Extranjero en mi Tierra: The Mexican Repatriation in the 1930’s

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Roberto Aguilar described his family’s sudden deportation in an interview with NPR, recalling “the way that the agents crashed into the house ... we were put into the trucks, taken to the train station, and then shipped out ... from 6 years old all of a sudden I felt like I was 15.” Roberto’s experience was not unlike many others during the Mexican Repatriation.1

Beginning in 1929 and continuing through the Great Depression, roughly one million Mexicans and American citizens of Mexican descent were repatriated from the United States to Mexico. Prior to 1929, Mexicans were hired routinely by American companies to work in the U.S., where immigration quotas set in 1921 and 1924 excluded Mexicans. This exclusion allowed for large-scale emigration to America in the 1920’s. However, the sharp increase in unemployment during the Great Depression led to a systematic effort by the United States government to deport illegal immigrants. An estimated 60% of the deported individuals of Mexican descent were American citizens. Many of these deportations were illegally done through intimidation or force. There has been debate over the motivations behind the federal government’s repatriation plan. Some historians argue that once the U.S. government had no more use for Mexican labor, they systematically targeted anyone of Mexican descent, regardless of legal status. Others argue that the government was merely trying to rid itself of illegal aliens who burdened an already struggling nation that could barely take care of its own. These theorists point to a lack of evidence that the government only targeted people of Mexican descent.2 Though the Great Depression provided a justification for the deportations of illegal aliens, the Mexican Repatriation was primarily motivated by the perceived inferiority of Mexicans. Before the Great Depression, congressmen had already wanted to de-

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port Mexicans and expressed racist sentiments towards Mexicans, despite their contributions to the American economy. During the Great Depression, the government passed legislation that targeted Mexican workers, prevented them from gaining employment, and used intimidation tactics to drive them out.

Large-scale use of Mexican migrant labor began in World War I, when high wages in industrial labor made agricultural work less desirable to American workers. Migration restrictions, like literacy tests, were decreased or removed in 1918, allowing more migrants to come into the U.S. However, agricultural labor shortages would no longer be a problem by 1930. When William N. Doak was appointed Secretary of Labor by President Hoover in that year, he was faced with the problem of high unemployment. He believed that deporting the illegal aliens within the country, whom he estimated to be 400,000 people, would help this problem. After hearing this number, Charles P. Visel, coordinator of an unemployment relief committee in Los Angeles, asserted that 200,000 of those illegal aliens lived in southern California. He asked for federal assistance for a mass deportation of illegal immigrants, hoping to free up jobs for “needy citizens.” The deportations during the repatriation had two purposes: to get rid of a few illegal aliens, and to communicate a “psychological gesture” to the Mexican community that would “scare alien deportables” to Mexico. With Doak’s authorization, federal agents conducted raids in public areas within Mexican communities, arresting those who could not prove legal entry, and questioning and detaining hundreds of people. Other similar actions were taken in cities with sizable Mexican communities like Detroit, Gary and Chicago, with and without federal funding. The repatriates would be sent to the border with their families in box cars or trucks. Both fear and force were used to repatriate people of Mexican descent.

The question of whether the government deliberately targeted Mexicans has been debated by historians. Despite presenting the federal government as at least partly responsible for the Mexican Repatriations, Eric Ray concludes that the current evidence cannot fully implicate the federal government for the unconstitutional deportations; the plaintiffs
would have to prove specific conduct of the government that targeted people of Mexican descent. In their book, *Decade of Betrayal*, Balderrama and Rodríguez propose that the Mexican Repatriation was a result of anti-Mexican hysteria created by the lack of jobs and encouraged by the law and government authorities. They claim that the repatriations were racially motivated. However, historian Benny J. Andrés Jr. offers a different interpretation on the repatriation. He argues that when faced with “the failure of farm strikes and an influx of competitors for their jobs,” some Mexicans voluntarily returned to Mexico. He argues that the reason behind the repatriations was economic.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that purpose of the repatriation was to deport illegal aliens whose work was no longer beneficial to America's economic health. Prior to the Great Depression, the federal government began restricting immigration from Europe and Asia with the Immigration Act of 1924. However, the act did not affect Latin Americans. As an example of a “non-quota immigrant,” the Act describes “an immigrant who was born in … the Republic of Mexico … and his wife, and his unmarried children under 18 years of age, if accompanying or following to join him.” Unlike Asians, Africans, and Europeans, Mexicans were explicitly allowed to enter the United States without any quota to restrict them. If racism motivated lawmakers in creating the act, they were able to overcome their prejudices when it came to Mexicans. In fact, Mexican immigration was welcomed by the agricultural industry prior to the Great Depression. During an agricultural labor shortage in 1930, the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce “stressed” the “relationship between the reported shortage of agricultural labor in California and the decrease for various reasons in the number of available Mexican farmhands.” Mexicans provided vital labor during times of prosperity and growth. Their importance to the economy was understood. During the Great Depression, the general unemployment of the American population meant that Mexicans were no longer needed. The migration from the midwest to California during the Dust Bowl added 200,000 unemployed agricultural workers. The repatriations during the Depression were an attempt by the government to secure the economic future of American citizens. Once
America needed labor again, Mexicans were brought back to America to work. The 1942 Bracero Agreement between the American and Mexican governments allowed Mexico to send contracted workers for “agricultural labor employment” within the U.S.\textsuperscript{15} The fact that Mexican laborers were requested when work was needed demonstrates that racism against them did not affect the government’s decision to allow them into the country. The decision to repatriate Mexicans during the Great Depression was an economic decision motivated by the well-being of American citizens.

However, while American economic concerns acted as a catalyst for the repatriations, the government seems to have had an underlying ethnically oriented goal as well. In the enforcement of the repatriation program, illegal aliens or Mexican citizens were not the only ones targeted. The legal status of the repatriated did not matter to the government when conducting the deportations. More than half of the repatriated were American citizens, many of whom were children leaving with their parents. Evidence has arisen that some parts of the government were aware of this. A letter from the Mexican consulate general to the city of San Diego offers to help repatriate Mexicans “with cooperation and aid” of the Welfare Committee of San Diego, which suggests that local governments worked with the Mexican government in repatriations.\textsuperscript{16} After Ruben Aguilar was deported along with his family, despite being an American citizen, he was drafted into the Army to fight in World War II.\textsuperscript{17} By at least that time, the American government was aware of American citizens’ whereabouts within Mexico. However, the government did not attempt to seek them out before World War II. In addition, Mexicans were not given the opportunity to contest their deportations, which forced them to live in a country in which their children were not citizens. Without citizenship, these individuals were unable to get health care or enroll in public schools. Pablo Guerrero, a man who was repatriated with his family in 1932, wrote a letter to Los Angeles County, stating that he had “worked [his] life since [he] was 19 years of age in the U.S. of A.,” and wanted to return “so that [his children could] be educated in American schools.”
American children were “not [given] any assistance nor protection,” by the Mexican government.\textsuperscript{18} Despite being American citizens, Guerrero’s five children were not allowed to return. Guerrero’s case was not uncommon. Most repatriates, including American citizens, found that they could not reenter the United States once they left. To say that the repatriation mainly affected immigrants would be inaccurate. More than half of those deported who had Mexican ancestry were American citizens. In 2006, California officially apologized for its part in the Mexican Repatriation Act with the “Apology Act for the 1930s Mexican Repatriation Program” bill. According to the bill, out of approximately “two million people of Mexican ancestry” about “1.2 million... had been born in the United States.”\textsuperscript{19} The large number of American citizens repatriated does not indicate that the government only targeted aliens for repatriation.

It appears that protecting American citizens was not, after all, the primary motive of the government during the repatriations, and evidence suggests that even before the Great Depression, racist perceptions of immigrants had overtaken the economic need for cheap labor. Back in 1920, hearings were held in the U.S. Senate regarding the suspension of immigration restrictions from Mexico. Cotton lobbyists attempted to convince Congress to free up potential in the labor force. Though they were motivated by a desire for cheap labor, their language also suggests the feeling of superiority they had over Mexicans. Fred Roberts, President of the South Texas Cotton Growers’ Association, explained that since “the negro” now worked in the “North or East,” Mexican workers, described as “docile [animals]” filled the void they left behind. Once black Americans found opportunities away from the South, the agriculture industry needed a new source of labor they could exploit. W.H. Knox, president of the Arizona Cotton Growers’ Association, stated that the “average peon Mexican” did not mentally develop beyond “a 12 or 14 year old child.” By comparing Mexican workers to animals and children, the cotton lobbyists infantilized Mexicans in order to convince the Immigration Committee that Mexicans could be allowed into America without danger. Throughout the hearings, the chairman of the
Immigration Committee sought reassurance that the workers would not become “a permanent part of the population,” despite any contributions Mexican workers gave to America. This sentiment was more strongly expressed on the eve of the Great Depression in 1928, when Congressman John Box of Texas attempted to impose immigration restrictions onto Mexicans, not in order to create jobs, but to protect “the American racial stock from further degradation… through mongrelization.” Box’s fear of interracial relationships between people of Mexican descent and white Americans not only demonstrates the perceived inferiority of the immigrants, but also suggests that the class system that kept white individuals above people of color would be subverted through interracial citizens. Box states that an “essential part of the Nation’s immigration policy” is to “keep out the illiterate and the diseased.” Box asserted the government’s role in molding society, using Progressive ideals to justify his racism towards Mexican immigrants. The necessity of labor prevented these racist viewpoints from being expressed by the government, but once the need for foreign labor disappeared, these views were exposed.

At the height of the Great Depression, immigrants were put under harsher scrutiny. The cartoon “Alien Corn” (see Appendix) portrays immigrant agricultural workers as threats to both the economy and government. In the cartoon, illegal aliens hide within a cornfield representing American industry, holding papers that say “Strike” and “Overthrow Of The Govt.” Towering over them, Uncle Sam holds a scythe, symbolizing “deportation.” Falling wages during the Great Depression led to a number of strikes, though white Americans participated in them as well. The unfounded fears of immigrants overthrowing the government was based on purely xenophobic beliefs.

The history of racism against people of Mexican descent among the general population did not begin during 20th century. Mexicans and Mexican-Americans have been subjected to racism and segregation in America since its founding, including those who were citizens. The “social isolation” between Anglos and Mexicans kept them away from each other in “all the daily aspects of life.” People of Mexican descent
were subjected to persecution in a similar way to African-Americans. Between 1828-1928, at least 587 Mexicans were lynched by mobs. From 1880-1930, the rate of lynching was such that in a population 100,000, an average of 27.4 were lynched. Mexicans were lynched for as little as “courting a white woman,” “refusing to play the fiddle,” or “cheating at cards.”

The racial binary of white and black led to Mexicans being labeled as “white” within lists of victims of lynchings. This whiteness did not give them any privileges associated with being white in America. Through the threat of violence, people of Mexican descent were kept from integrating into society.

The Mexican Repatriation in the 1930’s is part of a larger history of the mistreatment of Mexican workers in America. The Bracero Program of 1942, a diplomatic agreement between the U.S. and Mexico, brought Mexican workers back during World War II, though the limitations of the Bracero contracts led to illegal immigrants crossing the border. In response, Operation Wetback was launched in 1954. To enforce this federal initiative, U.S. border agents would apprehend, process and deport as many undocumented immigrants as possible, with help from the Mexican government in the transportation of these individuals. They reported that over a million individuals were deported from 1954 to the mid 1960’s, though that number is most likely exaggerated. As of 2014, 11.2 million undocumented citizens live in the U.S., with about 52% of them being Mexican. Indeed, ideas drenched in anti-Mexican sentiment regarding how to prevent and manage illegal immigration continue to be debated by political leaders.

In 2010, the Arizona state government passed the Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act, Arizona SB 1070, which required undocumented citizens to register with the U.S. government and carry documentation at all times. Police were empowered to stop and arrest any individual who they had “reasonable suspicion” of being an undocumented citizen.

Though this bill drew much criticism, it was only prevented from coming into effect when a federal judge blocked the more controversial parts; a diminished version of this law was enacted in 2012. The story of this act reflects how Mexican-Americans continue to face discrimination based on how “Mexican” they look and behave. Indeed, Mexican-
Americans with darker skin face more instances of discrimination than those with lighter skin. And likewise, the more education a Mexican-American person has, the less likely he or she is perceived to be Mexican.\textsuperscript{27} The American identity of people of Mexican descent continues to be called into question by racist legislation and ethnic profiling. ●

Appendix
Notes


4. George O. Coalson, “Mexican Contract Labor in American Agriculture,” The Southwestern Social Science Quarterly 33, no. 3 (December 1952)


8. Ray, “Mexican Repatriation and the Possibility.”

9. Balderrama and Rodríguez, Decade of Betrayal: Mexican.


20. Box, speech.


**Bibliography**


