Centre on Migration, Policy and Society

Working Paper No. 50,
University of Oxford, 2007

Anthropological Perspectives on Migrants' Political Engagements

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WP-07-50

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Abstract
Anthropologists have engaged little with the topic of collective action and with the relevant social scientific literature. This working paper seeks to respond to recent calls made within the discipline to engage with both. Drawing on fieldwork carried out among Latin Americans in London, this essay shows how their mobilization is shaped by a multiplicity of factors and not merely by the political opportunity structure of the country of arrival, as the prevailing approach to migrants' mobilizations seems to contend. In addition to indicating some of the other factors that influence migrants' mobilization, the paper makes some suggestions for rethinking the notion of political opportunity structure in more inclusive, loose, flexible and pluralist terms. Last but not least, this paper offers an account of how Latin American migrants are responding collectively to the difficulties they experience in Britain.

Keywords:
Mobilization; Multiculturalism; Integration; Political Opportunity Structure (POS); Trade Unions; UK.

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Since the early 1990s the UK has experienced a new immigration flow that – differently from that of that of the post-war years – is mostly from non-Commonwealth countries.[1] As pointed out by Vertovec (2006), the UK is increasingly characterized by: a sizeable migrant population from developing countries with no direct colonial link to the UK; a greater linguistic diversity (over 300 languages spoken in London); a proliferation of smaller groups (e.g. Colombians, Rumanians, Ghanaians, Kurds, Afghans etc.) alongside large and longstanding 'ethnic communities'; a more fluid duration and greater variety of legal statuses; the sustenance of greater transnational connections (social, religious, political etc.) on the part of migrants. This emerging scenario suggests that it is no longer appropriate to treat the UK as a 'post-immigration' country as much research and policy-making activity has been doing. The UK is a country of new immigrations – like Italy or Spain – but with a greater pre-existing ethno-cultural heterogeneity. This development in British society has been branded by Steve Vertovec as 'super-diversity' (2006).

Parallel to the new immigrations, Britain has in the second half of the 2000s experienced growing 'neo-assimilationist' wave which has put 'multiculturalism' – the prevailing public and policy attitude – on the defensive. This 'backlash against diversity' (Grillo 2005), has not only come from the Right, but also from important sectors of the Left which are now arguing that: the UK is too diverse; diversity undermines cohesion and solidarity; multiculturalism leads to separatism; minority should subscribe more strongly to British national values and way of living.[2]

In addition to neo-assimilationism, the British public discourse on integration treats migrants and minorities as objects of policy and governance[3] and ignores their political agency. Also, it includes – at best – voices from ethnic minorities but not those from new migrants. Unlike the public and policy discourse on integration, this paper prioritizes the perspectives of the new migrants by focusing on their collective efforts to improve their conditions in the UK. In doing so, it has been guided by the following question: what concerns do new immigrants have in the receiving

society that make them mobilize? The new immigrants' perspectives obtained by examining their collective action is thus the background against which I will in the conclusions make theoretical inferences.

The Significance of the Latinos

In 'super-diverse' Britain a migrant group that has received little attention despite its numerical significance is that of Latin Americans.[4] Unlike in the US where the Latin American population is on the whole much more established, in the UK Latinos are, for the most part, a 'new immigrant group' for whom there are not yet reliable official statistics. In my fieldwork I have repeatedly come across Latin Americans estimating their presence around 500,000. This estimate figure is made up by some 250,000 Brazilians, 200,000 Colombians and 50,000 Ecuadoreans and other Latin American nationalities.[5]

Latin Americans arrive in Britain through a broad range of immigration channels and hold a variety of different statuses including many students, unauthorised/irregulars (e.g. over-stayers, forged papers etc), asylum-seekers and refugees. The majority of Latin Americans came primarily for 'economic' reasons (e.g. poverty and lack of opportunities for self-development) although, as often is the case among Colombians, migration can be the result of the combination of 'economic' and 'political' reasons.[6] Apart from a sizeable group of refugees, there are many people who left Colombia for the generalized climate of violence, fear and instability that – with poverty – characterises vast geographical areas of the country.

In Britain Latinos are predominantly residing in London, with significant concentrations in Lambeth, Southwark, Islington and Camden.[7] They are heavily employed in the cleaning sector where they work for subcontracted companies (often multinationals) cleaning commercial and public buildings (offices, hospitals, and so forth) often under very exploitative conditions.[8] They have also developed a wide range of 'ethnic' commercial and cultural activities.[9]

Not being from Commonwealth countries Latinos do not speak English as a second language. As many of them recognise their linguistic competence at

their arrival is on average rather poor and tends to improve slowly over the years.

Their voice in the British media and public discourse is absent. In spite of such marginalization, the Latinos have an impressive and further growing 'ethnic' or 'community' media in Spanish that includes several radio programs and news magazines widely and freely distributed that cover developments in Latin American countries as well as in the UK. By addressing the entire Spanish-speaking Latin American collective in the UK, the Latino media are simultaneously facilitating the Latino population in the UK to imagine themselves as a 'community' (Anderson 1983; Chavez 1991).

Latino immigrants – unlike Commonwealth and EU ones – are not entitled to vote in any type of UK elections. This situation makes particularly compelling to adopt a notion of politics that transcends the voting and standing for election typical of certain political science to include a broader range of collective political initiatives.

An important point to make here is that the wide range of social, cultural and economic initiatives and exchanges just outlined is promoting physical and virtual encounters and networks among Latinos' migrants not only from the same nationalities but also from different ones. These encounters and exchanges are forging a growing sense of a Latino identity which – as we will see – has recently begun to be deployed politically.

Migrants' Collective Action: Just a Matter of Opportunity Structures?

The study of collective action is a story of scarce interdisciplinary exchange and cross-fertilization. The few anthropologists engaging with this topic have paid limited attention to the work done in other disciplines and scholarly fields and vice versa. In anthropology, the first author to highlight the disciplinary neglect of the topic has been Arturo Escobar (1992). He attributed such shortcomings to the following five reasons:

> ‘the concentration on representation as a political arena during the 1980s, which, although of great importance, shifted attention from other political terrains; an individual-oriented notion of practice; divisions of labour within the academy; the [socio-politically detached] nature of [anthropological] research; and perhaps even the decline of collective action in the United States during the same decade’ (1992: 400).

This scarce anthropological concern with social movements seems to be part of a wider ‘problem’ that the discipline has been having with politics for quite some time. According to Jonathan Spencer (1997), anthropology has addressed the political as something separated from the cultural until the early 1970s and then abandoned the study of politics and political institutions altogether. Paradoxically, by the time other scholars – primarily sociologists – were beginning to discover the significance of the cultural dimension in the study of politics (e.g. Touraine 1971; Melucci 1985) anthropologists – at least according to Spencer’s account – had already written it out.

Although Spencer’s article does not mention explicitly social movements, it is not difficult to see how – as suggested by Gibb (2001) – the restricted and rigid understanding of politics that came to characterize political anthropology may have contributed to the disciplinary neglect of social movements. A decade after Escobar’s critique the situation seems largely unchanged as pointed out by Edelman (2001) and Gibb (2001) and more recently by Nash (2005).

With regard to migrants and minorities, this limited disciplinary engagement has been even more acute. A reason for this seems connected to the relatively late engagement of the discipline with the study of migrants and migrations (see Brettell 2000, Foner 2003). Concerned with the studies of ‘cultures’ as territorialized and bounded units (Brettell 2000) and informed by a ‘sedentaristic metaphysics’ (Malkkii 1997), anthropologists merely focused on people who stayed put and ignored migrants.

If anthropology has paid scant attention to migrants’ collective action, the interdisciplinary field of migration studies has only in part been more attentive. Like policy makers, most migrationists have considered migrants

as objects rather than subjects of politics (Kofman et al. 2000; Zontini 2002). One reason for that is that migrants have been considered from the perspective of the nation-state and government of the receiving countries. Another reason is connected to the influence of the structuralist and Marxist paradigms which have represented individuals and their behaviour as mechanistically determined by structural constraints (Martiniello 2005). A further reason for not looking at migrants as political actors is connected to the migrants' lack of formal political entitlements (the only feature that can turn them into formal political actors) and to the prevailing understanding of political engagements as being restricted to electoral behaviour and politicians' activity. As suggested by Ireland:

> 'Such a lack of formal political rights and other political resources at first led scholars, like host-society public officials, to see foreign workers as largely unorganized and largely apolitical components of the economy' (1994: 4).

Clearly, this reductive conceptualization of migrants' political engagements is inadequate to account for their political initiatives that take place in absence of voting rights.

Despite the tendency in policy and research to consider migrants as objects rather than subject of politics, a number of recent studies have, nevertheless, focused on migrants as political actors. For the purpose of this paper, such studies can be distinguished between those concerned with explaining migrants' political behaviour and those addressing other aspects of their politics. It is only with the former that this paper engages.

The dominant approach characterising the studies that seek to explain migrants' political behaviour is that of the political opportunity structure (or POS). The POS approach was originally developed to study social movements and protest and in particular to explain their emergence. Its contribution consists of highlighting the role of the institutional and policy set up of a country in shaping its residents' collective political initiatives. The POS approach builds on Resource Mobilization Theory (or RMT) approach that

conceived collective action as the result of actors' rational calculation of cost and benefits as well as of their ability of mobilizing resources as a precondition of mobilization. POS complements and advances the essentially internally-oriented focus of RMT by locating collective action in its political context and correlating it to its external environment (Koopmans and Statham 2000).

The POS approach was initially applied to the field of migration studies by Patrick Ireland (1994). Ireland's work developed from dissatisfaction with pre-existing explanatory models of migrants' collective action based on class and ethnicity. Such models saw collective action as being deterministically produced, respectively, by the unequal capitalist organization of production and by the ethnocultural characteristics of migrant groups. Ireland replaced class and ethnicity with political opportunity structure as the key factor (the 'independent variable') for explaining migrants' mobilization.[10] Indeed, class and ethnicity are not mobilizing factors per se as their greater of lesser salience is itself the effect of the politico-institutional environment that migrants encounter. Drawing on comparative research carried out in France and Switzerland, Ireland explains variations in political participation of the same ethnic groups across localities with the different political-institutional set up that they encounter in the different localities.

Subsequently the POS approach has been adopted by a growing number of scholars (e.g. Garbaye 2000; Koopmans and Statham 2000; Odmalm 2004) who, for the primacy that they attribute to the institutional environment in explaining migrants' collective action, have been identified as 'neo-institutionalists'. Arguably, POS is now the prevailing approach to the study of migrants' political mobilizations. The following pages will explore how Latin Americans' mobilization in London 'fits' the theoretical approach just outlined.

Latin American Mobilization in London: an Overview

A schematic way of conceptualizing Latino mobilizations in the UK is to consider them as made of two parallel ideal-typical streams coinciding with

initiatives directed respectively towards Latin America and the UK. However, in practice peoples and organizations are often simultaneously involved in 'multi-directional' politics targeting the country of origin, that of arrival, and even a third country or no country in particular. The nature of such politics need not be the same, so we can have organizations or individuals who articulate Marxist politics vis-à-vis Latin America while, at the same time, being involved in the 'a-political' and 'charitable' activity of service provision in the UK.

The first forms of Latino mobilization in the UK are considered those of the Chilean refugees of the 1970s who constituted a small but active and well organised group primarily involved in opposing Pinochet's dictatorship. In subsequent decades, and especially since the 1990s, with the arrival of 'economic migrants' and 'asylum seekers' from other Latin American countries (especially Colombia) – the bulk of Spanish Speaking Latino migrants in Britain – the number of Latino initiatives grew further. Alongside homeland and transnational politics, political initiatives increasingly entailed the provision of information, advice and support on resettlement matters such as legal procedures, access to housing, health and other welfare provisions to their 'users' and the adoption of the 'non-political' organizational status of 'charities' and public subsidy.

In recent years, the most significant developments in Latino mobilization seem to reflect the growing concern with issues of long-term integration such as exploitation, marginalization, lack of recognition, legal status, racism, religious sectarianism, drug addiction, domestic violence, drug addiction, political exclusion etc.

With no claim of exhaustiveness, here I provide a sketchy account of the political and organizational complexity and heterogeneity I encountered in my fieldwork. I have deliberately omitted or disguised names of individuals and organizations to avoid exacerbating the divisions, rivalries, misunderstandings and polemics that characterise Latino initiative alongside collaboration, support and solidarity.

One form of organization is the ‘orthodox communist’. These type of organizations tend to engage in homeland politics and have an exclusively Latino membership. They are hierarchically and rigidly organised, and distrust more horizontal and open Leftist organizations (seen as ‘Trozkists’) who, they claim, have no idea of what a ‘real’ political struggle is. In turn, these organizations are seen as dogmatic, ‘Stalinists’, closed to debate, sectarian, centred around their leader and having a top-down idea of organization of struggle. They are also seen as *machistas*, with women having access only to subordinate and executive roles and tasks, as well as homophobic.[11]

Among the organizations with a more loose and horizontal structure, we find ‘Latin American-ist’ ones. These organizations are British-led and have a predominantly British membership. They have sometimes criticized for leaving Latinos little space and secondary roles. They have also being criticized for cooperating too little with each other for reasons that are connected to their position in the British political arena and which – from a Latino point of view – are unhelpful. Despite these criticisms, there is a wide appreciation among Latin Americans for the work and commitment of these organizations and their members. It is not uncommon for British members of these organizations to have a Latino partner or spouse.

A relatively loose and horizontal structure also characterises Latino youth organisations. These organizations are predominantly involved in ‘cultural politics’ that entail artistic and cultural productions like staging plays on the condition of the Latino migrants in London. They question many other Latino organizations for being little sensitive and supportive to issues and concerns of young and second generation Latinos. These organizations are sometimes criticized for the ‘too liberal’ and ‘relaxed’ lifestyle of some of their members.

There are also ‘women-only’ organizations engaged in the protection and promotion of Latino women in the UK. These organizations provide an important service that ranges from career development training to support for the victims of domestic violence. Highly structured and efficiency-driven, these organizations embody well the professionalized ‘British-NGO’ style.

These organizations have been criticized (by the same women who criticized and left some of the *machistas* organizations mentioned above) for being excessively separatist, dogmatic and even a little heterophobic in providing what otherwise they consider a crucial field of initiative.

Many are the organizations that – with varying degrees of professionalism and efficiency – are involved in the delivery of services and assistance connected to immigration, housing, health, and access to welfare. These organizations constitute the bulk of the Latino civic and community organising. They can be very different in terms of gender sensitivity and equality among its membership. Some of these are being criticized from within the 'community' for being mere service-delivery, de-politicized, divided, in competition with and jealous of each other, incapable of innovating to address issues of 'integration' that go beyond the arrival stage.

The collective initiatives of Latin Americans presented so far are 'progressive' in character. With regard to 'conservative' Latinos' engagement, it seems that this does not get articulated through civic and political organizations to the same extent. If 'progressives' tend to privilege face-to-face collective initiatives and organizations, 'conservatives' seem to prefer popular (and populist) radio programs and news magazines. Prominent 'conservative' figures appear to be economically well off and to own profitable commercial activities. Their politics seems to consist of encouraging disengagement, and laissez fair attitudes, stigmatising the initiatives that seek to alter the status quo in a more equitable and participatory direction. One example, concerns the response to the recent creation of the Latin American Workers Association, which, apparently, was portrayed on a conservative radio programme as an initiative of extremists from whom people should steer away.[12] 'Conservatives' are also said to be working more closely than 'progressives' with the diplomatic institutions of their sending country. There is, however, some 'conservative' face-to-face organizing too which I was told is connected to the activities of Latin American evangelical churches.[13]

While clearly schematic, the above account of the Latino associative sector provides a sense of the several axis of differentiation that separate many Latino migrants while uniting others. This already broad and heterogeneous scenario has diversified further in recent times. Since mid 2004 a sort of new wave of markedly political initiatives directed at improving Latinos' conditions from a longer term perspective of integration started to translate into collective action the growing concern for such conditions. As one of my informants pointed out:

> 'We are realising [toma de consciencia] that it's time to do something about our conditions here rather than just keep thinking about Colombia, as here we are having many problems like marginalization, lack of opportunities, education, religion (with the "Christian" sects), drug-addiction… and it's not just the society here the cause of the problems but the mentality of the Latinos too. …We are realising that a new way to approach politics in this country is necessary… rather than supporting the Labour Party automatically we are realising that we need to become more demanding and become aware also of our political and electoral weight for using it as a bargaining tool'.

The following sections will examine two important instances of these new collective initiatives.

The Latin Front

Arguably the most ambitious political initiative of the Latinos in Britain, the Latin Front (or LF) came into being in the second half of 2004 by the initiative of two liberal and middle-class Colombian women. The intent was to represent politically the interests of Latin Americans in the UK. Its official goals included: creating a sense of community; achieving recognition as an ethnic group; lobbying British and European Institutions to promote the rights of Latin American residents including the regularization of those with an irregular status, working rights, social security rights, voting rights, health and education, and citizenship for the 'Latinos' (children) being born in the

UK; and quantifying the Latino political 'weight' (for purposes of political bargaining).

Fig. 1. The Latin Front Logo

At least in the first year of its existence, ations and initiatives, create a strong unitary and representative 'community voice', and lobby British political institutions. As one of its founders defined it, the Frente Latino is a 'political but not party political group'. For this reason the possibility of acquiring the 'charity' status had been discarded.

The political background of the Latin Front activists is quite heterogeneous. The two founders have a liberal and centrist identity. One of them has been simultaneously active with the Liberal Democrats in Britain where she stood as candidate Councillor at the local 2006 elections, and with liberals in her country of origin where – taking advantage to electoral law changes – she has tried to be appointed candidate MP for one of the abroad constituencies.[14] The majority of the activists involved, however, seemed to be of left-of-centre orientations. Among these, those who had the status of refugee or had left their country of origin due to political violence were prominent. Some also had taken part in political and civic initiatives in Britain, some in local political parties, others in Latino community organizations. On the whole the Latin Front, at least in its first year of activity, was a collective initiative developed by a group of people that had a diverse political socialization, sensitivity and identity.[15]

From the outset, the Latin Front has also carefully dealt with Latin American diplomatic institutions and personnel in the UK. In order to retain full autonomy, a courteous distance was deliberately kept to prevent powerful and skilled diplomats from interfering with national and home-country agendas.

The Politics of the Latin Front

The main field of initiative in which the Latin Front operates is the party-political, as the front page of the newsmagazine Extra reproduced in Figure 2 illustrates. Lobbying all the main British political parties and institutions has characterised the Latin Front from the outset.

Fig. 2: The front page of the (British) Latino news magazine *Extra* (February 2005) which read 'The time has come! Join the Latin Front'

In its first year or so of existence, its activity culminated with the organization of three major public events with such parties and with a meeting with the home secretary. The public events were held in the hall of one of main Latino shopping (see Figure 3) malls of London with a lay out and arrangements designed to present the Latin Front and the wider Latin American collective in an authoritative and powerful way.[16]

The substantive politics being articulated by the Latin Front has been primarily directed at gaining recognition. The Latin Front mobilized to make Latin Americans visible and recognised as an 'ethnic minority' in Britain. It also mobilized for the regularization of un-authorized Latin Americans living and working in Britain and of their children, especially those born in the UK.

Fig. 3 The Latin Front meets British politicians, Spring 2005. Photo Davide Però.

In trying to widen its support basis and construct a powerful image vis-à-vis British institutions, the Latin Front deployed a shrewd identity politics based on a strategic use of the 'Latino' category. This is a category that (by and large) becomes salient outside Latin America to indicate some shared ethnocultural background vis-à-vis the rest of the population. Until then, the 'Latino' category had circulated 'spontaneously' in the everyday 'social' arena in London but had not yet been deployed contentiously. Other civic organizations had used the term Latino to appeal to a wider population of potential users or members, but not for purposes of explicit political claim-making at least on such a large scale. Thus, the Latin Front is the most forceful and grand-scale attempt to date to introduce 'Latino' as category of contention in the British political arena by making the most of the existing Latino identity, networks and resources. By clustering together all Latin American nationalities (and even southern European), this strategy has sought to convey the idea of the existence of a large and politically organized collective which is comparable to those of the established ethnic minorities and which therefore deserves similar attention from British institutions. It is a

strategy that reflects the multicultural set up of the UK and its encouragement to organize around ethnicity.

However, this organization around ethnicity was not just 'instrumental' and derived from a 'cold' assessments of costs and benefits, but also by a 'genuine' belief that organizing as Latinos is an intermediate stage necessary to create a larger and confederated migrants movement to protect migrants interests. As Ubaldo put it: 'we must learn to organize politically among Latinos and then begin to collaborate with other immigrant communities. If we can't unite among ourselves, how can we unite at a wider level?!'

The identity politics of the Latin Front extends not only horizontally across ethnic/nationality lines but also vertically across class lines seeking to appeal to Latinos from all classes and backgrounds. Little identifiable along the Left-Right continuum and in a somewhat populist and ambiguous fashion, the LF makes of political transversalism and ecumenism its own political flag. Indeed, the Latin Front leadership appears to conceive Left/Right divisions unhelpful to the goal of creating a single strong Latino ethnic community voice in Britain. This transversal character of the Latin Front represents in the eyes of many a good thing given that many Latinos (of any political affiliation) are likely to experience similar difficulties in the UK.[17]

As one of its founders once said in a meeting 'All the efforts of the Latin American organizations must converge in a broad and strong bloc'. I found this view shared by many other Latinos who were not actively involved in the LF. As Juana said 'it exists a common interest among many Latinos to have one voice representing us… for example many work and pay taxes and would like to be regularized or that there were an amnesty'.

Despite the popularity achieved during its first year and the support of much of the Latino media, not everybody within the Latino 'community' subscribed to the idea of confederating under the overarching framework and leadership of the Latin Front. Indeed, the majority from the civic and political Latino organizations steered away from the LF invitation to join in. Reasons for such lack of support included reservations about the LF ambiguous political nature, and the personal agenda and political affiliation of part of its

leadership, including in relation to their home country (many Leftist Latin Americans also rejected the idea of a transversal and interclassist organization organized around ethnicity and opted for alternatives; see below). Some also saw the leadership of the LF as too involved in 'politicking', and 'vote exchange' both here and in Colombia.

One way in which Latin Front activists explained the lack of support from many Latino community organizations was 'jealousy', competition and fear of being overshadowed loosing the visibility, status and benefits acquired by carving out a niche for themselves over several years. They also explained the lack of support with the obsolete participatory model subscribed by most existing community organizations, which entailed specialization in the provision of advice/assistance on issues of immigration, accommodation and access to welfare but were clearly failing to respond to emerging preoccupations such as those of more long-term integration (e.g. education, marginalization, voting rights).

Despite the above criticism and while not achieving its objectives, the initiatives of the Latin Front have made Latin American migrants more visible in the eyes of the local and national British politicians and administrators. The LF has also conveyed the impression of certain organizational and mobilization skills and resources, even if they are still not considered as adequate interlocutors by the local authorities, as the following quotation from a Lambeth Labour Councillor shows.

> Question: "What did you think of last year's event organized by the LF in the shopping mall ?"
> Answer: "Well I was very impressed first of all by the scale of it that was very good that there was such a large turn out of people. …But in terms of a working event it's not the way to bring people together. … nevertheless it gave an indication that there's a sizeable community that needs to be factored into the political process, and to try and make that happen you have to try and bring a crowd together and say to the politicians from all parts 'here we are' […] So as a starting point it was a useful opening point. But in terms of a practical way to dwell below the issues and then set up a machinery to make it happening from there on it hasn't done much to take that process forward. […].

Finally, after the Latin Front initiatives of 2005 some of its leaders have become part of mainstream public committees, such as the Refugee & Asylum Seekers Listening Group (which features the London Metropolitan Police). Even if such 'recruitment' may have had a co-optative dimension it still denotes some degree of recognition on the part of the British institutions, and represents a significant institutional forum where to voice concerns and demands.

The Latin Front has also given Latin American migrants themselves an empowering feeling, especially through the public meetings it arranged. It raised the awareness and boosted the confidence that they possess the resources and skills that can turn then into a collective capable of positively influencing their integration in the UK.

The Latin American Workers Association and the Transport and General Workers Union

The Latin American Workers Association or LAWA was set up by three Colombians and one Chilean males Trade Unionists as part of the British Transport & General Workers Union (or T&G) in the second half of 2004, after they had existed in a more informal way for several months.[18] Forming LAWA was seen as a necessary step to protect and support more effectively the large number of Latin American workers experiencing super-exploitation and abuses of various types at the work place. Until the creation of LAWA employment had been a crucial aspect of life which was left 'uncovered' by the existing Latino organizations. In the words of one of its:

> 'The LAWA is the product of a necessity, which has emerged progressively after that many Latinos had solved their immigration, housing and benefits problems. …Besides addressing some of the exploitative aspects experienced by Latinos workers in Britain, LAWA struggles for helping the Latinos workers coming out of the invisibility with dignity not by 'asking' (*pedir*) but by 'demanding' (*exigir*). Together with other workers organization – the Portuguese, the Turkish, the African – we share the same class need [necesidad de clase]'.

LAWA started out of an urge of Marcelo and Arturo to combat the many abuses experienced by Latin Americans at work. Together with Fernando and Pedro they looked for support in the British trade union movement in order to do that more effectively. The view that needs play a key role in the emergence of LAWA emerged also in an interview with another activist, Irene.

> People mobilize because they have needs otherwise they don't mobilize. For instance, in the case of immigrant workers here [UK], they organize because they have a need. And what is the need? The exploitation being perpetrated by the cleaning companies and by the Colombian themselves, Latin Americans [supervisors and managers] who exploit other Latin Americans [cleaners]. There is a need and it is not because they are providing structures, structures are there but people don't know them because it is a community which is immigrating and there is new people in the country and none of these characters [managers] is going to tell them "you are entitled to this and that", on the contrary they tell them that they have no entitlements. It is out of necessity that people get organized: "they are stealing my salary, they are underpaying me, they are sacking me without a justification, they are violating my rights" this is why people get organized. If people had it all they wouldn't organize.

The kind of problems that Latin Americans experience and the nature of LAWA's activity are illustrated by Ines.

> Sexual harassment, psychological maltreatment … abuses concerning working time, verbal abuses and discrimination of all sorts. Essentially all that happens because one doesn't know the [British] laws … and people [employers and managers] take advantage of that and abuse the power they've got. …I myself had a case and after solving that, I stayed on working with them [LAWA] as a volunteer. I was abused verbally and psychologically by my managers. …It happened in a cloths shop for which I worked. One day somebody stole underwear that were being sold at £1 pound and my manager made a terrible scene. She summoned us all working in the stock room saying that we were not getting out of there until we had shown her our own underwear. I opposed that saying that it seemed to me an unjust request and that it seemed that she was blaming me for the theft, and that I had my dignity and that I had no reason to prove her that I hadn't stolen the underwear. …Many girls showed her their underwear

> but I refused and since then she started to be after me all the time. She abused me because I was Colombian, at my back she referred to me with expression like 'that rat' and so forth. I endured that for sometime because I had no idea that we were protected by the law independently from the fact that I was a student who worked for more than the 20 hours allowed. But then I came across LAWA and resorted to their advice and support. It was a very bad period, she kept us without breaks. We worked for six, seven hours continuously without a break or the possibility to have a tea, and if someone said she needed to go the bathroom she made comments like "What's wrong with you? Have you got urinary problems?" and things like that. The kind of maltreatment was horrific. …I was renewing my student visa and the passport was with the Home Office and the Home Office takes one, two, three months in replying but that does not deprive me of any right … Nonetheless, in front of everybody she told me that I was illegal and that I should leave the store and never come back again because I was illegal, shouting that at me in front of the customers. … I wan the [court] case but didn't quit that job immediately afterwards but stayed on a few more months while she [the manager] … started to abuse the Koreans and the Chinese workers … so when I saw that she had started to do the same again with them I said "No, until I have made sure that this will not happen again I cannot leave", so we began to write letters again, there were meetings with her and at last the company got rid of her.

Indeed, Ines saw her decision to mobilize with LAWA as being connected to her working conditions but also to her civic and political identity, formation and values.

> Yes…it was like a means of protecting myself, because not only was I getting affiliated to protect myself in this case [see below] but also in future situations. It is a way of protecting oneself here as a worker, as an individual and as a human being. …I also always wanted to collaborate to my community … it's not possible that this [exploitation/abuse] is happening in a developed country and people just ignore it. …So I said: "my community needs it [trade union work], the volunteers are few and also I am passionate about this kind of work"… When I arrived here, after something like three months I started voluntary work with Initiative … I was with them for about two years …I also worked with my church doing social work and at some point the opportunity with the trade union [LAWA] came up …I've always had the urge to help politically the people since high school. …My mother always told me that I was 'the lawyer of the poor', that I always went out to defend this and that.

Although support in the field of employment was, in principle, available to Latino workers through the existing British trade unions, such support was not, in practice, accessible to them, for reasons of communication/language, trust, lack of relationships or links between the T&G and the Latin collective, and lack of adequate efforts on the part of the union to reach out for migrant workers.

An important concern in setting up LAWA was the preservation of its autonomy. LAWA founders had always been determined to form a political, rather than a civic or community 'charitable' organization. They wanted to avoid relying on public funding – as these organizations often do – because this would entail economic dependence on the state (an institution that they did not see as promoting the interests of working people and in particular of migrant workers) and political restrictions (for receiving public funding and a 'charitable' status). In the end, the four founders' guess about the need for LAWA proved right and the organization 'boomed' straight away (and with it Latino affiliations to the T&G) to the extent that after a few months of activity LAWA already struggled to keep up with the demand for assistance.

In terms of background, political socialization and experience the four founders all had a previous experience in trade union activism in their country of origin which was also connected to the reasons for which they had left their country. The other members of the directive committee also had a past of activism in their home country, although not necessarily in the trade union movement strictly speaking. LAWA has also begun to recruit activists among young people with a more limited political experience (if only for their younger age), as in the case of Ines.

Before setting up or joining LAWA, all its activists had been involved in one or more Latino civic organizations. Some became immediately active once in the UK, while others took longer as they went through a period of withdrawal, partly connected to the discouraging social environment (made of kin and acquaintances) in which they arrived and partly due to their contingent psychological situation. In fact, some of them lived forcedly separated from their closest family members and friends, in a country of

which they did not even speak the language and in which their qualifications were not being recognised. Fernando pointed out how before setting up LAWA, and while working full time as cleaner (despite his post A-level qualifications) he had been involved in some Latino NGOs but was not fully satisfied. While recognising the importance of civic-communitarian work, he explained that it is the socio-political work through trade unions what really fulfils him and what he is really good at, in addition to the fact that Latinos in London strongly need protection on this front.

As these organizers did not know each other in Latin America, it was their participation in the Latino civic and political circuit that brought them in contact with each other and which they now – through the set up of LAWA – are in turn making more comprehensive and stronger. This relationship of symbiosis with the Latino associative circuit is sustained by LAWA's members participating in other Latino organizations which, in turn, contribute to LAWA's growth by referring to them people with work-related problems.

LAWA Politics

The field of political initiative in which LAWA operates can be described as 'socio-political'. LAWA is neither interested in party politics nor in lobbying national and local politicians and officials (like the Latin Front does). They privilege political initiative in the socio-economic sphere around issues of workers' rights, and more generally, material justice. In addition to the protection of Latin American workers in the UK, they are connected to the initiatives of Social Forums and of the Global Justice movement. For example, in 2004 they participated to the European Social Forum in London. They have also been developing international/transnational links with trade unions in Latin America.

In terms of 'identity politics' LAWA articulates a particular blend of class and ethnicity. They are promoting greater ethnocultural recognition of Latin Americans within the class framework of the trade union movement. Overall LAWA considers important to be fully part of a large and organized British trade union, but feels there are ethnocultural specificities which require a

'customized' treatment hence their organization as Latinos within the T&G. However, as Fernando said, 'the objective and the essence of the struggle, as well as what unites us with other immigrant groups, is a question class.' The attitudes that LAWA members have towards unauthorised migrant workers further help us to form an idea of LAWA's political vision. In Irene's own words 'Work is a right that all human beings have, if they are illegal or not is not something that makes any difference to us … and this is why we also fight for illegal immigrants'. Figure 4 portrays members of LAWA at a demonstration for the regularization of unauthorized migrants in London.

Fig. 4. LAWA at a march for the regularization of migrants, London, 7 May 2007. Photo Davide Però.

supporting the strike and protest of the cleaners of the British House of Commons (Figure 5) to the organization of training on working rights to its membership.

It is important to point out that Latin Americans are becoming increasingly active also through the 'mainstream' T&G (rather than through LAWA). For many Latin Americans this involvement developed largely as a result of the recent large-scale efforts – like the Justice for Cleaners campaign – to organise migrant workers in the cleaning sector. Although not

centred around ethnicity (like the Latin Front), the trade union is a growing form of Latino engagement which is not only important in itself but also crucial to recognise if we want to avoid the 'ethnicist' (Brah 1996) or 'culturalist' (Vertovec 1996) reductionism of certain literature on migrants and minorities that considers them only as merely ethnocultural subjects overlooking all their other political identities, relationships and engagements. In terms of politics this mobilization represents a rather classic form of class politics, i.e. one in which the socio-economic component is paramount and the ethno-cultural is complementary but still (expressed for instance by the resorting to migrant organizers). This is also a politics that targets all workers independently of their ethnocultural background, who in the cleaning sector happen to be essentially migrant (with a significant quota of Latin Americans). Recently, the T&G has also started to strengthen its pro-migrant stand by starting to campaign for a regularization of unauthorized migrants as it recognises that their immigration status renders them vulnerable to super-exploitation and abuses and condemns them to exclusion and marginality. As for LAWA, the prevailing attitude within the T&G toward unauthorized migrant is inclusionary, they are seen as workers regardless of the legal status attached to them by the state.

Fig. 5. Migrant Cleaners' striking at the House of Commons. London, 20 July 2005. Photo Davide Però

In terms of achievements LAWA and the T&G have unionized a remarkable number of Latin American workers (nearly one thousand). This process has happened in a relatively short period of time and by overcoming a number of fears and prejudices including those of deportation (recurrent and yet unjustified among unauthorized migrants) and those of dealing with

philo-*guerrilleros* (recurrent among Colombians). The second achievement is the operationalization of the Latino workers protection which both LAWA and T&G have performed. Thirdly, they have also gained a greater visibility and popularity in the eyes of the Latin American collective and among employers who are becoming aware that there is an increasing chance to face the trade unions if they abuse migrant workers. Finally, all this activity has strengthened the overall integration of Latin American migrants into British society, particularly in the socio-political sphere.

Conclusions

Unlike the prevailing treatment of migrants as passive objects of policies, this paper has approached them as political actors, taking Latin Americans' collective action in London as a case study. The paper has shown how they have always been politically engaged since their early arrivals in the 1970s when they were still numerically few. It has also shown that Latin Americans' mobilization has progressively grown and diversified to include home-country politics, transnational politics, arrival (short-term oriented) and integration (long-term oriented) politics in the receiving society. In particular, this paper has focused on the last of these forms of politics by examining two of the most significant collective efforts recently articulated on this front: the Latin Front and the Latin American Workers Association. Through this examination, the paper has shown that Latin Americans in London are not only politically active[19] but also increasingly engaged in overcoming the marginalizing practices they are being subjected to. The material presented has given a sense of *what* Latin American migrants mobilize about in the UK and *how.* By and large their mobilization reflects the conditions of both invisibility and exploitation that they experience. Through collective action taking place broadly outside the formal political system, they struggle for recognition (both as an ethno-cultural minority and as residents) and material justice (dignified working and living conditions).[20]

At a more theoretical level, the ethnographic material has confirmed the significance of the political opportunity structure of the receiving country, giving a concrete sense of how such structure has helped Latino migrants to channel their collective action. For example, we saw how the British multicultural set up tailored around large long-standing ethnic communities has encouraged many Latin Americans from different nationalities to mobilize around a common Latino ethnic identity in the Latin Front. We also saw how the presence of trade unions, such as the T&G, has facilitated other Latin American migrants to mobilize around class, setting up the Latin American Workers Association as integral part of the workers movement.

However, the ethnographic material also indicates some limitations in the POS approach. One concerns issues of diversity and change. In fact, while such approach explains variations in the mobilization of a given ethnic group across localities with the different institutional environment of such localities (e.g. Ireland 1994), it has little to say about the diverse and changing mobilizations of a given group within a single and stable institutional environment, as in the case of the Latinos in London.[21] If anything, by treating ethnic groups as homogeneous entities, the POS approach denotes a certain ethnicist tendency.

Another limitation concerns the narrowly and rigidly defined range of forms that POS can assume. At present these are limited to the institutional and policy apparatus of the receiving society, but the material presented above calls for a broadening and loosening of what constitutes POS so as to include in it both migrants' movements and collective actions themselves as well as the wider cultural attitudes to difference of the receiving context.[22] For example, after being set up thanks (in part) to the opportunity provided by the T&G, LAWA itself came to represent an opportunity for the mobilization of many Latin American migrants. Similarly, the Latin Front's strategy to mobilize as an ethnic minority around the Latino identity is influenced not only by specific institutions and policies but also by the wider 'multicultural culture' that characterises the UK and which – in spite of the

mounting neo-assimilationist wave – still encourages ethnic identification and mobilization.

In addition to the failure of conceiving the structure of political opportunities transnationally (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003a)[23], the current narrow and institutionalist conception of POS reveals a problematic approach to theorising that tends to take institutions and governments as key referents at the expense of people (e.g. migrants). This tendency compels us to (re-) think who and what we are ultimately committed to when we theorize and how we, as researchers, position ourselves in relation to the governmental process.

The ethnographic material also indicates the presence of further influences that suggest that the explanation of collective action is more complex than the POS approach allows for. One is migrants' political socialization, background, experience and values. For example, someone who has been active in the workers movement and whose world view is characterised by a class vision (like Fernando) is more likely to reflect such repertoire in the mobilization he/she undertakes in the country of immigration. Conversely, somebody who has had a more liberal trajectory (like Isabel) is inclined to reflect such trajectory in his/her mobilization in the receiving country. Similarly those who are accustomed to undertake critical or antagonistic stands are more likely to mobilize differently from those who are used to endorse governmental or hegemonic views.

Another influential factor is that of the living conditions experienced in the receiving contexts. For many Latino migrants in London, these conditions are characterised by exploitation, marginalization and exclusion. When I asked my informants what made them mobilize, all of them made reference to the problems and difficulties the Latin American collective on the whole suffered from. To them it was actually more the structural constraints than the opportunities that made them mobilize. Indeed, it seems that their determination to change this situation was such to make them go against the wind and resist the institutional encouragement to organize as a publicly funded 'charity'.

A further influential factor that my ethnographic case has suggested concerns the migrants' networks and social capital. It is through the networks, circuits and social capital that they developed within the Latino and with the wider 'community' that they often made contacts, met, discussed ideas, got involved and found out about opportunities to mobilize and so forth.

This list of factors that – alongside and in interaction with the political opportunity structure as well as with each other – shape migrants' mobilization is to be considered tentative, in progress and open to alterations and developments. It is not meant to encapsulate the definitive typology of mobilizing factors, but only an indication of the influences at play in migrants' participation. To be sure, by compiling this tentative list, this paper is not seeking to discard political opportunity structures as irrelevant but merely suggesting a rethinking in more comprehensive, loose, actors-oriented and interactive terms so as to avoid mono-causal institutional determinism.

Future research on the topic should explore further the range of factors that influence migrants' collective action and how they interact. Given their traditional care for detail, micro-dynamics, and the demotic perspective, anthropologists are in a good position to make a significant contribution to the interdisciplinary development of research on collective action and in so doing get out of their marginal position in relation to this important topic.

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Endnotes:

[1] I wish to thank all my informants for the precious information they have shared with me. I hope that they will find my representation of things accurate enough despite my sometimes critical considerations. I also wish to warmly thank David Kertzer, Deborah Reed-Danahay and Elisabetta Zontini for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper that was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, December 2005. A revised and shortened version of this working paper will be published in Reed-Danahay D and Brettell C eds. 2008: *Citizenship, Political Engagement and Belonging: Immigrants in Europe and the United States*. Piscataway: Rutgers University Press.

[2] A good example of 'progressive' neo-assimilationism is Goodhart (2004). For a critical discussion see Grillo (2005), but also Back et al. (2002), Cheong et al (2005), Però (2007a, 2007b), Vertovec and Wessendorf (2005).

[3] For an anthropological discussion of 'governance' in the context of migration see Però (2005a; 2005b).

[4] Soon after beginning fieldwork with Colombians, the realization that much of their collective initiatives directed at the UK (the focus of research) involved people from other Spanish speaking Latin American nationalities as well and was being branded as 'Latino', made me shift my attention from Colombians to Latinos.

[5] At least for the Colombians, these estimate are consistent with those reported in Bermudez (2003) and Mcilwane (2005). The number of people with a Latino background in the UK is likely to grow further also because of their high birth rates (Lewenstein 2006: 2).

[6] See Macilwane (2005).

[7] According to Mcilwane (2005) a sizeable presence of Latino exist also in Totenham, Hackney and Newham.

[8] For an analysis of Latin Americans' involvement in the contract cleaning sector see Lagnado (2004).

[9] These activities include restaurants, bars, cafes, discos, food shops (e.g. groceries, butchers, etc.), *locutorios* (shops from which to phone Latin America at discounted rates), *giros tiendas* (shops from which to send remittances to Latin America, etc.), doctors and dentists, barbers and hairdressers, laundrettes and tailors, video rentals and music shops etc. The location of such activities tends to coincide with the territorial concentration highlighted above.

[10] In arguing his case Ireland draws attention to the fact that POS take up different forms in different localities producing different types of migrants' participation from the same group.

[11] Quite emblematic it has been assisting, in the headquarters of one of such organization, to an inflamed argument between two individuals that culminated with them shouting at each other '*maricon*!'('faggot').

[12] As to my question: 'but shouldn't these [conservative] people be happy if fellow Latinos in the UK improve their working condition and become less exploited? One of my informants replied with the extra patience only allowed to naïve outsiders 'Not if they themselves and their friends are those who run businesses which exploits their con-nationals, they don't!'.

[13] These organizations are said to 'suck in' and socially isolating their recruits and members from both the Latino community associations and the wider British (civic) society. This is a strategy which is very different from that of the Catholic church which tend to be in contact with Latino organizations (although the Latin American priests are still few).

[14] This reveals how so called 'host' and 'home-country' politics can be articulated not only simultaneously but also in synergy.

[15] In terms of the work activity of its main activists the Latin Front included: journalists and media professionals, students, teachers, cleaners, doctors, shop owners and law advisors.

[16] As figure 2 illustrates two long desks were placed in a 'L' shape with the side facing the floor sitting the British Politicians and a LF moderator while the other sitting journalist from the Latino media observing the event to report to the wider community. An amplified lecture podium was placed next to the Politicians desk. Considerable care went into presentational details and arrangements. A programme was printed and distributed, all speakers and journalist wore badges and had a

signpost with the logo and name of their organization. The entire event was professionally filmed and photographed and a large banner reading 'Frente Latino' was placed over the politicians' desk.

[17] However, I witnessed some concern on the part of a few LF supporters with the LF taking up a 'leftist image'. In these supporters view this possibility would alienate not only their support but would raise the hostility of various members of the Latino 'community'.

[18] In the 'pre-T&G' period much of LAWA's activity was conducted in coffee shops, fast foods, and private homes.

[19] As Martiniello (2005) observed, the 'presence in trade unions' and the 'creation of collective actors' constitute indicators of political participation.

[20] Interestingly, material justice is a matter which is being overlooked in the current public and policy debate counterpoising 'multiculturalists', who defend the existing British way to integration, and 'neo-assimilationists' (see Però 2007a).

[21] See also the case of Polish migrants presented by Garapich in this volume.

[22] This suggests that the line separating POS from movements is blurred, contextual and perspectival.

[23] The transnational dimension of POS has been illustrated – if briefly – in this paper when describing how one of the Latin Front's leader engaged across borders in a synergic way.