

“Without Borders”: A History of the Immigrants’ Rights Movement

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In 1970, Mark Day, then a young and idealistic priest looking to put his liberation theology convictions to practice, had found his way to Bert Corona, who was working on an immigrants’ rights campaign in Southern California. The crusade seemed like a lost cause at the time. “No one gave a [expletive]” about immigrants then, Day remembers.¹ The journalist Dick Reavis has offered a similar assessment: “even Mexican Americans” he recalls, hated Mexican immigrants and “called them ‘wetbacks.’”² So, too, Herman Baca, who has devoted the great majority of his adult life to immigrants’ rights, likes to tell the story of when Corona first walked into the young Baca’s print shop back in the 1960s. “We’ve got to get head of this immigration issue,” Corona told the young activist, who would become Corona’s collaborator and mentee. “What does that have to do with us?” responded Baca.³

That these anecdotes seem so odd today is testament to how much the times have changed. When Corona and Baca met, the focus for Chicano communities was seldom immigration. By and large, after all, the Chicano experience had little to do with immigration. The Mexican Americans of the Southwest could sometimes trace their history and ancestry to migration, of course, but many more had roots in the region dating back generations and sometimes centuries. The question on the minds of most Mexican Americans at the time was how to challenge the discrimination they routinely faced, how to gain full citizenship, and how to

¹ Mark Day, interview with author, March 6, 2018, phone

² Dick Reavis, interview with author, February 27, 2017, phone.

³ Herman Baca, interview with author, April 13, 2021, phone.

make economic gains. And if immigration figured at all into that equation, it usually meant stopping it.⁴

By the late 1970s, that had changed. At a critical conference on the issue at the height of the Chicano movement, a resolution passed that not only acknowledged the importance of the immigration issue to Chicano communities but took a decisively pro-immigrant stance, going as far as to claim that Chicanos and Mexican immigrants were “one people without borders.”⁵

Strikingly little scholarly attention has been paid to Brown intra-ethnic relations—or to the shift that produced what appears to us today to be a timeless affinity between Mexican Americans and their immigrant (often undocumented) co-ethnics. And yet, to make sense of the current ethnic and political landscape that defines Latinx communities, individually and collectively, it is crucial to understand this history. This is not to say that historians and others have totally neglected this question. Especially those concerned with labor, such as Lori Flores and Frank Barajas, understand that tensions have always existed.⁶ And recent studies such as Jimmy Patiño's groundbreaking *Raza Sí, Migra No* more fully undertake this question.⁷ Yet, sustained studies on this relationship remain rare. Most immigration histories focus on policy or on the lived experiences of immigrants, both useful and laudable goals. Chicano historians, on the other hand, often emphasize shared cultural and political struggles, downplaying conflicts within the ethnic Mexican communities. One of the best—and still one of the only—monograph-

⁴ David Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 40.

⁵ Resolution passed at the National Chicano Immigration Conference, May 24, 1980, Baca Papers, Box 18, Folder 11.

⁶ Lori A. Flores, *Grounds for Dreaming: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the California Farmworker Movement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Frank P. Barajas, *Curious Unions: Mexican American Workers and Resistance in Oxnard, California, 1898-1961* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012).

⁷ Jimmy Patiño, *Raza Sí, Migra No: Chicano Movement Struggles for Immigrant Rights in San Diego* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

length studies on intra-ethnic Mexican relationships is David Gutierrez's *Walls and Mirrors*, published in 1995, which masterfully traces one hundred and fifty years of Chicano-Mexicano relations.⁸

But published nearly thirty years ago, there is much that Gutierrez could not have seen clearly at the moment, not the least of which are the consequences of the Chicano attitude shift, including the rabid nativist backlash that culminated in California's turn against immigration in the mid-1990s, precisely when the book was published. I write this book, then, to continue in the tradition of Gutiérrez, though now with the benefit of three additional decades of hindsight. I write it also because I believe the scant attention paid to this subject is dangerous, and the stakes too high. Taking for granted the current affinities and connections between Mexican immigrants and brown Americans necessarily leads us to what Jorge Mariscal has aptly called “de-historicized identities.”⁹ Furthermore, failing to understand how these links were produced leaves too questions unanswered and many lessons and consequences unexplained.

I aim, therefore, to historicize this relationship, while uncovering how tensions, ambivalence, and ultimately kindship, led to new understandings of human, civil, labor, and citizenship rights among immigrants, native-born Latinos, and white Americans. I seek to understand how social movements developed—and what they gained as well as what they lost in this process. And I try to interrogate the paradoxes at the core of this story: how borders led to unity, how a fight for inclusive immigration policies led to new forms of restriction, and how activists built a robust social movement while simultaneously ceding the language and tools of citizenship to nativists while drawing racist and nativist abuse.

⁸ Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*.

⁹ Jorge Mariscal, “Foreword: The Chicano Movement,” in Mario T. García, ed., *The Chicano Movement: Perspectives from the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2014), xxi.

My narrative begins in 1954, though of course the larger story of ethnic Mexicans in the United States goes back much further. When Chicano activists came up with the refrain that “we didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us,” they meant it quite literally.¹⁰ Their presence in the United States is the result of American imperialism and settler-colonialism. Specifically, it is the result of the Mexican American War, in which the United States defeated an outmanned and outgunned Mexico, resulting in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The Treaty forced Mexico to cede half of its territory to its northern neighbor. But the war had profound consequences that went well beyond questions of land and territory. It also had profound consequences for people, specifically Mexicans in the ceded territories, who, as a result of the war, became effectively stateless overnight.

Offered the choice to either “return” to Mexico or remain in what suddenly was the United States, most chose to stay. This made sense, of course. Whether it was Mexico or the United States, these women, men, and families wished to remain in what had long been their homes and communities. But due to a war in which they had had little part, they became colonized subjects whose rights, land, language, citizenship, and dignity were routinely violated and whose existence became little more than a social problem for the government that now ruled, but hardly represented, them.

Over the next hundred years, immigration was not a central concern in the Southwest. The exception was the first decade of the twentieth century when the Mexican Revolution raged and the violence forced tens of thousands of Mexicans north of the border as they sought refuge from the violence and instability south of the border. But for the most part, the central struggle

¹⁰ Rodolfo F. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 3; Mathew C. Gutmann et al., eds., *Perspectives on Las Americas: A Reader in Culture, History, & Representation* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 10.

for the ethnic Mexicans of the Southwest remained that of full citizenship and recognition of their land and their rights, as the Treaty of Guadalupe promised.¹¹

Immigration only became a concern in the middle of the century when the United States entered the Second World War. It was then that the war effort produced a massive labor shortage. With millions of young men overseas fighting the Axis powers, including hundreds of thousands of Mexican Americans and other Hispanics, the country was faced with the question of how to maintain domestic production. American women answered the call in the factories and other critical wartime industries, but agriculture remained an open question. To solve the puzzle, United States officials worked with the Mexican government to import large numbers of temporary guest workers, called “braceros” (literally, those who work with their arms). Similar programs had been employed before, including during the First World War, only now the scale was much grander. The bilateral program seemingly satisfied all parties involved: Mexicans could send their men to earn and bring back dollars, while gaining valuable industrial knowledge the government could use to modernize its own nation; poor Mexican laborers could earn money to help sustain their families back home; and growers could find cheap, managed labor to do the work previously done by American workers.¹²

¹¹ David Fitzgerald, *A Nation of Emigrants: How Mexico Manages Its Migration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

¹² Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Erasmo Gamboa, *Mexican Labor and World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942-1947* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999); Mireya Loza, *Defiant Braceros: How Migrant Workers Fought for Racial, Sexual, and Political Freedom* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Don Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle over Industrial Farming in Bracero-Era California* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

One constituency hardly taken into consideration was Mexican Americans. Initially, they did not generally complain. Like others, they were focused on winning the war effort and on proving their devotion to their nation in hopes of being accepted as full citizens, not unlike African Americans and their “Double Victory” campaign. After the war, however, the problem became clear to them, especially because the Bracero Program did not end with the war. Instead, it continued and was formalized in 1951 at the start of a new conflict, the Korean War. The importation of braceros actually peaked later in the decade, with close to half a million arriving each year between 1956 and 1959.¹³

In this regard, the war, rather than helping the Mexican American cause, hindered it. As they returned from fighting overseas, the jobs they had vacated were now occupied by Mexican Braceros. And when they could get work, Mexican Americans found that as a direct result of the abundance of poor and even desperate Mexican workers, conditions had deteriorated and wages plummeted. If the importation of hundreds of thousands of Mexican men through the Bracero Program was not bad enough, hundreds of thousands more came without authorization.

These were the so-called “wetbacks” (known as such because of their common practice of wading across the Rio Grande that separated Mexico and the United States). Employers preferred these “wetbacks” to braceros because they were not protected by legal provisions, as the braceros were, at least on paper. And the undocumented workers often preferred to migrate outside the program because doing so provided a degree of freedom to seek out tolerable jobs and to do so in different industries and parts of the country.

¹³ David M. Reimers, *Other Immigrants: The Global Origins of the American People* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 104; “Termination of the Bracero Program: Some Effects on Farm Labor and Migrant Housing Needs,” 5.

Mexican Americans wasted no time in response. They mobilized to publicize the problem and to seek a resolution. They reasoned that both the Bracero Program and the illegal influx it had invited had to be stopped. While some focused on ending the formers through legislative pressure, others attacked the problem of the “wetbacks” by portraying it as a threat not just to Mexican Americans but to American society more generally.

Activists first found success on the latter front. Americans had become convinced that the “illegals” were, in fact, a threat to order and to American jobs. And in the midst of a massive recession, the biggest since the Great Depression, the government was persuaded to round up and deport these workers. What resulted was Operation Wetback, which nabbed some one million Mexicans and deported them over the course of a few months in the summer of 1954.¹⁴ The focus then turned to ending the Bracero Program. Activists, led by the Mexican-born American scholar and labor organizer Ernesto Galarza, eventually succeeded in terminating it a decade later, in 1964. By then, some five million Mexican men had come to the United States on seasonal contracts.

It was a triumph for Mexican Americans, but the context in which it came complicated the situation greatly. The end of the Bracero Program came, not coincidentally, at the same time as other civil rights victories. But the civil rights movement had other consequences for Mexican immigrants, for Mexican Americans, and for the relationship between the two. Immigration policy remained stuck in an age of exclusion, governed by racist national origins quotas established in 1924 at the height of the Klan era. Liberals, including President Lyndon Johnson, wanted to change that and to bring immigration policy in line the civil rights moment, and his

¹⁴ Juan Ramon García, *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980); Kelly L. Hernández, “The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration: A Cross-Border Examination of Operation Wetback,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (n.d.): 421–44.

administration succeeded in pushing through the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, otherwise known as “Hart-Celler” after its principal sponsors, the Democrats Philip Hart and Emanuel Celler.¹⁵

The law abolished the national origins quotas but retained numerical limits. And in the interest of fairness, it placed restrictions on the number of immigrants allowed from the Western Hemisphere for the first time in the nation's history. This came at precisely the same moment that the Bracero Program was being terminated. At the same time, neither supply nor demand for migration withered. Employers remained hungry for cheap, exploitable, and deportable labor. And poor Mexicans remained desperate for jobs.

What resulted was the return of unsanctioned migration, only now on a scale larger than ever before, as millions of Mexican migrants found themselves without access to legal channels. Mass migration, in turn, birthed new mechanisms of border and migration control. These racialized mechanisms often meant that Mexican Americans were caught in the middle, often harassed by authorities and discriminated by American society, which increasingly saw them as foreign, more like the “wetbacks” than like other Americans. At the same time and largely because of the same civil rights impulses that had created this new framework, Mexican Americans had come to shed assimilationist impulses and illusions. They now took pride in their Mexican heritage, emulating the Black Power movement and convinced that the old way of doing things was neither fruitful nor empowering.¹⁶

Nevertheless, ambivalence and even confusion about immigration continued among Mexican Americans. After all, the new wave of immigration produced results not unlike those in

¹⁵ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 21.

¹⁶ Nancy MacLean, “The Civil Rights Act and the Transformation of Mexican American Identity and Politics,” *Berkeley La Raza Law Journal* 18 (2007): 123–33.

the middle of the century. That is, these immigrants often took jobs that Chicanos perceived as rightly belonging to them. Resentment was not uncommon and anxiety about immigration was the norm, even as ethnic pride increasingly built bonds and links between the immigrants and U.S. born Mexicans.

The problem was most clearly visible and most starkly illustrated in the fields of California's San Joaquin (or Central) Valley. There, a band of Mexican Americans, who had joined Filipino laborers, had captured the national imagination as they mounted an offensive against growers who had long exploited migrant agricultural workers there. Led by a still obscure figure named Cesar Chavez, the farmworkers had gone on strike seeking better working conditions, better wages, and access to basic necessities. Their struggle, happening against the backdrop (and riding the coattails) of the African American struggle, had gained supporters across the Southwest and the nation.¹⁷

But their fight was complicated by the ongoing importation and hiring of "wetback" strikebreakers. Initially, Chavez took a hard line against them, with tactics that included spying on them, demanding Border Patrol raids against them, and most controversially, confronting them, sometimes violently, with an unofficial and makeshift border patrol in Arizona. These tactics proved controversial. Many Mexican Americans encouraged them, seeing them as essential steps to safeguard against the substantial gains the union was making. Others, however, were deeply disturbed at the sight of intra-ethnic conflict, which they felt was divisive and counterproductive.¹⁸

¹⁷ Susan Ferris and Ricardo Sandoval, *The Fight in the Fields: Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers Movement* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1997).

¹⁸ Frank Bardacke, "The UFW and the Undocumented," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 83 (ed 2013): 162–69, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547913000045>.

One activist saw a way out of the dilemma. Bert Corona, a socialist and longtime labor organizer and pro-immigrant activist, supported the farmworkers' cause but cautioned against attacking Mexican workers. In the midst of tremendous Chicano anxiety and ambivalence, Corona urged other Mexican Americans to rethink the problem and possible approaches to it. Thinking beyond zero-sum terms, Corona thought the undocumented could—and should—be folded into the struggle instead. He pointed to historical examples of immigrants and the native-born working together and to the many ways that immigration and law enforcement authorities harassed and terrorized Chicano communities, while also emphasizing the ways that both Mexicans and Chicanos were exploited by employers. His novel approach at once critiqued the strategies of the UFW and others who shared its concerns about immigration and applauded and supported the larger emancipatory struggle they were carrying out.

The intellectual and organizing work of Corona and other activists who shared his ideology, combined with the growing links and sense of shared fate that growing migration and migration control was gradually producing, led to a massive shift in Chicano attitudes. By the late 1960s and through the 1970s, a robust pro-immigrant social movement was underway, one that sought to eradicate the distinction between immigrant and Chicano and which was profoundly transformative for both communities and for broader understandings of race, labor, and citizenship. Merging class and ethnic consciousness and energized by Third World movements abroad, Chicanos fought back against racism, exploitation, and discrimination against all ethnic Mexicans, with an understanding that a more dignified future for each required fighting together as one.

It was not all good news, however. Even as the movement proved robust and lasting, it also energized its detractors, especially nativists, who were troubled by both the large and

growing numbers of unsanctioned immigrants in the country and the ethnic movement they had ignited. Nativists sought to restrict immigration, even as they also worked to mark supporters of immigrants as foreign themselves. In this way, nativists lumped together the undocumented, legal permanent residents, and U.S. citizens of Mexican heritage. All the while, many of these pro-immigrant activists grew disillusioned with American democracy and with the U.S. government, whom they felt had abandoned them and had nothing to offer them. This retreat from mainstream politics ceded the language of citizenship to the anti-immigrant right, although some organizations remained fully engaged in the political process and sought political solutions to both immigration and to the social and economic problems facing Brown Americans.

This disjuncture came to a head in the late 1970s when growing immigration caught the eye of policymakers. By then, the “immigration problem” was no longer a conversation confined to the Southwest. Unlike the 1930s and 1950s, few took seriously proposals for mass deportation. Despite a stagnant economy, it was increasingly understood that immigrants “took the jobs” Americans wouldn’t do—not because they were incapable but because the work had become racialized and marked as beneath the dignity of Americans, who in the postwar decades had become accustomed to social and economic protections. Relatedly, it was also understood by this point that employers would be resistant to a ban on the workers they had come to rely upon to make their massive profits. Similarly, the pro-immigrant movement would fight such measures. Still, the nativist movement had also grown in both influence and ferocity. Thus emerged the modern discourse of “comprehensive immigration reform.”

Although both Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford had flirted with the idea, it was under Jimmy Carter that the idea gained traction. Carter sought a middle ground between permissiveness and restriction, but he found resistance from all sides. In response, his

administration convened a bipartisan commission, the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy to study the problem and provide policy recommendations. By the time the commission finished its work in 1981, Ronald Reagan had unseated Carter. It fell to him and the new Congress to make something of the commission's suggestions, which recommended a three-pronged approach that included employer sanctions, increased enforcement, and legalization. It challenged Congress to produce legislation, in other words, that gave something to every stakeholder.

With so many opposing forces at play, passing legislation was not easy. Several times from 1981 to 1986, the legislative "Lazarus" appeared dead.¹⁹ Finally, in 1986, legislative wrangling and presidential intervention produced a law ultimately not that different from what Carter had initially presented. Taking credit for it, Reagan signed it into law on November 6, 1986.

Still, unsanctioned migration continued. Although IRCA did bring down the number of undocumented immigrants crossings during the first few years after its passage, by the early 1990s, the numbers were back to pre-IRCA levels and rising. Most immigrants were arriving in the Golden State, "the new Ellis Island." The failure of IRCA to stop illegal immigration lent credence to the nativist faction that had sought restriction prior to IRCA. Migration patterns and the demographic changes they were causing, nativists argued, proved that soft immigration policies not only failed to halt unsanctioned migration but encouraged it. In their estimation, only tough and harsh policies could deter illegality.²⁰

¹⁹ L.H. Fuchs, "Immigration, Pluralism, and Public Policy: The Challenge of the Pluribus to the Unum.," in *U.S. Immigration and Refugee Policy: Global and Domestic Issues*, ed. Mary M. Kritz (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1983), 289–315.

²⁰ Robin Dale Jacobson, *The New Nativism: Proposition 187 and the Debate over Immigration* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Juan F. Perea, ed., *Immigrants Out!: The New*

Nativists set about tackling the problem in California in their own way. Claiming that immigrants cost the state billions of dollars annually and seeking to send a message to the federal government and to immigrants and their supporters, a group of anti-immigrant activists joined forces to qualify for the November 1994 election a referendum initiative that would have deprived undocumented and their families of access to critical social services, including education and healthcare. The law passed with nearly 60% of the vote, though it was struck down as unconstitutional shortly thereafter.

Prop 187 revealed several critical paradoxes: immigrants remained “essential” but also unwanted; the immigrants’ rights Left had managed to produce a robust social movement but one with decreasing political power; and as old movements collapsed, new ones began.²¹

Proposition 187 also provided a stark and critical reminder: the Mexican American shift in attitudes, from the 1950s to the 1990s, was seismic but incomplete. There still remained a great number of ethnic Mexicans who feared, resented, and rejected the undocumented. After all, one in four Hispanic California voters supported the proposition in 1994 and a larger number appeared willing to consider supporting it before ultimately opposing it. Yet, in the years that followed, California continued to become a more multi-ethnic—and progressive—state. Some have credited Proposition 187 for this development, and while there were other factors involved, it’s certain that the implications of, and reactions to, the passage of 187 played a pivotal role. Yet, the ultimate legacy was a mixed bag: on the one hand, Hispanics found their voice, gained political victories, and convinced a large proportion of the population that immigrants were part

Nativism and the Anti-Immigrant Impulse in the United States (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

²¹ Gregory Rodriguez, “Undocumented Workers: Essential but Unwanted,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/oct/11/opinion/la-oe-rodriguez-column-illegal-immigr20101011>.

and parcel of the state's and the nation's social fabric.²² At the same time, nativists were emboldened to replicate the popularity of anti-immigrant sentiment in other states, and in many ways, offered California as both a cautionary tale and as a model for how to target immigrants. Not only did other states craft copycat legislation with more success, but they made it a national strategy, which in the new century produced the political rise of Donald Trump, arguably the most racist, xenophobic presidential campaign in modern history.

The struggle for immigrants' rights thus continued—and remains. What the future holds we cannot know. But understanding this history provides us a better and more complete understanding of the social, political, and cultural stakes of immigration policy. Understanding historical intra-ethnic relations helps us to make sense of the role of immigration in crafting, shifting, and restructuring the contours of citizenship writ large and allows us to probe how this issue has helped define questions about citizenship, belonging, and the relationship of individuals to one another and to the state. It is with that hope in mind that I write this book, so that we may better understand not only how Mexican Americans came to shift their position on immigration but of why this story matters to American history and politics more broadly.

To make sense of this story, I engage critical secondary historical and social science literature dealing with immigration policy, race and ethnicity, labor, and politics while injecting new and original questions and arguments into this ongoing conversation. This book is the culmination of a decade of primary historical research that relies upon archival materials and oral histories and a diverse range of methods, ranging from ethnography to quantitative and spatial analysis. It by no means portends to be a definitive history. Instead, it aims to contribute to an

²² Alex Nowrasteh, "Proposition 187 Turned California Blue," *Cato at Liberty*, July 20, 2016, <https://www.cato.org/blog/proposition-187-turned-california-blue>.

already rich tradition of social, cultural, and labor history, while insisting that it is not only critical to study the past in order to make sense of the present but also that to make sense of the past, we must also begin with a sophisticated understanding of our present. In a nation facing a reckoning with race and undergoing important debates about social justice, this is, I think, a critical story worth pondering, learning from, and taking seriously.