

The Immigration Debate About Mexicans

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Minutemen on the Arizona border violently oppose illegal immigration, particularly of Mexicans.

Since the late nineteenth century, Mexicans have been migrating northward into the United States in search of employment opportunities. Over the course of the twentieth century, this group represented a significant segment of the immigrant population and labor force within the United States as well as a large percentage of Mexican society. As of 2008, 12.7 million Mexican immigrants lived in the United States and Arizona had 1,784,000 residents of Mexican origin (Mexican born and Mexican-American).¹ Although there are no exact figures for the size of the undocumented population, conservative estimates claim that Mexicans represent 60 percent of the approximately 11 million undocumented people. Consequently, the total Mexican immigrant popula-

tion within the United States represents over 10 percent of the population of Mexico, which in 2010 comes to approximately 112,468,855.²

Current debates over illegal immigration from Mexico have ignored, or at best, over-simplified, the longstanding presence of Mexicans in the United States. These disputes mistakenly focus on individuals or segments of U.S. or Mexican society rather than on larger structural issues such as shared histories, free-trade commitments, and international relationships. Nonetheless, such debates are not unprecedented nor have they lessened the size of the migration stream because its geographical scope has continually expanded. In the late nineteenth century, the Mexican presence within the United States was made up of semi-permanent enclaves along the border, and then in the 1920s, it spread throughout the Southwest and areas such as Chicago, Illinois and Kansas City, Missouri. Today

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Mexicans live throughout the United States and are the fastest growing sectors in areas like the Deep South and the Pacific Northwest.

In Arizona the politics of immigration has reached a crisis of epic proportions. The lives of the immigrants and in many cases their U.S.-born children were being drastically impacted even before Arizona's SB 1070 was scheduled to take effect on July 29, 2010.³ Many Hispanic residents—and particularly Mexicans—have begun to flee Arizona for fear of SB 1070.⁴

Such xenophobia is not unprecedented, especially in times of economic crisis. During the Great Depression various patriotic groups like the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion led demands in some areas that Mexicans be “repatriated.” The National Club of America for Americans called on all Americans to pressure their government to deport all Mexicans and close the border to all Latin Americans.⁵ In 1954, the Eisenhower administration instituted Operation Wetback in response to criticism that the growing number of illegal immigrants constituted a serious threat to national security. According to the then-commissioner general of the Immigration and Naturalization Service the “alarming, ever increasing, flood tide of undocumented migrants from Mexico constituted an actual invasion of the United States.”⁶

However, such outrageous demands by overly vocal fringe groups rarely had any real impact on public policy. At that time the press claimed that Operation Wetback was a tremendous success. For example, one *Los Angeles Times* article claimed that illegal migrant arrests in Southern California and Arizona dropped by 44 percent while another article was titled “U.S. Patrol Halts Border Invasion.”⁷ However, since then scholars have questioned the accuracy of the Border Patrol's count and have noted that the decline in undocumented immigration was only short-term.⁸

In the twenty-first century the complexity of the issue at hand goes beyond citizenship and begs the question about who deserves the full protection of the state. Should a society's benefits extend to all people who contribute and labor on behalf of that society? Such is the case of Mexican immigrants working and subsisting in the United States over the last 100-plus years. During this period, Mexican immigrant labor has proven indispensable for the success of the U.S. economy; nonetheless, there is tremendous controversy over their place in society.

Mexican citizens working in the United States have subsisted in precarious circumstances influenced by historical legacies and paradoxical geopolitical factors. They are simul-

taneously recruited into the United States, yet loathed in varying degrees depending on the health of the U.S. economy or on the nature of current political issues. Over the course of the twentieth century, the borders of the nation-state have constrained the lives of these transnational migrants and prevented them from sharing fully in the rights promised by either the United States or Mexico. The 1930s is an especially telling decade because of the flagrant abuse Mexicans experienced following a period in which they were not only aggressively recruited to the United States, but when U.S. immigration legislation was constructed and applied in a manner to facilitate their entry. Assessing the evolution of the political debates surrounding immigration in the mid- to late-1930s provides significant context on the current controversies not

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only about immigration, but also about the place of Mexicans in the United States.

PRIOR TO THE 1930S

From 1900 to 1929, upon arriving in the United States, most Mexicans intended to return home to be reunited with their families. For them the United States represented *México de afuera* (Mexico abroad), an image founded on their intention to recreate their culture while they resided abroad temporarily. *México de afuera's* population benefited each nation economically and politically. For the United States, Mexicans provided an inexpensive, exploitable, and plentiful labor source. Their presence allowed policy-makers and employers to create the myth that they were birds of passage and consequently not a threat to U.S. society like immigrants from Asia or Southern Europe. According to Paul Taylor, a “large part, probably the majority of the Mexican population is migratory. It is the most mobile element in our labor supply.”⁹ For Mexico, unemployed and underemployed Mexicans who left for the United States removed potential supporters of

rebellions and enemies of the state. In addition, Manuel Gamio demonstrated the value of remittances, totaling close to US\$3 million a year for the Mexican economy. However, Mexican public opinion was mixed regarding the presence of their compatriots abroad; for some it was a tragedy that so many of their countrymen had to leave to support their families while other sectors accused them of abandoning their homeland.

THE 1930S

The Great Depression witnessed the most extreme examples of racist and negligent treatment of Mexicans and made the 1930s the only decade in which more Mexicans left the United States than entered. In addition, the plight of Mexicans at home was not much better. Although Mexican officials publicly welcomed home their compatriots, their limited resources and the economy's pre-modern condition prevented the state from fulfilling its pledge to aid them on a grand scale. Nonetheless, these circumstances contributed to a unique period in Mexican and U.S. history, which had a significant impact on the status of Mexicans in both nations and on their identity as Americans, Mexicans, or something in between.

Many significant and insightful works have been written about the thousands of Mexicans repatriated during the initial phase of the Great Depression. The majority of these studies have focused on the repatriation process and its impact on Mexican laborers and their families primarily while in the United States. However, such monographs as Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez's *Decade of Betrayal* and Mercedes Carreras de Velasco's *Los mexicanos que devolvió la crisis* have largely ignored the geopolitical influences and the social welfare of Mexicans in the second half of the 1930s. Such endeavors will provide tremendous insight into the contemporary immigration crisis by providing insightful context. The beloved President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) promised a utopia for all Mexicans, including those who would return from *México de afuera*. Nonetheless, despite his best intentions and limited government resources, his agrarian reform program and nationalization of the Mexican oil industry limited his administration's ability to implement his socialist agenda. Consequently, many repatriates did not receive sufficient arable land and government support like agricultural credits that were absolutely necessary for their livelihood. These limitations on the part

of the Mexican government continue to plague its populace in the twenty-first century.

Those who remained in the United States despite the harsh conditions intensified by the Great Depression and pre-existing xenophobia had essentially determined that *Aztlán* (the United States) was now their homeland. *Aztlán's* coming of age is demonstrated by the emergence of political bodies that sought to create American institutions rather than Mexican links. The development of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) in 1929 and the Mexican American Movement in 1934 are examples of groups seeking to advance an American-based ideology rather than recreate a nostalgic niche of Mexican society. However, as David Gutiérrez has insightfully demonstrated, such strategies created distinct problems within the Mexican community: "LULAC members consistently went to great lengths to explain to any-

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one who would listen that Americans of Mexican descent were different from (and by implication, somehow better than) Mexicans from the other side."¹⁰ In this era, identity was not sufficiently complex to include all people of Mexican heritage, but rather segmented the community by citizenship. Such a hierarchy is not necessarily limited to this era since the question of citizen versus non-citizen is one of the central elements of the current immigration debate, as it was for the Italians during the Roman Republican era.

However, today the significance of citizenship and civil rights has become more complex. The 1965 Voting Rights Act, which outlawed poll taxes, literacy tests, and other racist voting practices used for decades to keep Blacks from voting, also aided the Mexican-American community. The recent extension of the Voting Rights Act should be applauded. However, for the media and much of the United States, the struggle for civil rights is still perceived as a Black and White issue. The recent pro-immigrant rallies, especially those of May 1, have introduced a new era for civil rights driven by a demand for worker's rights. At the same time U.S. citizen-

ship has grown in importance, but historically Mexican immigrants have had a low rate of applying for citizenship. Historically, both governments discouraged Mexicans from applying for U.S. citizenship, and many Mexicans believed that their Mexican citizenship was their only source of protection against abuse from employers and discrimination. However since 1965 the explosion of undocumented immigration and the inadequate number of legal immigration slots have become the primary barriers for Mexican workers wishing to obtain U.S. citizenship. "Only 17 percent of the 1973 cohort of Mexican immigrants had naturalized by 1989.... Mexicans constitute the largest single population of non-citizen legal immigrants present in the United States."¹¹

The apprehension that contributed to the 1930s massive repatriation process bore many similarities to the current state of affairs, especially to outrageous demands by anti-

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immigrant groups who want to eliminate the presence of Mexicans in the United States. Current nativists such as the Minutemen claim that ridding the nation of the entire undocumented population will solve all other domestic problems, such as overtaxed social programs and rising gas prices, and protect us from future terrorist attacks.¹² One significant underlying element that nativist groups and policy-makers fail to acknowledge—at least publicly—is that each government is, for the most part, unable to minimize the presence of Mexicans in the United States (both then and now). It was the Great Depression—not public policy—that reduced the northern immigration stream. Xenophobia may have driven many Mexicans and their Mexican-American children home, but unemployment and dwindling economic opportunities were profound aftereffects. A more telling fact was that new legislation was unnecessary for the mass expulsion, and the focus was instead on the enforcement of the laws that had been largely ignored over the course of the previous decade.

The same progression has developed today partly as a nativist backlash against the pro-immigrant rallies. A July 31,

2006 *New York Times* article reported that workplace raids and employer sanctions had increased in recent months. The article indicated that the Bush administration was pushing increased enforcement in order to gain greater political power over the battle for immigration reform.¹³ President Barack Obama's administration has pushed deportations to record highs since taking office:

The Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency expects to deport about 400,000 people this fiscal year, nearly 10 percent above the Bush administration's 2008 total and 25 percent more than were deported in 2007. The pace of company audits has roughly quadrupled since President George W. Bush's final year in office.¹⁴

The current administration's inability to implement immigration reform should not be surprising since previous attempts dating back to the 1965 Immigration Act have worsened the legal immigration process rather than improving it.

The unilateral criticisms against Mexican public policy ignore U.S. immigration policy's paradoxical attitudes, U.S. employers' perpetual demand for labor, and lax U.S. border enforcement. Despite such condemnation, the Mexican government maintains significant interest in simultaneously aiding their compatriots abroad and encouraging their return. The 1934-1940 Cárdenas presidency offers an excellent point of assessment because, like no other previous administration, it was committed to implementing the goals of the 1917 Constitution and sought to include the welfare of its compatriots in the United States as part of its developmental agenda. According to the 1935 Six-Year Government Plan, encouraging the population of *México de afuera* to return would help fulfill the objectives of the plan formulated at the Querétaro Convention. Ironically, policy-makers determined that the nation's small population was one of the most significant barriers it had to overcome. The plan called for the return of their compatriots abroad in order to lift them out of poverty, and take steps to prevent their departure in the future.¹⁵ Of course, these goals were tied to the Cardenist agrarian reform program, which distributed 54 million acres of land to rural families and villages. However, by the end of his administration, it was clear that the *ejido* cooperatives such as the ones in the Laguna region and the henequen plantations in Yucatán were failures due to their declining production. The reasons for the failure were mixed and unfortunately not unfamiliar to Mexicans today: unresponsive bureaucracy, corrupt local

officials, parcels of land that were too small and infertile, lack of modern technology and implements, etc.

The repatriates remained in dire straights and many would welcome the opportunity to return to the United States through the Bracero Program and the rebirth of the unregulated immigration process. However, it is important to note that the modern immigration process is not primarily driven by Mexico's inadequate economy. According to Jorge Durand and Douglas Massey, "international immigration does not arise from a lack of economic development, but from development itself."¹⁶ This argument is reinforced by the fact that the number of immigrants entering the United States exploded during the 1940-1970 Mexican Miracle, when "the economy grew at a rate of over 6 percent per year, a rate superior to all other Latin American countries except Brazil."¹⁷ During this same period, millions of Mexicans immigrated to

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the United States as temporary workers, undocumented workers, and legal immigrants. Mexican immigration to the United States has transcended political systems, economic strategies, healthy economic times, and not-so-healthy economic periods.

Mexican immigration to the United States has grown to become an elemental component of the U.S. and Mexican economies, whose growth for the most part has transcended world wars, governmental changes, economic policies, the Cold War, and the rise of global terrorism. The questions are no longer how did we reach this point or how do we stop this exodus, but rather what does it mean for the future of each society and the space they share physically and ideologically? Also, during this same period, many developed nations have received mass immigration induced by similar factors, such as foreign policy, legacies of colonial periods, globalization, and refugee demands. Although the intake of large numbers of migrants has posed significant challenges for receiving countries, their presence has also provided many benefits, most importantly inexpensive and exploitable labor. In

2010, the place of the Mexican immigrant within U.S. society is not only uncertain, but under attack. History demonstrates that immigration is not a problem, but rather the intended and unintended consequence of the economic evolution of each nation and their growing integration. ■■■

NOTES

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- ² "Mexico: The World Factbook," Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mx.html>, accessed July 24, 2010.
- ³ State of Arizona, Senate. 2010. Senate Bill 1070. Forty-ninth Legislature, 2d. Session, www.azleg.gov/legtext/49leg/2r/bills/sb1070s.pdf.
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- ⁶ Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 155.
- ⁷ "Illegal Alien Arrests Drop 44% in 1954" January 5, 1955, and "U.S. Patrol Halts Border Invasion," June 17, 1955, *Los Angeles Times*.
- ⁸ Ngai, op. cit., 155; Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*, 2nd edition (New York: Perennial, 2002), p. 312; Juan Gómez-Quiñones, *Mexican American Labor, 1790-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), p. 204; Manuel G. Gonzales, *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 175-178.
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- ¹⁰ David Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 84.
- ¹¹ Jorge Durand, Douglas S. Massey, and Emilio A. Parrado, "The New Era of Mexican Migration to the United States," *The Journal of American History* vol. 86, issue 2 (1999), p. 532.
- ¹² David Schwartz, "Arizona Calls for Crackdown as Immigrants Protest," Reuters, May 1, 2006.
- ¹³ Julia Preston, "U.S. Puts Onus on Employers of Immigrants," *The New York Times*, July 31, 2006, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/31/us/31immig.html>.
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- ¹⁶ Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey, "Borderline Sanity," *The American Prospect* vol. 12, no. 17 (2001), p. 28.
- ¹⁷ Douglas W. Richmond, *The Mexican Nation: Historical Continuity and Modern Change* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002), p. 315.