CHAPTER 1

Interpreting the Chicano Past

Mexican Americans are a large and fast-growing ethnic group within the United States, and they have a long and rich heritage that dates back to precolonial Spanish days. Until relatively recently the history of Latinos of Mexican descent in the United States had not been well developed as a separate field of study, but during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s Mexican Americans became more conscious of their own group identity. During this time Chicano became a popular term to express their heightened sense of self and group identity. The term Chicano encouraged Mexican Americans to take increased pride and interest in their history of struggle in America. Chicano historians are beginning to provide a framework for understanding the Chicano experience. Influenced by methods adopted from other disciplines, the new studies by Chicano historians are bringing other perspectives to issues, raising different questions, and leading to a better understanding of the Chicano people.

Through the introduction of new methods and concepts, Chicano scholars are providing unique historical insight on Chicanos. These fascinating and richly textured studies reveal that Chicanos, both men and women, have been active agents in their individual histories. Other research focuses on exploring the processes by which Mexican immigrants became Chicanos as well as examining the political tradition of the Chicano community. Chicano and Chicana historians are making important contributions to the growing body of research on gender and on the social construction of race in the United States. The latter work is of special value to historians interested in the social and cultural history of the multicidal Southwest as well as to scholars engaged in the current debate over racial identity formation. Insights are being provided into how such categories as race, class, and gender have intersected.

More important, Chicano historians relate these histories to other events and issues that confront the larger American society. The many dimensions of Chicano history, much of which remains unexplored, illustrate that along with common differences of race, ethnicity, and gender, there are also common patterns of historical experience. What is the focus of the essays in this chapter? How do they provide insight into new directions of historical research by Chicano/a historians? Is Chicano history an ongoing process of historical revision of scholarly work?
ESSAYS

In developing alternative approaches to interpreting Chicano history, Chicano scholars agree that a complex intersection of racial and class oppression underlines the Chicano experience. Chicana historians have added gender to their scholarship, and the issues of ethnicity and identity are likewise a focus of historical study.

In the first essay, Gilbert G. González and Raúl Fernández, both professors of comparative culture at the University of California, Irvine, note that much of Chicano historiography uses cultural conflict and racism as models for historical explanation. According to González and Fernández, two other themes in Chicano historiography are the significance of the events of the nineteenth century and urban history. The weaknesses of these paradigms are elaborated on by the authors, who instead posit that economic factors, Chicano rural experiences, and a comparative approach are pertinent to Chicano history.

The general shift in Chicano history has been from the "them-versus-us" essentialism to an emphasis on agency. Alex M. Saragosa, an associate professor of Chicano Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, highlights key historical sources in the field. Saragosa states that Chicano history must be reevaluated in light of the diversity of the Chicano experience as well as the ongoing changes in the larger field of American history, particularly social history. He calls for historical writing on Chicanos that illuminates particularly the post-Depression era, Chicano self-identification, and the impacts of immigration from Mexico.

The significance of Chicano history to the larger history of the American West is the subject of the last essay by prize-winning historian David G. Gutiérrez, associate professor of history at the University of California, San Diego. Gutiérrez describes how the early historical interpretations of Chicanos, linked to the nineteenth-century ideology of American expansionism and romantic myth-making, were made at the expense of Chicanos. Gutiérrez next traces the efforts of Chicano scholars to represent Chicano history accurately by dispelling stereotypes of Mexicans. He focuses on the scholarship of George I. Sánchez and of the generation of scholars who emerged from the Chicano movement. The author concludes that Chicano historical scholarship has recently undergone a significant transformation through the use of interdisciplinary methods that examine questions of power and knowledge.

Alternative Approaches to Chicano History

GILBERT G. GONZÁLEZ AND RAÚL FERNÁNDEZ

Much Chicano historiography has built upon cultural and culture-conflict models focusing on race and nationality as the basis for social relations and, ultimately, for historical explanation. Clearly, in the post-1848 years in the newly acquired southwestern frontier, Anglo settlers frequently treated the Hispanic population much like they dealt with the native Indian population: as people without rights who were merely obstacles to the acquisition and exploitation of natural resources and land. And, to be sure, the violence of the conquerors was often met with the resistance of the conquered. But these cultural struggles and racial conflicts have be-

come for many Chicano historians the principal basis for understanding Chicano history.

Culture-based explanations tend to minimize the role of economic factors, which are crucial in shaping social and cultural forms and very useful in drawing regional comparisons. Innovative scholarship by Rosalinda González, David Montejano, and Douglas Monroy moves away from culture-based models and toward an emphasis on economic power and processes. The goal here is to advance and elaborate on some of these ideas about socioeconomic forms in a more systematic manner.

We begin by critically analyzing approaches that describe the history of Chicano-Anglo relations as a story of cultural conflict and racism. . . . We seek to emphasize the systemic roots of conflict between pre-1848 Spanish-Mexican society and post-1848 Anglo-imposed social economy. . . .

Historians who subscribe to the culture-based paradigm ground their perspectives in particular characterizations of pre-Anglo Spanish and subsequent Mexican societies in the Southwest. Some . . . describe those societies as pastoral, communal, peasant, traditional, frontier, or hacienda. Other historians who place more emphasis on economic factors . . . characterize this era as “early capitalist.” All, however, agree that Anglo-American society is capitalist and all use their own characterizations of the period as points of departure for their inquiries. . . .

If the period that began in 1848 is viewed as one in which two distinct socioeconomic formations, one largely precapitalist and quasifeudal and the other predominantly capitalist, collide, the situation looks akin to the North-South conflict in the eastern United States. More than just a “rough and tumble,” racially conscious Anglo society conquering and subduing quaint Mexican pastoralists, the conquest can be viewed also as one step in the economic . . . transformation of the United States from east to west. In other words, . . . the Anglo conquest was also a capitalist conquest. Economic change took place on a par with cultural transformation.

. . . A perspective grounded in economic power and processes can also be applied to two other themes in Chicano history. The first is the significance of the nineteenth century for Chicano historiography. Some scholars . . . find the Anglo conquest of 1848 and the ensuing Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo conflict to be a historical watershed that initiated a continuous nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chicano experience. . . . The second theme . . . is an emphasis on a common Chicano urban experience. Chicanos have been predominantly urban dwellers only since the 1940s, but scholars too often disregard the origins of socioeconomic structures that underlie the contemporary urban experience. . . .

The Character of Southwestern Spanish and Mexican Society

The transition from Spanish and Mexican rule to U.S. governance in the nineteenth century is critical to Chicano historiography. Most Chicano history scholars argue that the evolving relations between the Spanish-speaking and English-speaking peoples in the post-1848 era can be understood by studying the particular characteristics of these peoples, but they disagree about the characteristics themselves.

Two definitions of Spanish/Mexican society have been offered most often. Albert
Camarillo provides a succinct example of the first: "Once the subdivision of rancho and public lands had begun, the dominance of the emerging economic system of American capitalism in the once-Mexican region was a foregone conclusion. The process of land loss and displacement of the Mexican pastoral economy was fairly complete throughout the Southwest by the 1880s." In a second view, which also emphasizes economic elements, Spanish/Mexican societies are seen as "early capitalist." Juan Gómez-Quintana contends, for example, that the essence of Mexican society was an emerging capitalist order, a transition away from a formal, feudal social order. . . .

Historians utilizing the first approach characterize Spanish/Mexican society less specifically than Anglo-American society. Vague terms—for example, traditional or pastoral—define the former; a more analytic one—namely, capitalism—the latter. The invading society is distinctly described as capitalist in economy, culture, institutions, and behavior. We would expect it either to conflict with opposing social forms or to merge with similar ones. However, the existing categorizations describe Spanish/Mexican society without regard to specific economic structure. We cannot examine a conflict between a society whose economy remains vaguely described (pastoral or traditional) and one with a specifically described (capitalist) economy. . . .

Historians using the second approach . . . cite as evidence the existence of wage labor and the "capitalist" character of the hacienda or rancho. The problem with this evidence is that it is not altogether convincing. Several studies, for example, demonstrate the widespread presence of debt-peonage, hardly the stuff of free labor. Gilberto Hinojosa's study of Laredo, Texas, reveals that "the indebted poor fled Laredo rather than submit to a peonage system which amounted to slavery. The frequency of calls for assistance in returning runaways suggests both the widespread use of peonage and the extensive escape from it." Conversely, solid documentation for the prevalence of wage labor does not appear in the relevant literature. There is, for example, no entry for "wage labor" in the index of David J. Weber's Mexican Frontier, the most thorough study of the 1821-1848 period.

The descriptions of life in the Southwest prior to the Anglo conquest strongly suggest precapitalist . . . relations. California Indians, working as servants or laborers, were greatly exploited by the landowners and lived at the bottom of the class hierarchy. New Mexico consisted primarily of . . . farming communities in which poverty-stricken subsistence villagers were forced into sharecropping and servitude by . . . the dominant economic, political, and social actors. . . .

The idea that a Mexican "working class" existed before 1848 may arise from the appearance of monetary compensation for labor services. However, the existence of money payment does not, in itself, create a capitalist, free-wage-labor system. . . .

. . . Generally, ranches and villages in California, New Mexico, and Texas provided for most of the needs of the residents, both laborers and landowners. They functioned largely as self-subistence units. Although some of the products of the haciendas—primarily hides and tallow and, later, livestock—were exported, landholders used the proceeds to satisfy their taste for luxury, not to accumulate capital. In New Mexico, small landowners and communal village farmers performed their own labor, had no servants, and often sharecropped for the larger owners.
Within the large, small, and communal landholding system, labor remained relatively unspecialized. On the large landholdings, owners extracted wealth through the labor of their _peones_; in the communal villages, families eked out a marginal existence by their own labor and generally relied on payment in kind for labor services outside the village. . . .

. . . Admittedly, every work in Chicano history cannot be wholly arranged into our scheme. A very important example is Ramón Gutiérrez's award-winning work on Spanish-Pueblo and _gender_ relations in colonial New Mexico which we cannot neatly place in the two groups above. While Gutiérrez mentions the prevalence and, in fact, the increase of servile forms of labor in New Mexico towards the end of the eighteenth century, he focuses on gender systems and sexual practices as indicative of relations of domination and key to the construction, mediation, and defense of cultural identity. In his view, the Hispano-Anglo conflict can be seen primarily as a form of culture clash that can be explained without significant reference to systemic economic conflict.

We now turn to drawing on currents present in some of these works to suggest what we think would be a stronger analytic framework for examining Chicano economic and social history.

On Relationships of Production

. . . The social heritage of the southwestern Spanish/Mexican era derived from hierarchical and inherited class relations characteristic of the Spanish social order. This is not to say, however, that the pre-1848 New World social formations replicated Spanish social relations exactly and had no history of their own. The New World manifested numerous variations due to climate, topography, demography, and so forth. . . .

After the conquest of New Mexico, first the _encomiendas_ and later the _repartimientos_ formed the basis of colonial production. . . . Through the encomiendas, the Pueblo villages contributed an annual tribute in kind to the leading colonists, usually consisting of maize and cotton blankets. In New Mexico, the tribute accruing from the encomienda did not amount to much. The _repartimiento_—or apportionment of coerced labor required from the Indian population living near an _encomienda_—was utilized to the fullest extent by the settlers living on ranches.

. . . California missionaries confronted a different situation than those in New Mexico. In New Mexico, as in large parts of Mexico and South America, the Indian population was concentrated in relatively large native towns and villages where the missionaries took the faith to the residents. In California, where the Indians were scattered in hundreds of small hamlets, the Spaniards brought many of them into specially created mission settlements and, despite some examples of "benevolence," subjected them to forced labor that resembled slavery in all but name. That system came to an end in the 1830s with secularization and the rapid transformation of mission and other lands into privately held ranchos. The size and number of these ranchos and the social relations they engendered predominated for several decades. . . . Although there were exports of hides and tallow, those exports satisfied the luxury needs of the rancheros. . . .
The absence of capitalism is also apparent in Arizona and Texas. Arizona was settled as early as 1696, when Father Eusebio Kino founded a number of missions . . . near present-day Tucson. By the end of his work, around 1712, twenty-five years of quiet were shattered by the discovery of silver in Arizona. After this brief mining boom, Arizona’s economy was dominated by livestock production at the missions and the few haciendas. From the mid-eighteenth century onward, warring Indians made maintenance of this frontier next to impossible. With Mexican independence and the disappearance of the presidios, the area was abandoned from 1822 to 1862.

The case of Texas was at once different and similar. The settlements were small and dispersed mostly around San Antonio, La Bahia, and Nacogdoches. The recent work by Gerald Poyo and Gilberto Hinojosa . . . provides what seems like a check list for the lack of capitalist characteristics: absence of laborers, lack of markets for products, backward agricultural technology, and local “elites” concentrating on raising cattle in an extensive manner, much like the Californios. . . . The population of Texas barely reached 4,000 at the end of the eighteenth century. In the lower Rio Grande Valley (where the way of life was quite similar to that of early California), a “few large Mexican landowners lived an idle and lordly existence based on a system of peonage.” Already by 1830, Anglo-Americans outnumbered Mexicans by ten to one. They included some farmers, the harbingers of a new social system: many held slaves, planted cotton, and sold it. In Texas, then, two sets of relations—precapitalist and slavery—existed side-by-side.

On Relations of Exchange

Commodity production—that is, organized production of goods for sale in the marketplace . . . —was nearly absent in the Mexican Southwest. To be sure, there were trade contacts with the outside. Despite centuries of isolation, the Spanish/Mexican Southwest maintained an array of commercial ties with surrounding economies, but this trade cannot be considered capitalistic. . . .

. . . The intensification of commerce in the Southwest from 1831 to 1848 was not conducive to the development of local industry and manufacturing or to the growth of towns and handicraft industries . . . . Much of the revenue gained through trade was used to purchase luxury goods, manufactured items, and land. Consequently, the influx of revenue had little appreciable impact on the redistribution of land, division of labor, and technology in production. In fact, during the Mexican era, when trade expanded in New Mexico and California, class distinctions hardened, large land grants multiplied, and peonage increased. Moreover, by 1846, foreigners dominated in artisan production. . . .

Periodization: The Key in the Nineteenth Century?

. . . The notion that Chicano history begins with the conquest of 1848 is a common thread running through a majority of works in Chicano history. Moreover, Chicano historians nearly unanimously emphasize a continuity of Chicano history from that point to the present, with cultural conflict between Anglos and Mexicans being the explanatory center of the discourse. Typically these same historians apply concepts
that inadequately identify significant differences between nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chicano history, just as they tend to leave vague the nature of the economic conflict between conqueror and conquered in the mid-nineteenth century. On the other hand, a shared "cultural" trait—for example, being Spanish-surnamed or Spanish-speaking—provides prima facie evidence for continuity between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The conquest of 1848 appears to be the key event that subordinated Mexicans and thus represents the beginning of Chicanos as a discrete population in the United States. . . . Later immigrants entered a society that had institutionalized the separate and subordinated status of Mexicans. This view is most clearly advanced by Albert Camarillo: "The history of the Chicano people as an ethnic minority in the United States was forged primarily from a set of nineteenth-century experiences." "The key to reconstructing the history of Chicano society in Southern California," he continues, "is understanding the major developments of the half-century after the Mexican War. . . . In sum, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chicano experience seems fundamentally more continuous than discontinuous. The "importance of the nineteenth century for understanding the twentieth-century Chicano experience" has emerged as "self-evident to historians," according to David J. Weber. We question that assumption. The argument can be made for northern New Mexico, where twentieth-century Mexican immigration played a less significant role, and it may perhaps be extended to other subregions, but not persuasively to the region as a whole. . . .

The conventional view that the contemporary Chicano experience derives from social relations established after the 1848 conquest and that the nineteenth century is thus "key" to understanding Chicano history rests upon the assumption that today's Chicanos share certain characteristics with those of the past: possessors of a distinct culture and victims of racial prejudice that has led to life in segregated barrios, stereotyped behavior, violence, and subordinate social and occupational status. . . . Thus, the Chicanos' "conquered" legacy distinguishes them from other minorities such as the Chinese and Japanese . . . and parallels the involuntary origins of African-Americans and American Indians.

If one focuses on issues of economic development, however, important differences emerge between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Our examination of the record suggests the existence of two separate epochs and populations in the history of Spanish-speakers in the Southwest. . . . Of primary importance is the fact that, with the exception of New Mexico and southern Colorado, the small number of Mexicans annexed as a result of the conquest was inconsequential when compared to the much larger number of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mexican migrants to the region. Second, the parallels between the nineteenth-century Chicano experience and the experiences of other nonwhite minorities are striking. Mexicans suffered segregation, violence (such as lynching), and exploitation, but so too did the "non-conquered" Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, and Asian Indians, among others. Third, the massive economic transformations of the Southwest created a great demand for cheap, unskilled labor, which was met by unprecedented migration from Mexico beginning around the turn of the century.

Certainly, the pattern of regional development in the United States greatly affected Chicano history. The growth of southern California in particular became
intimately related with demographic shifts in the Chicano population. The extraordinary development of the western half of the Southwest region—a result of mass migration—came with the growth of California agriculture and southern California industry, both of which would have been impossible without massive water projects. Carey McWilliams noted economist Paul S. Taylor's trenchant 1927 observation: "Irrigation equals Mexicans." Additionally, the recent regional development of the Southwest has depended on massive east-to-west U.S. migration and on migrants from Asia, many of whom shared a common experience with those Mexican immigrants laboring for agribusiness.

There were frequent violent struggles between precapitalist Mexican and capitalist Anglo societies after 1848, but by 1900 they had faded as a new, integrated economic order arose. The 15,000 Mexican citizens living outside of New Mexico at the time of the conquest either accommodated to the new society or were overwhelmed by Mexican migrants. The conquered group lacked sufficient numbers to have a significant impact in the Anglo era. Moreover, once they had lost their lands by the late nineteenth century, they suffered further significant cultural disintegration. Except in New Mexico and southern Colorado, Mexican migrants introduced a completely new period in the history of the Spanish-speaking people in the Southwest, including Texas where the break with Mexico had come earlier in 1836.

Migration in the twentieth century altered the character of the southwestern Mexican community. By the 1920s, the Spanish-speaking population had grown dramatically, older settlements had expanded and many new ones had appeared, and Mexican labor had become of fundamental importance in economic development. There were other changes as well. Earlier Anglo-Mexican social relations had turned on the conflict between two distinct socioeconomic formations, while twentieth-century social relations centered upon the internal class conflicts inherent to corporate capitalism. The economic issues affecting Anglo-Mexican social relations had shifted from conflicting systems of production to class relations within the same system. Likewise, the political conflicts shifted from land issues in the nineteenth century to working-class concerns in the twentieth. . . . These conflictive relations are expressed in the racial and ethnic dimensions of the contemporary Southwest. The Mexican community, as we know it today, developed in this new atmosphere of corporate capitalism, a twentieth-century phenomenon.

The Urban Emphasis: A Reappraisal

Besides calling for a rethinking of the periodization of Chicano history, we also suggest a reappraisal of the emphasis on the urban experiences of Chicanos. In a review of three major books in Chicano history by Albert Camarillo, Mario García, and Richard Griswold del Castillo, David J. Weber notes that "all three try to link their work to the mainstream of social and urban history while still focusing on the particularity of the Mexican American experience." Moreover, these scholars have "established the importance of the city as the crucible of change in Chicano society and culture, and have provided a valuable corrective to the notion of Chicanos as an essentially rural people. Ricardo Romo, while acknowledging that "Chicanos have not always lived in urban areas," nonetheless contends that "since 1609, at
least, when their Spanish-Mexican ancestors founded the pueblos of Santa Fe, they have contributed to and have been a part of the urbanization process in the Southwest." Griswold del Castillo concurs, adding that "[d]uring Spanish colonial times probably a larger proportion of the region's population lived in pueblos, towns, and cities than did the population in other areas of the United States." Thus, historians have tended to view Chicano history since the Spanish era as a branch of urban history. An immediate problem with this view is that it labels as "urban" even small population centers, such as Tucson in 1850. Such practice blurs the distinction between "urban" and "rural" to the point where it virtually disappears.

Another consideration here is that pre-1848 southwestern towns and pueblos can hardly be classed with contemporary industrial urban centers on the East Coast, ... because precapitalist population centers differ significantly from cities and towns in a capitalistic social economy. Moreover, fully seventy percent of the southwestern population lived in rural areas at the turn of the century. It is doubtful that Chicanos were more urbanized at that time than the general population. As late as the 1930s, urban Chicanos made up only half of the Chicano population. ...

As a consequence of the emphasis upon so-called "urban" life, Chicano historiography has focused primarily on industrial, blue-collar labor and neglected rural and semirural Chicano communities like the citrus picker villages of southern California. Carey McWilliams, one of the few historians to recognize the rural character of such communities, has observed: "This citrus belt complex of peoples, institutions, and relationships has no parallel in rural life in America and nothing quite like it exists elsewhere in California. It is neither town nor country, neither rural nor urban. It is a world of its own."

Attention to the economic developments that engendered these communities would reveal, especially by the early 1900s when commodity production in large-scale agriculture, mining, and transportation was assuming economic predominance, a variety of community forms shaped by the industries that fostered them. Labor camps reflected the needs of railroad, mining, agricultural, stock-raising, lumbering, and other industrial enterprises. For example, Arizona mining towns, which employed considerable Mexican labor beginning in the late nineteenth century, differed in character from sharecropping communities of Texas, and from cities with a large commercial/industrial character like Los Angeles. Many communities existed only briefly, disappearing when a mine was exhausted, a track completed, or orchards subdivided. The Mexican community, affected by the demand for its labor power, settled according to the pattern of economic activity.

Rural citrus communities in southern California, as revealed in recent research by Gilbert G. González, tended to be permanent, remaining as barrios today in spite of the suburban sprawl that has engulfed them. ... Thus, some labor camps were clearly defined, permanent, stable, and well-structured Mexican villages. Such camps existed not only in the southern California citrus belt, but also in migrant agricultural areas (especially in sugar beet fields), and in mining, railroad, and construction regions as well. On the other hand, those camps consisting of laborers under the contract system, which structured family labor in agriculture, were transitory and labor was unorganized (except in beet work).

Some camps were essentially company towns, owing their existence to a single company or grower association. Colonias, or barrios, in the copper towns of
Arizona, the Goodyear cotton-town of Litchfield, Arizona, the beet-fields of California and Colorado, the steel mills of Indiana, and the citrus-grower association camps of southern California were part of a larger pattern of company towns in the West, the Midwest, and the South. There were significant variations among these communities. For example, the sugar beet company towns in Ventura County, California, had a decidedly different atmosphere than the towns of the South Platte Valley, Colorado. Even within southern California, the citrus company towns varied, some experiencing heavy-handed paternalistic intervention into daily life, others a hands-off policy by growers, and still others something in between.

The great variety among camps led to significant differences in gender and family relations. For example, employment and/or educational opportunities available to women and children varied with the organization of labor in particular enterprises. These, in turn, affected family, culture, and, ultimately, community. In the regions where family labor was widespread, the independence of women as economic actors was sharply curtailed in comparison to their urban counterparts. Where family labor was largely absent, as in the citrus industry, it was because such labor was of little significance in maintaining production. In the citrus industry, this permitted women to be widely employed in the packinghouses where they earned wages equal to those of their male counterparts, the pickers. This distinguished female employment in citrus from that of migrant family labor in such activities as cotton production. Women packers developed a sense of self-worth based upon their individual labor and talents that was all but impossible for women who worked as part of a family unit. In the latter system, the male head of household nearly always received the wages directly from the employer or labor contractor. Thus, women engaged in family cotton picking rarely received individual compensation for their labor. This pattern decidedly affected gender relations.

Educational opportunities also varied among the communities. In urban settings they were much greater than in the rural migrant settlements. Rural migrants were far less likely to attend school, or if attending at all, to attend only a portion of the school year. Statistics for Texas in 1945 indicate that only half of the Mexican children were enrolled in school. In part, this was due to a deliberate policy by boards of education to bar Mexican children, especially migrant children, from enrolling in school. In citrus towns, however, opportunities for education were greater due to the absence of family labor, and they were greater still in urban areas where fewer families were engaged in migratory work.

Differences between rural and urban communities can also be detected in other areas, including the civil rights activities of the 1940s and as recently as the 1970s. César Chávez, for example, left the Community Service Organization in the mid-1950s because the latter focused upon urban issues. Chávez had dedicated himself to resolving the problems of rural Mexican communities, a decision with far-reaching and well-known effects on the history of farmworker unions and California agriculture. That urban and rural settlements differ is further underscored by their contrasting emphases on school reform during the 1960s and 1970s. Rural activists generally demanded integration, while urban activists turned toward separatism, community control of neighborhood schools, and bilingual education.

Fortunately, the urban emphasis in Chicano historiography may be waning. For example, Sarah Deutsch's analysis of the transition from rural to urban life,
Vicki Ruiz's incorporation of gender issues in her examination of women's organizations in the agriculture-based food-processing industry, Richard Griswold del Castillo and Richard García's ... biographical study of César Chávez, Robert Alvarez's study of Baja California migrating families, and Arnoldo De León's several works demonstrate that some communities do not fall into the urban pattern emphasized in the earlier literature. Still, much remains to be done before we will have an adequate understanding of the complexity and enduring significance of Chicano community life.

We hope that the preceding pages have caused readers to think more deeply about the conventional wisdom that passes for much of Chicano history. Close attention to economic transformations questions the standard periodization of Chicano history and suggests that the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Spanish-speaking populations of the Southwest should be viewed as largely two different populations. And even within those populations, the nature of economic development has produced communities that vary significantly. Behind our approach lies the conviction that culture and economic life should not be kept in separate historical compartments. Moreover, our findings suggest that Chicano history should be viewed as something more than the distinct experience and contribution of one particular regional, ethnic group. Perhaps Chicano historians will also find value in the work of those southern historians who focus on capitalist development as a way of integrating the history of the South into the history of the entire nation. Chicano scholars might then take the first step in demonstrating that Chicano history is an integral component of American history. They might also be encouraged to advance efforts toward a multicultural history by distilling the common as well as the different experiences of cultural, ethnic, and gender groups. To paraphrase Cornell West, keen attention to economic structures can assist historians to contextualize cultural history.

Recent Approaches to Chicano History

ALEX M. SARAGOZA

Introduction

The intent of this essay is to assess Chicano historiography over the last decade as a means of interpreting the Chicano past. ... I ... argue that past formulations of Chicano historical experiences have been inadequate and require a critical reevaluation. ... The conceptual moorings of Chicano history have been affected by recent shifts and debates in the broader field of American history, particularly the area of social history. Combined with other factors, this ... holds important consequences for Chicano historiography and its direction. ...
Basic questions of interpretation, analysis, and methodology continue to vex students of the Chicano past. In this light, Chicano history confronts an important point in its development. This turn in Chicano historical writing consists of several elements, and they merit brief mention.

The first issue is generally underestimated: the very small number of new scholars entering the field. The motivation of a group of academics in the wake of the Chicano movement of the 1960s contributed importantly to the conceptual origins and early production of Chicano history. With relatively few exceptions, the overwhelming majority of Chicano graduate students in the last decade have avoided academic careers generally, and specifically in history.

Furthermore, with notable exceptions, non-Chicano historians have generally not entered the field. Hence, even a cursory review of published articles and books on Chicano history finds sparse results.

Second, it is clear that the place of Chicano history in the profession continues to be neglected. The relative insignificance of Chicanos as subjects in the writing of American history raises several questions, and the issue is not related simply to professional visibility, or to the number of titles of books and articles on Chicanos in the bibliographies of standard United States history texts. Chicanos and other peoples of color continue to be subordinated to and/or subsumed in the historical trajectory of Blacks. Questions of race, ethnicity, and even class and gender in American history remain often bounded by references to Blacks. The history of African Americans continues to be the essential reference point in the acknowledgment of race in United States history. Only a casual glance at the textbook indices or tables of contents and survey materials is necessary to underscore the point.

Third, intrinsic to this problem was the propensity of social history to focus its interpretive lens on geographic areas other than the West. Thus, many of the main currents of American historical writing, especially those spawned by the "new social history," essentially left out Chicanos. Given the bias of practitioners of the new social history to locate their research in the East or Midwest, Chicanos were subsumed in the application of ideas and concepts generated by research on Blacks or European immigrants, or both.

The combination of the scarcity of Chicano historians, the relative unimportance accorded to Chicanos in United States history, and the tendency of the "new history" to slight the West has made the field of Chicano history largely dependent on the interpretive aspects that undergirded the spate of books that appeared roughly from 1979 to 1984. That initial generation of "Chicano" historical works reflected to a large extent the reigning questions of the "new social history." The debates and discussion engendered by the approach of the "new historians" resonated in the writing of Chicano scholars and their interpretive outlook. The monographs on Chicanos that began to appear in the 1970s marked a sharpening of the debate over interpretation among Chicano scholars.

Central to this debate is the issue of labor, or workers, of the so-called new labor history, perhaps the most vibrant subfield encompassed by the new social history. Understandably, such a view engendered a perspective amenable to "Chicano" history as opposed to the history of working-class Chicanos. Or, as I
will discuss below, the new social history facilitated a "them-versus-us" notion of the Chicano past.

Such an approach is no longer tenable.

... The assumptions of Chicano history, particularly the tendency to suggest a collective experience, require rethinking. ... Class tensions and social rifts have marked the history of people of Mexican origin from the beginning. ... If American racism lessened such differences among Chicanos, it did not erase them. A sense of nationalism or group grievance may have attenuated class distinctions, but class cleavages endured. The implications of a basic bifurcation within the "Chicano community" over time clearly undermine the initial premises of Chicano historiography.

In this respect, the issue of gender also challenges the notion of a collective experience as a core element in the interpretation of the history of Chicanos. ... The incorporation of gender suggests more than mentioning Chicanas, regardless of the criteria. ... Gender implies a major challenge to the writing of Chicano history. ...

... Recent Chicano historical scholarship represents a departure from the conceptual origins of the field. ... Recent works point to the fundamental diversity and complexity of the Chicano experience. ... Students of Chicano history have highlighted ... the sources of differentiation within the Chicano community, past and present. More important, recent research affirms that issues of class, as well as race, represent critical factors in the interpretation of Chicano history. And ... gender questions clearly form a crucial dimension for the conceptualization of the Chicano past.

**Them-versus-Us History**

... During the 1970s, the conjunction of the civil rights movement and fresh trends in American historiography, particularly the rise of the "new social history," moved historians to depict the evolution of American society "from the bottom up." ... The intellectual roots of Chicano history were nourished by the profession's enthusiasm for labor, urban, family, and related historical fields that fell under the rubric of social history. Furthermore, the orientation of the practitioners of the new social history tended to be revisionist, critical of previous treatments of minorities, workers, and women.

This view within the profession facilitated ... the emergence of Chicano history and its intrinsic disapproval of an assimilationist perspective on ethnic/race relations in American history. ... The nationalist currents among various minority groups paralleled the development of the new social history. ...

This nationalistic bent formed an essential element in the underpinnings of much Chicano scholarship through the 1970s. The concept of racial conflict, or racism, complemented this premise and prompted a generalized acceptance of a Chicano-Anglo dichotomy, i.e., a "them-versus-us" approach. ... The consequences were ... significant. First, this approach tended to emphasize the separation and conflict that existed between the two groups by the very nature of the dichotomy. Second, and related to the latter point, the "them-versus-us" perspective
minimized internal stratification and gender differences in the historical experi-
ence of Chicanos. Third, the conceptualization of Chicano history in such terms
exaggerated the continuities in Chicano/mexicano culture and obscured its discon
tinuities and variation. Fourth, a tendency toward local community studies inhib-
ited a geographically comparative view.

As a consequence, the theme of victimization ran through much of the histori-
cal literature on Chicanos. Not surprisingly, occupational charts revealed the his-
toric downward mobility of most Chicanos in the face of Anglo ascendancy. For
those Mexicans who held property, landholding patterns after 1848 exposed fre-
cquent dispossession at the hands of venal Anglo lawyers, a racist judicial system,
and corrupt politicians. To complete the picture, many stressed the resistance of-
fered by Chicanos to their historical subjugation. The publication of Rodolfo
Acuña’s first edition of Occupied America culminated this trend through its use of
the internal colonial “model.” ... Published originally in 1972, Acuña’s landmark
book greatly popularized the application of the concept of internal colonialism as
an interpretive framework for a synthesis of the Chicano experience. ...

... The internal colonial model was found inadequate by several Chicano
scholars by the time of the publication of the second edition of Occupied America
(1981). ... Yet ... the colonial framework fails to explain adequately the experi-
cence of Chicanos in the nineteenth century. ... For instance, the colonial frame-
work did not explain satisfactorily the discrepancies in timing and character of
Chicano resistance. Why the rise of the gorras blancas [white caps] in the late
nineteenth century in New Mexico as opposed to the solitary social banditry of
Murrieta in California half a century earlier? ...

Between 1979 and 1984 over a half dozen publications appeared that ... sur-
passed Acuña’s popular text. The majority of these efforts ... reflected the imprint
of the currents generated by the new social history. ... Urban history figured
prominently in these works. Southern California, specifically Los Angeles, re-
ceived deserved attention. Richard Griswold del Castillo, Albert Camarillo, and
Ricardo Romo provided an excellent foundation to which historians of the City of
Angels and its environs will remain indebted for years to come. Mario T. García’s
fine account of El Paso complemented Oscar Martínez’s study of Ciudad Juárez.
Arnoldo De León offered much valuable information with his works on Texas. ...
David Weber produced an important book on the Mexican era of the Southwest, an
accomplishment supplemented by Oskah Janes’s contribution on northern Mexico
in the colonial period. ...

... Other examples may be cited, but the conclusion was clear: the concep-
tualization of Chicano history had to take into account the diversity of the Chicano
experience from its beginnings. ...

... In brief, as a whole these works constituted a transition away from mere
chronicles of victimization to a perspective open to nuance, subtlety, and complexity.

This shift, however, also made for certain dilemmas. Notably, there arose the
problem of reconciling two distinctive yet interrelated dimensions over time and
space: first, the apparent inequities of intergroup relations (Chicano and Anglo);
second, the differences in intragroup relations (among Chicanos themselves). ...
And, equally important, in what ways was gender to be taken into account to
deepen our understanding of both intergroup and intragroup relations? Thus, the surge of published monographs from 1979 to 1984 served to underscore the need for, and contributed to the question of, the conceptualization of Chicano history.

**Structural Origins of Chicano Diversity.** Capitalist development in the United States occurred in a series of fits and starts that leapfrogged certain areas and engulfed others at the same time. And the consequences, when analyzed carefully, failed to meet the easy generalizations of "them-versus-us" history.

Thus, careful scrutiny found contrasting outcomes in the timing of capitalist penetration dominated by the new, non-Spanish-speaking population. Population distribution and growth in Texas, California, and New Mexico varied greatly and had significant implications for the Spanish-speaking communities of those areas. New Mexico, for example, held approximately two-thirds of the Mexican population of the Southwest at the time of the Mexican War. The majority of New Mexico's *hispanos* were concentrated in the northern region of the province. In contrast, the Spanish-speaking population of California hugged the coast so that the land boom of the 1840s led to American immigrants being "geographically isolated from the Californios" in the Central Valley. The substantial size and density of the New Mexican population conditioned the gradual entry of Americans into the same area as opposed to the initial geographic distance between the American and Mexican populations in California. The location, size, and density of the Mexican population in the two areas distinguished the impact of the "Anglo invasion": for New Mexico it meant a longer period of adjustment to, and defense against, American encroachment; for California, it facilitated the victory of the American immigrants.

As Weber's account of the Mexican frontier illustrates, demography and geography in Texas also figured prominently in the transition away from Mexican control. "*Tejano* oligarchs saw the economic growth in Texas . . . and their fortunes," Weber observes, "as inextricably linked to the well-being of the Anglo newcomers and their slave-based, cotton growing economy." On the eve of the Texas revolt, *tejanos* were outnumbered ten to one, due in part to efforts of *tejanos* of the upper class to promote American immigration.

In this light, Weber's account of the northern Mexican frontier provides an indispensable reference point to assess the repercussions of the early interaction between the capitalist penetration of the United States and the Southwest's Spanish-speaking population. The similarities and the variation in that process make works concerning the period before United States-Mexican hostilities important to understanding the specific consequences of annexation.

**Responses to Subordination.** Despite the diversity that marked the experience of Mexicans in the post-1848 era, the process of subordination touched the lives of most Spanish-speaking people. . . . Erosion or loss of landholdings, reduction in opportunities, or the effects of institutional racism held consequences for even the upper crust of Mexican rancheros, merchants, and artisans. In certain areas such as California, the process of subjugation took place rapidly in the wake of the tremendous influx of Americans that overwhelmed the small coastal settlements of
the Spanish-speaking population. In other regions, the shift in power, numerical superiority, and/or American geographic expansion differed, such as in New Mexico. Consequently, the responses by Mexicans varied given their status, resources, and ability (or time) to respond to the seemingly unavoidable confrontation with American domination and its consequences.

Most Mexicans, nonetheless, were or became laborers, ranch hands, farm workers, railroad crewmen, and the like. While regional variations occurred, the vast majority of Mexican workers generally faced various forms of economic discrimination: dual wage structures, job segregation, and racist labor practices. Organized protest to these conditions took place, yet the work on Chicano labor history prior to the 1920s suggests a rather paltry record of strikes, unionization efforts, and overt labor actions. Further research on Chicano workers in the 1848 to 1900 period may alter this impression. Still, this apparent lack of labor activism demands explanation.

The answer appears complex and seems further complicated by the arrival of Mexican immigrant workers. Mario T. García emphasized that the “Mexicans’ response to their conditions must be seen in light of their motives for having left Mexico.” In García’s view, “Mexicans tolerated their economic subordination because a job in the United States made for a ‘significant improvement over their previous lower paying or unemployed positions in Mexico.’”

This does not mean, as García went on to stress, “that Mexicans were not incapable of struggling against exploitative conditions.” Clearly, there were forces that limited overt resistance, but one must also appreciate the specific circumstances of the Mexican, particularly the immigrant, worker...

The historical rendering of Chicano workers... remains incomplete when reduced to obvious, organized forms of resistance. Chicano labor history must also take into account more subtle expressions of protestation. Particularly for Mexican labor between 1848 and the 1880s (when immigration accelerated substantially from Mexico), one must take into consideration the structures of power, authority, and economic necessity that forced many Mexican workers to avoid explicit confrontations with their employers (Anglo or Mexican). Instead, the seeming “passivity” of Mexican workers reflected a pervasive and often effective system of repression, compelling Mexican workers to indirect forms of protestation, e.g., leaving their jobs, returning to Mexico or moving elsewhere, slowdowns, workplace “sabotage,” and other forms of resistance. And the labor movement in the United States into the late nineteenth century held scant hope for Mexican workers for a number of reasons, not the least of which was the general racism that characterized early labor organizations. In sum, the responses of Mexicans to American domination in the post-conquest era contained an essential diversity, including among Mexican workers, whose protests ranged widely in form and magnitude.

In light of the above, the conceptualization of the Chicano experience must be anchored in the extension and penetration of capitalist development in the West. Furthermore, several factors mediated the specific outcomes of the interaction between Mexicans and an expanding American economy: local economic structures, geographic location, proximity to the border, ethnic composition of the population, and the presence of Mexicans in the area as merchants, landholders, or
political figures. In brief, the interface between Mexicans and the westward movement of American capitalism and its intrinsic racism reflected a variegated, complex process. . . .

... Mexicans in the United States . . . responded in various forms to their encounters with an essentially racist economy and its socializing institutions. This process was cumulative, complex, and subject to the conditions in which it took place. . . . Male-female relations, gender roles, childhood and adolescence, religion, popular culture, social network, i.e., the inner lives of mexicanos, have escaped the concerted focus of the historical writings of the last ten years.

Periodization and Conquest. . . . "Chicano history" begins before 1836, and certainly prior to 1848. . . . The actual "conquest" commenced with the Texas revolt of 1836 and culminated with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In this respect, a full understanding of this period must extend beyond an emphasis on the sources of American imperialism. The underlying causes of Mexico's inability to defend its borders must also be examined, as well as the role of other foreign powers . . . in conceding United States territorial expansionism.

The post-conquest era reflected the consolidation of American domination and the structural incorporation of the Southwest into the United States economy, signaled by the completion of the transcontinental railroad (1869). This process took place with wide variations in timing and specific consequences given the context of the locality involved. . . . The years from the 1880s to the 1920s mark a distinctive period in the post-conquest era owing to two key elements. First, the period witnessed the hardening of the structures of subordination that eclipsed the remnants of the "Spanish" population, symbolized by the virtual disappearance of the landed elite of pre-conquest society. Second, the four decades following the railway linking of the East and West accelerated dramatically the absorption of the Southwest into the rapid spread of industrial capitalism. Hence, the general economic development of the West intensified the demand for cheap labor, generating an increasing migration of Mexicans to the region. This latter trend was furthered by the particular conditions in Mexico that induced migration to the United States. . . .

These two elements formed the basis of the distinction between immigrants and the Spanish-speaking population that derived from the pre-conquest era. More important, this basic bifurcation in the Mexican/Spanish-speaking communities of the Southwest occurred despite the similar treatment accorded to both groups by American rule. . . . Nevertheless, stratification and social hierarchies . . . persisted within chicano communities. Moreover, in social and cultural terms the arrival of increasing numbers of immigrants changed in many respects the ethos of Spanish-speaking communities in the United States. . . .

As noted earlier, it seems that for most Chicano historians the years from 1836 to the 1920s create the foundations of Chicano inequality. Thus, recent Chicano historiography suggests, if only indirectly, that the depression years represent a pivotal time, as they precipitated a sharp intensification of anti-Mexican sentiment and the dissipation of a thirty-year surge in Mexican immigration. The question remains, however, whether the period after the New Deal . . . marks a distinct stage in the Chicano experience.
Modern Chicano History: Problems and Issues

... World War II represented a rare moment where the social distance between Anglos and Mexicans diminished before the exigencies of an external threat. Wartime meant an enormous common experience which touched virtually the entire spectrum of the Chicano community. Nonetheless, this common experience failed to stem the growing differentiation among Chicanos. Rather, it served to reveal its fragmentation and to crystallize a singular group, i.e., the so-called Mexican American generation. “These ‘new’ Mexican Americans... increasingly saw themselves as closer to United States conditions,” Mario T. García has concluded, and “specially the more middle class members of this generation sought full integration and achievement of the ‘American Dream.’” In this respect, the variation of the Mexican population apparently continued and multiplied in the post-World War II era with important consequences...

... The American economy underwent a momentous period of growth... during and following World War II, especially in the Southwest where most of the Chicano population was concentrated. The flux created by wartime meant job openings... which had been difficult if not impossible to acquire before 1940. The postwar boom sustained this greater degree of opportunity for Chicanos...

As the 1960s wore on, however, signs of change in the structure of the United States economy appeared that held adverse consequences for most Chicanos. First, the now well-recognized process of de-industrialization began to take effect. Second, the cumulative effects of decades of discrimination and institutional racism meant that most Chicanos were ill-prepared for an economy where higher skills were required. Thus, the mobility of the two decades after World War II waned for working-class Chicanos in the 1970s... Third, the number of secondary labor market jobs (the so-called service sector) accelerated through the 1970s and into the 1980s...

Fourth, these shifts in the economy took place with particular force (and volatility) in the so-called Sun Belt, including the Southwest. Fifth, the combination of a declining American economy and the fiscal conservatism of the 1980s had especially negative consequences for cities. The level of urbanization of the Chicano population spelled an intensification of the problems faced by inner city, poor Chicanos...

... The historical basis of this phenomenon... continues [to be] unexplored. The recent work of Martín Sánchez-Jankowski, Joan Moore, Ruth Horowitz, and James Diego Vigil documents primarily the contemporary outcomes of a historical process for significant segments of the Mexican origin population...

The Impact of Immigration. Immigration represents a fundamental source of the continuing differentiation within the Chicano community...

Immigrants generally differ upon arrival from their American-born counterparts; and the recién llegado should remind historians of the different ways of "seeing" self and society in the Chicano experience in specific times and places... Yet, the historian’s analysis of the meaning of immigration must be construed carefully, especially regarding questions of culture, identity, and ideology...
As a whole, the Mexican immigrant experience of the last forty years or so remains largely unexamined.... This post-1940 generation of mexicanos and their experience of adjustment, including the process of cultural change, continue to be slighted by historians.... The historical rendering of the immigrant—who came with the bracero program, who overcame "operation wetback," and the termination of the bracero program in 1964, and who continued to arrive thereafter—awaits an author. Significantly, this neglect suggests a persistent flaw in Chicano scholarship: the tendency to underestimate the importance of continuing immigration, including the complexities of Chicano-mexicano relations in the formation of Chicano communities since World War II. And, though the controversy over contemporary immigration has fueled prodigious amounts of research, it sustains a preoccupation with economic considerations and an aversion for understanding the Chicano-mexicano dimensions of Mexican immigration....

New Directions for Historical Research. Recent Chicano historiography, in spite of its strengths, reveals certain shortcomings that must be addressed by students of the Chicano past. Four key areas of need can be identified. First,.... there is an urgent need for research on Chicanas. Most of the studies under review include women in their examination of occupational patterns, labor relations, and other areas related to employment. Still, the deeper questions of male-female relations, family, child-rearing, and the like remain often unexplored....

Clearly, historians must begin to explore this dimension of the Chicano experience in a way that is sensitive to the critical place of women in the formation of the Chicano community without losing sight of the differentiation that apparently occurred among women themselves....

.... The lack of research on Chicanas and of an adequate approach to the complexity of their lives hinders substantially a full understanding of the Chicano experience....

.... The relationships between new immigrants and previous generations of immigrants represent an important focus of analysis.... Chicano historians must acknowledge.... the continuing significance of immigration for a full understanding of the Chicano experience....

Immigration suggests a third area of concern for Chicano history, i.e., the impact of American culture and ideology on the Mexican origin community. On this point, the current discussion among historians of the influence of advertising, the mass media, fashion, consumerism, and related issues holds important possibilities for examining the sources, as well as the consequences, of the ideological variation among Chicanos, particularly after 1940.... Furthermore,.... historians must not lose sight of the manifestations of "counter ideology" among Chicanos, without falling prey to romanticizing such expressions.

This last point underscores the necessity of taking into account the specific texture of American society, a fourth area of need in Chicano history. The recent wave of Chicano historical scholarship has tended to concentrate on certain geographic areas or cities. As a result, the interface between Chicanos and broad
trends in the United States economy, politics, and culture possesses a disparate quality, given the diversity of the Chicano community.

... Chicano history would be enormously improved by work that compares different geographic areas in the context of political, economic, and social currents in American history.

Summary and Conclusion

... This essay has emphasized the fundamental diversity of the Chicano experience, a diversity complicated by an expanding American capitalism and its attendant cultural forces, including its pervasive racism. I have argued that the post-depression era witnessed an acceleration of an antecedent differentiation because of a widening class structure in the Mexican-origin community. ... This has exacerbated if not created sources of divisiveness over time. It appears ... that the presence of a persistent racist ideology and the spread of a consumer culture have extended and deepened the cleavages among Chicanos with diverse consequences, including a wide range of self-identification.

The resultant variation in self-perceptions has implied political distinctions as well as social and cultural diversity. And this process of differentiation has been furthered by the recurring and varying impacts of immigration from Mexico. Consequently, these rifts in the Chicano community have intensified with time. ... Given the diversity of the Mexican-origin population in the United States and their specific circumstances, the history of their responses has understandably lacked uniformity.

The contemporary Chicano community and its differences reflect, therefore, the diverse ways in which people of Mexican descent have responded to their conditions over time. ...

... The commonalities in the Chicano experience have waned. ...

... The historical literature of the last few years suggests the complexity of the Chicano experience. To press history to yield essentially an epic of heroes, victories, gallant resistance, and labor militancy blurs the everyday struggles of working Mexican men and women to sustain their dignity in a world that has taken a great deal, including, at times, their sense of self. The outcomes of those struggles, it seems, represent the basis of the Chicano past and present.

Chicano/a Historians and the Revision of Western History

DAVID G. GUTIÉRREZ

In considering Mexican American history one might argue that the debate about the significance or importance of ethnic Mexican people in the West has reflected the central themes of the social and political history of the region. Whether one considers initial Mexican resistance to American exploration of the Mexican Northwest (a territory now encompassing the five southwestern states plus Nevada

and Utah); Mexicans' active resistance to American imperialism during the Mexican American War; or ethnic Mexicans' subsequent campaigns to achieve the full rights of citizenship; we might argue that on one fundamental level, ethnic Mexican residents of the American West have been involved in a protracted struggle to prove their importance, to prove themselves significant in American society.

One might argue more generally that... a substantial portion of the ethnic conflict that has occurred historically in the American West has involved subject peoples' efforts to contest and resist efforts to impose ascriptive social judgments on them, particularly by interpreting and representing their histories in certain ways. Much of the most compelling recent theoretical work in social history, cultural criticism, and feminist studies relies on this as one of its central premises: military conquest or absorption of one society by another usually represents only the first step of the process by which one society imposes itself on another. Ultimately, however, the most crucial development as a result of expansion and domination is the subsequent construction of elaborate sets of rationales which are designed to explain why one group has conquered another and to establish and perpetuate histories that help "set... and enforce... priorities, [repress] some subjects in the name of the greater importance of others, [naturalize] certain categories, and [disqualify] others."

Myth and Myopia

The silence of applying such a perspective to historical analysis of ethnic Mexicans in the American West is clear, for any such exploration must begin with an acknowledgement of how American ideologies of expansion have powerfully influenced historical representations of and about "Mexicans" (and other subject groups) after the United States acquired the region. Of course, this process was well under way even before the actual annexation of the West. Indeed, Americans had developed a rather detailed demonology about Mexicans (and about Spaniards before them) even before they had established regular contact with Spanish-speaking people in the region in the 1820s... With the advent of the cluster of racist and nationalist ideas collectively known as Manifest Destiny in the early 1840s, these stereotypes assumed a more virulent form. Although the specific ideas that contributed to the notion of Manifest Destiny seemed diverse and complex, virtually all derived from Americans' belief in the superiority of the United States' civilization, culture, and political institutions. ...

Acceptance of these fundamental premises in turn enabled Americans to demean, and ultimately to dismiss, the people they had incorporated into their society. This process was speeded along by the segregation of ethnic Mexicans that occurred in varying degrees throughout the region. As Mexican Americans were slowly forced by population pressures and discrimination to withdraw into shrinking urban barriers and isolated rural colonias, they seemed to gradually disappear from the landscape, thereby fulfilling the prophecies of those proponents of Manifest Destiny who had predicted that the West's indigenous peoples would "recede" or "fade away" before the advance of American civilization. By the turn of the century, Mexican Americans had become, to use the words of one well known historian, America's "forgotten people."
To assert, however, that America forgot this ethnic group oversimplifies a far more complicated story. What actually occurred was a rather peculiar reenvisioning of the role Mexicans played in the region’s past. Gradually released from the necessity of viewing Mexicans as any kind of political or military threat, Americans were able to indulge themselves in romantic reveries about what the landscape must have looked like before the war. In a process no doubt similar to the one that allowed Americans to construct the notion of the noble savage after Indians had been effectively removed from lands they coveted, the consolidation of American control over former Mexican domains allowed westerners to construct what Carey McWilliams aptly called “the Spanish fantasy heritage.” With historians and history buffs, artists, travel and fiction writers, amateur ethnographers, and eventually, local chambers of commerce and real estate boosters all contributing, Anglo-American residents of the region helped to construct a benign history of the not-so-distant past where gracious Spanish grandees, beautiful señoritas, and gentle Catholic friars oversaw an abundant pastoral empire worked by contented mission Indians. . . . This creation not only fit nicely with the images that Americans held of themselves; it also allowed them the freedom to extol and selectively appropriate for their own use those aspects of the region’s culture that amused them. . . . By the early decades of this century, it was rare to find a town of any size in the “Old Spanish Southwest” that did not celebrate its illustrious past by restor- ing missions, erecting historical markers, and holding what seemed to be a nearly endless round of annual Spanish fiestas, replete with dons and doñas (usually Anglos) in full “Spanish” regalia astride matched palominos.

Resistance, Excavation, and Recovery

While some may persist in arguing that the elaborate historical and popular reimaginings constituting “the Spanish fantasy heritage” were harmless examples of romantic myth-making, Mexican Americans have long been aware of the ways such myths have helped to obscure, and thus to diminish, the actual historical producers of the culture that Anglos ostensibly celebrated. It was one thing to suffer the humiliation of conquest and the subsequent indignity of relegation to an inferior caste status in the emerging social order of the American-dominated West, but it was quite another to sit idly by and watch the Americans appropriate for their own amusement aspects of Mexican culture they found quaint and picturesque reminders of the past. Moreover, many Mexican Americans knew, to a painful degree, that the seemingly harmless celebration of Spanish fiestas masked the disdain so many Americans felt about the actual remaining representatives of Hispanic culture in the West. One can easily imagine Mexican Americans’ bewilderment and anger as they watched gringos celebrate appropriated cultural events knowing that the very term “Mexican” had already become deeply embedded in the vocabulary of the region as a label of derision and stigma.

In many ways, ethnic Mexicans’ awareness that they had been rendered insignificant as human beings in this manner has provided one of the major forces driving both their efforts to achieve full political rights in American society, and their attempts to recapture and rewrite their own history. In fact, these two objectives have worked hand in hand since the 1850s, even if the resultant efforts went
largely unheeded until very recently. But even a cursory knowledge of the region’s ethnic history reveals that Mexican Americans have long considered the struggle to represent their own history and, to be represented accurately in the West’s history generally, to be crucial components of their ongoing campaign to achieve their full rights as American citizens and as human beings.

The dual nature of this struggle is readily apparent in the work of the first generation of scholars who began publishing research on the West’s ethnic Mexican population in the years following World War I. Most of this generation of Mexican Americans were either descendants of the Spanish-speaking people whose presence predated that of the conquest or, more commonly, were the children of the huge numbers of Mexican immigrants who settled in the United States after 1910, so they had first-hand knowledge of what it meant to grow up with the stigma of being Mexican in the American West. Thus, when reviewing the work of pioneering intellectuals such as George I. Sánchez, Arthur L. Campa, Carlos Castañeda, Ernesto Galarza, Jovita González, or Américo Paredes, it is immediately clear that these individuals were driven by more than a merely dispassionate pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake. ... They recognized that before they could ever hope to gain a fair reading of their work it would be necessary to break through the deeply entrenched, dehumanizing stereotypes about Mexicans that Americans had come to accept since the early nineteenth century. This first generation of intellectuals also faced the burden of having come of age during an era of heavy immigration from Mexico. Forced to do their work in an atmosphere of intensifying anti-Mexican sentiment, this generation of Mexican American scholars had to be even more careful in the way they framed their research questions and in the language they used to represent the subjects of that research.

... When viewed in hindsight, ... the body of work produced by these individuals is unified in several important respects. The most important theme unifying this research was these scholars' obvious concern to represent ordinary working-class Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants as complex, fully-formed, and fully-functional human beings. While this might not seem to be a significant point, when viewed in the context of the times, this work should be seen as the first stage of a bold—and inherently political—project of excavation and recovery that was designed, at least partially, to upset the prevailing regional social order by demonstrating the extent to which stereotypes about Mexicans were the products of Americans’ active, and truly powerful, imaginations.

A brief discussion of George I. Sánchez’s research helps illustrate some of the ways Mexican American scholars of this period used their work both to advance objective knowledge and to alter what had become the master discourse used to describe Mexicans in the United States. Superficially, the work of the longtime University of Texas history and education professor appears to be an example of fairly straightforward academic research. But a closer analysis of his work reveals that Sánchez pursued a self-consciously political agenda throughout his long career. But this was not politics in the sense that most Americans associate with the word. ... In some ways his attempts to get the readers of his research simply to recognize Mexican Americans as human beings represented the most radical political position he could have advanced in the 1930s and 1940s. From the time he wrote his earliest work on general issues concerning education, Mexican American
bilingualism, and intelligence testing, Sánchez focused intently on destroying prevailing notions of Mexican Americans as a culturally monolithic, socially unstratified population by demonstrating the complexity and utility of the Southwest’s syncretic Mexican American culture. . . .

. . . Sánchez sought to illustrate, in a subdued and scholarly way, that because Mexican Americans disagreed about politics and were divided, among other things, by class, religion, customs, and language preference, their community was as internally complex and functionally cohesive as any other. Building on this basic premise, Sánchez systematically dissected theories that attributed Mexican American poverty and low educational achievement to putative flaws inherent in Mexican culture or biology. . . .

. . . On the most fundamental level, Sánchez’s arguments, and those made by other Mexican American scholars and activists of this generation, undermined an ideological edifice that had long maintained notions of American superiority and Mexican inferiority as fact. . . . In the context of their own times, these individuals’ efforts represented a serious and inherently subversive assault on the entire system of meanings that Americans had constructed about the annexation of the West, and perhaps more importantly, about the significance of the ethnic Mexican people living there. By attacking Americans’ common assumptions of racial, cultural, and political superiority—using scientific and objective research methods that could not be faulted by mainstream scholars—Sánchez and his generation issued a crucial first challenge to the very core of the ethnically stratified social order in the American West.

The Chicano Moment

. . . Sánchez’s generation of scholar-activists in many ways anticipated the research agenda, modes of analysis, and political rhetoric of the generation of intellectuals and social activists . . . of the Chicano movement. This second generation of intellectuals and social critics, however, were in a much better position than their predecessors to take the project of humanization begun earlier several crucial steps further. Coming of age during a period of social ferment symbolized by the civil rights movement, inner-city revolts, and the intensifying protests over the war in Vietnam, by the mid-1960s young Mexican Americans in scattered locales across the Southwest had embarked on a series of political campaigns that became known collectively as the Chicano movement. . . . One of the least noticed, yet most important effects of the Chicano movement was the extent that it helped force open the doors of colleges and universities to Mexican American students. The opening of such previously restricted institutions not only allowed unprecedented numbers of students the opportunity to pursue a higher education; it also helped fuel a renewed drive among Mexican Americans to recapture and rewrite their own history. . . .

From the point of view of many Chicano militants, history would play a central role in the project to reconstruct Chicano identity. Indeed, from the very outset of the movement, Chicano activists argued that ethnic Mexicans must learn their true history before they could even hope to develop a strong sense of community and solidarity. . . .
Interpreting the Chicano Past

At its worst, the history produced during this period helped to create a different totalizing discourse that in some ways was as distorting, essentialistic, and exclusionary as the one activists were attempting to transform. Some Chicano activist-scholars showed a tendency to reify "Chicano culture" into a set of codes and symbols designed to offset what they argued was the inherent acquisitiveness, materialism, chauvinism, and rapaciousness of Anglo culture. Few seemed to realize that much of the rhetoric of the Chicano movement—and the scholarship that drew inspiration from that rhetoric—slid perilously close to replicating the same kind of exclusionary, hierarchical, and dehumanizing ideologies that Anglo Americans had used so effectively for so long to suppress minority peoples.

At their best, however, scholars writing during this period broadened and deepened comprehension of the social history of the West by pulling Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants out of obscurity, by rendering them visible and significant in regional history. And perhaps more importantly, the best of this generation of historians gave new life to the humanizing project their predecessors had initiated nearly fifty years earlier. At the level of the academic production of history, scholars such as Rodolfo Acuña, Tomás Almazán, Mario Barrera, Arnoldo De León, Mario T. García, Richard Griswold del Castillo, Juan Gómez-Quiñones, Ricardo Romo, David Weber, and others published important works that compelled scholars—and at least some of the general public—to replace the traditional, stereotypical representations of ethnic Mexicans that had long dominated regional history with more complex and subtle renderings of individual Mexicans and Mexican culture. Employing the same sophistication in conceptualization, methodology, and argument that other so-called new social historians were developing at this time, Mexican American scholars publishing in the 1970s and early 1980s produced work that gained increasing notice, respectability, and legitimacy in mainstream academic circles.

The Changing Significance of Difference in Western History

Though some would argue that the project of humanization pursued by historians of the ethnic Mexican experience since early in this century continues in the present period, the character of this enterprise has recently undergone a significant transformation. In fact, the present generation of ethnic Mexican and other Latino intellectuals ... seem intent on pushing their demands for recognition and inclusion even further than the militants of the 1960s and 1970s. Moving well beyond the rhetoric of mere inclusion, many in the present intellectual ... generation are insisting on developing a fundamental reconfiguration in the ways minority peoples are conceived of, categorized, and analyzed in history and contemporary American society.

The effect of this political sea change on historical scholarship has been no less profound. The widespread challenges to established authority issued on the streets and in the universities during the 1960s contributed to a sharpening of debate about the politics of representation of minority peoples and, more broadly, about the nature of historical authority itself.

Although it is impossible in this limited space to assess the full impact of this revolution on questions such as those concerning the historical significance of
minority populations in the West, . . . the emergence of three interrelated trends in recent regional historical interpretation is particularly relevant to this discussion.

First, consider the dramatic increase in the number of scholars who are bringing interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approaches to their study of the history of ethnic Mexican peoples in the West. Drawing theoretical, methodological, and critical insights and research questions from what used to be much more discreetly demarcated disciplines, the recent “blurring of genres” . . . so evident in western historiography has brought a variety of new perspectives to the study of minority populations. It is also contributing to a rapid dismantling of the kind of victor’s history that has dominated regional historiography since the Mexican Cession. Whether one considers the recent explorations in autobiography and literary theory by scholars such as Hector Calderón, Angie Chabram, Clara Lomas, Genaro Padilla, José David Saldivar, Ramón Saldivar, or Rosaura Sánchez; the musings of anthropologist Renato Rosaldo; the historical investigations of folklorists such as María Herrera-Sobek, José Limón, or Manuel Peña; the ruminations on regional history of sociologists such as Tomás Almaguer or David Montejano; or the work of formally trained interdisciplinary social historians such as Deena J. González, Ramón A. Gutiérrez, Douglas Monroy, or George J. Sánchez, one cannot help but be struck by the extent that old “us versus them” interpretations of interethnic relations have given way to extremely subtle analyses in which Mexicans, Anglos, Indians, and others emerge as complex, multifaceted, sometimes cooperative, and often contradictory actors on the regional stage. For example, it is impossible to read the work of González, Padilla, or Gutiérrez on New Mexico, Montejano or Peña on Texas, or Monroy or Almaguer on California, and not come away with the understanding that the conquest of the Mexican Northwest in the 1840s involved more than the abject subjugation of ethnic Mexicans and Indians. . . . In short, work of this type shows the extent to which Mexicans were simultaneously objects of subordination and active agents of political and cultural opposition and resistance.

While the move toward interdisciplinary analyses represented by such work has accelerated the project of humanization initiated by pioneering ethnic Mexican activists and intellectuals, an even more fundamental challenge to “business as usual” in regional history has been issued by western historians of women, gender, and sexuality. Spurred by developments similar to those that stimulated women in the civil rights, antiwar, and New Left movements to reassess their relationships to male activists in the 1960s and 1970s, the recent florescence of Chicana history grew out of Mexican American and Mexican immigrant women’s experiences in the Chicano movement. Ethnic Mexican women played central roles in the myriad organizations that made up the Chicano civil rights struggle, but like their counterparts in the other social movements of the times, they quickly discovered that they were expected to conform to traditional subordinate gender roles within their culture.

Exposed through their political activities to the raw dynamics of continuing gender subjugation within a movement ostensibly dedicated to their liberation, Chicana and Mexican American activists soon began asking more comprehensive questions about the actual nature of their oppression in society. Logically, the answers to these questions initially tended to focus almost exclusively on the dynamics of male/female relationships within contemporary Mexican American and Mexican
culture. However, as increasing numbers of women activists gained access to higher education along with their male counterparts in the Chicano movement, such inquiries inevitably began to influence the production of regional historical scholarship and interpretation.

The work of a new generation of women scholars influenced by these political and intellectual developments began to appear in the 1980s. Led by women’s historians such as Vicki L. Ruiz, Rosalinda González, Sarah Deutsch, Deena J. González, Antonia Castañeda, Peggy Pascoe, Susan Johnson, and others, this generation of scholar/activists immediately transformed the research agendas in the West by systematically including, often for the first time, women as primary subjects of analysis in regional, social, and cultural history. Perhaps just as important, from the time they first entered graduate school, women scholars made it a fundamental part of their business to insist that male historians rethink the ways they framed and pursued their own research.

While this insistence played a crucial role in reducing the glaring distortions resulting from traditional research methods that had obliterated at least half of the putative subjects of social history, it proved to be just the first step in a series of logical steps that led women’s historians and feminist theorists to ask deeper questions about the nature of gendered systems more generally construed. The importance of the critique that arose from such a realization extended far beyond its proximate concentration on women, per se. On the most basic level, scholars who sought to analyze gender—that is, the complex systems of social and cultural meanings assigned to sexual difference—played at least as powerful a role in ordering and stratifying men and women in society as did race or class. Using this basic premise as a point of departure, women’s historians and feminist theorists explicitly and implicitly raised important theoretical questions about the production and reproduction of all kinds of subjective identities, including those based on race, ethnicity, and class. ... Just as importantly, such a line of inquiry eventually led feminist scholars to reject notions of unified naturalized identity categories in favor of those that treat identity as “a contested terrain, the site of multiple and conflicting claims. ...”

The third, and potentially greatest contribution of the present generation of critical scholars to the project to render significant the ethnic Mexican population of the West is its unwavering commitment to explore and illuminate the intrinsic relationship between power and knowledge in scholarship and in society at large. Although many academics refuse to acknowledge that the production of any historical knowledge is an inherently political act, it is clear that many (if not most) scholars of the ethnic Mexican experience in the West have accepted the view, as Peter Novick notes of those who believe this, that “postures of disinterestedness and neutrality [in historical scholarship are] outmoded and illusory.”

The production of knowledge based on acceptance of such a premise has not occurred without cost to those actively engaged in it. On the contrary, ... scholars pursuing this type of innovative, nontraditional research will continue to face charges that the inherently political nature of their work renders their project an exercise in polemics rather than rigorous, objective historical scholarship. ... Clearly, practitioners of this kind of research ... will inevitably continue to attract the ire of those in society who feel personally threatened by the implicit and
explicit challenges to the social status quo (or who have a vested interest in preserving the status quo).

... By drawing from and building on theoretical and methodological insights developed by those involved in interdisciplinary cultural studies, and more recently, by women historians and feminist theorists, historians interested in analyzing other kinds of socialy constructed systems of difference and power seem committed to struggle to transform the ways we conceive of and understand the histories of subordinated peoples in the region. This exceedingly diverse and complex work should not be thought of as a monolithic project, or as some magical device that will provide historians the means to bridge the gap between the lived experiences and historians’ representations of ethnic Mexicans’ (or, for that matter any group’s) social history. . . .

Taken together, however, research of this type suggests a number of innovative ways to reconceptualize historical inquiry that perhaps will help us to challenge more effectively the racist, sexist, and culturally chauvinistic stereotypes and structures that have long permeated thought and discourse about the significance of different peoples in the American West. By exposing and painstakingly analyzing the constructed, manipulated nature of social hierarchies of all types, scholars and social critics working from this point of view might help change the terms of debate about the historical and contemporary significance of ethnic Mexicans and other minority peoples. . . . If these trends continue, to paraphrase the recent musings of two scholars of the emergence of multiculturalism, we may be witnessing “the development of a new definition of what comprises ‘mainstream’ culture.” If such hopeful prognostications turn out to be true, then the question of who is, and who is not, considered significant in this society will itself take on an entirely new significance.

**FURTHER READING**


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