

**Mexican migration to NYC. The social, economic, and cultural characteristics in comparison to traditional Mexican migration to the Southwest.**

*Introduction*

With the establishment of Latinos as the largest ethnic/racial group in the city, the Hispanic population of New York City has fixed itself as a dominant presence among the city's community. Even more recently, specific Latino groups have begun to make their marks on the city. For years, the dominant Latino presence in the city has rested among people of Puerto Rican descent. While Puerto Ricans still remain the dominant Latino group in the city, they're beginning to face some stiff competition from a rather unexpected source: Mexico. Only ten years ago, Mexicans were present in sparse numbers throughout the city. In 2001, the number of Mexicans living within the city has increased to such an extent that Mexicans have become the third-largest Hispanic group after Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. (Dallas, pg.30) This is an interesting concept being that for years the traditional destination for Mexican migrants was among the southwestern states. However, recent data shows that this is changing as more and more Mexican immigrants discover new frontiers within the U.S. Why is this happening? Why are so many people coming to New York? How is this different or similar to the traditional Mexican immigration to the southwest? In my paper, I will be looking at the reasons why so many Mexicans are coming to NYC and comparing them to the characteristics associated with past, more traditional Mexican migration to the southwest.

*Traditional Mexican Migration (1848-1964)*

In order to examine Mexican immigration to NYC, we must first look to traditional Mexican immigration of the past. The first known incorporation of Mexicans

into the U.S. came in the mid-nineteenth century with the Mexican-American war. After losing to America, Mexico signed the *Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo* in 1848 in which it agreed to the secession of what now spans an area covering California, New Mexico, Texas, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, most of Colorado, and parts of Wyoming. Besides gaining vast territory, the U.S. now found itself gaining a rather minute fraction of the Mexican population as it granted citizenship to the thousands of Mexicans who chose to remain in the new American southwest. With thousands of Mexicans now living within the United States, the first waves of Mexican immigration were ready to begin.

"Mexican immigration to the United States is parallel to the growth and development of infrastructure, agriculture, and critical economic sectors in the United States." (Peters, pg. 56) As we will see, it is also fair to say that Mexican immigration to the U.S. is also parallel to crises or economic underdevelopment in Mexico. The acquisition of a nationwide rail system and an export-based economy financed in large part by foreign capital brought economic prosperity to Mexico under the rule of its President, Porfirio Diaz.

Meanwhile in the United States, the development of the new southwest and its railroad systems, as well as the post-civil war industrial expansion, led to great economic development. All these changes taking place caused there to be a great demand for labor in helping to expand and develop the U.S. Furthermore, with the implementation of laws in the U.S., like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Gentleman's Agreement with Japan in 1907, there was a massive increase in the demand for labor as other sources of immigrant labor were cut off. So, the U.S. looked towards its southern neighbor for a new source of much needed labor. U.S. recruiters in the railroad, agricultural, and mining industries poured into Mexico looking for labor, and Mexican immigrants rapidly answered the calls. Despite the economic

development, Mexico's economy went through negative changes. With the consolidation of the hacienda system by President Diaz, thousands of Mexican farm workers found themselves without work. These displaced workers, in so desperate need for employment, were more than willing to head north in search of jobs. The trip north to find employment was made easier when the Mexican and American rail systems were integrated. Now the labor supply (the Mexican immigrants) had a direct link to the demand for immigrant labor. (Durand, pg.5)

With the beginning of the 20th century came the beginning of what became known as "The Great Migration". (Gonzales, pg. 133) From 1900-1930, the first major waves of Mexican immigrants flooded the United States, settling mainly in the southwest. We have already seen the impact that labor demands had on Mexican immigration in the early years of the new century, and this trend would increase enormously with the beginning of World War 1. As the war called for the boys at home to leave and defend their country, enormous vacancies were left in the labor market. The poorer classes moved into the more urban industrial oriented jobs, but there was no one left to take the place of the drafted farmers. The Immigration Act of 1917 had placed a head and literacy tax on Mexican immigrants attempting to enter the U.S. in an attempt to curtail immigration. However with the desperate need for labor during the war, the U.S. government was forced to exempt Mexicans from these taxes. Instead, in an attempt to preserve agriculture and the economy, the U.S. government issued special labor contracts to Mexicans so they could come to the U.S. and work in the fields. (Hondagneu-Sotelo, pg. 125) Another factor also contributed to the enormous waves of Mexican immigrants entering the U.S. during the late 1910's and into the 1920's. The displacement of thousands of Mexican farm workers with the collapse of the

hacienda system was made worse in 1910 with the fall of the Diaz regime and the commencement of ten years of civil unrest. (Durand, pg. 5)

The violence and chaos brought on by the Mexican Revolution would spur considerable amounts of immigration by political refugees seeking to flee their nation. The degree of immigration was so high that "some 8,000 refugees crossed the border in a single day in 1913." (Gonzales, pg. 118) Labor demands and the plight of the Mexican State during the early decades of the new century would keep immigration at high levels throughout much of the 1920's.

The American economy did a rapid 360-degree turn in the late 1920's with the crash of the stock market in N.Y. With the beginning of The Great Depression in 1929, average American citizens now found themselves roaming the streets in search of work. Anti-immigrant sentiments had begun way before the Great Depression, but with the enormous aid to the U.S. economy that Mexican immigrant workers had provided during the war, many people looked the other way. Yet when they themselves were unable to find employment, Americans began looking on Mexican immigrants with increased hatred and resentment. To Americans, the Mexican immigrants were lowering wages and stealing away jobs that were rightfully theirs as American citizens. Beginning in 1931, and continuing throughout the decade, Mexicans (legal, illegal, U.S. citizens, and native born) were deported back to Mexico in huge amounts. Some Mexicans, sharing the inability to find jobs within the U.S. with Americans, went back to Mexico voluntarily. However, many of them did not. During the repatriation movement that characterized the 1930's, "approximately half a million people of Mexican descent were deported." (Novas, pg. 95) Somewhat better times for Mexicans would come in later decades.

By 1942 conditions began to change within the U.S. With America engaged in another world war, Americans once again had jobs. Moreover, just as in the previous war, Mexican immigrants found that they too had a place in the U.S. labor market. Once again workers were needed in the agricultural sectors of the economy, and once again, the U.S. initiated a labor-contract program to supply these workers. In 1942, the U.S. government created the *Bracero Program*. With the end of the war, The *Bracero Program* was terminated in 1947. However, U.S. employers had become so dependent on this new cheap form of labor, that they convinced the U.S. government to reinstate the *Bracero Program* in 1948. It extended into the 1950's and 1960's until finally ending in 1964 after "nearly 5 million temporary labor contracts were issued to Mexican citizens." (Hondagneu-Sotelo, pg. 115) The *Bracero* years coincided with years of economic hardships in Mexico that further pushed Mexican immigrants north. During this period, the Mexican government made feeble attempts to improve the economy by distributing land to its peasants, but they failed to provide them with the capital and resources needed to tend the fields. So instead, the Mexicans were left with nothing to do with their land, and an increase in the need for cash. Mexico also made other attempts with the Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) program. The plan was to rid the country of its dependence on imports by producing products within the country that could substitute for these imports. The plan tried to limit foreign investment, and also required licenses and duties for imports coming into the country. The plan worked for a while, but ultimately failed. Benefits coming from the policy were not being equally distributed throughout the classes. (Baker, pg.92-94)

The years encompassing the *Bracero Program* saw a massive increase in the amount of legal and illegal Mexican immigrants coming to the U.S. With the *Bracero Program* thousands of Mexicans entered the U.S. legally as contract laborers, but many

thousands also entered the U.S. illegally. These *mojados/wetbacks*, named so because they risked their lives swimming the Rio Grande to get into America, crossed the border because they weren't selected to be contract laborers, but they knew that there was work to be found. In 1954, the U.S. government instituted what came to be known as Operation Wetback in which they apprehended and repatriated over 1 million Mexican workers. (Hondagneu-Sotelo, pg. 118) Yet this had only modest effects because U.S. employers had become so dependent on this cheap Mexican labor that they used any means necessary (i.e. smuggling) to bring these Mexicans to the U.S. With the official end of the *Bracero Program* in 1964, the amount of undocumented Mexican immigrants increased to even greater amounts. Between the *braceros* and the *mojados*, there was increasing competition in the amount of jobs available to Mexican immigrants.

*New Mexican Migration (after 1964)*

The *bracero period* not only prompted significant changes in the flux of Mexican immigration to the U.S. It also was the beginning of significant changes in the composition and characteristics of Mexican immigration. Previously, the traditional Mexican immigrants were working-age Mexican men who traveled to the U.S. alone, found jobs primarily in agriculture, predominantly settled in the southwest, and sent money back home to their families with the intention of returning to Mexico. While this is still the dominant case in later decades, you can see that in the *bracero period* this traditional image is beginning to be challenged. Trends towards more urban oriented settlements, as well as jobs, began to take place. An increasing number of people began choosing the more nontraditional states of the Midwest and the Northeast with their urban, industrialized employment opportunities, over the traditional agricultural work

of the southwest. "From 1940 to 1960, Mexican immigration to industrialized states such as Michigan and New York rose." (Durand, pg. 7) Also more and more women, children, and relatives of the Mexican immigrants settled in the U.S., were becoming part of the migration population.

"In the U.S., the growth of settled-out, urban-based Mexican immigrant communities [and hence, immigration] was fostered by a changing configuration of immigration legislation and labor demand." (Hondagneu-Sotelo, pg. I 10) Smith also supports this argument in his article. In his article, Smith argues that the majority of the Mexican immigrants coming to N.Y. are from the *Mixteca Baja* region (particularly the state of Puebla). While these immigrants came to N.Y. in steady numbers during the period 1942-1980, the great impact of Mexican migration to N.Y. came in the late 80's when the Mexican population in N.Y. exploded. Smith attributes this immigration of Mexicans to N.Y. in the late 1980's to three main factors. The first is that this migration explosion occurred during a period of economic crisis for Mexico known as "the lost decade." In an essay that I found for my research entitled "Recent Structural Changes in Mexico's Economy," Enrique Dussel Peters argues that economic factors are the main reasons Mexicans migrate to the U.S. Throughout his article he correlates recent changes in the Mexican economy with Mexican migration to the U.S. In one instance he seems to agree with Smith's views by saying that, " 'the lost decade' of the 1980's, which resulted mainly from a fall in the generation of employment, as well as declining GDP per capita and real wages, seems to have affected migration to the U.S." (Peters, pg. 57) He goes even further to argue that the abandonment of the ISI model discussed earlier in 1982, and the transition towards a Liberalization Strategy that brought private capital into the country and structured a more export-oriented economy, had profound effects on Mexican migration to the U.S. Despite its positives, the Mexican government was still

unable to create jobs for the massive amounts of Mexicans entering the work force each year. He argues that the economic crisis of 1994 and the devaluation of the peso further set back the Mexican economy. During the period of 1980-1996, "1 5.5 million individuals had to search for a job either in the informal sector or in the United States." (Peters, pg. 66)

The second factor influencing Mexican immigration in the late 1980's according to Smith is the establishment of Mexicans as a 'preferred labor source' in the industrial sectors of New York. Smith goes into further detail with this argument when he describes the Korean-employer, Mexican-employee relationship. Mexicans in the city are a preferred source of labor because unlike other immigrant groups, and most Americans, they're willing to do the most unpleasant work and work the longest hours. Mexicans are also the cheapest labor. Employers can hire several Mexicans with the money they would pay one non-Mexican employee. The reasons that employers can get away with paying these immigrants so badly is because: 1) it's still better than what they're getting in Mexico; and 2) the fact that many of these immigrants are illegal allows the employers to take advantage of them. The immigrants' undocumented status keeps them from speaking out because of their constant fear of being discovered and deported.

Lastly, Smith says that the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) also spurred Mexican immigration to the U.S. The IRCA granted legalization to "nearly three million undocumented immigrants, who had been working in agriculture or living illegally in the United States before 1982." (Baker, pg. 87) While the IRCA attempted to reduce immigration by granting legalization, the effects once again were the direct opposite. Thousands of immigrants flocked to the U.S. in an attempt to become legalized residents of the U.S., and many wives, children, and other family

members of Mexican immigrants began immigrating to be with their families. Smith argues that Mexican immigrants were no longer threatened by the fact that they would never be able to return home to Mexico. They could travel to Mexico and not have to worry about not being able to enter the U.S. when they decided to return because they now had legal status. Another aspect of this that Smith doesn't discuss is that the IRCA's effects on Mexicans back home and in the southwest affected migration to N.Y. Back in Mexico, and in the southwest, the legalization of Mexican immigrants completely flooded the labor markets in California (at this point, the most dominant state for Mexican migration.) With the increased competition, many Mexicans were forced to look elsewhere for work. In addition, the fact that they were now legalized gave them more freedom to move around the country and try settling in states like N.Y. without fear of being arrested. (Durand, pg.9) The recession and passage of Proposition 187 (which denied public health, education, and welfare services to illegal immigrants) further impelled thousands of Mexican immigrants to out-migrate within the U.S. as immigrants searched for more economically stable and immigrant-friendly states; all of which encompasses N.Y.

### *Conclusion*

Since the beginning of Mexican immigration into this country, Mexican immigrants were traditionally characterized as young working-age men who came to the U.S. often alone, settling typically in Texas, or California, or some other southwestern state. They came to these states, not only because of their proximity to the border, but because this was where the jobs were. And most of the Mexican immigrants who came to this country came looking for jobs. After they settled in the U.S., they predominantly found work working on American fields in American

agriculture. The Mexican immigrants that came to the U.S. during early, traditional immigration were of the sojourner type. They came to find jobs and make money that they could send back home to their families, and then they had every intention of returning to Mexico. They were seasonal laborers: they came to the U.S. when they were needed as farmers during the harvest and then spent the remainder of the year back in Mexico. Starting with the 1940's, while this dominant trend was still the case in most instances, there was a growing trend towards more nontraditional immigration to the U.S. Growing numbers of immigrants, especially in recent years, were characterized as settlers. They came to the U.S. looking for more permanent work in more urban environments. Instead of agriculture, they turned towards more secondary-low pay labor sources like restaurants, housing and childcare, grocery stores, and manufacturing. They came with their wives and their children, and often only visited Mexico during holidays. Yet these immigrants all had one thing in common. They came to the U.S. because in comparison to the lives and wages they had in Mexico, the U.S. was far better. The most dominant push and pull factors for these immigrants were economic: they came for labor and because of the existing economic conditions of both the U.S. and Mexico at the time. As we have seen, all kinds of factors ranging from labor to political unrest to having relatives in the U.S. sparked immigration to the U.S., but it was the economic factor that drew them the most.

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