

THE MEXICAN AMERICAN: *
A NATIONAL CONCERN
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The Mexican Americans proper have all the characteristics of recent immigrants. Having come from backward rural sections of Mexico and having distinctive racial features of their predominantly Indian ancestors, they find it difficult to assimilate into, or to be accepted by, the dominant American group. Although concentrated in Texas and California, they have spread throughout the entire Midwest, and have made their homes in urban as well as rural places in this country. Wherever they are, however, they are treated as the group furthest down, matched in low social status only by the Negroes. The author of this essay is one of the outstanding leaders of the Mexican group in the United States. He presents a rather thorough analysis, in succinct and popular terminology, of several aspects of Mexican American life.

The conditions of life and work of the Spanish-speaking minority in the United States are no longer a problem only of the borderlands. A historical process has been at work lifting this problem above local and sectional concern. It now involves communities as distant from the United States - Mexican border as Chicago, New York, and Detroit. It shows up in the rural slums that lie on an arc stretching from Arkansas to northern California. It is documented in federal reports on employment and in community conferences on human relations in the urban industrial East as well as the rural agricultural Southwest. It has become a skeleton in the closet of our Latin American policy.

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The Mexican agricultural migrant and itinerant railway maintenance worker have been the primary agents in this process. Over the past fifty years they have moved into practically every state of the UNION. Today, while the bulk of over 2,500,000 of this minority is still anchored in California, Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico, thousands can be found in Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Kansas.

Within the group, the inferiority complex has been disappearing. From the uncomplaining ranks of Mexican "stoop labor" have emerged trained men and women to spoil the myth of the innate servility and incompetence attached to this group, with some romantic concessions, by finance farmers and railway corporations that long have exploited them. Two world wars proved the courage, tested the loyalty, broadened the experience, and tempered the will of young men born and bred in a no-man's-land of social rejection and lack of civic opportunity for adult citizenship.

In the cotton fields the truck farm, and the corporation ranches, as well as in the armed services, the Mexican has mingled with other minority groups more experienced in the defense of human rights and dignity, especially the Negro. He has rubbed shoulders with the militant Nisei GI's who did not come back from Monte Cassino to take it lying down. Through these contacts, methods of action have been learned and technics of organization have been discovered and communicated. The language of protest, pure and simple and almost always unheeded, has been supplemented by self-education and the discovery of the methods of redress available in the larger society by which he is surrounded. In this process not a few Mexicans have discovered the weaknesses of civic and political organization, locally and nationally, as well as the mirages of international relations which have affected their welfare. For half a century they have experienced, intuitively rather than rationally, the red tape, obscure diplomatic deals, misrepresentations, and legal taffy in which the civil liberties and economic opportunities of Mexicans in the United States have been entangled. But as the American school system has inevitably rescued a few of the more fortunate ones from the colonias of the rural countryside or the gashouse districts of the large cities, understanding has become more rational, supported by knowledge and experience.

As the individual capacity of certain Mexicans has been developed and as their collective insight has become sharper and more meaningful, the attempt to stop the clock on them by some social groups has also taken on different forms. In Washington an Associated Farmers' lobby prevents the extension of social security, minimum wages, and other forms of protection to the Mexican rural workers. The same lobby inspires highly confidential agreements with the Mexican government for the recruitment of Nationals or braceros, whose major strategic function is to depress wages in California and Texas. Men who are highly sympathetic to the policies of the Associated Farmers sit securely in control of the machinery of the Inter-American System, thereby heading off constructive multilateral action to tackle the problems of inter-American labor migration at its roots.

On this and other aspects of the changing context of the problem of the Mexican minority in the United States, an abundant literature has developed. This literature runs all the way from the serious, compact, and sustained scholarship of Dr. Paul Taylor's studies to the articles, newspaper accounts, and books of the "protest" type. In between are the shelves of catalogued masters' and doctoral theses, government reports, case studies, and monographs numbering thousands of items. Bibliographically, at least, the Mexican minority has come of age.

But now the time has come for this minority to find the connection between the library card index and life. In the living and working conditions of this group certain problems have been isolated, defined, studied, and analyzed. Now they must be resolved. Which are most urgent?

Wages and Income

The Mexican agricultural workers, as well as those who work in the manufacturing, transport, and service industries, fall into the lowest income class. The purchasing power of semi-stable agricultural workers in California and Texas is comparable to that of the sharecroppers of Arkansas and Mississippi. As a group the Mexican workers have not been able to shake off the tradition of "cheap labor." Wage discrimination based on race has been uncovered by federal

investigators even in the mining industry. In the absence of adequate wage and income studies of the group, the economic status of the Mexicans can be verified by simple observation of their absenteeism, indebtedness, unpaved streets, and the almost total absence of decent recreational facilities for the whole family immediately type the average Mexican community.

Employment

In the urban centers, the Mexican still finds barriers to the better-paid jobs. In industry individual skill is not infrequently discounted because of color. Employers in the service industries, where "the customer is always right," yield to prejudice and close certain avenues of economic advancement to darkskinned citizens of Mexican ancestry. In agriculture the employment situation is somewhat less subtly arranged. The Mexican field workers, by and large, are dependent on contractors, whose controls of the total social life of the group are all-pervading. These contractors are the bridge improvised by the boss-culture of the employers and the servant-culture of the workers. The labor power that passes back and forth over that bridge pays a heavy toll in the form of petty larceny, short-weighting, usury, wage competition, rent gouging, company-store profits, alcoholism, and other types of catering to starved human needs. Even where the contractor happens to be a decent fellow, or where the corporation ranchers go into the labor market themselves, the Mexican farm worker fares little better. He may expect, as he has found in California, that the corporate interests will move into the machinery of farm-employment placement, through which in part, the labor market can be kept in a profitable state of over-supply.

Foreign Labor

Since 1942 a new element has been added to the wage and employment situation of the Mexican farm workers in the United States. This is the recruitment of braceros or Mexican Nationals, through agreements between the government of Mexico and the United States. These agreements were originally signed as a wartime measure, but they have been continued under the insistent pressure of the agricultural employers' associations who were looking for a counterpoise to the wage demands of Mexican workers long resident in this country.

Stripped of technicalities, the recruitment of Nationals is a new phase of the old quest for sources of low-cost, inexperienced, unorganized mass labor power. The original intention of the agreements as understood by some of their early advocates; the protection of wages and living standards as well as civil rights of imported workers and domestic labor in time of great national stress, has been sidetracked. Instead, there is now the concept of "task forces" of Mexican Nationals, maneuvered in divisions of 5,000 or more, and assigned to duty in any state of the Union where local Mexicans, Negroes, Filipinos, and Anglo-American whites threaten to organize or ask for higher wages.

The negotiation of these agreements, practically behind closed doors, and the determination of the conditions of such employment by self-appointed arbiters in Washington and Mexico City, establish a form of international economic government practiced without the consent of the governed - in this case the millions of agricultural workers whose wages and standards are immediately affected by such agreements. Relief from this kind of misgovernment has not yet been found by the Mexican workers in the United States, either through Washington officialdom or through the present administration in Mexico City.

Inter-American Standards

Since the wartime bracero agreements have been repeatedly hailed as a shining example of the Good Neighbor policy in action, their essential function and results in peacetime must be pointed out to be a glaring violation of the spirit of that policy. This is indeed the opinion of the former Secretary of Foreign Affairs of Mexico, Jaime Torres Bodet, stated publicly in October 1948.

By all the standards for decent living and working conditions laid down in the Chapultepec Conference and later in the Inter-American Conference of Bogota, the agreements have been an economic Trojan horse, an administrative subterfuge, and a long-run political boomerang. Here was an area in which the Inter-American System, through the Pan American Union, could have taken over administrative responsibility on a truly multilateral, representative basis. These agreements could have been drawn up with the participation of legitimate trade-union representatives. They could have been administered

without yielding to special interests or political expediency. But, as it has turned out, the Pan American Union, which the workers support directly through public funds appropriated from taxes, has proved an utterly useless instrument for the maintenance of inter-American standards of work and living. In public affairs the misuse of a symbol must be challenged as promptly and as decisively as the subversion of a human right or a constitutional liberty. In this case, the kidnapping of the Good Neighbor symbolism by those who have shut the door of the House of the Americas on the workers is something to which the organized Mexican workers in the United States will have to give special attention.

Illegal Labor

There is also the widespread exploitation of Mexican workers brought to this country illegally. These so-called wetbacks number probably not less than 60,000 in southern Texas alone. In some border areas--Imperial Valley, Brownsville, El Paso--the bulk of the unskilled farm labor is done by these people. In the San Joaquin Valley between Bakersfield and Modesto there are probably not less than 20,000 illegals. People who talk about labor pools could well describe these reservoirs of bootleg manpower as labor quicksands, for in them all efforts to raise income for the agricultural worker flounder.

Up to the present, the burden of blame and punishment for violation of the immigration laws of the United States falls on the wetback himself. He pays the penalty in the low wages he must accept, the mistreatment he must put up with, the constant fear of arrest, the loss of wages if he is picked up, and the hostility of the local Mexican community. That he is a symptom of a basic maladjustment in the economies of the two countries and a victim of the feebleness of inter-American standards is not generally recognized. Moreover, it is not only the bootleg contractor and the grapevine headhunter who paves the way for the wetback. In a sense he is forced to seek better conditions north of the border by the slow but relentless pressure of United States' agricultural, financial, and oil corporate interests on the entire economic and social evolution of the Mexican nation. Inflation, rising utility rates, the agrarian stalemate, and the flank attack on oil expropriation are some of the major causes of the persistent exodus of Mexican workers.

Racial Tension.

The Mexicans, by tradition and custom, are a racially tolerant group. The acute sense of personal dignity, a Spanish legacy, strengthens the notion that no man should be judged according to his color or his race. Normally, Mexican communities in the United States have preserved remarkably well this valuable cultural trait.

But the operation of the present wage system of contracting and employment and the strategic use by corporation agriculture of race blocs to maintain and encourage racial jealousies as a means to competitive wage bidding, is injecting bad blood into normal racial tolerance. Today there is emotional dynamite lying around loose between Mexican local workers and Mexican Nationals, between Mexican Nationals and Mexican illegals--not to mention the possibilities for racial misunderstanding between Mexicans on the one hand and Filipinos, Negroes, and white Anglo-Americans on the other. Fortunately, this encouragement of racial antagonism is being held in check by the responsible leaders of all these racial groups. But for how long? Will their influence be strong enough to counteract the effects of prolonged unemployment?

DISCRIMINATION

In many communities Mexicans are still excluded from parks, from motion pictures theatres, from swimming pools, and from other public places. Certain neighborhoods excludes Mexicans, however acceptable they may be culturally and professionally. There are still schools for Mexican children separate from those maintained for "white" children. In some important towns Mexicans do not patronize certain barber shops or stores. There are no "Keep out" signs, but instead of having a pleasant greeting for Mexican customers "they make one a bad face," as the saying goes. This type of social exclusion has been responsible for a good deal of the northward migration of Mexican workers and their families. Like the Negroes of the Deep South, the Mexicans have sought the more friendly towns and cities of central and northern California, Colorado, Wyoming, Indiana, and Ohio, where prejudice does not make a specific target out of them.

Closely tied to this problem is that of segregation. The location of the hundreds of Mexican colonies--invariably marked by the railroad tracks, cactus patch, city dump, and employemnt bureau signs is in itself one huge, ubiquitous case of segregation.

Housing

This leads directly to the problem of housing, typically resolved by the Mexican workers in their patchwork neighborhoods commonly called colonias. Usually lying outside the corporate limits of the towns and cities to which they are attached, these neighborhoods cling to the surrounding countryside like gray desiccated barnacles, from which some unseen inexorable hand constantly squeezes the vital humors and amenities of community living.

A trip through one of these colonias is easy to make. Any motorist traveling along US 99--California's Main Street, as it has been called--can see these typical California rural slums from the windows of his car. From the upper stories of the better hotels in Fresno, Modesto, Sacramento, or Bakersfield, good views can be obtained of shack rows, tent settlements, and privy subdivisions occupied by Mexican families. In the Shafter colony of Mexican agricultural workers the stench from backyard toilets in summer is intolerable. In the heart of the Mexican colony of Bakersfield, young children play barefoot in sewer water backed up by winter rains. The colonias rarely are taken into account in public-housing projects. They have become normal sights. But public agencies and social workers know that these areas are foci of disease. On the tuberculosis maps the black dots are heaviest in the Mexican colony.

Education

The educational problems of the Mexican minority are of two basic types--the extension of educational opportunities to the young, and the creation of adult education programs adapted to the needs of these communities. So far as the children are concerned, education and child labor are waging, now as in past years, a bitter struggle for the young mind. The tent schools of San Luis Obispo County in California are better than what most counties in that state provide for the children of wandering Mexican pickers. But they are also mute reminders of the inability of local, county, state, and federal authorities to provide these young American citizens with decent facilities for learning.

The adolescent and college-age Mexicans today represent a reservoir of possibilities for leadership that has not been recognized. Hundreds of young men and women who have somehow survived the attrition of the crops and the economic pressure on the home and

have finished high school can go no further. They represent what the American way of life can do at its best, even against the underlying resistance of finance farming, the international traffic in low living standards, and the other complexities of the lost culture.

Civil Liberties

The degree of enjoyment of civil liberties and constitutional rights varies with the nature of sub-groups within the Mexican minority. Lowest in the scale are the wetbacks, the illegals, for whom there are no rights. Next come the Nationals, whose rights are defined by contract and occasionally enforced by a weak bureaucracy of United States and Mexican officials. Then there are the long-resident Mexicans who have never become citizens. They are reluctant to demand protection or to insist on their constitutional prerogatives because their status, too, is vulnerable.

The Mexicans have probably not missed any of the forms of mistreatment and violation of civil liberties that have been visited on the other minority groups in American life. Thus far, however, they have failed to develop strong institutional resistance to such invasions.

Community Relations

The relationship between the Mexican minority and the dominant elements has generally been a punitive-inquisitorial one on the part of the latter. It is interesting to note how the Mexicans shrink from contact with even those agencies of the dominant group that are intended to "do good". These agencies too often approach the Mexican client with a questionnaire in hand. Being questioned, for the Mexican worker, has too often been but the first step toward being arrested. Hence the reluctance of the Mexicans to ask for relief, to apply for medical assistance, or to have any truck with the formidable apparatus of any federal agency. The machinery of government, to the Mexican, has been something to avoid. It must be met only when it comes at one aggressively in the war dress of a cop. What lies across the railroad tracks can be left well enough alone.

But the dominant community is there. And so is the Mexican colonia. What adjustment there is has been worked out by the contractors on the economic level, by the survival of patriotic and cultural traditions that have worn thin, and by a silent skepticism toward the questionnaire-state that lies across the tracks and runs the show.

Rural and Urban Relations

Many important Mexican communities lie in the heart of metropolitan areas. In Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Antonio they have often been engulfed, sometimes bulldozed out of old quarters to make way for swank subdivisions or modern highways. Mexican centers of this type play a multiple role. They are winter havens for the migrant workers that criss-cross the land in spring and summer. They provide a steppingstone from farm to industrial employment. They bring the young people into closer and more intense contact with the dominant culture. Here the rural attitude dissolves into an urban resentment and a mental confusion created by the economic and social conditions which face all city workers. One result, for the Mexicans, has been the separation of the urban from the rural groups, so that the full force of the Mexican community has never been brought to bear on the problems they have in common. The urban Mexican has never reached, as has the urban Negro, toward the rural Mexican so that both could improve their status. This gap is one that has not been sufficiently noticed by Mexicans themselves or by non-Mexicans who have attempted to work with the group.

Political Impotence.

From what has been said, it is not surprising to find that the Mexicans are a political nonentity in the United States. Though many thousands of them are citizens by birth or naturalization, they keep clear of political obligations and therefore do not take advantage of political opportunities. There are counties in the Southwest where the Mexicans could theoretically swing the results of an election if they registered and voted. But too often they do not. This in turn means that state and federal legislation rarely takes them into account. Even in municipal affairs it is uncommon to find spokesmen for the Mexican. Therefore all pleas to the state

governor, the President of the United States, the legislature, or Congress must be based on considerations of high human sentiment. In the American political system, however, such sentiments have always been found to fare much better when supported by precinct organization and votes in the ballot box.

Trade-Union Organization

Perhaps the most serious weakness, and by no means the least important of the problems of the Mexicans in the United States, is their lack of economic organization.

The Mexican workers, both in industry and agriculture, have given sufficient proof of their understanding of solidarity among workers. They have shown that they can take every form of violence which vigilantism in this country has been able to devise. Mexican workers in Imperial, Salinas, and Orange have sustained industrial disputes single-handed against the combined police, political, and propaganda resources of finance-farming and corporation ranching. But as yet they have not solved the problem of union-organization. The attempt to set up separate unions on racial lines has been disastrous. There is a language barrier. The labor movement itself until recently has taken a somewhat benevolent interest rather than an active organizational concern in Mexican workers.

In the field of agriculture, there are still other difficulties. There is the myth that farm workers are unorganizable and Mexican farm workers twice so. Farm wages are so low that the monthly union dues seem a heavy tax on the workers. There are long periods of unemployment when union obligations can be met only at considerable sacrifice. A trade-union of farm workers must face and meet assaults on its security ranging from local irritation, through state legislative attacks, and up to international maneuvers to swamp local living and working standards.

Nevertheless, the problem of union organization must be solved. The economic education of the Mexican worker is much more advanced than his cultural assimilation or his political experience. The union is his most vital point of contact with the large community....