2014, p.14; Riley, 1983). In this context, one of the purposes of this thesis has been to show how a critical understanding of culture as semiotic practices can produce new types of arguments around causality, rationality and action. From this perspective, although a political culture is *per se* the manifestation of the psychological and objective dimensions of politics, it cannot be devoid of the subjective elements binding people together in an environment of shared intelligibility (Weeden 2002). Political cultures are thus complex languages ingrained in the historically constructed agreements and disagreements of a

polity. Concepts and institutions, formal and informal practices, legends and myths, rituals and rumours all cohere in a symbolic order upon which an idea of the state is structured. A political culture is thus a language not always fully graspable to the eye of the foreigner.

Throughout this thesis I have demonstrated how inherited conceptions comprising symbolic forms of politics are inscribed in concrete environments of intelligibility. Moreover, I have shown how such symbolic forms produce observable political effects. Nonetheless, as I will further develop in the following conclusions, what may look like a highly cohesive language with apparently similar outcomes is indeed the product of multiple dialogues of self-reflection constituted and affirmed by others. In the end the consistency yet diversity of such dialogues mimics the intricacy of a culture that has been described by political sociologists and anthropologists as extremely complex in its relationships with the state (e.g. Wolf 1956; Wolf and Hansen, 1967; Lomnitz 1995; 1999; Knight 1992; 1994; 1998). From this perspective the language of culture is articulated not only through common points but through evident differences and contrasts understood because they have been commonly shaped. These dialogues and reflections have been explicitly discussed in the context of participants' narratives of political acculturation. In my view, these are highly influenced by complex hierarchal relationships embedded in the interaction among individuals, groups and the state. They all reflect systems of signification widely established by shared agreements produced and experienced in given socio-cultural contexts.

But as this research has shown, such languages are not exclusively political but also social. That is because one can hardly imagine the political world divorced from its social counterpart. People construct sets of symbols to provide social guidance, and it is through such guidance that the relationship between citizens and structures of power is engraved. This is particularly explicit in the narratives of most participants which give account of complex relationships between social and political realities. To the average participant the social world encountered both in Mexico and New Zealand is the product of a political world, but at the same time, the political world is considered to be a consequence of social arrangements. In this context it is difficult to speak about an exclusive language of political culture. Instead, this research suggests that culture is a wider frame in which a political dimension exists. Speaking thus of a political culture would be difficult without considering it to be a part of a more comprehensive symbolic system.

Finally, my research has shown that the language of culture is constructed through practice and because of this it is continuously evolving to fit the challenges posited by the environment. Indeed, participants in this research have clearly demonstrated that notions of politics derive not only from *endoculturation*¹³² but also from live experience and embodied practices with politics. In this regard this is not a static language written in stone, but a dynamic system of signification continuously transformed, though highly dependent on the past.

All these reflections combine in a way that positions culture and cultural interpretations as major decoders of political information and triggers of political action. Without them, social interaction would be extremely difficult and human beings would hardly be able to find a path to follow. Culture thus is not just a language but the most important language people have, to make sense of political reality. Understanding culture as a semiotic system, a language embedded in practice is consistent with a number of propositions made by contemporary political scholars who, drawing from Geertz's original notion of symbolic systems, have advocated in favour of more dynamic concepts of political culture and cultural interpretivism (e.g. Wedeen, 1999, 2002; Ross, 1997, 2007; Chabal & Daloz, 2006).

2) Political acculturation is a complex process that relies on culturally mediated interpretations and not simply on the transfer of political information.

This thesis has argued that political acculturation is a long-term complex process affected by a number of intricate and intertwined dimensions. It has been structured upon four of such dimensions: perception, cognition, emotion and action. In this context, meaning-construction was shown to be neither a mere product of transfer nor a simple consequence of exposure, but a complex process of synthesis at the nexus of these four dimensions. While these have been explored separately, it is clear that they cannot be understood in a vacuum. Just like stories of perception are embedded with cognitive and emotional components, stories of emotion hold crucial cognitive and perceptual traits. Participants' understandings of politics are therefore crafted through seeing, reasoning, feeling and living simultaneously in two polities. From this perspective individuals in this research are neither trapped in an old world, nor starting from scratch, but actively constructing a new political reality based on what they have lived

¹³² Here I use the *endoculturation* referring to the early processes of socialisation (mostly acquired through family upbringing and school education) within a given community. The term has served as a reputable form to distinguish these from other types of socialisation processes in the French and Spanish traditions.

throughout their lives. Culture is thus the vehicle that mediate the interpretation of political symbols.

Considering the relevance of culture in the articulation of human understandings of the world, it is almost natural to see why participants constantly draw from familiar symbols to make sense of their new political environments. As has been shown, Mexican migrants arrive in New Zealand with almost no conception of its political system, institutions and practices. Nonetheless, they land with an extensive inventory of understandings of politics. In that regard, culturally acquired notions consistently appear in participants' stories as footprints to follow whenever they make sense of the New Zealand political environment. As previously argued, such a proposition is consistent with different works in the field of political socialisation of migrants; nonetheless, as this thesis suggests, understood in its traditional form political transferability does not fully capture the complexity of political acculturative phenomena¹³³.

Following this line this thesis recognises the importance of political transferability but locates it as a part of a more intricate process of cultural reconstruction. From this perspective transferability makes little sense without considering, for example, the cultural origins of political knowledge, the contextual arrangements of migration and the endless individual and group negotiations between migrants and their new political environments. People do not simply unpack and apply pre-migratory political knowledge out of rucksack, instead they individually and collectively reshape their systems of signification and create new forms of political cultural capital through culturally mediated processes¹³⁴. The results of such cultural mediation are not seemingly consistent among all members of the Mexican community however. While the prevailing evidence presented in this thesis seems to lead to the idea of cohesive interpretations of politics, there are caveats which complicate any neat closure of debate.

Indeed impressions of cohesiveness may arrive from the overwhelming similarities that characterize most of the processes explored in the study. It is true that in abstract terms people

¹³³ As argued in Chapter Six, behind the proposition of political transferability lies the assumption that migrants' past experiences with politics are part of a toolkit they can put into use during the process of political acculturation. In different contexts this is analysed mostly through the exploration of migrants' partisanship and voting behaviour (Wilson, 1973; Finifter & Finifter, 1989; Wals, 2011). Whenever correlations are found between pre- and post-migratory patterns, an assumption of political transferability is created. In this thesis I argue that we need a new view on these types of phenomena.

¹³⁴ On a similar note, Umut Erel (2010) criticises "rucksack approaches" on the basis that they view particular cultural resources and practices as ethnically-bound. Such an approach, he argues, ignores the multiple cultural practices and forms within a migrant group and the diversity of cultural factors validated through elements such as class and gender within a specific community.

find themselves linked by similar perceptual, cognitive and emotional paths. It is more so if we consider that these are closely tightened by a number of accumulated experiences people share as members of a nation with strong and cohesive elements such as Mexico. But it is also true that neither all processes lead to similar political behaviours, nor that they all converge in identical interpretations of New Zealand political institutions and practices. From this perspective and borrowing the expression from Wolf (1956, p.1065), the system that gives way to a common view of state and power is in fact the ‘bones, nerves and sinews’ binding people together, yet different views, convictions and actions are internally negotiated and carefully crafted at the individual and group levels.

At the individual level, people construct accounts of politics shaped by their own interests, experiences and practices with two political systems. The continuous adjustments involved in such a process cannot but lead to a series of negotiations of the self and how this is positioned towards the state. It is clear that, as polities, New Zealand and Mexico bear radically different cultural underpinnings that need to be reconciled and synthesized if people are to make sense of politics and respond to any challenge posited by the environment. Old conceptions and convictions need to give way to new forms of citizenship people may find strange and even disagree with based on their own experiences. Although collectively lived such experience is also deeply personal. It is in this context that members of the Mexican community often find themselves in similar circumstances while holding somewhat heterogeneous interpretations of political concepts, rituals and institutions. These constructs are in the end expressions of their own making shaped through common processes of continuous change and affected by shared historical discussions of how the political arena is to be understood.

The different meanings attached to elections are a good example to illustrate this proposition. As argued in Chapter Eight, at the group level there is a culturally shaped environment upon which different meanings of voting have been historically crafted in Mexico. Although these may have resulted in an abstract, if shared, notion that elections are useless, corrupt or unfair, once in New Zealand people reshape such meanings in a variety of ways. Beyond the group-based interpretation that voting is the ultimate proof of integration to New Zealand, lies a series of different understandings at the individual level. While for some people voting is seen as a precious opportunity to take political stances in their new polity, others see it as a commodity to trade, yet others may not even see the point of voting at all. Following this logic, the process of political acculturation is not simple, linear or homogeneously crafted, but rather fragmented. Yet it is somehow surprisingly connected by thin lines of cohesion.

But beyond the subjective meanings that individuals in this research assign to their own actions, there are also several intersubjective meanings which are negotiated and constructed through establishing normative rules and social practices at the group level. Probably, the most important form of group negotiation affecting the Mexican community relates to the construction of a group identity. Indeed, this thesis has demonstrated how cultural mediation is constantly employed to construct cohesive arrangements from which a clear and distinctive cultural community emerges and attempts to find its place in New Zealand. Given the small nature and scattered distribution of the Mexican community, this was an unexpected finding, one that reveals how, when people are confronted with a contrasting social and political reality they will find ways of constructing shared worlds on the basis of culture and ethnicity¹³⁵.

Shaping a collective identity in New Zealand through cultural mediation proved to be problematic to say the least. The constant and resounding references to be considered both as a traitor and an intruder were consistently embedded in most participants' narratives. Being Mexican is in fact a category of social differentiation coined through centuries of history and culture. As such the Mexican community in New Zealand reconstruct its group identity based on what it is considered to be the positive aspects of a "millenary culture" to use the words of a participant. What is good and what is bad is therefore culturally mediated in a convoluted environment where romantic notions of Mexico, perceived threats to its underpinning elements, negative stereotypes and future expectations cohere around and put pressures to create a positive group identity. Probably the most interesting part of such a process is how it results in the construction new forms of belonging able to reconcile the traitor-intruder dichotomy.

The *moral-transactional agreement* reached by members of the Mexican community is in that regard a one-way type of pact structured upon shared conceptions of what is "good" and "possible". Interestingly what is considered to be "good" is most of the times rooted in what would be a perfect fit for any authoritarian Mexican politician. Mexicans who don't challenge the system, don't protest and are highly obedient of the rules and regulations of their new country. They vote, pay their taxes, and keep their political opinions to themselves. Moreover, even though they are sometimes dispersed around remote places in two islands they find ways of ensuring that such a pact is being honoured by most of its members.

¹³⁵ Here the use of the term ethnicity goes beyond the traditional characterisations of race and merges with the concept of *Mexicanidad* (Mexicanity) as one participant articulated in the idea of the *mestizo* (native Mexican of mixed blood).

But once again it would be an exaggeration to state that all members of the Mexican community adhere to this pact in identical terms. While there seems to be some guiding lines communally observed –the rejection of a New Zealand national identity, the almost religious obedience to the law and the self-imposed restriction to commit what is perceived as pernicious political activities- fieldwork of this research shows that this pact is polysemic in nature and as such subject of multiple readings within the community. Stories told by people acting as community leaders, political activists, good neighbours, philanthropists, party members, and public officers provide different understandings of good citizenship, always suitable to fit within the limits of such a pact.

In that regard, this study challenges the notion of political culture as a seamless system of meanings with ubiquitous logical consistency¹³⁶. Instead it suggests a more heterogeneous arrangement of understandings articulated in systems that people are able to comprehend based on shared experiences with politics in two settings¹³⁷. This reflection is crucial to understanding the uniqueness of acculturative processes and the importance of analyses at the micro level¹³⁸. What participants in this research have experienced in their acculturative processes are a series of distinctive traits, negotiations and reformulations that may only make sense in the context of their migratory experience.

3) Culture creates a diverse mosaic of understandings of the political world, yet at the individual level evidence mostly suggests lines of continuity between the past and the present.

The existence of multiple interpretations of political reality may be seen as a symptom of a thorough transformational experience at the individual and group levels. Indeed, the rich mosaic of experiences found in the field may give the false impression that at such a diversity flows from a number of disruptions between cultures of origin and destination. Nonetheless, it is worth

¹³⁶ Such consistency can be better exemplified in the work of early political culturalists discussed in Chapter Three who tended to construct broad characterizations of societies based on holding similar attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

¹³⁷ Scholars have long argued that exposure to similar discourses do not necessarily shape peoples' minds in a fixed way. For Instance Nuijten (2003) uses the work of anthropologists such as Bhabha (1991), Said (1978) and Young (1995) to illustrate such a proposition. To these I could add the works of political culturalists and semioticians such as Barighost (2001), Wedeen (2002), and Ross (2007).

¹³⁸ By micro-level I mean the ethnographic exploration of contextual arrangements pertaining to members of one ethnic or cultural group as opposed to pan-ethnic characterisations of migrants and their political behaviour as used by rational choice and positivist theories.

noting that participants' stories reflect more lines of continuity than points of disruption in their political acculturative processes. As argued in this thesis, culture is a dynamic framework through which people collectively shape understandings of the worlds they inhabit (Geertz 1973). Yet it is a framework that is highly influenced by the positions and trajectories experienced by individuals in multiple fields comprising any given social context. In that regard as previously observed it is not necessarily conformed by well organized, less tightly knitted agreements about the state. Instead it is an interconnected web of tangential understandings articulated in a common circle of intelligibility (Weeden 2002).

As has been shown, beyond group agreements, members of the Mexican community have different ways of understanding New Zealand politics. In my view such differences are the product of complex processes of political socialization with at least two distinctive components. On the one hand a common exposure to an impressively homogenous —and effective— nationalistic construction of the state and its structures; and on the other, a number of different languages flowing from the interaction with the political arena in real life. This dual composition explains not only the positive-negative contrasts that characterize participants' opinions of the state, but also the different approaches they take to New Zealand politics.

From this perspective the study suggests that different processes of political socialization within one culture result in different approaches to understand politics and act politically in that culture. But, more importantly, it suggests that cultural reconstruction occurs along the lines of such personal understandings of politics. While not claiming that culture trumps change, evidence collected in the field gives account of remarkable attempts of cultural reproduction at the individual level. Interestingly, more than being a mere response to the uncertainty and ambiguity that characterize the migratory experience such reproduction seems to be associated with the roles people has traditionally play within the polity. It is in that context that members of the community who have traditionally remained absent of the political arena in Mexico showed to be more likely to do the same in New Zealand, while those who have historically been active political players find ways of reconstructing such character once in New Zealand.

Following this line, this study has given an account of vivid memories of political socialisation through which people have forged not only images of the state but convictions about politics and political action that remain unbroken after moving to New Zealand. This is particularly evident in the stories told by the more politically experienced who have historically perceived their roles in a clearly consistent manner. In that sense it would be inaccurate to state that contact

with a new and radically opposed political system has transformed the minds and hearts of these participants, turning them into lively political characters. Instead it would be more accurate to note that they have reconstructed themselves based on their accumulated symbolic experiences and repertoires. But stories such as Mayela's and Marco's —the richest narratives of political activism— are in a way, not that different from those expressed, for instance, by Doña Juana and her family. Within all these stories also lies a strong commitment to reconstructing the social and political world in a historically consistent manner. Here, the words of Doña Juana's daughter-in-law sound strikingly solid: 'whatever happens and wherever I am that is my idea of politics.' In this sense, everydayness embedded in tradition and positionality is also crucial to understanding cultural reconstruction in a new political system. In that regard, although change is inevitable it occurs more as an evolving regeneration of the self than a breaking point in people's lives¹³⁹. Conceived in this way "cultural reproduction provides the grounds and the parallel context of social action itself" (Jenks 1993, p.3). From this point of view cultural reproduction does not inhibit change, instead change is inscribed along the lines of what people have traditionally thought and felt. As observed by Vestel (2009, p.468) such is an exercise that involves a great deal of creativity.

Living transnational lives seems to have important effects to such evolving regeneration. Agreeing with other scholars of migration that the study of transnationalism has been characterized by a number of unclear terminologies, along the thesis I have avoided using the term spaces in its broadest sense and concentrated instead in some of its specific dimensions. In that regard this thesis proposes terms such as *transnational perceptual spaces* and *transnational emotional spaces*. The examination of such spaces revealed how culturally acquired symbols and meanings do not vanish completely but merge into new syncretic forms neither fully Mexican nor completely New Zealander. Such syncretism, however, does not supersede the fact that, along the process, contact with transnational kinship groups seems to reinforce long-held roles, conceptions and positions that affect the political acculturative equation. Continuous interaction with a place people call 'home' cannot come without consequences, and is crucial to the creation of emotional and rational relationships with a new political environment. Living transnational lives provides thus members of the Mexican community with powerful incentives

¹³⁹ Here I use the term regeneration following the point accurately made by Jenks (1993, p.2) that the Bourdieuan concept of cultural reproduction has been mostly misunderstood in cultural studies. In this regard he observes that cultural reproduction has been wrongly considered in its negative terms as copy and imitation and not in its positive qualities as regeneration and synthesis.

to cultural reproduction that affect —although not impede— the creation of new forms of citizenship and belonging¹⁴⁰.

Following these considerations, this study also challenges the assumptions defended by theorists of exposure¹⁴¹. As previously argued, such theorists depart from the premise that the longer migrants are exposed to the host country's political system, the more change they will experience¹⁴². As I have stressed throughout the study, such a proposition does not fully capture the complexity of political acculturative phenomena. As this thesis suggests mere exposure to a political system across time does not necessarily result in the realignment of the self to match a number of traits considered to be mainstream. Much less it results in gradually consistent homogenous outcomes. For instance, stories such as Maria's and Alejandro's show how, even after years of living in New Zealand, individuals selectively adapt certain components of their semiotic frameworks while clinging tenaciously to others considered to be relevant. Indeed, the fieldwork did not reveal any clear trend regarding time and change. Quite the opposite, most stories reveal that expectations of change cannot be simply based on the number of years people spend in an allegedly more democratic environment, but on the diverse interpretations individually and collectively shaped in two political systems.

At this point I would like to add a personal note. When I started this research I was convinced that the reproduction of culture in its purest terms would be a crucial finding among participants. Such expectation can be easily deduced just by reading the preface of this thesis. However, cultural continuity proved to be more complex and less predictable than I had originally anticipated. It is true that people's attempts to recreate pre-migratory conditions of intelligibility were widespread across the study, but it is also true that no participant in this research is the same person he or she used to be in Mexico. Yet their stories revealed striking similarities between the past and the present. In this context one cannot help but remember the words of political culturalists who observe how cultural change is inevitable but can sometimes result in

¹⁴⁰ Other scholars have argued in favour of understanding new forms of citizenship as a consequence of globalization and transnationalism. Faist (2010) points out that the ongoing and spreading of meanings and symbols in transnational social spaces requires new approaches that help understanding how sets of meanings merge as a consequence of transnationalism: 'to think of transnationally enriched syncretism as another layer of immigrants' insertion process it to use an understanding of culture a "whole way of (immigrant) lives" he asserts, "one that emphasizes their translocal aspects without occluding the facts that cultures are still overwhelmingly nationally bounded and have mainstreams" he continues.

¹⁴¹ The almost "optimistic" character of these assumptions has been previously noted by authors such as White et al. (2008).

¹⁴² White et al. (2008) exemplify these propositions by citing the works of authors such as Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Teixeira, 1987; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993. To these I would add several others whose works have been cited in Chapter Two.

the creation of a new version of what we used to be¹⁴³. Although these observations were made in the context of a positivist approach to political culture, they sound remarkably pertinent in the context of this discussion. This takes me to my last point.

4) The concept of culture in politics and migration can draw upon diverse and sometimes opposing methodologies.

I could not close this thesis without final consideration of its methodology. As argued at the beginning, using an interpretive-oriented approach to my subject of study was a decision I made in order to get closer to the types of answers I was looking for. After four years of intensive ethnographically oriented research I can affirm that overall, I believe my decision was the right one. The semiotic exploration of the field allowed me to understand people's construct of the state from different perspectives. I learnt to patiently unwrap layers of meaning that were expressly and tacitly contained in peoples' stories. I looked into their understandings, motives and actions at individual and group levels. I unveiled different connections, negotiations, and contextual arrangements that were not possible to discover through the use of my old methodological toolkit. In short, I made a plan, I stuck to it and I got the types of results I was looking for. However, exploration was not always easy and there are many things I would do differently if I were to start over again. These would include (1) having a smaller but more widely spread group of informants¹⁴⁴; (2) pursuing further opportunities to generate more follow up meetings in order to go even deeper into certain topics and (3) find new and better forms of establishing connections between field experiences and in-depth interviews.

But probably my major concern would be how to generate better points of intersection between interpretive and non-interpretive methodologies. As discussed in previous chapters, one of the biggest challenges the study of culture in politics faces today is the construction of bridges across epistemic communities. Here I cannot help but recognise that while constructing this project, I faced several doubts, insecurities and worries about its reception in the political science environment. These mostly derived from reading the small but consistent body of literature regarding dominant and alternative approaches to the study of culture. There I realized how we have not just inherited two particular views of politics and culture but a tradition of conceiving

¹⁴³ In his passionate defence of political culturalism, Harry Eckstein (1988, p.794), drawing on Parsons' concept of pattern maintenance observes that regardless of the evolving character of culture, this sometimes leads to the continuation of specific traits. 'The French have a half-facetious adage for this sort of pattern maintenance: The more things change, the more they remain the same'.

¹⁴⁴ This would create a more intimate setting for ethnographic exploration and would facilitate connections between stories and actors.

these as mutually exclusive. Furthermore, embedded in these traditions are passionate debates aiming to diminish one position in favour of the other. As argued by Welch (2013, p.38), there are probably more parallels than differences between both conceptions of culture. Nonetheless, emotionally grounded mutual disqualifications have resulted in both positions arguing to be the alternative to, rather than within political cultural research. Probably one of the most striking critiques I found was in Eckstein (1996, p.495):

A related reason for not associating the general idea of culture with the versions of the concept extant in anthropology is that the idea has been increasingly associated in that field with anti-scientific positions: those of Geertzian ‘interpretivists’ and those of ‘phenomenalists’. I do not wish to critique these views here. Suffice to say that my concern here has been with culture as an orienting concept for ‘positive’ social science, not with versions of social analysis that repudiate positive philosophy... anthropologists can only confuse us here.

At the end of this journey I can state for sure that looking at the symbolic dimensions of political action is not to turn away from its concrete expressions but to plunge into the midst of them (Geertz 1973, p.30). But I also recognise that this is not the only valuable view on the subject. Twenty years have passed since these words were written¹⁴⁵. Today, political sociology and anthropology are evolving and vibrant fields calling for connections and fruitful collaborations between disciplines. Different scholars have made this clear; from D’Andrade (1984) and Ross’ (2007) attempts to bring social psychology and interpretivism closer together, to the promising relationship between rational choice and political semiotics highlighted by Wedeen (2002), political sociologists and anthropologists seem ready to meet non-positivists half-way.

In line with such reconciliatory attempts, this thesis has aimed to narrow the gap between positions through the cognitive and emotional exploration of meaning-making processes. As mentioned in my methodology section, I did not just attempt to open windows to understand acculturative phenomena, but to explore the frame within which such windows are contained. In so doing I identified points of agreement between extremes and used them as the basis of what I considered to be an innovative methodology. This task was far from easy and I can but recognise that there are still many opportunities to make such an attempt more fruitful.

¹⁴⁵ It is worth noting that one can easily find similar types of arguments about positivism. In fact many interpretivist accounts contain similar disqualifications of positivist theories of culture (see for instance Merelman, 1989 and Chabal & Daloz, 2006).

The role that culture plays in the realm of politics is one of the major challenges that our discipline now faces. The progressively complex questions posited by fewer and fewer heterogeneous societies living in a global world turn culture into a key concept that is needed to understand political phenomena. As complex human beings, our actions are fundamentally cultural. To become human is to become individual but individuality cannot exist without the guidance of cultural patterns that give form, order and direction to our lives¹⁴⁶. Such a proposition allows different methodologies to come together and contribute to our understandings of the different layers upon which culture is structured.

¹⁴⁶ Although this proposition is explicitly mentioned by Geertz (1973, p.52) it is also a fundamental point of departure in the work of non-interpretivist political culturalists such as Huntington (1991), Putnam (1993) and Inglehart (2008).

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