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Beginnings

1848–1920

Mexicans began migrating to the United States in significant numbers in the early twentieth century, a time when both Mexico and the American Southwest were undergoing dramatic transformations. Although the character of Mexican migration to the United States has changed profoundly over the course of a century, the forces that drew Mexicans northward have remained essentially the same: Mexicans were enticed by American employers who offered them work for better wages than they could earn in Mexico; and they were propelled to leave by violence, poverty, and lack of opportunity in their homeland.

By the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, several enduring patterns had been established. American employers actively recruited Mexican workers when they were needed, but took no responsibility for them when the need decreased. Mexicans, who migrated from the neighboring country and could relatively easily be sent home, were an employer's dream: Mexicans were cheap and expendable, and, so long as labor unions or the US government did not interfere, they had little recourse to defend their rights and improve their lot. When the US economy slowed and jobs became scarce, Mexicans made handy scapegoats. The pattern of migration that developed was circular: Mexicans came and went, with relatively few choosing to settle permanently in the United States and assimilate to American culture.

Beyond Borders: A History of Mexican Migration to the United States

By Timothy J. Henderson

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American capital, lured to Mexico by the enticements of cheap labor and raw materials, came to dominate the Mexican economy. That domination was an important factor retarding Mexico's economic development, for the chief lures attracting capital to Mexico have remained constant: cheap labor and resources. Mexico's leaders have added to the problem by making unwise choices with depressing regularity.

This chapter traces the beginnings of these enduring patterns.

How the Border Came to Be

In a sense, the first Mexicans to reside in the United States managed the remarkable feat of migrating without ever leaving home. Instead, the border of their country migrated to the south and west, landing them in a new and alien nation, one in which they quickly came to comprise a small and frequently persecuted minority. Their numbers are usually estimated between 80,000 and 100,000.

Understanding how and why that border readjustment came to pass requires at least a brief recounting of some deep history. From even before their respective foundings as colonies of European powers, Mexico and the United States developed very differently, and the differences tended overwhelmingly to favor the United States as the world entered into the "modern" era. Mexico – particularly its southern and central regions – was home to the populous and highly advanced indigenous civilizations of the Aztecs, Mayas, and a number of smaller groups. The Spaniards who arrived to conquer and colonize Mexico in 1519 found it neither possible nor desirable to eradicate or relocate such large numbers of Indians – although they did manage to kill off appalling numbers with a combination of over-exploitation and imported diseases – so they sought accommodations. Indians were cast in the role of peasants and workers, the lowest rung in what soon became a complex racial hierarchy. Indians were joined by Africans and persons of mixed race, known generically as "castes." By the time the Spanish colony came to an end in 1821, Mexico's population consisted of roughly 60 percent Indians, 22 percent castes, and 18 percent whites. Most Indians and castes were poor and illiterate; many could not speak or understand Spanish, which white elites insisted was the national tongue; and a long legacy of

discrimination and exploitation, together with the practical impossibility of rising up the social ladder no matter how hard they worked, tended to give them a rather pessimistic worldview. White people, meanwhile, had a near monopoly on literacy, owned most of the wealth, and held virtually all of the political power. In short, Mexico's racial and class makeup was more complex than that of the United States, meaning ultimately that Mexico was forced to confront challenges that the United States was not obliged to face.

Race and class were not the only obstacles to Mexico's smooth entry into the modern world. A wealthy Catholic Church that wielded much political power and which had no intention of tolerating competing belief systems; a formidably rugged geography that made transportation and communication exceedingly difficult; a tendency for its people to fragment into isolated regional cultures; a long history of government by kings who claimed absolute power; and an economy that for three centuries had been a state monopoly that was obsessively focused on a single pursuit, the mining of silver: all of these factors combined to make Mexico's early years as a nation uncommonly difficult. Those years were characterized by extremes of penury and political turmoil, even while the United States grew in population and power, increasingly insisting that its "manifest destiny" was to control the North American continent in its entirety.

The United States, by contrast, was the spawn of Great Britain, the world's pioneer industrial nation. Great Britain was the world's greatest producing and trading nation in the late eighteenth century, and the seat of a vast and lucrative empire. It permitted its North American colonies far greater economic and political freedom than Spain allowed its dependencies, so the United States entered its independent life with experience of free trade and representative democracy – an enormous advantage in the modern world. The United States also enjoyed an abundant supply of labor, both free and enslaved, while Mexico, severely depleted by a bloody ten-year war for independence, saw its population stagnate throughout most of the nineteenth century.

Mexico's weakness attracted US aggression. When Mexican leaders found that few of their citizens were willing or able to move north to populate the frontier regions that abutted the United States – the territory that is now the US Southwest – they overcame certain misgivings

and invited Anglo-Americans from the United States to colonize the territory known as Texas. Most of the colonists who took Mexico up on its offer had no intention of abiding by Mexican law, and Texas soon emerged as a grave problem for the Mexican state. In 1836 the Texans rebelled and claimed their independence. Ten years later, the United States annexed Texas, a move that precipitated the US–Mexican War of 1846–1848. The United States won that war convincingly. According to the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the war, the United States paid Mexico \$15 million in exchange for more than half of its territory, including the states of California, Utah, and Nevada, most of Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado, and a sliver of Wyoming. In 1853, when the United States persuaded Mexico to part with an additional 30,000 square mile chunk of land on its northwest border for a railroad right of way, the border assumed the essential shape it retains to this day: that is, a 2,000-mile-long line that follows the Rio Grande (or Rio Bravo, as it is known to Mexicans) northward and westward from Brownsville, at the southern tip of Texas, to El Paso, then sets out due west through burning deserts and craggy scrubland till it ends in the Pacific Ocean.

The Great Transformation: Mexico

Substantial flows of migrants from Mexico to the United States began with dramatic transformations that took place in both countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Mexico's case the transformations were wrought by a civil war that brought to power a generation of ambitious folks who subscribed to the ideology of liberalism, and who tried to set Mexico on a firm course toward "modernity." In the process they helped to bring misery and dislocation to vast numbers of their countrymen.

Between 1858 and 1861, Mexicans fought a civil war known as the War of the Reform. In that war, two political persuasions that had been locked in a death match since 1821 had it out once and for all. After two years of the bloodiest fighting Mexico had seen in the four tumultuous decades of its existence, the liberals triumphed decisively over the conservatives. Those liberals thereupon set out to change just about every

aspect of Mexican reality. They championed the impartial rule of law; civil liberties, including freedom of religion; free enterprise and free trade; greater social equality; representative government; and compulsory public education. Above all else, the liberals believed in the promise of the individual, and they lamented how the colonial centuries had, in their view, inculcated in the majority of Mexicans a disposition toward dependence and communalism. Much of Mexico's land was owned by the Roman Catholic Church, a corporate entity that, in the liberal view, was an absolute obstacle to the efficiency and profitability that only private enterprise could bring. For the same reason, the liberals decried the communal ownership of land by Indian villages, which had been the tradition since before the conquistadors arrived. They passed a law, known as the Lerdo Law, in 1856, which prohibited the ownership of real estate by "corporations." The church was thus obliged to auction off all of its land except that used in day-to-day operations, and Indian villages were forced to convert their *ejidos* (as communal village lands were called) into individually owned plots. The liberals hoped in this manner to make agriculture a fully commercial enterprise that would enlarge the food supply, provide goods for foreign exchange, and increase revenues accruing to the state, all of which would underwrite a transition to industrialism and modernity. For a variety of reasons, the law's results were disappointing to say the least, but it is undeniable that it brought about a major change in the Mexican countryside, one that brought capitalism to rural Mexico – capitalism of the most rapacious and unfor-giving kind.

The leader who sent these changes into high gear was General Porfirio Díaz, who seized power in a military rebellion in 1876. Although his rebellion was guided by the slogan "Effective suffrage and no reelection," Díaz went on to hold sway as Mexico's dictator for the next 35 years. Once in power, he adopted a new slogan: "Order and Progress." This slogan was inspired by a philosophy known as Positivism, which was championed by the French thinker Auguste Comte. "Order," for those who subscribed to Positivism, meant an end to democratic politics, which Mexico's history tended to suggest were inevitably disorderly and divisive. The leading architects of the Porfirian system styled themselves *científicos* – not scientists, exactly, but "men of science." They believed that governing should be done by experts, men who knew what was best

for society – what, that is, would best ensure “progress” – and who would not have to answer to “the people.” Porfirio Díaz, for them, was the necessary man of his time, a man who enjoyed nearly universal admiration (at least for a while) and who had the skills to keep the nation from descending into anarchy.

The second part of the *científicos*’ formula – “progress” – meant an ambitious program of commercializing Mexican agriculture to make it productive and profitable in the hope it would underwrite the development of industry. The problem lay in the fact that Mexico, in the late nineteenth century, was a poor country, with relatively few well-heeled entrepreneurs willing and able to invest in the target areas: building railroads, founding banks, revitalizing ports, pioneering new crops, exploring for new minerals, drilling for oil, and building new factories. Such capital, the *científicos* reasoned, would have to be imported from abroad, and it would have to be wooed to Mexico with generous concessions – tax breaks, rights of way, land grants, and cheap labor.

To ensure the latter enticement – cheap labor – the Díaz government outlawed labor unions and gave employers carte blanche to behave as callously as they wished. Repression of labor during the Porfiriato – as the period of Díaz’s dictatorship is known – was notorious. One of the more famous accounts, journalist John Kenneth Turner’s aptly titled *Barbarous Mexico*, contains harrowing descriptions of Maya and Yaqui Indians forced to work as slaves on hemp plantations under the brutal sun of Yucatán, starting well before daylight and ending well after sunset, their day’s only meal a couple of tortillas, a cup of beans, and a bowl of rancid fish broth; and of people shanghaied by local political bosses or corrupt labor contractors to work on the tobacco plantations of the Valle Nacional in Oaxaca, where overwork, lack of food, and exposure to disease guaranteed certain death within a space of seven or eight months. Similarly horrifying conditions prevailed on rubber, fruit, coffee, and sugar plantations, as well as in the tropical hardwood industry. Most of the producers who used such virtual slave labor raised goods for export. Most Mexicans were poor, barely able to afford corn and beans and some sort of roof over their heads; they consumed very little. Economic production, then, was a show put on largely for a foreign – mostly American – audience. American capitalists found the lure of so much cheap labor well-nigh irresistible. Ex-president Ulysses S. Grant, toward the end of

his life, took to preaching the boundless opportunities for American capital in Mexico, mostly because, in addition to many valuable natural resources, Mexico could furnish workers who were “industrious, frugal, and willing to work for a pittance, if afforded an opportunity.”¹

Little is known about Mexicans who migrated to the United States prior to 1910. Most of those who crossed the border were likely itinerant workers – ranch hands, mine workers, railroad workers, and the like. Rural folk in the region that eventually emerged as the overwhelming source of migrants – the north-central states of Michoacán, Jalisco, Guanajuato, San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, and Durango – were reasonably well off, at least by the harsh standards of Porfirian Mexico. Most were permanent employees of *haciendas* (as large farms were called) who received guaranteed monthly wages, rations of corn to meet their family’s needs, grazing and planting rights, and free, if humble, housing. Others were temporary workers, who lacked the security of the permanent workforce, but were somewhat compensated by being paid higher wages. This is not to say conditions were enviable. The people of the center-north suffered along with the rest of the Mexican people as the population expanded rapidly even while wages stagnated and the price of basic foodstuffs rose. But this was not enough of a “push” to send people trekking toward the border in large numbers. Something more would have to happen before that exodus began. A large part of that “something” was the advent of railroads.

The development of railroads linking Mexico to the United States was perhaps inevitable, but it took some time. When Porfirio Díaz first came to power, the US–Mexican border was a source of considerable international tension, for it was largely the domain of criminals, smugglers, hostile Indians, and US troops demanding to be allowed to use whatever means necessary to calm the situation. And any leader of Mexico hoping to consolidate a base of support had to rattle a few sabers in the direction of the United States. So Díaz, shortly after seizing power, canceled a railroad concession that his predecessor had granted to an American firm. A year later, Díaz’s Development Minister negotiated a contract with another American company to build a railroad connecting Mexico City to the US border, with a branch to the Pacific at either San Blas or Manzanillo, but the Mexican Congress overruled it, wanting no part of a rail connection to the Northern Colossus. Alfredo Chávez, a leading

voice in Congress on the matter, explained the reasoning: “Nations of the North generally invade nations of the South,” therefore “we should always fear the United States.”²

The construction of roads to facilitate trade with Mexico had been a goal of the United States ever since its first Minister to Mexico, Joel Poinsett, had tried without success to interest the Mexicans in cooperating on a highway connecting Mexico City to Santa Fe and St. Louis. In April 1877 the United States granted its official recognition to the Díaz regime. A year later, US Minister to Mexico John W. Foster made a high-profile case that trade would be a boon to both countries, but that at present it was obstructed by the “revolutionary character of the country, the want of protection to American citizens and capital, and the opposition to railroad connections to the United States.”³ The time seemed ripe for railroad building, since many diplomatic problems had been smoothed over and Díaz had adopted a more conciliatory attitude. Although Mexican officials remained leery of US domination of railroad lines, they did not have sufficient capital to carry out such projects themselves. They also shared American enthusiasm for increased trade. Accordingly, the first American railroad to be built in Mexico was incorporated in Boston under the laws of Massachusetts. With a generous concession and subsidies from the Mexican government, that railroad – completed in 1884 – connected Mexico City to Ciudad Juárez/El Paso, where it went on to link to the Southern Pacific Railroad. Soon enough, branch lines and competing railroads connected nearly every major city and zone of production in Mexico to nearly every major city in the United States. When Díaz came to power in 1876, Mexico had only 416 miles of railroad track; when he left in 1911, Mexico had 15,360 miles of track, and United States companies and United States capital had built some 70 percent of it.

The changes that came about in Mexico during the Porfiriato are important to the story of Mexican migration to the United States for several reasons. First, they created social, economic, and political tensions that, in 1910, would explode in an epic bloodletting known as the Mexican Revolution, and that horrific violence provided a major motivation to migrants. Second, the architects of Porfirian development sought quite deliberately to court foreign – mostly, but not exclusively, American – capital with the enticement of cheap labor, generous concessions,

and lax regulation. Once established, that pattern proved devilishly resistant to change. Third, and finally, the completion of an international rail system was crucial to the immigration story for several reasons: it made it far easier and cheaper to travel to the northern border from anywhere in Mexico; it facilitated an increase in trade, which meant a growing commercialization of agriculture, which in turn meant a rise in land values and the dispossession of poor rural landowners; and it led to a sharp increase in communication and trade, which effectively made Mexico an economic satellite of the United States. By the early 1890s the United States was buying 70 percent of Mexico's exports, while Mexico bought 56 percent of its imports from the United States. US corporations came to own nearly all of Mexico's mineral and oil deposits, vast quantities of choice Mexican farm and pastoral lands, and some key industries. Mexico also came to be linked so closely to the US economy that a recession in the United States was often felt as a depression in Mexico. As the Mexican population continued to grow, while economic opportunities remained stagnant, the ranks of the Mexican poor exploded. Migration to the north was now both feasible and, increasingly, necessary.

The Great Transformation: The Southwestern United States

These changes in Mexico followed or coincided with momentous changes in the United States. There, railroad building had been going on for some time. The first transcontinental railway was completed in 1869 with the joining of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railways at Promontory Summit, Utah. Once completed, the Southern Pacific Railroad garnered immense power, dominating western land and politics and employing all manner of corrupt and abusive practices, including, essentially, donating public lands to itself.

During the late eighteenth century, the West was very sparsely populated, so labor for mines and railroad crews consisted almost entirely of immigrants. Railroad companies maintained the curious practice of determining wages according to the worker's nationality or ethnic group, with Mexicans the lowest paid of all. The heyday of western railroad

building coincided with a steadily increasing popular and official hostility toward Asians, who had made up a large majority of workers on the Central Pacific line. Chinese, who commonly worked as shopkeepers, common laborers, launderers, and fruit pickers, made convenient scapegoats whenever the economy of the southwestern states suffered a downturn. Organized labor, small manufacturers, and small farmers claimed that the willingness of the Chinese to work for meager wages depressed the economy and gave unfair advantages to the big farmers and manufacturers who were crowding out the little guys. Chinese were murdered with impunity, and they were the targets of discriminatory legislation. The California constitution of 1879 charged that the Chinese were, or were likely to become, “vagrants, paupers, mendicants, criminals, or invalids afflicted with contagious or infectious diseases,” and in order to protect the “well-being of the state” it forbade corporations to hire them, barred them from working on public works projects, and permitted cities and towns to expel them or herd them in ghettos. In 1882 the federal government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which effectively cut off further immigration from China.

Hostility also focused on the Japanese, who tended to be more successful in acquiring land of their own and who formed clan-based mutual aid societies to aid their agricultural operations. California landowners did not welcome the competition. At the national level, the United States and Japan worked out a so-called “Gentlemen’s Agreement” in 1907, which virtually ended Japanese migration to the United States. For good measure, California land barons pushed for the passage of an Alien Land Law, which went into force in 1913, barring persons ineligible for citizenship – namely, Asians – from owning real estate. Migrants from southern and eastern Europe also faced growing discrimination in a nativist movement – that is, a movement that sought to privilege citizens over immigrants – that eventually culminated in the Immigration Act of 1924, which made a large portion of the world’s people officially unwelcome in the United States.

All of this left employers the choice of either paying higher wages in an effort to attract citizen laborers, or recruiting Mexicans. Of course, they chose to recruit Mexicans, who by 1900 made up between 70 and 90 percent of the track crews on the railroads of the Southwest. To recruit Mexicans, southwestern employers built up an ambitious recruiting

system, with contracting offices in US border towns, and Mexican recruiters enticing workers deep in the Mexican interior with promises of jobs and riches to be gained in the United States. The US immigration law of 1885 explicitly outlawed luring workers in foreign countries with promises of work – this seemed too much like indentured servitude, something that legislators decided was un-American – but employers ignored the provision against contract labor and the authorities did not enforce it. Recruitment proved easy enough: farm laborers in Mexico were paid between 12 and 15 cents a day, whereas railroad workers in the United States earned about a dollar a day. And from there it got even better: other industries found it easy to lure away the Mexican workers that the railroads had recruited, since work in mines and smelters paid \$2.46 a day. Mexicans quickly came to dominate the labor force in the copper mines near the border.

In contrast to the case of the Asians, there was little popular hostility toward Mexicans. That was not due primarily to racial tolerance on the part of the Americans, but rather to the fact that Mexicans in the United States were still relatively few in number and they tended to work in mines or on railroad lines, well away from population centers. If complaints about their presence should arise, employers burnished their stock retort, namely, that, unlike the Asians, if Mexicans should ever prove objectionable, sending them home would be comparatively cheap and easy.

By 1900, tracks linked most of the major cities of the West and Middle West to the populous East, making possible the shipment of goods to lucrative eastern markets. But, as of 1900, the arid and sparsely populated West had few goods to ship. Cotton was farmed commercially in east Texas, and in California wheat was grown extensively, mostly for local consumption. But the Southwest was still far from the agricultural powerhouse it would become. That began to change in 1902 when the US Congress passed the National Reclamation Act – also known as the Newlands Act, in honor of its author, Representative Francis G. Newlands of Nevada – which made available the proceeds of public land sales in the West and Southwest to build and maintain large-scale irrigation works. Soon, the Great American Desert began to disappear, replaced by an agricultural oasis that yielded vast quantities of cotton, vegetables, fruits, and grains. At the same time, the advent of refrigerated railroad

cars and new techniques for drying and canning produce made it feasible to ship perishable products over vast distances, to markets in the Midwest and East.

The transformation was rapid and impressive. In 1900 the southwestern states accounted for practically none of the produce sold in the markets of the Midwest and East; by 1929 those states accounted for about 40 percent of that produce. The amount of irrigated land in California increased by more than 2 million acres between 1909 and 1929, while Texas saw a 317 percent increase. Cotton cultivation spread from east Texas into south, central, and west Texas, and later huge cotton plantations appeared in the Mesilla Valley of New Mexico and in the Imperial and San Joaquin Valleys of California – places where temperatures routinely hit between 100 and 112 degrees Fahrenheit, and where willing workers were hard to come by.

As formerly desolate lands began rendering tons of produce, the value of those lands skyrocketed. In California an acre of land that sold for around \$25 in 1900 was fetching \$115 by 1925. Meanwhile, new technologies such as steam shovels, dynamite, and improved surveying instruments led to a boom in copper and coal mining in New Mexico, Arizona, Oklahoma, and Colorado. New employment opportunities also emerged in midwestern industries, including meatpacking plants, steel mills, textile mills, and railroad maintenance. Yet the population of these regions remained sparse, and the federal government insisted on making it sparser still with its prohibitions against immigration from Asia and increasing harassment of Europeans who made up a significant part of the workforce. That left the Mexicans, who became the region's established working class. And Mexicans proved to be a big hit with southwestern farmers. A 1907 edition of the magazine *California Fruit Grower* described them as “plentiful, generally peaceable, and . . . satisfied with very low social conditions.”⁴ These were traits that southwestern growers greatly admired.

California's agricultural development deserves a bit of special attention, given that that state's farms acquired a well-nigh insatiable appetite for transitory labor, and so it became the destination for the largest numbers of Mexican immigrants. Critics found in California the most egregious case of the evils of capitalism imaginable. Famed reformer Henry George, writing in 1871, described the apportioning of land in

California as “a history of greed, of perjury, of corruption, of spoliation and high-handed robbery, for which it will be difficult to find a parallel,” while Karl Marx allowed that “nowhere else has the upheaval most shamelessly caused by capitalist centralization taken place with such speed.”⁵

No sooner had California been acquired by the United States at the close of the US–Mexican War than a distinctive pattern of land ownership emerged. As long as it owned California, Mexico had maintained the policy of making very generous grants of land to anyone who was willing to pick up stakes and settle in that remote territory, something few Mexicans were inclined to do. The policy made sense considering that Mexico’s objective was to attract people to its northern frontier region with generous enticements. But, on the eve of the US–Mexican War, schemers and speculators scrambled to secure enormous land grants, and the recipients of such grants were able to make certain that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the war, ensured their grants would be recognized as valid. So an enormous swath of California’s land was carved up among a handful of people even before California was admitted to the American union in 1850. One commonly used tactic was for a grant holder to wait till settlers had moved in and improved a piece of land, whereupon he would produce his claim and appeal to the courts to have the settlers evicted. The courts, partners in such rascality, nearly always obliged.

Other methods were used to solidify the monopolization of land by a few wealthy people. Well-connected individuals were able to buy so-called “swamplands” that had been given to the state by the federal government, paying only a nominal fee. One of California’s greatest early landowners once had himself pulled around his land in a boat hitched to a team of horses so that he could righteously declare that it was indeed “swampland.” By 1870 one five hundredth of the state’s population owned half of the state’s farmland, and those folks were, of course, well positioned when land values increased after 1900. According to Henry George, some of those estates were so vast that “a strong horse cannot gallop [across them] in a day, and one may travel for miles and miles over fertile ground where no plow has ever struck, but which is all owned, and on which no settler can come to make himself a home, unless he pay such tribute as the lord of the domain choose to exact.”⁶

Aspiring homesteaders arriving in California were out of luck. Many of those who received no land, or who were forced off of land they thought was their own, became tenant farmers or joined a burgeoning army of migrant workers, soon a fixture on the California landscape. Variouslly called tramps, hoboes, or bindle-stiffs, these men would work for a season and then move on to the next crop, the next harvest, putting down no roots and all the while remaining desperately poor. Like the immigrant workers who came later, they were creatures of capitalism, California-style.

The railroads, too, were able to secure immense land grants – some 20 million acres by 1870. They engaged in the same sort of shenanigans that so many private landowners had used. Settlers would move in, occupy and improve a parcel of land that they imagined to be their own, only to find that the land in question was in fact a bit of unsurveyed right-of-way claimed by the railroad. The settlers would be evicted, and the railroad would take over the land, improvements and all. In fact, the railroads actually encouraged settlement for the very purpose of appropriating already-improved land. The Southern Pacific Railroad had the support of the state government because, in many ways, it *was* the state government. The Southern Pacific was instrumental in deciding who got what land and under what terms, and it ensured that the great landed estates of California remained essentially untaxed. Occasional murmurs of dissent were silenced, at times with great brutality.

The attitude that took hold among the great landowners of California was a reckless one. They were not much interested in diversifying their crops or using scientific methods, nor did they let their fields lie fallow or use fertilizers. The soils were quickly exhausted, leading to a pattern of adopting and then abandoning crops in succession. Wheat was the main crop until 1870, when it became unprofitable and was replaced by fruits. In 1897 a new, very stiff tariff against imported sugar was passed by the US Congress, leading to a huge boom in the cultivation of sugar beets throughout the Southwest. In 1902 California sugar beet farmers merged their enterprises into the Sugar Trust, enabling them to set the price of sugar beets and drive small farmers out of business. The Sugar Trust ensured that the sugar beet industry, like so much of California's agriculture, was concentrated in very few hands.

Activist-journalist Carey McWilliams, writing in the late 1930s, noted that travelers in California – the nation’s premiere farm state – would see few of the trappings that they might associate with rural life. Lacking were “the schoolhouse on the hilltop, the comfortable homes, the compact and easy indolence of the countryside. Where are the farms? Where are the farmhouses?”⁷ Instead, travelers would see vast, intensive, mechanized operations, “factories in the field.” Crucial to these factories was an itinerant rural proletariat. And since the development of this pattern of land holding and land use coincided with a major backlash against Asian immigrants, and since relatively few Americans, white or black, would willingly give up the comforts of home for an endlessly monotonous, endlessly oppressive and impoverished life on the road, that meant that the hard work of California agriculture came to be done almost entirely by Mexicans.

The Mexican Revolution

Mexico’s history prior to 1876 was one of almost ceaseless upheaval – popular uprisings, political rebellions, foreign interventions, and civil wars. The Díaz dictatorship, while punctuated by periodic violence, brought about an era often referred to as the “Pax Porfiriana,” for there were no major tumults during those 34 years (1876–1910). But the ingredients for upheaval were gathered during the Porfiriato, and the recipe was unwittingly concocted: a combination of popular rage at poverty, marginalization, and general lack of fairness; nationalist resentment of Díaz’s favoritism toward foreigners at the expense of Mexicans; discontent in some circles – most notably the army – at Díaz’s inability to keep from growing old, and his refusal to take matters of political succession seriously, which threatened an ugly power struggle in the offing; and a stifling system of favoritism, political cronyism, and autocracy that allowed few opportunities for the small but growing middle class.

In 1910 Díaz’s power was challenged by a diminutive, wealthy landowner from northern Mexico named Francisco I. Madero. Madero attracted deliriously enthusiastic crowds wherever he campaigned, and his movement grew steadily, even despite repression unleashed by the

authorities. When it became clear that Díaz had no intention of allowing a free and fair election, Madero went to San Antonio, Texas, and plotted violent revolution. It soon became apparent that Madero's chief problem – which he seems not to have completely understood – was that building a viable coalition of people who had such disparate and irreconcilable complaints was impossible. Madero's movement was probably doomed from the start.

The revolution broke out in November 1910, and its first phase ended in May 1911 with Díaz's resignation. Madero was elected in November 1911, but long before that happened serious dissension had erupted in Mexico, and that dissension led to Madero's overthrow and assassination in February 1913. From that point, Mexico descended into unremitting violence and chaos, which did not seriously begin to abate until after 1917.

The years of revolution mark the start of substantial migration from Mexico to the United States. The revolution gave Mexicans plenty of reason to flee their country: horrific violence, epidemic disease, starvation, and runaway inflation. Agriculture practically ground to a halt as the armies of several revolutionary factions, joined by marauders and brigands, occupied abandoned haciendas, looting and pillaging and destroying all along their way. The price of corn rose tenfold, and real wages dropped by three quarters between 1913 and 1916, the years of greatest violence. Revolutionary violence was especially intense in those states that were fast emerging as the prime "sending states," especially the center-north states of Michoacán, Jalisco, San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, Durango, and Guanajuato. Although the people of that region tended to be fairly passive toward the struggle, the revolution followed the railroads. And, since the center-north was between central Mexico and northern border, railroads crisscrossed it like a spider's web, ensuring that the destruction was especially intense there. Agriculture in that region, which before the revolution was among the most productive in the country, was virtually destroyed.

Terrifying though it was, the violence and hardship of the revolution were not necessarily the definitive factors in provoking massive migration. They certainly provided an important "push," but only when the push was joined by the "pull" of available, relatively high-paying jobs in the United States did migration really pick up. The volume of

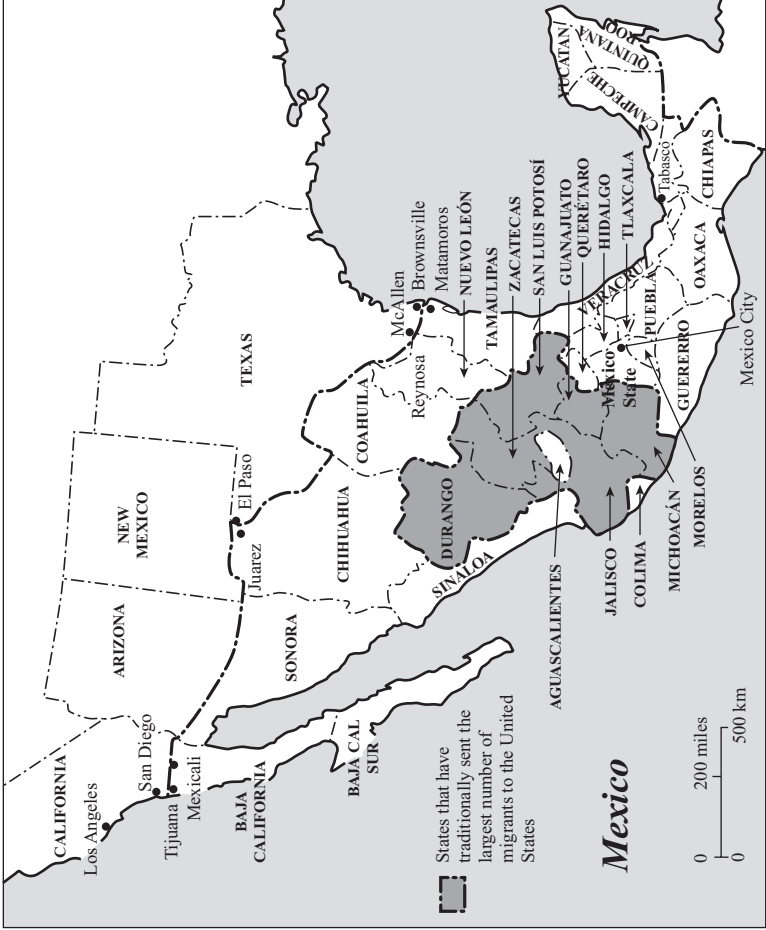


Figure 1.1 Map of Mexico and the sending region.

immigration from Mexico began to rise in earnest in 1918, just as the violence in Mexico was winding down. In that year, the United States entered into World War I. About a million US citizens were conscripted into the military, while at the same time impoverished whites and blacks went north to take relatively high-paying factory jobs, creating a severe shortage of labor that Mexicans were invited to fill. According to estimates – which are necessarily unreliable, since keeping close track of thousands of transients is virtually impossible – fewer than 50,000 Mexicans migrated to the United States in the first decade of the twentieth century; the second decade witnessed the migration of some 219,004; and the third (1921–1930) more than doubled that number, to 459,259.

Even so, the importance of the Mexican Revolution with respect of immigration would be hard to overstate, for its impact went well beyond the hideous violence of its epic phase. It was especially important for the character of the regimes it brought to power and the kinds of reforms they championed. In 1920, as the revolution's most violent phase came to an end, power was seized by a triumvirate of men who hailed from the northwestern border state of Sonora. The most important of these, Generals Alvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles, who ruled Mexico formally or from behind the scenes from 1920 to 1934, styled themselves champions of the downtrodden, the victors in a massive popular uprising whose most fundamental demand was social justice. A new Constitution, promulgated in 1917, contained one of the most progressive labor laws in the world for its time. That Constitution mandated eight hour workdays and six day work weeks; a minimum wage; equal pay for equal work regardless of race, gender, or nationality; an end to child labor; and the right to strike and bargain collectively. In the ensuing decades those provisions were often honored in the breach.

Obregón and Calles largely based their power on a close alliance with the industrial working class, as presented by a moderate labor union called the Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (or CROM, in its Spanish acronym). But the industrial working class was still a small sector of the Mexican workforce. The Mexican Revolution was largely a rural phenomenon, with much of its violence fueled by peasant anger. The epicenter of the rural revolt was the state of Morelos, where peasants

had been illegally deprived of their lands by politically connected sugar barons, for the most part absentee landlords collecting the profits from vast sugar plantations. The peasants of Morelos were joined by other rural folk, mostly from the south-central part of the country, whose grievances were deep but varied.

This was a world that the Sonoran generals, who led the country after the revolution, did not understand very well. They knew, however, that the demand for “land and liberty” – the slogan of the followers of the leading agrarian rebel, Emiliano Zapata – would need to be placated. The land reform provisions that were incorporated into the 1917 Constitution were quite radical. Villages desiring land grants did not have to prove that their lands had been illegally taken from them, but only that they lacked sufficient lands to meet the needs of the village population, as determined by government agents. Once it had been certified as needy, a village could formally petition for lands, which were to be taken from surrounding haciendas and granted in the form of *ejidos*. The *ejido* was an extent of land that was farmed by a village communally. It was an old colonial-era institution that had been done away with by the liberal reformers of mid-century, who believed strongly in the redemptive power of individual private property. *Ejido* lands were technically owned by the state, and they were administered by village *ejidal* committees, who would decide who could farm which parcel and, in conjunction with higher-level institutions, what to grow and how to market what was grown. The land could not be bought, sold, used as collateral for loans, or alienated in any way.

The *ejido* was, in fact, an ambiguous concept, and the revolutionary elite responsible for carrying out the agrarian reform could not agree on what exactly it meant or how it should operate. Obregón and Calles made it fairly clear that they had little use for the *ejido*, and carried out a halting agrarian reform mostly as a matter of political expediency. By the late 1920s, the Calles government was drastically scaling back the pace of land distribution.

The center-north region, which was fast emerging as the primary sender of migrants to the United States, benefited little from revolutionary reforms. The destruction of the revolution was compounded by a severe drought in 1917. By that time, agriculture had ground to a halt on all of the large haciendas of the region, leaving rural people – most

of whom had been attached to the haciendas either as resident workers or as day laborers – without employment. Meanwhile, the price of corn was ten to fifteen times what it had been in 1910, and buying power – for those lucky enough to have some income – declined by 75 percent. Epidemic disease added to the misery, especially the great Spanish influenza of 1918, which viciously attacked this weakened social organism. Some people reverted to the primitive, hunting small game or gathering edible weeds and herbs. Others moved to the cities in hopes of finding work, while many others headed north to take advantage of the wartime boom in the United States.

Even when peace returned to the center-north region, landowners had little capital to spend, and they were in any case loathe to spend what they had in a climate of such uncertainty, where their lands might at any time be invaded by squatters or seized by the government. In fact, the common folk of the region were mortally skeptical of the Mexican government, and few of them applied for land grants. Most people, once agricultural operations resumed after 1920, became sharecroppers or tenants, assuming the risks and burdens that had previously belonged almost exclusively to the landowners. Prices remained very high, and conditions were worsened by a sudden spurt in population growth.

Then, in 1926, came yet another blow: President Plutarco Elías Calles decided to enforce some provisions of the 1917 Constitution that entailed the persecution of the Catholic clergy. The result was a bloody rebellion known as the Cristero War, owing to the rebels' war cry, "*¡Viva Cristo Rey!*" ("Long Live Christ the King!"). The Cristero War was particularly fierce in the conservative, religious, government-hating region of the center-north – precisely those states that were already undergoing such great trials. The Cristero War cost roughly 90,000 lives and forced many people into exile. It also added further to the ongoing plunge in food production. The Mexican government sought to punish landowners who had given aid and comfort to the Cristero rebels by seizing and dividing their haciendas into *ejidos*, even if the recipients balked at such largess. Mexico was forced to spend millions importing corn and beans merely to meet the most basic nutritional needs of the population, but the imports barely kept pace with population growth, and the specter of starvation remained very real to many Mexicans.

In the mid-1920s a team of Mexican anthropologists ran some calculations and arrived at some shocking conclusions. They listed the prices in Mexico of many articles of primary necessity – food, fuel, clothing, and shelter. They determined that subsistence in Mexico at the most marginal level – excluding expenses for such luxuries as education and recreation – would cost approximately US\$144 per month. The average rural worker in Mexico earned less than \$18 a month. A factory worker, meanwhile, earned a little over \$60 a month. So a rural worker's wages would have had to increase more than eightfold, and a factory worker's wage would have had to more than double, merely to afford the barest essentials of life. Low as they were, wages paid to unskilled workers in the United States were very attractive to people suffering privation on such a scale. Unfortunately, the huge discrepancy in wages was a two-edged sword, for it allowed US employers accused of abusing their Mexican workers to say, not without some justice, that conditions in the United States at their worst were probably better than conditions in Mexico.⁸

Within Mexico, there was much ambivalence toward the migration issue. Many educated Mexicans viewed emigration as a national disgrace, a humiliating sign that Mexico could not meet the needs of its own citizens. Some went so far as to vent against the migrants themselves, portraying them as traitors who peddled their labor abroad rather than stay and work where they were needed. They fretted that perhaps those migrants would be swayed by Protestant missionaries, or would adopt the notoriously libertine practices of the neighboring republic. Others – notably, anthropologist Manuel Gamio – had a more optimistic view, comparing time spent in the United States to attending a “giant university” where Mexicans could gain “valuable experience in agriculture or industry,” learn to “handle machinery and modern tools,” acquire “discipline and steady habits of work,” and improve their material culture, returning better dressed, better nourished, more literate, more frugal, more ambitious, and less fanatically religious.⁹

The Mexican government, in its various manifestations over the years, was also ambivalent. It billed itself as a government that arose from a quintessentially popular revolution, and as such the legitimate representative of the peasants and workers who made the revolution. The apparent fact that this revolutionary government could not provide adequate employment for those same peasants and workers was a major

embarrassment that some regimes tried to compensate for by insisting that their nationals abroad be scrupulously well treated.

Most Mexican leaders overcame their embarrassment for eminently practical reasons, which have remained salient down to the present day. Migrants sent large quantities of money to their families back home – so much that such remittances became a key source of foreign exchange for Mexico. Moreover, Mexican governments greatly appreciated the so-called “safety-valve” effect. Many of those who left for the United States were among Mexico’s poorest, yet the very fact that they had the gumption to migrate suggested that they were ambitious and enterprising. They were, government officials reasoned, the very type that might, if kept home, become mired in frustration, adopt rebellious attitudes, and cause serious domestic strife. And every person who left was one fewer person who needed to be provided with a job in Mexico, where jobs were perilously scarce.

The United States, ca. 1910–1930: Xenophobia and Employment

Prior to 1917 the only obstacles for Mexicans wishing to enter the United States were the expense of the voyage and the forbidding terrain. No laws barred their entry into the United States, and only about sixty Bureau of Immigration agents patrolled the 2,000 miles of border.

During the nineteenth century, nationalism – that is, a deep and sometimes belligerent devotion to the nation and its supposed interests – had become a potent and destabilizing force in the world. Nationalism reached something of a crescendo in World War I, which was largely a bloody outburst of bellicose chauvinism among the nations of Europe. For the first time, nations began issuing passports to regulate international migration. The United States was no exception: as it ramped up for its entry into the Great War, nationalism reared its head, as did nationalism’s first cousin, xenophobia. There arose a veritable mania for protecting the nation’s territorial and racial integrity, which meant that national minorities and immigrants came increasingly to be seen as treacherous organisms that threatened to infect the national bloodstream. Of course, since Germany was the enemy in the Great War,

Germans and German Americans were singled out for the harshest treatment. But peoples of southern and eastern Europe were also targeted, since they were more likely to be Catholics or Jews who, in the official racial ideology of the day, were considered not only to be racially inferior to whites descended from “Nordic” stock, but especially susceptible to anarchist and Bolshevik propaganda.

The Immigration Act of 1917 was an expression of these growing sentiments. Ostensibly, it was aimed at persons who were “likely to become public charges” – an ample category that included, among others, drunks, beggars, epileptics, anarchists, the “feeble-minded,” and the insane. In fact, the Act’s racist undertones were unmistakable. It broadened discrimination against Asians by creating an “Asiatic Barred Zone,” which proscribed all immigration from a region extending from Afghanistan to the Pacific. Now it was not just the Chinese and Japanese who were unwelcome, but all other Asians as well. The law also forced would-be immigrants to pass a reading test in at least one language, imposed an \$8 head tax for immigrants upon entering the United States, and declared it illegal to immigrate in response to promises of work, whether or not such promises were true. Southwestern growers howled in protest, for the law, as intended, quickly brought about a decrease of nearly 50 percent in immigration of workers from Italy, Greece, Portugal, and the Slavic countries of eastern Europe – hitherto a significant part of their workforce. Meanwhile, since roughly three quarters of Mexicans – and nearly all Mexican immigrants – were illiterate, and since \$8 was a considerable sum for impoverished Mexicans, employers fretted that their only remaining option for labor was imperiled.

Making matters especially dicey, the new immigration restrictions were promulgated at a time of unprecedented expansion in southwestern agriculture, since World War I generated enormous demand for food and agricultural raw materials. The growers were able to paint a harrowing picture of what would happen if heroic remedies were not implemented: agriculture collapsing, fertile lands reverting to howling desert, the war effort and US security endangered. They had much support at a time when popular magazines and newsreels routinely proclaimed that “Food Will Win the War.” And they prevailed, pushing through a proviso in the law that allowed the Secretary of Labor to set aside the law’s provisions if, upon investigation, he became convinced that a labor shortage was

imminent in any given sector of the economy. On May 23, 1917, Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson specifically exempted temporary workers from Mexico from the provisions of the 1917 Act, and in the summer of 1918 he extended this waiver to Mexicans working in construction, mining, railroads, and factories. This was the start of what is sometimes called the first “*bracero* program.” (*Bracero*, a term derived from the Spanish word *brazo*, or “arm,” commonly refers to an unskilled, usually agricultural, laborer.) Secretary Wilson began a government directed effort to help growers and other employers meet their labor needs in this emergency situation.

About a quarter of a million Mexicans entered the United States under the terms of the waiver between 1918 and 1920. Employers were pleased with the initiative generally, but less than delighted by the red tape that, they felt, gummed up the works. Employers had the burden of proving they had a genuine need for labor; workers were to be provided with picture identification cards upon entering the United States; contracts were limited to six months; and employers were enjoined to withhold 25 cents a day from each worker’s wages to ensure that the worker would have the wherewithal to return to Mexico once his contract expired. Employers complained that such regulations would discourage immigration, which was the last thing they wanted to see. Their chief advocate in government, Food Administrator Herbert Hoover, made their case for them. Hoover was especially critical of the policy of limiting workers’ stays to six months, and of compelling employers to withhold funds to ensure their workers’ return to Mexico. Hoover and his constituents did not want the Mexicans to go home, but to continue working for low wages as long as their bodies held out. If there were no withholding, he seems to have reasoned, those immigrants would be too poor to go home.

To be sure, many Mexicans who had no patience for the bureaucratic snags could simply enter the country illegally, and many of them did so. It was during these same years that a couple of new and enduring characters made their first appearance on the scene: the undocumented immigrant, popularly known as the “wetback” (*mojado* in Spanish) because many swam the Rio Grande to enter the United States (prior to 1917, there were no illegal Mexican immigrants for the obvious reason that there were no laws restricting Mexican immigration); and the *coyote*,

a professional people smuggler who, for a fee, helped to ensure the immigrant a successful entry. By 1920 the flow of migrants over the border was becoming torrential. There were a couple of episodes that slowed that flow, but only briefly. In the spring and summer of 1917 a rumor ran through the Mexican migrant community that Mexicans were going to be drafted into the US Army. Where these rumors started is not known, but some US consuls insisted they were deliberately spread by German agents or German sympathizers hoping to sabotage the US war effort. If so, the ploy nearly worked, because suddenly hundreds of panicked immigrants were fleeing back across the southern border. There were, in fact, a few cases of Mexicans mistakenly or illegally drafted into the US military, but it was never a matter of policy. The mass exodus of Mexican workers under the conditions that prevailed in the summer of 1917 could be disastrous, since it would affect both agricultural production and rail transport of vital military supplies. US officials, accordingly, enlisted Mexican consuls, newspaper editors, Roman Catholic clerics, the military, and US citizens to help them persuade Mexican workers that the rumors were unfounded. Spanish language posters appeared in many a Texas town assuring that no Mexicans were to be drafted. By late summer of 1917 the exodus had slowed considerably, but the campaign to override the rumor went on well into 1918.

A second circumstance briefly interrupted the flow of labor over the border. In early 1921 the wartime economic boom played out suddenly, and the US economy entered into a grave, if short-lived, crisis. Some 5 million people were thrown out of work, 100,000 businesses went bankrupt, and nearly half a million farmers lost their land. Mexican workers were among the poorest and most expendable elements in the US labor market, so the depression hit them especially hard. Local charities that tried to provide relief soon found themselves swamped. They implored the US Congress to allocate a special fund to deport the Mexicans back to Mexico, but Congress paid no heed to their requests. Some desperate Mexicans moved to cities in the hope of finding work, often ending up homeless and still more desperate. Meanwhile, the companies that employed Mexican laborers put their cynicism and hypocrisy on full display, and not for the last time. They had been unstinting in their praise for Mexican workers during times when there was a shortage of labor and their profits were threatened, though they considered the Mexicans'

most admirable trait that they were willing to work hard for very little money and without complaint. Those employers were directly responsible for the Mexicans' presence in the United States – they had actively enticed Mexicans to cross the border and expended tremendous effort to ensure that government regulations that might have impeded their crossing be waived – but now they refused to take any responsibility for helping the Mexicans return home. After the economy rebounded, they once again boisterously sang the praises of the noble Mexican worker. Meanwhile, Mexicans in some locales made handy scapegoats for the economic hard times. In Ft. Worth, Texas, Mexicans were threatened with mass murder; dozens of unemployed and homeless Mexicans in Denver, Colorado, were arrested for vagrancy and put to work on chain gangs; and in Ranger, Texas, masked Ku Klux Klan night riders raided an ad hoc Mexican labor camp, dragging about a hundred men, women, and children from the tents and beating them.

The Mexican government involved itself fairly extensively with the migrant community for the first time. Even though Mexico's economy was in an even more deplorable condition than that of the United States, the government spent over a million dollars to feed immigrants and transport them home. The expenditures had an impact, though a relatively small one: the Mexican government aided roughly 50,000 Mexicans, out of a population that is impossible to estimate, but was presumed to number between 260,000 and 1 million.

By 1923 the US economy had rebounded, and the welcome mat was once again rolled out for Mexicans.