MEXICAN AMERICAN RELATIONS, 1846-1939

THROUGH THE EYES OF AN “AMERICAN”



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 During the early 1800’s in New Spain, the contrast between a renewed way of life and culture in Mexico alongside the budding lifestyle of Americans moving west was complicated, and brought with it a number of imbalances within the two people, including religious prejudice, racial inequalities, and cultural and political polarities. Two authors, Manuel Gonzales and Howard Zinn illustrate these aspects of division between people as well as the reasons that contributed. This paper will identify and analyze the Mexican American relationship between the time period of 1846-1939 that is portrayed by Gonzales and Zinn in addition to providing insight from the perspective of an American college student on the subject.

The act that kick-started this feeling of animosity between people was the drafting and ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, named after the Mexican city where it was negotiated in 1846 which illustrated the surrender of the states of California, New Mexico, and Texas totally in 947,570 square miles of land. Latino people living in the conquered areas were given two options: move south back into Mexican territory, or stay in the newfound American Southwest. After that point, economic integration of the American capitalist movement sparked and issues of labor arose, more so than the injustices of any previous minority, especially with the lure of profitable lands seemingly up for grabs. The fertile lands of the region, especially in California enticed the incoming Americans, especially when gold was discovered in California in 1848; this triggered an influx of people from all over the country, Latin Americans being the first to reach success. However, once more and more Americans came in, Anglos, a separation of people along the lines of racism was created, and in an attempt to drive out Spanish speakers and other minorities, laws were created to hinder their mining success. For example, mining codes were put into place that restricted where minorities could mine, in addition to a Foreign Miners’ License Tax which robbed the mining minorities, forcing them to pay a large sum of their gold back to the government, something Anglo Americans did not have to do. As Gonzales points out, it seems that while the Mexican population was promised the same rights as real “Americans” this was more of a theory than a reality.

Another injustice that Mexican minorities faced was regarding land ownership and maintaining what they had already owned before the signing of the Hidalgo Treaty. Looking to the federal government for help, Latin Americans were instead met with the difficult task of having to prove their ownership of land; especially in a time where authorities had never felt precision was necessary in establishing the boundaries. Many Mexicans lost their land because they were either unable to provide irrefutable legal ownership, or could not hold out during the litigation process, which was both costly and time consuming, especially for a people who were often not told the whole truth and were made unable to understand many of the legal formalities in order to keep them at a distance.

During the 1860’s, an influx of Anglos arrive in the West due to the construction and completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869. Not only did this increase the number of Anglo Americans, but it also required a great deal of constructive force which wealthy politicians and engineers found in the Mexican, Chinese, African, and European immigrant labor; cheap labor. For the duration of this time the 1960’s, Anglos began to outnumber Mexicans; relations in California were probably worse than in any other state, however Gonzales does mention that not all Anglo attitudes were negative, and many incoming Americans did not see Mexicans as an inferior race. On the other hand, because the vast majority of Anglos did feel this way, resentment of Americans by Mexicans became especially strong, and with the increase a sense of lawlessness was struck and many Mexican bandits were born. In California especially, “social banditry” became abundant, in which Mexican bandits fought for their people, outside of the law, and became recognized as heroes by their communities. Simultaneously, the elite Mexican landowners now living on American soil were trying to “whiten” their bloodlines through interracial marriages with Anglo women; many upper-class Mexicans embraced American culture as long as they were able to maintain their land and social standing. In return, this was met with some hostility by the lower Mexican classes, setting a divide within people of the same culture and race.

In the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, Mexico gained some ground in incorporating itself into the capitalist equation of the global market; railroads were constructed to connect major trade cities and by 1910, 1200 miles of track had been laid (Gonzales, 2009, pg 116). However, while this benefitted some citizens, mostly upper-class, the majority of citizens reported little economic improvement. Soon, anti-Diaz sentiments increased and were concentrated on the bordering Northern states and in the early 1900’s, a series of rebellions were initiated and in 1915, there was a revolution in an attempt to overthrow the U.S. control and capitalist system; due to a lack of support and power against the overwhelming Anglo majority, this revolution failed, followed by a number of other equally disappointing revolutions with similar results. More than 1 million Mexican people, including women and children, died during the Revolution until its end in 1920. Religion also played a substantial part in this revolution, as anti-clerical legislation was a cause for major concern; the Catholic Church became unpopular with revolutionaries because of its conservative views. Revolutionaries tried to weaken the Catholic institution, however they found that church priests respected by their societies, and people came to the church’s defense.

In addition to the Transcontinental Railroad, an increase in other engineering feats and technological advances materialized, including the replacement of human labor by electricity and steam, the use of iron and steel in manufacturing, and the use of oil in machinery and other structures such as lighting. The use of machines changes businesses forever; typewriters, telephones, farming machines, sewing machines, and more all created to ease the lives of citizens, but especially business profiteers. In Howard Zinn’s book, he states that in order to accomplish the successful development of machinery and other useful products “…required ingenious inventors… clever organizers and administrators of the new corporations, [and] a country rich with land and minerals, [as well as] a huge supply of human beings to do the back breaking, unhealthful, and dangerous work,” all of which the new United States possessed, especially the minorities used for labor which of course included Mexican Americans. Still, under the conditions many knew they would face, so many Mexican citizens immigrated, often illegally, to the U.S. during this time to escape the steadily increasing hostility in Mexico. Not only that, but due to the revolutionary movements in Mexico, discussed in the previous paragraph, Mexican citizens immigrated to find a better life; the majority of immigrants moved to Texas where the lands were similar to what they had grown up with. Jobs were another reason for the move, especially since most Mexicans were given work as laborers, in lumbering camps, on ranches, or in the food service industry. Up until the 1920’s, as Mexican citizens continued to immigrate, railroad and mining both fell as the major business attractions and were replaced by agricultural success.

 With the increase in agricultural economics, the small scale family farms were replaced by larger, more efficient factory-farms which required a great deal of manual labor to maintain its success; here, Mexican people really flourished and took the positions. During the time of the First World War starting in 1914, European immigration in the U.S. declined, especially with the immigration acts of 1921 and 1924 after the war was concluded in 1918. With European immigrants competition practically gone, Mexican agricultural workers and farmers faced very little threat and by the 1930’s, outnumbered any other race, even with the agricultural expansion. Gonzales writes that, “…Mexicanos were considered indispensable to economic life of the Southwest…” (pg 125). Even though Mexican people served as a great source of labor, they were still being mistreated in their communities by Anglos, but also by their own people who wanted to distance themselves from the lower classes. Because most Mexican immigrants could not speak English, they were ignorant of their legal rights, and were very often taken advantage of. Instead of fighting back, however, many simply continued on due to the fear of being ostracized or worse, deported. Gonzales also points out that many Mexican immigrants saw their life in the states as temporary, and thought they would return to Mexico with money and good fortune; this was rarely the case.

With the coming of the Great Depression, Mexican immigrants faced even more challenges and injustices, especially those working in the once profitable agricultural field. Housing was dilapidated, unsafe and overcrowded, in addition to poor sanitation, low wages and substandard education in segregated school. Racial injustices increased, especially in larger cities like L.A. where young Mexican men were criminalized, often beaten and framed, or gunned down, historian Kevin Starr explains. Well into the 1930’s, another problem was agitation within the Mexican workforce; strikes occurred and there was unrest in labor intensive factories and fields.

As a female Caucasian American, I could never fully understand the different injustices that were faced by any minorities during the time at which the United States became its own entity, its own establishment within the global economy. However, with the aid of Howard Zinn and Manuel Gonzales, I can understand a little more the details of these crimes, but with a conflicting tone; Manuel seems to feel a sort of resentment towards most Americans, it is subtly shown in his writing in Mexicanos. Howard Zinn provides a different prospective, perhaps similar to my own, which is informative, but almost guilty; the guilt brought on by the acts of our ancestors is something that I too felt while reading both pieces of literature. Religious prejudice, racial inequalities, and cultural and political oppositions divided the Mexicans from the Americans, but within these struggles successful businesses were created in agriculture and industrialization. The Mexican American relationship between the time period of 1846-1939 is written on uneven ground, stories changed, facts are forgotten or rewritten. For a while it seemed that each country built off of the other, but the relationship soon developed out of balance, separating people by class, race, religion, language, and power. What could have been born between the two people had one side been more fair, and the other more understood; if efforts had changed perhaps history would have been a different story, but as is the case for most stories of conquest, and of profit, one side will always be subjugated and the other flourishes under the tainted title of superiority.

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