La Migra, la Huelga, y la Raza: Deportation & the Boundaries of Race, Class, & Nation in the Depression-era Southwest

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**Introduction**

In 1921, the La Habra Citrus Company purchased a plot of land about a mile from the town of La Habra and built a labor colony for its Mexican pickers. The company combined “the business of raising and packing fruit with that of making Americans,” teaching its pickers “American ways” in a form of capitalist paternalism. C.R Crumrine, manager of the Citrus Association, explained his organization’s efforts as a “self-defense measure… It was started in an effort to hold workable help here to be used when we nee[ded] them. It has been… as beneficial to the association as to the Mexicans.” The organization no longer wished to rely on “the itinerant orchard worker who migrated from place to place in rickety wagons and who refused to assume responsibility either to his family or his employer. Children of this class became objects of pity… and the menace to the community’s health emanating from the temporary camps made a problem to be solved.”

The *Los Angeles Times* reporter heaps praise on the company for its Americanization camp, and in doing so, unwittingly highlights an essentially colonial relationship. At first glance, it may seem strange to think about relations between orchardists and fruit pickers in colonial terms—after all, California and its oranges are quintessential to the identity of the American West, and what could be more democratic than the American West?- but many of the key elements of colonialism are present in the piece. The growers used constructions of race and class to control the physical bodies of their immigrant workforce, holding them and their labor power in place in order to more efficiently produce commodities for the growers to sell on a growing national and global market. At the same time, “Americanization” defined the worker as a product of a

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backwards, inferior culture, and as child-like adults who deserve their subjugated status and are in need of tutelage and “raising up” by the dominant group.

In this study, I seek to understand the labor, political, and social relations between Mexican workers, Anglo workers and owners, and mainstream society through the theoretical framework of “coloniality of power,” a concept advanced by the post-colonial scholar Anibal Quijano. Quijano argues that the basic political, social, racial, and economic power relations of early colonialism outlived the actual colonies themselves and have become a foundational part of the modern, Eurocentric capitalist order. I follow Quijano in defining colonialism as a structure for the control of the commodity-producing labor of subjugated groups by a dominant group, in which unequal distribution of power and resources are normalized and legitimized by an essentializing, biological discourse of race. “The codification of the differences between conquerors and conquered in the idea of ‘race’,” writes Quijano, “a supposedly different biological structure that placed some in a natural situation of inferiority to the others… [was] the constitutive, founding element of the relations of domination that the conquest [of America] imposed.”

Importantly, racism serves as a mechanism of social ordering that allocates positions in the class system. Racial and class hierarchies reinforce and penetrate each other at all points. In the Spanish colonies, as Quijano points out, this hierarchy extended from Spanish “whites” at the top, occupying high-level positions in the military and clergy, as well as artisanal and skilled wage positions, through semi-feudal systems of reciprocal obligations for indigenous peoples and mestizos, ending with enslavement for imported Africans. In the Depression-era Southwest, this hierarchy looked slightly different, and the categories were not as rigid and fixed. Lines of race and class cut across each other— not all Mexicans were workers, and not all workers were

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4 Ibid., 535-539
Mexican. Nevertheless, the basic aspects of colonialism—relations of subjugation and domination legitimized by placing workers in racial categories—are easily discernable. Emphasizing the importance of immigration in the coloniality of the Southwest, Mae M. Ngai calls this structure “imported colonialism,” arguing that the importation of Mexican, Filipino, and other workers from the imperial fringe created a “migratory… proletariat outside of the polity,” whose labor was necessary for the creation of great wealth, but who were not considered eligible for membership in mainstream society and the body politic for reasons of race, class, and nation.

Since the colonial subjects of early 20th century southwestern America were “imported”, deportation and immigration policy were cornerstones of the structures of power that made up the Southwestern political economy. Deportation served as an important means of marking social boundaries and regulating the class structure of the internal colony. As Ngai writes, “the illegal immigrant cannot be constituted without deportation”—in other words, it is the very threat of deportation that defines a person’s legal or illegal status and therefore, their ability to be full-fledged member of the political community. A group that lives under threat of deportation will invariably be a group that is marginalized, subjugated, and dominated in various ways. As well as serving as a marker of social status, deportation also helped to control the labor power of Mexicans in the Southwest by regulating the flow of migrants across the border. It also served as a safety valve, allowing business elites and the state to deport those deemed “troublemakers”—union organizers, reformists, radicals, and others who resisted domination. I will begin with a discussion of the discourse of race and nation in the late 1920s on the eve of the Depression. Relying primarily on Congressional debates over immigration policy, I will show how this racializing discourse reinforced and legitimized Mexicans’ subjugated status and made them both

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6 Ibid, 58
more easily exploitable as workers and more easily deportable as residents. Next, I will examine how deportation served as a tool for the business elites of the Southwest to counteract their Mexican workers’ unionization efforts and claims to better pay and working conditions. Labor organization posed a fundamental threat to the unequal power relations of coloniality, and dismantling these efforts was an important function of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which was involved in many of the major labor disputes of the Depression era. Finally, I will turn to a discussion of welfare and public relief during the Depression. While many Americans see welfare as parasitical mooching, I conceive of it as a claim to national belonging based on having contributed during the boom-time of the 1920s. Mexican-Americans were not eager to turn to public assistance, and the majority of welfare recipients were white Anglo-Americans, but many Mexicans saw public relief as their right due to the fact that they had helped create so much wealth for the United States before the Depression. Nevertheless, the mainstream public refused to accept this claim, and many clamored for the deportation of indigent Mexicans. Immigration authorities scoured welfare rolls, while county relief boards across the country pressured Mexicans—both citizen and undocumented—into “repatriating” back to Mexico. Thus, deportation and repatriation were ways of countering Mexican workers’ demands for equal support in bad times in return for their efforts in good times. In this context, deportation was a rejection of Mexican-Americans’ claim to national belonging, especially as the nation scrambled to alleviate the economic woes of the white working class.

**Immigration and the Southwestern Economy**

The early twentieth century was a time of rapid growth for the Southwestern agricultural industry. Technological advances in harvesting, shipping, and refrigeration allowed produce
from California, Arizona, Texas and New Mexico to be sold and eaten across the country and the globe for the first time. The massive growth in demand for agricultural products precipitated huge growth in the demand for labor, much of it supplied by immigrants from Mexico. Pushed by years of war and revolution in Mexico, and pulled by the lure of the economic boom in the United States, Mexicans crossed the border in ever-increasing numbers throughout the 1920s. Newly minted restrictions on immigration from Europe and Asia gave even more importance to immigrant Mexican labor. Growers themselves admitted that their agricultural empire rested on a foundation of Mexican labor. Their hyperbolic cries of impending doom in response to proposed restrictions on Mexican immigration, which I will discuss in the following section, are evidence enough of that.

At the same time, capital ownership in the agricultural industry grew more and more concentrated. By the onset of the Depression, 10 percent of California farm businesses took in 53.2 percent of the gross income, 9.4 percent paid 65 percent of the total labor costs, while 7 percent employed 66 percent of all California farm workers. The growing profitability of agricultural products transformed labor relations on southwestern farms from a semi-feudal system of contract labor and reciprocal obligations into a system more reminiscent of urban industrial relations, with wider stratification and clear class conflict7. This class stratification tended to reproduce itself along racial lines. Various legal structures, such as California’s Alien Land Laws, impeded immigrant groups from acquiring property and joining the capitalist class. As Adrian Cruz has shown, these restrictions shaped and were shaped by racial assumptions about these groups. For example, Japanese tenant farmers, who occupied a middle ground between capitalists and wage-earners, were perceived as industrious and qualified for managing

land ("the most desirable renter[s]" and "not as bad at impoverishing the soil as the [Mexicans]", in the words of a white resident of Vacaville)\(^8\).

Within the wage-earning class, a racial hierarchy formed based on employers’ preferences for different racial groups. As I will show in the following section, these assumptions influenced the growers’ preferences for importing different groups based upon their supposed desirability as laborers. They also created a de facto racial segmentation of the labor market, in which there was a general split between “industrial” positions in the packing-houses, canneries and shipping centers, and field work or “stoop labor” such as planting, thinning, topping and picking. Cruz points out that the industrial positions were largely reserved for white workers, and that working in an industrial position came to be seen as a marker of whiteness\(^9\). This distinction was not absolute; there were a number of Mexican workers employed in industrial positions in canneries, auto manufacturing, and mining, and I will discuss the deportation case of one of these workers, Jesus Pallares, later in this study. However, the distinction was so prevalent that Fred J. Hart, managing editor of the California Farm Bureau Monthly (and, incidentally, a native of Tacoma), could assert, “The packing-house employs white labor… [the] cannery employs white people… It is my honest conviction that there are no Mexican people employed in these places.”\(^10\) While some skilled immigrants did indeed break into industrial manufacturing or mining, the vast majority of Mexican immigrants in the 1920s and 30s were relegated to low-paying, unorganized jobs in the fields that were back-breaking in the most literal sense.

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\(^8\) Adrian Cruz, “There Will Be No ‘One Big Union’: The Struggle for Interracial Unionism in California Agriculture,” *Cultural Dynamics*, 22, 1 (2010): 36

\(^9\) Ibid., 35, 41

The Immigration Debate and Racial Boundaries

The relegation of Mexicans to the lowest place in the class hierarchy, that of the “peon”, as many contemporaries pejoratively called Mexicans, required an attendant racialization and a construction of a “Mexican” race in order to legitimize and normalize this class-based subjugation. In 1920, the US Census re-classified Mexicans from “white” to “Mexican”, symbolically depriving them of “white”-ness and placing them into a new and separate racial category with one stroke of the bureaucratic pen. Yet there was much disagreement what or who exactly a Mexican was, and where they fit into the racial hierarchy. The hearings conducted by the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization regarding proposals to restrict immigration from Mexico offer perfect examples of this racial construction. Testifying before the Committee, Judge Henry L. Yates, of Brownsville, Texas, proffered his judgment that the Mexicans should be classed with Native Americans. “They are not Spanish and are not East Indians, of course,” Yates claimed, “I mean they are aborigines to the American continent.”

Harry Chandler, the publisher of the Los Angeles Times, concurred, adding that the Mexican “has in him 85 per cent Indian blood on the average.” The Indian-ness of Mexicans made them seem more natural as candidates for work inside the United States, for it made them into a familiar feature of the racial landscape, a known quantity with a long history of subjugation. “Every American knows, who is familiar with the Indian character,” Chandler stated, “[that] Indian blood has never degraded our citizenship… and there is no more problem with [the Mexicans]

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12 Immigration Hearings, 41
than with our original Indians.” However, significantly, “they were not Americans and they were not our race.”

The attempt to present Mexicans as a “safe” immigrant population rested in part upon a perception of Mexicans as transients, moving from place to place without ever forming a permanent part of any community. “They live as nomads… they do not stay anywhere much, and they are on the road about half the time,” claimed Rep. Thomas Jenkins of Ohio. Part of this “safety” was the perception that Mexicans’ semi-nomadic lifestyle prevented them from posing a sexual threat to white women. In a brief submitted to the Committee, Ralph Taylor, the Executive Secretary of the Agricultural Legislative Committee of California, an industry lobbying group, argued that “the Mexican does not intermarry with Americans except in rare instances, and has no ambition to do so. He is not, therefore, a menace to the American bloodstream.” Fred Hart contrasted the sexual safety of Mexicans against the supposed threat represented by Filipinos, who “will not leave our white girls alone, and frequently intermarry.”

The proximity of the border also figured importantly in the image of Mexicans as transients. “The Mexican,” said S. Parker Frieselle, a lobbyist for the growers, “is a ‘homer’. Like the pigeon he goes back to roost.” This image of Mexicans as “pigeons” is actually quite common. Portraying the life of a migrant family as a bucolic tourist adventure, the Pacific Rural Press wrote, “Isn’t the word ‘peon’ a little out of character when applied to a Mexican family which buzzes around in its own battered flivver, going from crop to crop, seeing Beautiful California, breathing its air, eating its food, and finally doing the homing pigeon stunt back to

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13 Ibid., 60-61
14 Ibid., 44-45
15 Ibid., 236
16 Ibid., 199
17 Carey McWilliams, Factories in the Fields: the Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 127
Mexico?" These quotes display an unspoken assumption that the Mexicans of California were in the United States only for the purpose of laboring in the harvest season, but never to become part of the society.

Once the harvest season ended, Mexicans were expected to deport themselves back across the border. “We in California,” Frieselle testified, “would greatly prefer some setup in which our peak labor demands might be met and upon completion of our harvest these laborers would be returned to their country.” B.P Fleming, manager of the Elephant-Butte Irrigation District in New Mexico, concurred in his testimony before the immigration Committee. “Our suggestion is… [that] the Secretary of Labor be empowered to grant seasonal passports for farm laborers… which would secure the return of these laborers to their own country at the end of the season,” Fleming testified19. Deportation thus served as a political and economic safety valve, ensuring that large populations of unemployed immigrants did not accrue in the cities of the Southwest. As McWilliams writes, “the general attitude of the growers towards the Mexicans is summarized in a remark made by a ranch foreman to a Mexican: ‘When we want you, we’ll call you; when we don’t – git.’”20

Even when large and stable Mexican populations did accumulate in towns, they were dismissed as too docile and politically unsophisticated to make claims to democratic participation in the body politic. “Ask anyone who has lived in a community where Mexicans live,” wrote Ralph Taylor, “and the evidence shows that the Mexican is not politically conscious, has no political ambitions and does not, no matter in what numbers he may live there, aspire to dominate the political affairs of the community in which he lives.” Therefore, to Taylor, “he is the least objectionable of all nationalities.” Mexicans’ alleged inability to challenge the political

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18 Ibid, 126  
19 Immigration Hearings, 53  
20 McWilliams, Factories in the Fields, 126
power structure of the Southwest was directly related to their status as workers. Taylor argued that “whatever suspicion, fear, misunderstanding, or ignorance he may have as regards our laws, the Mexican is not by nature radical or Bolshevik.”\(^{21}\) As Cruz points out, this statement tracks with California farmers’ preference for Mexican workers because they were “less independent.”\(^{22}\) In a telling passage that speaks to his deeply held racial assumptions about the Mexican and Filipino workers, Chester B. Moore, the manager of the Western Growers Protective Association, told the Committee of a Mexican pickers’ strike he had witnessed in the Imperial Valley. “I told [the Mexican consul],” Moore said, “if he would investigate the situation he would find that the Filipinos had instigated it… Filipinos had come into the valley and gone to the [Mexican] mutual association and… gotten them to strike and then stepped in and took their jobs. This is the sort of thing that happens with Filipinos. We don’t have that with the Mexicans.”\(^{23}\)

Chandler contrasted the presence of “friendly and docile”\(^{24}\) Mexicans against the potential problems that might crop up if business groups in the Southwest were forced to import Puerto Ricans or Filipinos to replace them. Chandler threatened, “If our Mexican labor is taken away from us, our farmers… will send to Porto Rico (sic) or the Philippines, which seem to be the only sources that we could go to for extra labor.”\(^{25}\) In Chandler’s view, this would pose a serious threat to labor relations in the Southwest. Chandler cited the recent occurrence of vigilante violence against Filipinos in Watsonville, California, as a warning of what might be in store if Filipinos immigrated in larger numbers. “That is one of the main reasons,” Chandler testified, “why we think… we are a thousand times better off with Mexicans than Filipinos… because the

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 235-236
\(^{22}\) Cruz, “There Will Be No ‘One Big Union’”, 35
\(^{23}\) Immigration Hearings, 245
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 44-45
\(^{25}\) Ibid.
Filipinos are quarrelsome and aggressive.” As Cruz has shown, landowners also considered Filipinos to be more aggressive as labor organizers, especially when compared to Mexicans, who were not expected to “raise a fuss about their plight as exploited workers.”

In addition, as recently incorporated imperial subjects, Filipinos were not as vulnerable to deportation as Mexicans. While Mexicans could easily be removed across the border, Filipinos had a claim to legal status as American subjects, which protected them from arbitrary deportation. For the agricultural and industrial power elite, this posed two problems. First, it raised the specter of a large and permanent immigrant population in the Southwest, much of which would be unemployed in the slack season, which could create a variety of social ills, from increased welfare expenditures to political agitation. Second, a large Filipino worker population would deprive agriculturalists and industrialists of their recourse to deportation in the event of labor organizing, a common strategy which will be discussed in the next section.

The immigration debates of the 1920s helped to create a racial paradigm that defined certain groups as valued insiders and others as unwanted outsiders. White Americans, as well as immigrants from Britain, Germany, and other countries whose populations were perceived as “white”, were welcomed as good material for American citizenship, while Filipinos and Puerto Ricans, as well as immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, were rejected as unwanted and unfit for citizenship. Mexican immigrants did not fit neatly into either category. While the groups in power in the United States did not perceive Mexicans as eligible for citizenship or democratic participation, and some groups on the right and left perceived them as a threat, their labor was a valuable source of wealth for agricultural and industrial capitalists and the value it created was a great boon to the United States’ growing industrial economy. The narrative

26 Ibid., 64-65
27 Cruz, “There Will Be No ‘One Big Union,’” 35.
promulgated by the powerful anti-restrictionist groups, which defined Mexicans as a “safe” racial group, easily exploitable and easily deportable, was ultimately the narrative that determined United States immigration policy through the 1920s and 30s. This narrative helped to preserve the “imported colonial” relations of the Southwest because it created a legal situation in which Mexicans were held in limbo between complete inclusion and exclusion. Being in limbo eroded Mexicans’ tenuous claims to belonging in the United States, making them vulnerable to deportation in the event that they posed a threat to the contemporary political order.

**Labor Organizing and Class Status**

When, in spite of their alleged docility, Mexican workers did raise a fuss about their exploitation, deportation served as a readily available tool for Anglo landowners to combat Mexican claims to better pay and working conditions. Throughout the 1930s, mainstream society’s fear of Communism combined with the Immigration and Naturalization Services’ mandate as a deportation agency to ensure that Mexican participation in labor actions was always fraught with the danger of investigation and potential deportation by the immigration authorities. While it would be simplistic to describe the INS’ role in labor disputes of the 1930s merely as an anti-Mexican strikebreaking service (INS officials claimed their policy was “to remain strictly aloof from participation or connection with labor difficulties”[28]), the agency’s budgetary reliance upon influential members of Congress from the Southwest meant that the Service made itself readily available to powerful Southwestern business interests. As D.H.

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Dinwoodie has pointed out, the INS’ mere presence at sites of labor conflicts “often served to bulwark the local anti-labor, anti-immigrant forces.”

This was certainly true in the case of Jesús Pallares, a Chicano mine worker who was deported from New Mexico in June of 1936. Pallares was a veteran of the Mexican revolutionary army who entered the United States legally in 1915, after being wounded in the jaw in combat. He was a committed socialist who attempted to organize with the Liga Obrera de Habla Española, or the Spanish-speaking Workers League, at coal mines owned by Kennecott Copper in Madrid, New Mexico. Pallares and other workers sought the aid of the state coal board and the federal government in enforcing their legal right to form a union. State coal board commissioner T.S. Hogan came to Madrid in early 1934 for hearings on the miners’ complaints, only to summarily reject all of the workers’ demands. It was only after the painful realization that official mediation would only reinforce the company’s position that the workers decided to go on strike. Unfortunately, the strike occurred during the spring, a slack season in coal production, and one in the midst of Great Depression at that. The company quickly gained the upper hand and the strike failed.

Despite the fact that the National Recovery Act and the National Labor Relations Act gave Pallares and other industrial workers legal protection for union activity, the company fired Pallares and evicted him from his company-owned home, forcing him to find work with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in Santa Fe. On April 23rd, 1935, Pallares was arrested and charged with having advocated the forcible overthrow of the government, a deportable offense, during the Madrid strikes. The main evidence against him was his own testimony from

29 Ibid., 200
the Hogan hearings two years earlier, in which Pallares, in his capacity as the spokesman for the workers, testified, “Mr. Hogan, I hope you come here to bring us full justice, if justice exists for the workingman. If you cannot see that we get it, we shall find other ways of getting it for ourselves.” Pallares was referring to the workers’ offer to postpone or cancel their strike if Hogan would help them achieve union recognition and improved pay and working conditions. When this did not happen, and the workers went on strike, the authorities began to view Pallares as a threat. Through discovery motions in Pallares’ deportation case, the miner’s lawyer unearthed a letter from Clyde Tingley, Governor of New Mexico, requesting that Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins expedite Pallares’ deportation on the grounds that the Liga Obrera de Habla Española was “the New Mexico branch of the Communist organization.”

While the Liga was indeed a left-wing union affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations, a radical breakaway from the American Federation of Labor, Liga workers had sought mediation through all available official channels before resorting to strike action, a remarkably moderate course of action for a radical union. That Pallares had no intention of “overthrowing the government” is clear from the testimony of one informant. When asked, “Have you ever heard [Pallares] make inflammatory speeches about the government,” the informant replied, “No, not exactly- he urges the Mexicans to fight for their rights.”

This piece of testimony highlights the racial dimensions of the case. While Pallares and the Liga Obrera pursued relatively moderate strategies as a union, their claim that Mexican workers deserved equality with white workers and better pay and working conditions represented a fundamental threat to the quasi-colonial racial caste system in place in the Southwest.

Ultimately, deportation proved to be a more expedient response to the Liga Obrera than the much more burdensome task of proving that members had engaged in any actual violence.

31 Ibid., 68-69
As Zaragosa Vargas has written, “Summary deportation thus became an alternative to standard judicial punishment… It offered [authorities] a way of quickly eliminating so-called undesirables, particularly the rebellious Mexicans who opposed the policies of the coal companies and the government.”\(^{32}\) The deportations of Mexican workers reached such a fever pitch in New Mexico that one miner’s wife was moved to write to Governor Tingly in 1936: “In the name of our Mexican colony I am asking you for protection… Our persecutors are the immigration officers who deport us and treat us like criminals. All… this has happened since the [Gallup, NM, coal] strike of 1933… All this makes us think that there is a plan against Mexicans. I want you to help us all you can for we were born in the United States and have children born here too.\(^{33}\)

Deportation as a strategy to counter labor organizing was not limited to the industrial areas of the Southwest. In 1928, a sheriff in the Imperial Valley promised to begin a “general deportation movement of all Mexican laborers employed in the valley” should a Mexican cantaloupe pickers’ strike continue\(^ {34}\). Throughout the Depression, shrill cries for the deportation of Mexican workers echoed in the newspapers from all corners of California. The Associated Farmers of Riverside County commended Governor Frank Merriam for urging the Labor Department to deport “alien agitators,” claiming that “weakness in such a crisis gives strength to those whose ultimate goal is overthrow of the government.”\(^ {35}\) An editorialist at the Los Angeles Times lamented the “concentrated movement against orchardists and farmers in the Imperial Valley” and called for a “swift kick” with “no reservations” that would “land the kickee either in 

\(^{32}\) Zaragosa Vargas, Labor Rights are Civil Rights (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 111
\(^{33}\) Cited in Vargas, Labor Rights are Civil Rights, 112
\(^{34}\) McWilliams, Factories in the Fields, 130
prison or “back home.”  The California chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution wrote to Labor Secretary Frances Perkins demanding that any foreigners arrested in connection with agricultural strikes in the Imperial and San Joaquin Valleys be deported immediately for “terrorism” and attempting to overthrow the government.

These frenzied and hyperbolic responses to the strikes illustrate the extent to which the agricultural empires of California rested on the exploitation of vulnerable immigrant populations, as well as the extent to which unionization posed a threat to that exploitation. The mere possibility of unionization of the field workers provoked the growers and their allies to violent rage. Deportation was a powerful tool to respond to this threat when it came from Mexican and other immigrant workers, although it was but one tool among an arsenal that also included beatings, kidnappings, and murder. The deportation of Mexicans for trying to organize unions highlights the colonial power relations in play in the Southwest. To the powerful business and political interests of the region, Mexicans only held value insofar as they were inexpensive sources of labor. If the Mexicans themselves were no longer willing to cooperate as exploited workers, and made a democratic claim to equality and rights, they no longer held that value. Thus, deportation was a way of protecting those colonial power relations by brute removal of individuals and groups who threatened them.

**Welfare and National Belonging**

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When Mexican workers become unemployed, as millions did during the Depression, they had several avenues to which they could turn for support. First, as Balderrama and Rodriguez show, family and community networks were the first line of defense against hunger desperation during *la crisis*, the Depression. Informal groups of Mexican mothers and wives, known as *las comadres*, helped organize distribution of what few extra goods the community could supply to the least fortunate members. More formally organized groups, such as La Beneficencia Mexicana and the Catholic Church, also helped organize relief efforts[^38]. *Mutualistas*, or mutual aid societies, served both as centers for labor organizing and sources of help for the unemployed. For many proud families, the county welfare office was often the last stop for those who could not get by on private relief.

As the Depression worsened, and more and more Mexican families were forced to seek public relief, welfare began to lose some of its stigma among Mexican communities. As Balderrama and Rodriguez write, “There was a growing feeling that they had earned it through the sweat of their brow. Their work had contributed significantly to the vast wealth the nation had amassed. Thus, it was only fair that they should be eligible to receive assistance along with others temporarily down on their luck.”[^39] In remarks attributed to him the *Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express*, Governor Culbert Olson supported this view, stating, “Many of these people, particularly the Mexicans, were invited to come here and in many ways brought here so they could work to create the wealth of this state. They worked for low wages to help create this wealth and are entitled to share in it.”[^40] The seeking of welfare by Mexican families can thus be understood as a claim to national belonging. It was a claim to having contributed in a meaningful

[^38]: Francisco Balderrama & Raymond Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 41
[^39]: Ibid.
[^40]: Ibid., 85, 90
way to the progress of American civilization that made Mexican families worthy of relief from the desperate situation many found themselves in during the Depression.

Nevertheless, this claim to belonging was roundly rejected by mainstream society. Despite the fact that Mexicans comprised less than 10 percent of all families receiving welfare in the United States, and eighty five percent of welfare recipients were white Anglo-American citizens, a potent combination of racial stereotypes and economic scapegoating led to the creation of a strong association between welfare and the non-white, immigrant populations of the United States in the public imagination. This is immediately visible in a 1931 editorial cartoon from the *Los Angeles Times*. Entitled “The Undesirable Alien,” the cartoon depicts a beggar in ragged clothes, carrying a large sack labeled “the Un-American Dole”, being turned away at Ellis Island by a stern-looking Uncle Sam, who reads a newspaper that labels welfare “a colossal failure in England.” Many of the contemporary anti-immigrant tropes are present in the cartoon. The beggar is depicted as physically alien, with dark skin, short stature, blind eyes, a large, hooked nose, and an under-bite that makes his chin disappear into his neck. The other-ing effect is heightened by the fact that the Uncle Sam figure is large and robust, with white skin, broad shoulders, and a strong jaw. Nothing in the depiction of the immigrant indicates that he is a capable or willing worker who might pay his own way in the United States while contributing to

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41 Ibid., 81, 85
the national wealth. Instead, the immigrant appears at Ellis Island with a cane in one hand and a
cup and sack for alms and welfare in the other, giving the reader the impression that the
immigrant’s sole purpose in coming to the United States is to live an easy life on the public dole.

Despite their contributions to the wealth of the United States, immigrants were
considered unworthy of public aid during the Depression. A debate in the pages of the Modesto
Bee & News-Herald over a proposed state bond to pay for welfare benefits is typical of the anti-
immigrant rhetoric that swept the nation as welfare costs soared in the first years of the crisis. A
letter to the editor strongly opposed the bond measure, claiming that “nearly one-half the
unemployment in California is due to the presence of Mexican citizens, who are either
themselves dependent upon relief, or, by displacing workers already here, constitute the principal
reason for the needed bond issue.” In response, the editorial board of the Bee & News-Herald
urged voters not to allow the fact that “many of those to be assisted are not citizens” to prevent
them from approving the bond measure. Tellingly, the editors did not support the relief of
undocumented immigrants; instead, they appealed to the voters to think of the plight of the many
white citizens who needed relief, closing with a rhetorical question: “Shall good citizens stay this
measure of mercy because some undeserving may be aided thereby?” For the editors and the
letter-writer, it was obvious that a poor person’s citizenship status, as well as their racial status,
were inextricably linked to their “deserving”-ness. The idea that the undocumented and the non-
white may need or deserve public aid is rejected out of hand.

As Balderrama and Rodriguez argue in their seminal book Decade of Betrayal, welfare
distribution was one of the major sites of INS scrutiny during the Great Depression. As cities and

counties began to chafe against the burden of supplying welfare to immigrants, and in response to a right-wing populist outcry against them, immigration authorities descended on the Southwest in search of undocumented immigrants to deport. Welfare officials and the Immigration Service established an informal partnership in which the Service helped welfare departments reduce expenditures by deporting undocumented immigrants receiving relief, while the welfare departments helped the Service beef up its deportation numbers in order to present Congress and the public with evidence of the Service’s effectiveness. In order to pressure immigrants to repatriate, the INS and local relief offices resorted to such tactics as threatening to withhold benefits from those who could repatriate, giving Mexicans tickets to soup kitchens instead of a government check in order to expose them to public humiliation, and outright arrests and forcible deportation.45

The dispute over relief for indigent Mexicans was inextricably linked to their status as workers. Growers and businessmen feared that if Mexicans were given too much welfare, they would cease to be a valuable source of cheap labor. In an internal memo, a Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce employee speculated, “By the time the new deal [sic] and the more abundant life get through with these Mexicans, agriculture is not going to get any satisfactory labor supplies from the big cities.”46 In some senses, this was a real possibility; farm wages dropped precipitously during the Depression, leaving many farmworkers barely able to feed themselves, and in some cases workers could receive more money by moving to the city and applying for welfare than through employment on the farms. Growers saw this as a threat to their ability to control the labor of the farmworkers, since those workers would no longer be dependent on the growers’ wages if they lived on public assistance. Agriculturalists and their allies pushed

45 Balderrama & Rodriguez, Decade of Betrayal, 78-81
46 Ibid., 86
local governments to attempt a variety of strategies to counteract this tendency. In the San Joaquin Valley, the local relief agencies removed all farm workers from their rolls, only to find that of the five hundred workers stricken from the rolls, only seventy-five sought work on the local farms\textsuperscript{47}. Critics of welfare used this event as “proof” that welfare made workers indolent and lazy. Growers and welfare officials alike neglected to examine the effect that starvation wages had on their workers’ work ethics.

The controversy over welfare for immigrants shows the rejection of Mexican workers from belonging to the national community. While the nation clamored for the relief of the white working class, leading to the creation of much of the New Deal welfare state, only working-class Mexicans themselves, as well as the radical left-wing unions and publications, advocated for public relief of indigent immigrants. This rejection highlights the subordinate position, outside of the mainstream social body, occupied by Mexican and other immigrant workers. When they became a drain on national resources, mainstream society’s response to these workers was harsh and xenophobic. The disparity in official responses to the crisis—from an outpouring of support for the white working class, to rejection and deportation for the Mexican working class—raises nagging questions about the liberalism of the New Deal. Who was it meant for? How much did it really accomplish? The experiences of Mexican workers in the United States during the Depression and New Deal provide answers to these questions that show the New Deal in a less favorable light than it is usually depicted in American political memory.

**Conclusion**

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 83
Through the three aspects of the Depression-era Southwest analyzed in this paper, we can observe the ways in which immigration policy and deportation served as markers of racial boundaries, class status, and national belonging for Mexican residents of the United States. Contemporary debates over the racial suitability of Mexicans for immigration and citizenship in the United States helped to mark off Mexicans as racially and socially “other”, mentally and politically inferior, and physically suited for manual labor. Growers, industrialists and their political allies constructed Mexicans as transient, migratory laborers, forever separate from what they considered to be “real” American society, yet forever dependent upon the great agricultural and industrial empires of the Southwest for employment and survival. Mexicans’ deportability allowed authorities to make this racial construction into a reality, holding Mexican workers in a perpetual legal limbo. While growers and industrialists decried mass deportation raids because these raids deprived them of their labor force, the fact of Mexican workers’ deportability also benefitted capitalists by rendering Mexicans more easily exploitable and less capable of rising up in protest.

When Mexicans did protest their unequal treatment, whether this consisted of claiming rights as workers or claiming access to public aid during the economic crisis, deportation was favorite response of authorities across the region. Jesus Pallares and other Mexican organizers with the Liga Obrera de Habla Española were deported because their resistance represented a threat to the power relations of the industrial empires run by men such as Solomon R. Guggenheim. Their deportations, as well as those of organizers like them across the southwest, helped to keep the majority of Mexican immigrants in a lower-class category. Other ordinary men and women were deported or pressured to repatriate for seeking the same kind of public relief that white citizens sought in response to desperate times, so that cities and counties in California and elsewhere could save funds for those they considered real Americans. The anti-
immigrant movement that appeared in response to the Depression pressured local and state authorities to deny public funds to indigent Mexicans, regardless of their citizenship status, and denied Mexican claims of belonging to the national community.

What these deportations show us is that the experiences of Mexican immigrant workers in the Southwest in the early 20th century can be understood as a kind of colonialism at home. The frontier-era had long since passed and California was considered to be as American as any of the original Eastern states, and thus subject to the same kind of patriotic mythology about liberty and democracy for all. Yet Mexicans living in the United States, many of whom held citizenship or had American-born children, were subject to many different legal, social, and economic restrictions that relegated the majority to lower-class status as manual laborers who lived and worked in the United States, but were not eligible for political inclusion, capital ownership, and social belonging in the same way their white neighbors were. Their labor helped to create the powerhouse that was the United States’ economy in the 1920s, but when the stock market crashed and the nation’s prosperity disappeared virtually overnight, Mexicans were among the first to be blamed for the country’s problems.

When the Depression began to ease as the Second World War picked up steam, all the dire predictions of the impending collapse of capitalism disappeared and the country’s economic and political powers went right back to business as usual. The massive importation of Mexican workers during the Bracero program, then their subsequent deportation during Operation Wetback in 1954, and another phase of importation during the later 50s and early 60s were the continuation of a pattern as old as industrialism itself. The industrial economy feeds off the labor of imported groups in boom times, and then rejects them in the inevitable bust. The recent controversies over SB1070, the state of Arizona’s law requiring police officers to check the immigration status of anyone they deem suspicious, and SB 160, Georgia’s law denying drivers
licenses, grants, public housing, and public retirement benefits to undocumented immigrants show that the cycle is on another downswing in post-Great Recession America.
Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


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