

MEXICAN IMMIGRATION: A Historical Perspective

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CHICANOS IN A CHANGING SOCIETY: FROM MEXICAN PUEBLOS TO AMERICAN BARRIOS IN SANTA BARBARA AND SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, 1848–1930. By ALBERT CAMARILLO. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979.)

BY THE SWEAT OF THEIR BROW: MEXICAN IMMIGRANT LABOR IN THE UNITED STATES, 1900–1940. By MARK REISLER. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976. \$14.50.)

MEXICAN EMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES, 1897–1931. By LAWRENCE A. CARDOSO. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1980. \$19.50, \$8.95.)

IMMIGRANTS—AND IMMIGRANTS: PERSPECTIVES ON MEXICAN LABOR MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES. Edited by ARTHUR F. CORWIN. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978.)

MEXICAN WORKERS IN THE UNITED STATES: HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES. Edited by GEORGE C. KISER and MARTHA WOODY KISER. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979. \$7.50.)

In the 1920s and 1930s there was a burst of research on Mexican immigration. Manuel Gamio's studies, *Mexican Immigration to the United States: A Study of Human Migration and Adjustment* (Chicago, 1930) and *The Mexican Immigrant: His Life Story* (Chicago, 1931), employed imaginative and careful research methods to trace the causes of Mexican immigration, the migratory routes being established in the 1920s, and the social consequences of this phenomenon. Paul S. Taylor's monumental ten-part study of Mexican immigrants in the border states and selected cities elsewhere, *Mexican Labor in the United States* (Berkeley, 1928–34), provided an invaluable source of information about the experiences of this population. A few years later, Carey McWilliam's work on the history of Mexicans in the United States, *North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People in the United States* (Philadelphia, 1949), crowned this literature with the insights of a committed and thoughtful social reformer. Following this period, the topic was severely neglected for several decades. Although the immigration itself probably reached new highs, little attention was given to it in academic circles.¹

In the last ten years, this neglect seems to have ended. Earlier works have found their way back into print, as several publishing houses (notably Dover, Arno, Greenwood, R and E Research Associates) committed themselves to the task of reprinting older studies, and a burgeoning new literature has emerged. The rebirth of ethnic awareness in the United States in the 1960s, accompanied by a rejection of the "melting pot" as either an accurate historical description or a normative goal, heightened academic interest in this topic. Growing awareness of the political and economic importance of the Chicano population paralleled this general movement and led to increased attention to Chicano history. And, finally, the emergence of a generation of Chicano scholars in major research institutions also contributed to this scholarly renewal.

One of the new studies is Albert Camarillo's *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848–1930*, a carefully constructed history of the annexation, colonization, and development of Southern California. Camarillo attempts to understand Chicano society "from the bottom up." His emphasis is on the emerging Chicano working class, and he also gives special attention to Chicana history. While the book focuses on a single city, two of its nine chapters are explicitly comparative, analyzing changes in Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Bernadino as well as Santa Barbara, and making observations about development patterns throughout the area.

The book is implicitly divided into two sections. The first deals with the decline of Chicano prominence and power following the 1848 annexation. It details the mixture of natural disasters (flooding, drought), market factors (competition with Texas cattle, mortgages and foreclosures) and legal gambits (nonrecognition of traditional claims, exorbitant taxes, sale of communal lands, etc.) that combined to divest *californios* of their land and wealth. Camarillo also describes developments and tactics that eroded Chicano political power, such as population shifts and the switch from at-large to ward representation, with gerrymandering used to dilute the strength of the Chicano vote. By 1870 Chicanos were no longer the majority in Santa Barbara; by the early 1880s they had been completely purged from county Democratic party conventions. "Barrioization" (the process of residential segregation) developed quickly, leaving Chicanos insulated and isolated in their home territory. Economic transformations exacerbated this process. "Either out of pride or preference, or job discrimination, most [Chicanos] remained tied to the ever diminishing pastoral economy" (p. 51). These *rancheros* were increasingly marginalized in favor of an emerging capitalist economy dominated by agriculturalists and the merchant sector. When, under extreme economic duress, Chicanos finally abandoned the traditional sector, they

entered the economic system in the lowest position, rapidly undergoing a process of proletarianization.

The second section deals with the period between 1890 and the late 1920s. Here Camarillo traces how turn-of-the-century indifference to the Chicano population was transformed into active promotion of Mexican immigration for labor purposes, giving rise to an assimilationist push in the 1910s that shifted to condemnation of the community and deportation efforts in the 1920s. His meticulous quantitative analysis of data from city directories demonstrates that there was very little change in the Chicano occupational structure during this period. This group remained overwhelmingly and disproportionately in low-level, blue-collar positions. Chicanos experienced greater economic stagnation than did non-Hispanics; even other immigrants (from European countries) were more likely to become proprietors, professionals or skilled workers.² Camarillo's analysis points to several important conclusions—that various forms of segregation were firmly institutionalized before the turn of the century; that the established labor movement shunned Chicano workers; that Chicanos were not a “tractable” labor force; that between “old” and “new” Mexican immigrants there was much friction and limited social interaction. Some of these observations have been disputed elsewhere, and this study will surely fuel those debates.

In terms of its theoretical contribution, the book is strongest in the first half, where Chicano power loss is linked to regional capitalist development. While the transition may be more accurately seen as from one kind of capitalism to another, the general point here is well taken—the decline of Chicano power was intimately linked to the erosion of the pastoral economy and the emergence of a complex market structure that was fully tied to the national economy. The second half of this study is most striking for its methodological contribution. Informed by Stephan Thernstrom's seminal works (*Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City* [Cambridge, Mass., 1964] and *The Other Bostonians* [Cambridge, Mass., 1973] on immigrant occupational structure and mobility), Camarillo has produced a useful occupational categorization scheme and clear, comparable data on occupational stratification. (His sources and methods are discussed in an appendix.) Unfortunately, Camarillo's data are on occupational *structure* at ten-year intervals, and not occupational *mobility*, and he offers little information on the property or income characteristics of his population. This kind of partial, snapshot information must be interpreted with caution, so his conclusions must be modest. His quantitative analysis, however, has been complemented with references from newspapers, memoirs, diaries, local histories, and oral histories—that rich medley of sources that seems to be the social historian's trademark. While it lacks the pizzazz of Leonard

Pitt's earlier study of the topic, *The Decline of the Californios* (Berkeley, 1966), it is a much more carefully conceived and focused piece of work.

Camarillo has wisely avoided generalizing beyond what his data warrant. Yet we know that patterns in New Mexico, where Chicanos retained a numerical advantage, and Texas, with its closer ties to the American South, differ in important ways from those Camarillo delineated. At its best, therefore, this is a fine regional study that needs to be combined with several others to capture the broader outlines of Chicano history.³

Mark Reisler's *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900–1940* and Lawrence A. Cardoso's *Mexican Emigration to the United States, 1897–1931* provide good, broad-based introductions to Mexican immigration from the turn of the century through the Great Depression. This period marked the first large-scale immigration of Mexicans to the United States and it was characterized by important economic transitions in both countries. This was also the time when national immigration policy was first being adopted in the United States. Strong, systematic analysis of this period was long overdue.

Reisler's study is a broad ethnic history that focuses on Chicano labor conditions. He notes that "[T]he story of Mexican immigrant labor in the United States from 1900 to 1940 is largely one of enduring poverty and isolation rather than one of progressive economic gain and social acceptance" (p. xi). This contention is supported with numerous examples; over half of the study details the pattern of difficult working conditions, low wages, and discrimination. There are, appropriately, separate chapters on agricultural and urban-industrial workers, providing more attention to the urban immigrants in areas like Chicago than is typical. Early unionization efforts are also explored, focusing on the depression-era activities of California farmworkers, describing the employer collusion, violence, and propaganda which countered this movement.

Much of the remainder of the book reviews the shifts in and debates about U.S. immigration policy, tracing the repeated opening and closing of the border. The pattern of leaving loopholes and exceptions in this policy to facilitate the periodic use of deportable Mexican labor was established quite early. A World War I temporary admissions policy was developed to fill "war-created" labor shortages in the Southwest. Significantly, Mexican workers were not excluded by the major restrictionist legislation of the early 1920s. The debate about this exemption raged until the end of the 1920s, when stricter interpretation of existing laws and the Depression combined to reduce the flow of Mexican immigrants. Reisler presents this historical narrative masterfully, delineating the host of interests aligned on each side of the issue (large growers and the State Department on the one hand; organized labor and an array of nativists, on the other). Implicitly combining a bureau-

cratic and an interest-group politics approach, he effectively recreates the dynamics of that debate.

This is a well-documented and carefully written piece of research, which draws on an array of private papers, correspondence, congressional hearings, and official reports. Its major flaw lies in its desire to be exhaustive. Apparently unwilling to exclude information painfully gathered in long research, the author has attempted to make use of it all. The result is a study that is very detailed and occasionally redundant. Aside from the brief introduction and conclusion, it is largely atheoretical and pays little attention to the broader questions associated with this theme. And, as with Camarillo, references to developments in Mexico are few.

Cardoso brings to his analysis a special point of view and special skills. He has done extensive research in both U.S. and Mexican archives, and the result is an engaging analysis of the *emigration* of hundreds of thousands of Mexicans before the Depression and of the reaction of the Mexican government to this diaspora.

Cardoso's analysis of the causes of emigration is much better than most. Instead of focusing on the "push" impact of the Mexican Revolution, he places the emphasis on the drive for rapid capitalist agricultural development during the *porfiriato*. The legal destruction of the *ejido* system in the name of capitalist modernization, and the distribution of much of this land to private companies, caused the displacement of thousands of peasants. Thus began a pattern of mobility that preceded even the Revolution. Simultaneously, the introduction of irrigation projects and the development of large-scale agribusiness in the U.S. created the need for a large, mobile labor force. The construction of the railroad system in northern Mexico and the southwest U.S. provided the conduit, bringing in Mexican track workers and transporting those who followed them. The Revolution was only an "additional circumstance" prompting emigration (p. 54), with the cause being more directly linked to structural changes in the economy of both areas.

The key question Cardoso addresses concerns the Mexican attitude toward the exodus. Analyzing newspaper essays, popular literature, and historical accounts, he concludes that the general attitude of the literate population toward emigration was hostile; the exodus was seen as a national disgrace. The attitude of Mexican government officials was somewhat more ambivalent, since the benefits of emigration (financial remissions, a political safety valve, manpower training, etc.) were also valued. Still, a dual strategy was adopted by the government to deal with this issue. On the one hand, it tried to discourage emigration by publicizing the pitfalls (discrimination, poor treatment) some emigrants had encountered, and, on the other, it tried to protect those who were already in the U.S., using consulates, consulate-backed organizations, and even private Chicano citizens. In times of widespread distress

(the 1920–21 recession, the Depression) the government provided financial assistance and transportation to returning workers. While Cardoso may overstate the degree of concern that the Mexican government had for its distant workers, he does demonstrate that a real effort was made periodically to assist them.

This study is somewhat better than Reisler's at delineating the broad, *structural* characteristics that prompted Mexican labor migration. Still, much work needs to be done on both the process of *descampesinización* (the withering away of the peasantry) in Mexico and the development of large-scale agribusiness in both northern Mexico and the southwestern U.S.⁴ The structure of political power in the Southwest needs more careful scrutiny to determine how large growers were able to circumvent legal restrictions on recruitment and develop a "local, regional veto over national immigration laws" (Cardoso, p. 34). This is one of several policy areas in the United States that have historically been turned over (at least partially) to a particular interest group in the private sector. The definitive history of Mexican immigration will need to come to grips with these theoretical issues.

Unfortunately, the two remaining works are no better in this regard—although they are useful analyses in their own way. *Immigrants—and Immigrants: Perspectives on Mexican Labor Migration to the United States*, edited by Arthur Corwin, is the more provocative of the two (beginning with its rather curious title). This work could easily have been entirely Corwin's own: of the fourteen essays, he wrote eight and was the co-author of three others. Apparently in an effort to round out the analysis and strike a collegial note, Corwin included a number of pieces by other prominent scholars in the field. There is a chapter by Hoffman on repatriation during the Depression, a partial reprint of a statement by Ernesto Galarza at a 1969 Senate hearing on migrant labor, and brief concluding remarks by Paul S. Taylor. Each of the essays merits some comment, but let me focus on some of the chapters written by Corwin.

The introductory chapter is essentially a review of the literature on Mexican labor migration. It is similar to, although in a revised and updated form, a review essay Corwin did on the topic for *LARR* in 1973.⁵ This piece showcases Corwin's thorough knowledge of the field and would be useful to any scholar beginning work in the area. Mexican immigration is then discussed in roughly chronological form, beginning with migration in the postconquest period and continuing to the present "wetback invasion." The historical piece tracing the general immigration patterns (written with Cardoso) and the chapter on the Mexican policy response are quite good, and were subsequently elaborated in Cardoso's own work. Those essays dealing with more contemporary issues, however, are more problematic and reveal certain unfortunate stylistic propensities of the editor.

According to Corwin, the major force behind current immigration is the development of the U.S. welfare state. He argues (with co-author Johnny M. McCain in one essay, Walter A. Fogel in another) that modern welfare programs entice older immigrants out of the labor market, creating a void which can only be filled by new immigrants, who themselves soon abandon those positions and move onto the dole. There has emerged, he contends, a "new style wetback" who enters with forged documents, finds employment in the urban, industrial sector, brings his family, and soon collects a whole gamut of social welfare benefits (p. 69). In this fashion, new waves of immigrants, pulled in by the repeated reopening of bottom-rung positions, have created a self-perpetuating antipoverty bureaucracy of grand and growing proportions.

This is an interesting and provocative theme hammered home in chapter after chapter. There are, however, two problems with this perspective. First, it provides little insight into connections between early and recent immigration. Mexican immigration, documented or otherwise, did not suddenly materialize in the 1960s with the development of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society." While the new welfare programs could have something to do with the current rate of entry, the forces that prompted immigration in the 1920s and 1940s are probably still the major forces behind that process.

Second, this kind of analysis ignores the finding of several recent empirical studies that the use of welfare services by undocumented workers is quite low. Although Corwin mentions the work of "revisionist" analysts like North and Houstoun, Bustamante, and Cornelius (even briefly discussing their methods and findings—pp. 282–5), he quickly reverts to his old position without giving their conclusions serious consideration. Disagreements of this sort are a critical part of intellectual inquiry, but when the findings of a carefully wrought empirical study are rejected, it is incumbent upon the analyst to specify the flaws in the study and/or provide contrary evidence. Instead of rigorously substantiating his position, Corwin simply refers to pieces from popular periodicals or interviews with officials from the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Corwin repeatedly uses the "conservative" estimate of 8.2 million illegal aliens in the U.S. in 1975 (pp. 128, 135). This estimate comes from a report by Lesko Associates (under INS contract) that has been widely disputed. The assumptions on which the Lesko statistical projection is based are inconsistent with current knowledge, probably leading to a substantial overestimation of the size of the undocumented population.⁶ Corwin has not only accepted this figure uncritically, he has also offered his own estimates of several other statistical unknowns, such as the number of uncensused, extralegal settlers from Mexico since 1941 and the number of perennial migrant crossers in each of the last three de-

caedes (see pp. 124, 130). He offers no sources and specifies no assumptions for these projections. (To his credit, Corwin does at least entitle the chapter in which most of these figures are presented “¿Quien Sabe? Mexican Migration Statistics.”)

The final work considered here is *Mexican Workers in the United States: Historical and Political Perspectives*, edited by George C. Kiser and Martha Woody Kiser. This collection combines official correspondence, commission reports, articles from periodicals, and scholarly analyses to bring “readable” and “less accessible” sources to a wider audience (p. 2). It espouses no particular point of view, but mixes pieces that are polemical with some that are research-oriented, selections from the United States with some from Mexico. It is an interesting, albeit somewhat arbitrary, mix.

The book is divided into six sections, each of which contains an introduction by the editors. “The World War I Era” includes a reprint of an article by Cardoso (“Labor Emigration to the Southwest, 1916 to 1920: Mexican Attitudes and Policy”), whose work on this era is increasingly familiar. “Repatriation during the Great Depression” contains bits of correspondence and a reprint of George Kiser and David Silverman’s carefully wrought essay, “Mexican Repatriation during the Great Depression.” “The Second Bracero Era, 1942–1964” includes several selections that analyze the program in conventional interest-group terms. Ellis W. Hawley’s “The Politics of the Mexican Labor Issue, 1950–1965” is a particularly good essay on the politics of the farm bloc, its internal organization and Congressional and bureaucratic alliances, and its growing isolation in the early 1960s.

Predictably, the section on “Illegal Mexican Workers” gets disproportionate attention—about one-third of the book. Several interesting items from Truman’s presidential papers are included here, along with excerpts from the report of the President’s Commission on Migratory Labor (1951), the Bustamante story from Julian Samora’s *Los Mojados* (Notre Dame, 1971), and policy statements by Presidents Echeverría and Carter. The final two sections, “Mexican Commuters” and “Mexico’s Border Industrialization Program,” deal with tangential, although obviously related, issues.

Works of this nature typically suffer from a lack of organic unity. Through the section introductions, careful organization, and judicious excerpting, however, Kiser and Kiser have managed to produce a fairly coherent collection. The introductions are written simply (almost simplistically), assuming no prior knowledge by the reader and apparently aimed at an undergraduate audience. While a few selections will be useful to advanced researchers, most of the best pieces are reprints, and the use of excerpted material will not be very satisfying. For younger

scholars, however, the combination of primary and secondary sources should be of pedagogical value.

Clearly there is still much to be done in this field. It is an area plagued by inaccurate official data and a research population that may be less than fully cooperative. Sources for the history of a group that has not been politically powerful are scant and many have not been preserved. Even looking at migratory movements of only sixty years ago, we must often turn to rougher sources like the *corridos* to understand the experiences of these immigrants. Theoretical constructs in this field are even more poorly developed. In spite of this emerging literature, there is obviously room for continued research.

NOTES

1. Notable exceptions are Ernesto Galarza's *Merchants of Labor* (Santa Barbara, 1964) and Leo Grebler's *Mexican Immigration to the United States: The Record and Its Implications* (Los Angeles, 1965).
2. In 1900, 57 percent of the Spanish-surnamed male heads of household in Santa Barbara were unskilled workers; in 1930, 56 percent were in this category. For non-Hispanics, the figures were 14 percent and 11 percent, respectively (pp. 173–80).
3. Interesting studies of different areas include Douglas E. Foley et al., *From Peones to Politicos: Ethnic Relations in a South Texas Town, 1900–1977* (Austin, 1977) and Oscar J. Martínez, *Border Boom Town: Ciudad Juárez since 1848* (Austin, 1975).
4. Raul A. Fernandez, *The United States-Mexico Border* (Notre Dame, 1977), J. Craig Jenkins, "The Demand for Immigrant Workers: Labor Scarcity or Social Control?" (*International Migration Review* 12 [Winter 1978]:514–35), and Robert L. Bach, "Mexican Immigration and the American State" (*International Migration Review* 12 [Winter 1978]:536–58) have done more in this area.
5. "Mexican Emigration History, 1900–1970: Literature and Research," *LARR* 8, no. 2 (1973):3–24.
6. See Kenneth Roberts et al., *The Mexican Migration Numbers Game: An Analysis of the Lesko Estimate of Undocumented Migration from Mexico to the United States* (Austin, 1978) and Sidney Weintraub and Stanley R. Ross, *The Illegal Alien from Mexico* (Austin, 1980), pp. 16–17.