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Looking Beyond the U.S.*

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# *Past and Current Realities about Mexican/Latino Immigration. Looking Beyond the U.S.*

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## **Abstract**

The literature including social media shows that Mexican/Latino immigrants have attracted contempt and have been traditionally objected to as a minority in the U.S. The intent here is to search for historical and other factors that might explain the public antipathy and to identify reasons that could, either in isolation or in combination with others, explain anti-immigrant sentiments among people, many of whom are descendants of immigrants. The perusal of the challenges of Mexican immigrants to the U.S through the decades will highlight some similarities related to discrimination against waves “peoples of color”, not only in the U.S. but in other parts of the world. The daily treatment within the society of immigrants of color as well as the frequent lower immigration quotas imposed on certain groups, including Mediterranean people, makes the topic quite relevant to today’s concerns.

**Keywords:** Civil rights; Historical discrimination; Immigration; Nativism; U.S. Mexicans.

## *Purpose and Introduction*

This paper will examine factors that might explain the antipathy to the Mexican/Latino immigrant population. The literature including social media shows that Mexican/Latino immigrants have attracted contempt as a minority from the start in the U.S. The intent here is to search for historical and other factors that might explain the public antipathy toward Mexicans in the U.S. and to identify reasons that could, either in isolation or in combination with others, explain nativist—often xenophobic- and other anti-immigrant sentiments among people, many of whom are descendants of immigrants.

For those particularly interested in the implications of a socio-historical piece on Mexican immigrants, the perusal of the challenges faced by Mexican immigrants to the U.S through the decades will highlight some similarities related to discrimination against waves of “brown” and other

“peoples of color”, not only in the U.S. but possibly in other parts of the world. The daily treatment within the society of immigrants of color as well as the frequent lower immigration quotas imposed on certain groups, makes the topic quite relevant to today’s concerns.

The persistence of negativism towards Mexican immigrants in American society has been a surprise to many observers from other nations. The U.S. as well as most Latin American nations have been the home to immigrants from all over the world. Consecutive flows of Irish, Italians, Greeks, Jews and even some Latin-American waves of immigrants overcame their initial rejection while millions of Mexican migrants continue to have pointed difficulties in the society, their plight becoming a historically intriguing subject.

In brief, although this paper ostensibly addresses Mexican immigrants, readers can learn that using a similar rationale, nativists movements in the U.S. were instrumental in developing restrictive entry quotas for Southern European migrants during decades following the 1924 Immigration Act. Much of this discrimination falls within the spectrum of what W.E.B. Dubois (1903) called “the color line”.

### *1. The Spanish Settlers*

During the period of the Spanish explorers fear of the Spaniards brew deeply in the Anglo mind. In 15th and 16th hundreds, when the Spanish settled in the Americas, the British, the Dutch and the French competed for lands in the continent. The geo-political reality of competing empires offered fertile terrain for the propagation of stigmatizing narratives. The *Black Legend* about the Spanish “race” as a “brutal, sanguinary and sadistic” group of abusers was propagated and took root in the public psyche (Fuentes, 1992, p.132). Bartolomé de las Casas, in an attempt to defend the native inhabitants from abuses, reported the colonizers’ mistreatments of natives to the Crown. The bad behavior of the colonizers solidified negative perceptions. This was the start of what today is called the “Latino threat narrative”. This negative narrative was inherited by Mexicans centuries later and survives, as we shall see, to these days.

An early source of Anglo-American antipathy towards Hispanics is found in the *Black Legend*. This interpretation has sixteenth-century English propagandists discrediting the reputation of the Spaniards in the New World in order to further their own imperialistic plans. As a consequence, Anglo-Americans held negative views even before confronting Mexicans on New Spain frontiers where the encounter itself deepened prejudices and provided at least one important rationale for 'Manifest Destiny.' The violence of the Texas Rebellion and the Mexican War further fueled the antipathy. (Rosales, 1997, p.5)

The Spanish were "the first Europeans to traverse much of the United States" before the arrival of the pilgrims in 1569 (Daniels, 1990, p. 96). Cabeza de Vaca walked the western country from Galveston to Culiacan, Mexico (1536). From Santa Barbara in Mexico, the Spaniards moved into New Mexico and Arizona. New Mexico was settled in 1598 before the Pilgrims arrived at Jamestown, in 1610. Florida remained in Spanish hands from 1565 to 1819 when the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, also known as the Transcontinental Treaty, the Florida Purchase, or the Florida Treaty, ceded Florida to the U.S. and defined the boundaries between the U.S. and New Spain, the latter remaining Mexican until approximately 30 years later<sup>1</sup>.

From Santa Bárbara in Mexico, Spain moved to claim "the Kingdom of Teja" to resist threats from the French and Christianize the Caddo Indians, ca. 1680 (Iber & De León, 2006, p. 57. See also Steward & De León, 1993). Junípero Sierra founded 9 of 21 missions in California from 1769 to 1823 (Daniel, 1990). New Mexico, Arizona, California, parts of Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Oklahoma and Kansas remained part of Mexico until 1848 when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed at the end of the war with Mexico and the Gadsden purchase expanded the southern border in 1854. Mexicans, the descendants of Spaniards and native groups had a significant presence in what is today the U.S., a matter that causes surprise when observers notice the marked antipathy to a population that was once native. The Mexican population was not at the start an immigrant population but rather an autochthonous one in southern North American lands. Puerto Rico was annexed in 1898 after the Spanish American War.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-u-s-acquires-spanish-florida>.

## 2. *The Sequelae of the Black Legend and Racism*

The cruelty ascribed to the Spanish colonists existed in other imperial powers but the Black Legend had disseminated attitudes against Mexican immigrants, different from the attitudes about other foreign nationals arriving in the U.S. The issue of Catholicism and language emerged after the creation of the new nation and loomed large in the Anglo mind for many decades. “Anglo-Americans held negative views even before confronting Mexicans on New Spain frontiers where the encounter itself deepened prejudices. The violence of the Texas Rebellion and the Mexican War further fueled the antipathy.” (Rosales, 1997, p.5).

After the annexation of the various Spanish territories, the reality was that the Spanish language remained predominant in many areas. Texan local politicians delivered speeches in both languages until the 1900s (Rosales, 1997). However, the issue of language was a contentious point in Arizona and New Mexico. New Mexico protected its heritage the longest by provisions in its constitution which made Spanish an official language, equal to English (New Mexico Constitution, Artxx-12, 1912.)

Still during the colonial period, with the arrival of African slaves to the New World (circa 1619), racism took complete hold of the minds and hearts of the white population. The English saw the Spanish as the embodiment of racial impurity exemplified by “mestizaje” with the Moors and the Indians. Racist attitudes about not only Africans but other dark-skin people, including southern Europeans, persisted until the Civil Rights movement. In Texas, for example, De León writes:

Most whites who first met Tejanos in the 1820s never had prior experiences with Mexican nor encountered them anywhere else. Yet, their reaction was contemptuous, many thinking the Mexicans abhorrent....” (De León, 1987, p. 1).

Racism penetrated immigration policies from the start. In Texas, for example, Stephen Austin and his son, who had been granted permission to settle in those lands, desired only “to redeem it from the wilderness—to settle it with an intelligent, honorable and enterprising (sic) people” (Stephen Austin, quoted by De León, 1987, p. 3). De León further comments that it was clear that Austin’s and other politicians desire was to bring to

Texas a population that would harmonize with the rest of the Anglo settled states on the *East*, “in language, political principles, common origin, sympathy, and even interest.” (De León, 1987, p. 3).

Taking a big time leap, racist removal policies were present during WWII, when fear fueled not only the removal of immigrants, both Mexicans and Japanese, but the rise of fear and intrigue regarding immigrants. However, an interesting thing occurred in relation to Mexicans, which we shall discuss later under The Bracero Program.

There were many immigration laws and regulations that targeted Mexican/ Latino as well as Southern European immigrants through the decades. The important thing to remember is that given the numbers and the proximity of Mexico to the U.S., the situation was always more acute in their case. Measures that addressed literacy as a condition for entry were keenly felt by a population that for years had provided field laborers. On this point, comparisons with Italian immigrants, many of whom had come from the Mezzogiorno and a tradition of agricultural labor and were not necessarily literate also provide points of comparison.

The constant changes in U.S. and Mexican policies did not create even the most minimal level of trust between those two groups. As Mexican President Porfirio Diaz (1830-1915) once stated, “Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States!”. His words appear to remain quotable today, particularly when US politicians are bent on curtailing immigration at all costs.

### *3. Nativism and Flooding Immigration*

Although the U.S. is a country of immigrants, the arrival of large numbers of immigrants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> C. was perceived as a threat. In 1894, a group of Harvard graduates formed the Immigration Restriction League, a pressure group that argued for fundamental changes in the immigration policies.

According to one of its founders, Prescott F. Hall, the question for Americans to decide was whether they wanted their country “to be peopled by British, German and Scandinavian stock, historically free, energetic, progressive, or by Slav, Latin and Asiatic races historically

downtrodden, atavistic and stagnant". (Daniels, 1990, p. 276). Daniels further comments—and this also affected Mediterranean people, that

...by the late nineteenth century, many of the 'best and brightest' minds in America had become convinced that of all the many 'races' of Europe [today, we would say 'ethnic groups'], one alone—variously called Anglo-Saxon, Aryan, Teutonic or Nordic—had superior innate characteristics. Often using a crude misapplication of Darwinian evolution, which substituted these various races for Darwin's species, historians, political scientists, economists, and later, eugenicists discovered that democratic political institutions had developed and could thrive only among Anglo-Saxon peoples. (Daniels, 1990, p. 276).

This latter has been called the Anglo-Saxon complex (Daniels, 1990, p.276).

Within the spirit of restricting immigration, a large number of bills made their way through Congress (1895, 1897,1913,1915), sometimes getting to the presidents, who typically vetoed them, until 1917. These bills had a common theme, which was literacy that frequently masked racism. In 1910 the Mexican Revolution erupted. Waivers from literacy restrictions were given for temporary agricultural and railroad workers. However, the nativist spirit continued, even though Presidents Cleveland, Taft and Woodrow Wilson argued that the U.S needed labor to do work Americans did not want to do. An immigration restriction bill was finally passed in 1917, but by then, European immigration had decreased due to the war in Europe. The literacy bill of 1917 eventually proved to be unnecessary. (Daniels, 1990; Lukens, 2012). The acts of 1921 and 1924 related quotas and birthplace (McSveney, 1987). Quotas favored the Northern European countries that had been represented in the U.S. population. Despite changes in ideology through the decades, "the nation's basic immigration law remained the national origins system set up during 1924-29." (Daniels, 1990, p.305).

According to Daniels (1990) and other observers of the immigration quota system in the U.S., quotas remained fairly intact until 1965, even though after the War, there was a gradual relaxation and a large number of immigrants entered the country.



#### 4. *The Bracero Period (1924-1950)*

The Bracero program was a special agreement that affected primarily Mexican immigrants. Between 1929 and 1936, at least six hundred thousand Mexican nationals and their children, many of whom were born in the U.S., returned to Mexico—this represented about one third of the U.S. Mexican population. Economic downturns had been a constant factor in their lives, but nothing compared to the suffering created by this crisis. (Rosales, 1997, p.49). In 1942, the US and Mexico signed the Bracero Agreement for the recruitment of Agricultural workers. As part of the agreement 4.6 million contracts were issued between 1943 and 1965 for agricultural workers and 69,000 for railroad maintenance (Alarcón, 2011). Both the U.S and Mexico promised to apply the protections of labor laws, public health, fair treatment, etc. to the “bracero” workers. About 10% savings were withdrawn from workers’ salaries. These monies were to be returned to the workers at the end of the contract by the Mexican government. However, no savings were initially returned and the controversy continued until a settlement was reached in a California court in 2008 (Belluck, 2008).

In spite of their role in the economy, in 1947, Mexican undocumented immigrants from California and Texas were targeted for return. In 1954, through Operation Wetback, more than one million workers from the West Coast were deported.

In 2005, President Bush suggested a guest worker program similar to the Bracero Program for other immigrants but Congress did not support him (Fletcher & Fears, 2005).

As we try to offer some useful comparisons with Europe, the old U.S. Bracero Program has a great many similarities with the current practice of guest workers in Europe, for example, “contratos en origen”, in Spain. Agricultural workers are often hard to find and the harshness of the labor makes it very undesirable to natives. Furthermore, agricultural business interests often make the case that they have to rely on foreign cyclical workers for their business, since crops are seasonal.

### 5. Race and Self-perception among Mexican Immigrants in the U.S.

The contemporary usage of "white people" or a "white race" as a large group of (mainly European) populations contrasting with Black, American Indian, or other non-white categories originated in the 17th century. Today it is often used as a racial classifier in multiracial societies. Wikipedia offers a fuller discussion of current census classifications in various countries.

Many countries have specified categories under which they count citizens from other lands. Generally, people are counted by country of birth. In Europe, after the WWII in particular, any racial classification was viewed as suspect. Neither France nor Spain, for example, collect any data on racial classifications (Bleich, 2001). They use country of origin to identify immigrants from different countries. This is not to say that often, policies based on geographic regions where specific groups with specific needs might reside, do not become equally politically controversial.

However, in the U.S., where race was always a variable and a determinant of historical discrimination, the conflicting messages sent by the Bureau of the Census in its counting practices, did not help Mexicans. Until 1920, the Census had not identified Mexicans; however, the enumerators tended to note the presence of Spanish surnamed "mulatos" in the Western States (Ortiz & Telles, 2012, p.4). The 1930 Census provided specific instructions for the counting of Mexicans, identifying them as a very mixed group belonging primarily—if not totally, to the laboring classes. According to Ortiz and Telles (2012), the use of 'laborers' in the first line of the Census instructions "suggests that class may have played a role into the use of Mexican in that laborers might have been classified as *Mexican* but higher status Mexicans might have been classified as *White*" (Ortiz & Telles, 2012, p.4). This caused the Mexican government and LULAC (the League of United Latin American Citizens) to protest about using Mexican as a racial category, and from there on, until the period of self-identification in 1980, Mexicans who may have marked "other" in the Census form, were classified as White. Finally, in 2000, for the first time in the Census, individuals were presented with the option to self-identify with more than one race and this continued with the 2010 Census.

The way in which countries classify their immigrants has always had policy and legal consequences. An interesting significant event which

involved a number of well-known civil rights attorneys and LULAC in the post WWII period addressed race/class classification in a criminal case which got to the U.S. Supreme Court. The case, *Hernandez v. the State of Texas*, was about a migrant cotton picker accused of murder in a small town in Jackson County, Texas. The lead defense attorney, Gustavo García,

...envisioned the Hernandez case as a challenge to the systematic exclusion of persons of Mexican origin from all types of jury duty in at least seventy counties in Texas. It was not surprising to him when Hernandez was found guilty and the decision was upheld by the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals<sup>2</sup>.

When the Warren Supreme Court finally heard the case in January, 1954, García argued that the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment guaranteed protection not only on the basis of race but of class. The State of Texas contended that the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment covered only Whites and Blacks and that Mexican Americans were White, at least at that moment. However, the Supreme Court, ordering the reversal of conviction, “accepted the concept of distinction by class, that is, between ‘white’ and Hispanic, and found that when laws produced unreasonable and different treatment on such basis, the constitutional guarantee of equal protection is violated” (*Handbook of Texas on Line*, accessed April 27, 2017). This was a great triumph for the concept of “other white” applied to Mexicans, a concept that persisted until the 1970s.

These changing classifications fueled Mexicans’ own definitions of self and influenced the public images of the group. This is not unlike what happened among other ethnic groups where color and class intersected with their ethnicity. Given the complex relationship of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and other dimensions in the modern world, it is not surprising to find that members of many groups find themselves confused by the Census and sometimes the courts, which, by default, required until very recently single classifications. In the case of Mexican Americans, even for the courts, when acting favorably to them like in the case of *Hernandez v Texas*, the issue of identification was unsatisfactory (“other white”) from the perspective of psychological identity.

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<sup>2</sup> *Handbook of Texas Online*, V. Carl Allsup, “Hernandez v. State of Texas,” accessed April 27, 2017, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jrh01>.

## 6. *Mexicans and Civil Rights*

After WWII, the struggle for land and labor rights gave rise to a significant period in the Chicano civil rights movement. It involved leaders, such as César Chavez, and Reies Tijerina. For Cesar Chavez, the continued flow of cheap labor for the agricultural fields was an unrelenting impediment to the improvement of working conditions: “for millions of ordinary Americans, the terrible plight of migrant workers and efforts of the late César Chavez were the introduction to the Chicano/a movement” (Iber & De León, 2006, p. 266-7).

For Cesar Chavez, as long as there were unorganized Mexicans who followed the crops in the West, there was plenty of room for disempowerment, rejection and disdain. He looked towards the unions to support the cause. Tijerina branding a strong sense of entitlement did not shy away from confrontation. But the “*aliancistas*”—members of a strong movement started by Tijerina—quickly became associated with violence in the minds of the authorities. Other groups involved in civil rights but with antecedents preceding the formal Civil Rights period such as LULAC, founded in 1929, which participated and won a number of important court cases, were involved in litigation. Very importantly, LULAC formed strong alliances with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP, founded in 1909).

Although statistical correlations might be missing, U.S. history shows that the nativist perspective apparent during the colonial period continued to taint all policy measures and events through the decades and into the Civil Rights period. In the 1920s — although many surviving today — examples of nativist organizations were the American Party or Know Nothing Party; the American Protective Association, the Ku Klux Klan, the Aryan nation, the English Only movement, etc.

In spite of the variety of approaches and philosophies in the struggle for Mexican recognition which rendered many successes, Mexican-immigrants and even Mexican-Americans remained more marginalized and disparaged than white members of other immigrant groups. Chavez’s ideas about the constant supply of poorly or non-organized labor coming across border and being unable to demand equal treatment continues to be a valid

hypothesis to attempt to understand the discrimination of immigrants in various parts of the world.

*Conclusions: The current situation*

The decline of Mexican immigrants documented and undocumented entering the U.S. in the past nine years is a well-documented fact.

In the last decade and a half, the Mexican share among all immigrants dropped from 29.5% in 2000 to 27.6% in 2014... Mexico is no longer the top origin country among the most recent immigrants to the U.S. In 2013, China and India overtook Mexico as the most common countries of origin ... more Mexican immigrants have returned to Mexico than have migrated to the U.S. since the end of the 2007-2009 Great Recession (Zong & Batalova, 2016, pp.1-2)

This decline did not alter the anti-immigrant public discourse. Although the constant flow of new comers is often associated with nativist tendencies, the intensity of negativism does not correspond to an increase in the volume of newcomers, either in absolute or relative terms. Massey and Pren (2012) have suggested that it is not easy to document the rise of xenophobia because it is not asked in surveys but they reliably trace it to the rise of border apprehensions and the rise of conservatism in the U.S., which are reliably measured. McCarthy (2015) reporting the results of a recent Gallup survey<sup>3</sup>, suggests that “the treatment of Hispanics, particularly of immigrants, takes on special significance as the nation continues to debate immigration reform” (p.4). Very pointedly, he reports on the gravity of the issue which has been brought to the fore by Donald Trump not only during his presidential election campaign but also as his presidency took hold and executive measures began unfolding, in spite of persistent reversal of those measures by the courts.

Signs of exclusion of specific groups, and even anti-immigrant violence have occurred in places *without* large or sudden increases in the immigrant

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<sup>3</sup> [www.gallup.com/poll/184769/immigrant-status-tied-discrimination-among-hispanics.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/184769/immigrant-status-tied-discrimination-among-hispanics.aspx).

population (Papademetriou & Banulescu-Bogdan, 2016). In the U.S., the case of the “dreamers” - young men and women who were brought by their parents as children and had lived in the U.S., attending schools and often succeeding beyond expectations -was highlighted during and after the presidential campaigns. They were not really part of a constant flow but their case often activated the same negativism and anti-immigrant sentiments. The same document by Papademetriou and Banulescu-Bogdan from the Migration Policy Institute Transatlantic Council suggested that anti-immigrant sentiment all over the world is not necessarily changed by the reality of numbers. Nothing has been truer for the current status of the Mexican immigrant in the U.S. and immigrants in general in parts of Europe.

It is important to note that what is observed in others countries is also observed in the U.S. No single factor can be directly correlated to outbreaks of nativism and xenophobia. And yet, each factor (the appearance of taking jobs from Natives, single criminal occurrences, etc.) is used often as an explanation to exclude a particular group. Language, religion, dress, customs are all used to show that a group is not fitting into the nucleus of a specific society.

U.S historical ties to slavery and disdain for African Americans extended to other non-northern European populations. As we noted earlier quoting W.E. B. Dubois, "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line," and the 21st century color line is the Border (Newman, 2005). Today's color line, which after the Civil War reserved the best jobs, businesses, etc. to decrease blacks extends to the border and citizenship. The question must be asked whether particular borders are the demarcating line between acceptable and non-acceptable migrants in Europe. The historical relationship drawn by census and courts when they classified Mexican/Latino immigrants using class as well as race, designating laborers as “mulatos” or Mexicans while other Mexicans/Latinos were designated as white, showed how color and class mattered.

What the research literature shows is that a predilection for groups that blend easily into the host society has been a historical and sociological fact. Witness for example, the threat of the Muslim ban in the U.S. today, or the threat that less-restrictive border crossing policies of the European Union represent for some member states, as evidenced by the success of many ultra-right political platforms. King, a prominent Iowa Republican and a

vocal advocate against illegal immigration, tweeted, “We can’t restore our civilization with somebody else’s babies” (*The New York Times*, 12 March 2017). The building of the wall, the expulsions of people, the constant discourse associating Mexicans with danger, all show a disregard for what were believed to be the ingrained moral and legal principles of the U.S. as a country of immigrants. While many in the U.S. are denouncing the racism inherent in these extremes, the fact that citizens of a well-known solidly immigrant community would dare make such statements bespeaks of underlying racism. It should be equally asked whether exclusivist remarks and proposed policies in Europe do the same thing.

Our premise was that perhaps historical data would provide some enlightenment on the migration predicament of citizens of Mexico. We believe that it offered explanations for the ingrained prejudicial pattern of discrimination that the U.S. has not overcome. The data confirmed the coexistence of xenophobic periods with periods of high unemployment and economic strain. It also showed that the constancy of a flow of immigrants from a single region to the same places often aggravate negative feelings in local communities, even though those communities often request immigrants to perform specific tasks.

On a more hopeful tone, for all groups in the U.S., the historical data also shows that time spent in the country produces changes in the local social structure and often eases the situation of immigrant groups. Current examples of an African-American President, or of Latino members of the Senate or of Mexican legislators and mayors, etc., should be viewed as an indication of progress, albeit slow, fraught by regressions and never broad enough.

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