

PhD Thesis Summary:

Imagining the West: Marginality and Possible Lives at the Outskirts of a Mexican City

Mgr. Marie Heřmanová

The thesis aims to develop various results of a long-term fieldwork in the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, México, where rural-urban migration was pervasive since the 1960s. The research concentrated on the second generation of Tzotzil and Tzeltal migrants living at the suburbs of the city. Young indigenous people, whose parents came to the city to seek jobs, are now completely bilingual (they speak their maternal language – mostly Tzotzil as well as Spanish they have learned in the school in the city). They mostly work in the same areas as the first generation migrants – as shop-keepers, souvenirs sellers or street-food vendors. They are thus in everyday interaction with both tourists and expats in the city centre. These interactions and meetings are in the context of the thesis seen as a constitutive element to imaginations of mobility, modernity and Western lifestyles developed by the young indigenous people from the suburbs. The concept of „Imaginary West“ (Yurchak 2005) is central in the thesis, an unseen and yet ever-present homeland of the tourists and most importantly a place where „better lives“ happen. The text explores how the search for better/possible/livable lives shapes and affects everyday choices of the indigenous youth and their perceptions of their identity, their place in the socioeconomic structure of the city and their futures. Mobility seems to be a key element in the imagery of a better life, as it represents a whole scale of possibilities, different life-choices and ultimately, possible lives defined by power over one's own movement. The final chapter then deals with the rise of social media and other digital communication technologies and its influence on the relationality of imaginary and everyday socialities. Daniel Miller's (2012) observations on the workings and re-inventions of internet in local environments and also Tom Boellstorff's (2012) analysis of the constitutive gap between virtuality and reality are used to explore how the now virtual mobility interacts and clashes with their inability to move in geographical space and how the use of communication technologies such as Facebook had shifted the horizons of possible lives.