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Mexican-American *Historya* (1846 – 1940): A *Mexicano* Perspective

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The United States, a nation established and maintained by immigrants since its foundation until the end of the human species. Immigration to the American soil will end until all of its troops around the world return home. In one way or another, the infinite interventionism of Americans in the affairs of other nations have motivated immigrants to chase the Dream that escaped from their homelands when the American flag waved there for the first time. The idea of Manifest Destiny, which was the belief that the United States was destined to expand from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, was short in expectations. Since its foundation, Americans have strongly desired to control the world, something that nowadays has proven to be a real truth. The Mexican-American War (1846-1848), which should be the American-Mexican War, since only one side determined to go to a nonsense war that had the purpose to take away half of the Mexican territory. Despite the normal assumption of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, it did not only declared California, Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, parts of Colorado, Wyoming and Utah as part of the United States, but also the most important element of Mexico, its people along with their cultures and traditions. “After the US-Mexican War, both governments had to account for roughly 50-100,000 Spanish speaking Mexican citizens that now found themselves living in the United States of America” (Montano, 2017). This was the beginning of the Mexican-American history.

The role of Americans in the international spectrum has always been hidden under patriotism. The United States has been portrayed as a heroic nation which has the responsibility of protecting the less developed countries from other elite nations. This is not a personal belief, that is something that a teacher in a high school in this nation would instil in its students. In most of the major war conflicts there has been evident or hidden presence of the United States. Once a war begins, the division of the American

society tends to unite as one, “I am glad to know that the people in every part of the country mean to be devoted to one flag, the glorious Stars and Stripes; that the people of this country mean to maintain the financial honor of the country as sacredly as they maintain the honor of the flag” (Zinn, 2009). By 1900, the United States strategy of power projection and ascension in the world, had a government structure that benefitted the majority groups and oppressed minority ethnic groups. Until this year, the United States intervention in the Western Hemisphere was enormous, in Latin America, it intervened 17 times in only 30 years (Montano, 2017). The very common claim, “go back to your country” that some people use to attack immigrants would have never existed if Americans would have followed it when they invaded other parts of the world.

After the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), some Mexicans left and others remained to protect their property. Nevertheless, years later there was a re-encounter between the Mexican Americans and the Mexicans living in Mexico due to the economic, political and social instability at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. The reasons that motivated millions of Mexicans to move to the neighboring country were the last years of the *Porfiriato*, the presidential term of Porfirio Díaz that took place from 1876 to 1911. Another major reason was the economic catastrophe before, during and after the Mexican Revolution. At the beginning of Díaz's presidency there was economic prosperity in the country because he ruled with an iron fist and restored order in exchange for the liberties of the citizens. In addition, he built thousands of miles of roads and promoted foreign investment (Gonzalez, 2009). However, the first years of the 19th century Mexico fell into a deep economic crisis that affected all social classes and led to the Mexican Revolution. At the beginning of this conflict, the United States had an immense control of Mexico's

economy, “controlled 75% of mining companies in Mexico and 70% of its metallurgy, invested heavily in Mexican infrastructure projects” (Montano, 2009). This contradicts Diaz’s famous remark that Mexico was “so far from God and so close to the United States.”

One of the first Mexicans that challenged the United States in their own land was Ricardo Flores Magón who founded the Mexican Liberal Party (PLM) with the purpose of staging a coup d'état in Mexico. However, this attempt failed and provoked hostility from the U.S. government, which had been favored by Diaz's foreign policies. A few years later, the *Magonistas* created el *Plan de San Diego*, an effort to recover the territory that Mexico lost to the United States. Likewise, the plan failed after U.S. authorities killed hundreds of Mexicans and the Carranza government opposed the movement. Magán lived his last years in a U.S. prison under very suspicious circumstances. The purpose of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) was highly positive, but it ended up being a resounding failure that asserted the economic and political conditions of the country. The slogan of "land and freedom" attracted millions of Mexicans to fight, especially peasants who called for agrarian reform where they would be given fertile land so they could produce their own food and live from it. In this way, they would be freed from the hacienda system where the owners took advantage of their lack of rights by forcing them to work under terrible conditions and being paid a small wage. However, the corruption of the Mexican authorities was once again evident. The distribution of land was unfair, very few peasants received land and it was infertile land. Those who appropriated the fertile land were the elites and the government authorities. In other words, the slogan of "land and freedom" was never fulfilled because of the terrible land reform that took away the freedom of the Mexican people; the poor got poorer and the rich got richer. This paved the way for a large wave of immigration to the United States.

The marginalization of Mexicans originates from historical, social, political and ethnic reasons. For example, Mexicans were initially targets due to the Mexican-American war, the Battle of the Alamo and personalities such as Joaquín Murrieta and Pancho Villa. The famous revolutionary, Villa has been perceived as a villain by some and as a hero by others. In 1916, he led the only instance of a Latin American military intervention into the United States when he

had a violent encounter with American forces in Columbus, New Mexico (Montana, 2009). Historically, Mexicans have been blamed for violence, drug trafficking and crime as a result of the large number who have crossed the border, something that was not considered a crime before the 20th century because they were a fundamental part of the labor force during WWI in jobs such as the construction industry, the mines, on the railroads, in restaurants and more recently in agriculture. It is undeniable that Mexican workers are despised in the United States, they are never given the recognition they deserve for the physical demands of their work.

During World War I (WWI), the immigration of Mexicans to urban cities increased dramatically. For example, by 1930, Los Angeles had the second-largest Mexican population, after Mexico City. The life of immigrants in these places had its negative and positive aspects. For instance, the surroundings of the barrio were familiar with homeland, because culture was easily perceivable. Spanish was the dominant language; Catholicism was still very important in their spiritual life and festivities were very common. The barrios were a form of self-identity of these communities, but from the outside perception it was a place of crime and violence. In the Midwest, Mexicans were more heavily urbanized, had higher wages, better education, less isolated, it was harder to maintain ties with their native country, compared to Southwestern. However, both groups assimilated at a similar rate since they continuously faced discrimination and ethnic nationalism was encouraged as they competed with other immigrant groups.

The Great Depression (1930-1940) devastated the American economy after the collapse of the New York stock market which affected at all levels. One of its main causes was the credit system, a strategy to increase the buying power of Americans who were unable to pay their debts as they lost their jobs. And as always, the collapse of the economy was blamed on Mexicans, it was “the Mexican Problem.” In regards to the Southwest, many Anglo-Americans competed with Mexicans in the low-paying jobs in the fields which caused wages to decrease as more workers were available. However,

the overproduction of crops also caused major losses to the agriculture sector. The welfare programs established by President Roosevelt's New Deal left Mexicans unprotected since most of them were ineligible for being undocumented or failing to meet the residency requirements. According to Gonzalez (2009), in the 1930s, half of the Mexican population returned to Mexico, since it was more attractive than an industrial United States in a moment of collapse.

The Mexicans that stayed in the United States, just as other groups in the labor force had to protest the abuses from their employers. During the 1930s, the Mexican government strongly advocated for the rights of its citizens through the consular offices, especially during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas. However, the lack of success of the strikes was due to the opposition of some middle-class Americans who supported management since they were perceived as anti-Communists (Gonzalez, 2009). Other Anglo Americans supported racial unity, "united in their war against trusts, and in the promotion of the doctrine that farmers should establish cooperative stores, and manufactures, and publish their own newspaper, conduct their own schools, and have a hand in everything else that concerns them as citizens or affects them personally or collectively" (Zinn, 30). In reality, unity was never part of the fight for better labor conditions, but it was in the battlefields during World War II.

In one way or another, unity was perceived at a minimum capacity during WWII, a conflict in which 250,000 to 750,000 Latinos and Latinas defended the cause of the United States. Some of them served to improve their socioeconomic status and to show the gratitude to this nation that gave them the opportunity to have a better standard of living. In particular, Mexicans represent one of the most decorated ethnic groups due to their heroic participation. For example, Guy Louis Gabaldon (1926-2006) killed 33 enemy soldiers and captured more than 1,500 combatants and civilians during two months, a record in the history of the American military. Jose M. Lopez (1910-2005): killed more than 100 soldiers, being the American soldier with most people killed during WWII. And Manuel Gonzalez (1910-1996), had the rank of major while serving in Europe and the Pacific, from 1943 to 1946 (Gonzalez, 2009). In general,

the lives of men and women improved during and after WWII. The G.I. Bill paid for the education of 7.8 million soldiers, many of them Mexicans. And women had a pivotal role in sustaining the economy while men were serving the nation.

Another noticeable trend among the Mexican community was their massive movement to the urban centers. Their standard of living improved with more labor opportunities. However, they still faced discrimination, deficient housing and segregation in schools. These factors motivated groups such as the Pachuco during the 1940s and 1950s which represented defiance to the social norms. For this reason, they became national targets. In the Sleepy Lagoon case, 22 members of a gang were convicted for the assassination of a man. Lieutenant Edward Durán Ayres of the Los Angeles Police Department stated that Mexicans were criminally inclined for genetic reasons, “[they have] an utter disregard for the value of life...and all [they] know and feel is a desire to use a knife or some lethal weapon” (Gonzalez, 2009). In 1943, a violent encounter between pachucos and U.S. servicemen in southern California took place and was known as the “Zoot Suit Riots.”

A binational program that united Mexico and the United States was the Bracero Program in which Mexican nationals were recruited to work in America between 1942 to 1964. This action was taken to solve the labor shortage in the Western U.S. due to the rapid agricultural expansion and the movement of Mexicans to urban life. Despite its modifications to improve the conditions and treatment to the workers in the Public Law 78, they were treated terribly, “Mexicans still occupied a segregated part of American life and were treated as if they were dogs” (Montana, 2017). In 1954, during the Operation Wetback, more than one million Mexicans were sent back to Mexico. And it is estimated that during the 22 years of the Bracero Program, 5 million undocumented immigrants were apprehended in the border. Historically, the United States have manipulated Mexicans and other immigrants to serve for their benefit. However, in times of conflict or disaster, “the Mexican Problem” continues to be a successful claim that even elects Presidents.

References

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