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The Undergraduate Historical Journal at UC Merced

Title

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Permalink

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Journal

The Undergraduate Historical Journal at UC Merced, 5(1)

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Publication Date

2018

DOI

10.5070/H351041980

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Peer reviewed|Undergraduate

How Latin Americans Transformed the US During the Cold War¹

The twentieth century provided a window of opportunity for Latin Americans to improve their position in the United States. U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt presented the Good Neighbor Policy (1933) in an effort to improve relations with Latin American nations. One result of this policy is the initiation of the Bracero program. Initially providing favorable conditions for Mexican laborers, however, these favorable terms did not outlast World War II. As the Cold War ensued, the U.S. was pressed to consolidate its influence over Latin America. This resulted in undermining of the Good Neighbor Policy and worsening conditions for Latinos in the U.S. As a result, Latin American citizens found themselves being alienated in the U.S; programs like the Bracero Program were changed to exploit Latin Americans rather than empower them.

Latin Americans did not accept this negative change willingly. Latin Americans utilized a variety of methods to resist the U.S. and to ultimately reshape the U.S. Their efforts were most effective in the 1960s when they aligned their efforts with the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement provided motivation and insights on how to run a successful movement, allowing for Latinos to utilize local politics and lobbying federal officials to its fullest potential.

The New Yorker recently published an article criticizing the lack of effectiveness of current social movements like Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter.² This discourse minimizes the success social movements have been and are capable of; this which discourages people from involvement in social movements. This paper aims to debunk this narrative by highlighting the historical effectiveness of social movements among the Latinx community and to contextualize the events that shaped these methodologies.

Worsening Conditions for Latinos in a Post-World War II USA

¹ The author, being also an editor, recused himself from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.

² Nathan Heller, "Is There Any Point to Protesting?" in *The New Yorker*, (Conde Nast, 2017), [Link](#).

Adopted in 1942 as a result of WWII, The Bracero program served as an emergency labor program to solve a labor shortage in the U.S. agricultural industry. The original program promised Mexican laborers protection from discriminatory practices, the same wage as Anglo laborers, and guaranteed transportation back to México once their contracts expired.³ Throughout WWII these promises were mostly kept, making it a beneficial program for both employers and Mexican laborers. However, the renewal of the Bracero program in 1948, brought an end to these times.⁴ Conditions for Mexican laborers were renegotiated every time the Bracero program was renewed, each time proving to be more favorable to agribusiness. Additionally, the end of WWII marked the end of the labor shortage; this made it more difficult for Mexican laborers to receive concessions from agribusiness. The increase in Mexican labor in the U.S. coincided with the rise of deplorable conditions experienced by farm workers.⁵ Devaluation of Mexican laborers by agribusiness can be illustrated by examining the statements of Texan employer before a Congressional hearing: “As soon as you begin to Americanize a Mexican he’s no longer any good. He just won’t work anymore.”⁶ This individual was strongly against raising wages for Mexican laborers; he strongly believed concessions to Mexican laborers would empower workers and, in turn, suppress their work ethic. If this were to happen, the entire purpose of the Bracero program would be defeated because agribusiness saw the program as an opportunity to maximize profits off of cheap labor. Overall, the Bracero program serves as merely one example illustrating a common pattern of unfavorable conditions for Latin Americans in the U.S.

Much like the Bracero program, U.S. immigration policy worsened for Latin Americans after World War II. In response to Fidel Castro’s success in Cuba, the US authorized the Cuban Refugee Program⁷ and

³ “The Bracero Program” in *Latin America and the United States, A Documentary History*, by Robert Holden and Eric Zolov, (Oxford University Press, 2011), 159.

⁴ Ellis W. Hawley, “The Politics of the Mexican Labor Issue, 1950-1965” in *Agricultural History* Vol. 40, No. 3, (Agricultural History Society, 1966), 158.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁷ William L. Mitchell, “The Cuban Refugee Program” March 1962, 4-5.

passed the Cuban Adjustment Act;⁸ these essentially allowed Cubans to settle in the United States. At the same time, the U.S. passed the Immigration Act of 1965, which limited immigration from Latin America for the first time in US history.⁹ Focused exclusively on policy, the U.S. made it appear as if conditions were significantly worse in Cuba compared to the rest of Latin America. This is because Cubans were labeled refugees rather than migrants which implied that Communism worsen their conditions. In practice however, Cubans were at least allowed to enter the U.S. as refugees while other Latinos were alienated by immigration policy. For example, per the 1965 Immigration Act, Dominican immigrant population of New York to shifted from being largely documented to mostly undocumented immigrants.¹⁰ It mattered little to the poor if conditions worsened, as the conditions were already bad enough for them to seek prosperity in the United States.

The U.S. was not blind to the continued migration from Latin America. United States' fears of alienating Latin Americans during the Cold War allowed for Latin Americans to undermine the immigration limit. This was done by allowing for Latin Americans to lend each other money to meet financial requirements for visitor visas, allowing for the family exemption to be used to the fullest extent, and doing little to crack down on Latin Americans who entered the U.S. from Puerto Rico pretending to be Puerto Ricans.¹¹ Overall, U.S. immigration policy during the Cold War was used to win over support from Latin American individuals and to prevent Latin American nations from siding with the USSR. The biggest flaw with this strategy was that it did little to keep Latin Americans from supporting the U.S. over the USSR. Once they arrived in the U.S., Latin Americans were victims of discrimination but they were resilient people who helped reshape the U.S. for their benefit.

Reshaping the USA

⁸ "Cuban Adjustment Act", H.R. 15183, 89th Congress, 1966.

⁹ Jesse Hoffnug-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York After 1950*, (Princeton University Press, 2008) 90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹¹ Jesse Hoffnug-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities*, (Princeton University Press, 2008), 90-91.

Latin Americans were not strangers to discriminatory practices in the U.S. These practices continued to exist during World War II, despite FDR's Good Neighbor Policy attempt to right wrongs against Latin Americans. For example, Mexicans in the U.S. military complained about injustices like insufficient income to support their families and about denial of citizenship.¹² Discrimination against Latinos extended well into the 1970s when Dominicans in New York City were placed into schools that did not expect them to graduate, resulting in a 30% graduation rate.¹³ Latin Americans in the U.S. were largely dissatisfied with these conditions, so they organized and fought for better conditions. Latinos assumed political positions and succeeded in passing legislation to remedy their conditions. In New York, Dominicans became heavily involved in the policymaking process for schools. Notably, the George Washington High School's student government was completely controlled by the Dominican dominated Pan American club in 1972. Under the club's rule, the school was transformed into a learning institution without weapons and drugs.¹⁴ The Pan American club failed to resolve all problems experienced by Dominicans at the high School,¹⁵ but it was a step in the right direction. Joining the policymaking process at the local level allowed for reforms to be implemented to improve conditions for Latin Americans in the U.S.

Latin Americans did not limit their efforts to the local level. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s provided enough momentum for them to protest and lobby Congress for beneficial legislation. Latin American efforts were rewarded with the passing of the Bilingual Education Act of 1967 in which provided assistance to public schools for bilingual programs to be established.¹⁶ Puerto Rico's director of the migration division of the Department of Labor, Joseph Monserrat, described a gap in graduation rates between Non-Hispanic White Americans and Spanish speaking minority groups before a Congressional

¹² Emilio Zamora, "Mexican Nationals in the U.S. Military" in *Beyond the Latino World War II Hero*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 104-105.

¹³ Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities*, (Princeton University Press, 2008), 134.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁶ "Bilingual Education," (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967), 1.

hearing. Monserrat also detailed the importance of education for social mobility.¹⁷ Therefore, the passing of the act demonstrates the U.S. government's realization of the need to improve the schooling system for its Spanish speaking population. The passing of the act was an attempt by the U.S. government to expand social mobility to more of its residents, specifically the Spanish speaking minority. The bilingual program provided the means for Latinos to increase their graduation rates, thus their economic success as well. The only legal barrier that prevented Latin Americans from reaching their full potential in the U.S. was the lack of citizenship. The lack of citizenship among many Latin Americans in the U.S. continues to be a reality today, but U.S. policy has officially taken steps to induce social mobility for Latin Americans. With a real opportunity for change, Latin Americans have the potential of living a more prosperous life in the U.S.

Conclusion

The Cold War period witnessed Latinos in the U.S. mobilize to improve their conditions. Conditions for Latin Americans in the U.S. grew worse as immigration policy began to limit the amount of Latin Americans allowed to enter the United States. Latin Americans did not accept their worsening conditions and took advantage of the Civil Rights movement to improve their situation. Latin Americans may continue to have struggles today, but because Latin Americans were successful in transforming the U.S. into a more hospitable nation to reside in during the Cold War era, change is possible again. Today, voting is seen as one of the only method in which actual change occurs, with social movements often being minimalized. Latinos have suffered and continue to suffer from low voter turnout rates and many lack citizenship preventing them from voting.¹⁸ As shown here, social movements can be an effective method for implementing change in a political system.

¹⁷ "Bilingual Education," (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967), 5-6.

¹⁸ Antonio Flores and Mark H. Lopez, "Key Facts About Latinos in the 2018 Midterm Elections" in *Fact Tank*, (Pew Research Center, 2018), [Link](#).

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