

UCLA

UCLA Historical Journal

Title

DAVID E. GUTIERREZ. *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8c7206tv>

Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 17(0)

Author

Hernández, David Manuel

Publication Date

1997

Copyright Information

Copyright 1997 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

DAVID G. GUTIÉRREZ. *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995.

David G. Gutiérrez' *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* explores the historical relationship between Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants from the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 to the 1990s. In tracing this at times fluid and often conflicted relationship, Gutiérrez fills a gap in traditional immigration and Chicano Studies scholarship and also broadens the current immigration debate. Gutiérrez writes, "One of the least understood dimensions of the debate over the immigration issue in the United States is the response the controversy has elicited among Mexican Americans and other long-term Latino residents." (2) Moreover, by sketching the evolution of this relationship, primarily through Mexican American organizational responses in Texas and California, Gutiérrez also addresses the contradictions, ambivalence and shifting positions over Mexican immigration within the Mexican American community. For instance, not only does the author challenge studies and generalizations that conflate Mexican immigrant and Mexican American populations^óuntil fairly recently few Americans have recognized much of a distinction between long-term U.S. residents of Mexican and Latin descent and more recent immigrants from Mexico" (20)^óhe also frustrates the notion of homogeneity within the Mexican American community. In fact, Gutiérrez examines the "intriguing contradiction" created by the differences and commonalities in the "walls and mirrors" in between Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants in order to broaden the scope of Mexican American identity and social history, as well as to ventilate the often reductive and narrow scope of the national debate over immigration policy (4).

Mostly a classic history text, proceeding chronologically from the political genesis of the Mexican American taxonomy at the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848, *Walls and Mirrors* creates an historical context for the diverse Mexican American viewpoint on immigration today and shatters the not uncommon notion that today's immigration issues have only recently emerged. Likewise, his documentation of Mexican American civil rights struggles and their evolving identity politics from 1848 onward also challenges the view that the 1960s and the Chicano Movement were the genesis of Mexican American activism. Gutiérrez thus details, over the course of a century and a half, the continuous struggle and debate on the part of Mexican American and Mexican immigrant activists in accumulating political power.

The text thus operates as an oppositional history, responding to Mexican American historical erasure and drawing on a variety of sources, from Mexican corridos, GAO reports and newspapers, to the private papers of Mexican American and Chicano activists. Gutiérrez details the systematic, political and economic disenfranchisement of Mexicans and Mexican Americans who remained in the U.S. after 1848, as well as their consistent and diverse methods of social resistance, including social banditry, the formation of cultural enclaves, and the creation of mutualistas, or mutual aid societies. He posits that the proximity of Mexico to the U.S. and the almost constant flow of immigrants reinforced Mexican cultural practices and greatly supplemented the natural growth of the Mexican American population. As the Mexican American community grew, like other non-white communities, it encountered a discriminatory and racist U.S. society. Gutiérrez thus couches Mexican immigration within U.S. immigration historiography and policy, which includes the country's penchant for nativism and restrictionism.

Although the mainstream point of view that Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants exist as a singular community temporarily disguised the growth of Mexican immigration at the turn of the century, to Mexican Americans, *los recién llegados* inspired attitudes of both uneasiness and empathy from the outset. Gutiérrez captures this "tradition of misunderstanding and suspicion" between Mexican and Mexican Americans by tracing the ebbs and flows of contradictory positions of Mexican American civil rights organizations on the issue of immigration in the twentieth century (57). Key organizations include the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), El Congreso de Pueblos de Habla Española, the Mexican American Movement (MAM), the American G.I. Forum, the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA), the United Farm Workers (UFW), and others. For example, LULAC, which "considered themselves part of a progressive and enlightened leadership elite" (77), excluded non-citizens at its inception and promoted an assimilationist perspective which prioritized citizens over immigrants. Like other organizations and intellectuals, LULAC rationalized its restrictionist position with an expediency argument—a "rational attempt to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of Mexican Americans" (79).

As Gutiérrez explores the internal differences within these organizations, it is immigration policy in the 1950s that best illuminates the ambivalence of Mexican American immigration positions. At this time, U.S. policy is itself in deep contradiction: the importation of immigrant labor through the Bracero Program occurs simultaneously with the passage of deportation legislation and the INS's administration of Operation Wetback. Gutiérrez details the increased ambivalence of LULAC, MAM, and the American G.I.

Forum, who generally supported U.S. policy, yet became alarmed as deportations and INS harassment affected Mexican Americans both personally and indirectly, as families and communities were being disrupted by raids and deportations. We thus begin to see a gradual shift in the restrictionist position of the Mexican American community. For example, activist and intellectual Ernesto Galarza, who once actively opposed the Bracero Program, began to see the problems of immigration as responsibilities of government and business, and not solely that of immigrants.

Ultimately, as Gutiérrez insists, "Increasing awareness of the racist dimensions of immigration policy contributed to the development of a broader sense of community solidarity with resident aliens . . . and demonstrated once again how little difference before the law actually existed between citizens and noncitizen members of the extended Mexicano community" (175). As such, a decisive shift in the political positions of Mexican American organizations occurred, as most groups moved to oppose restrictionist immigration policy. For example, Gutiérrez argues that "the UFW's shifting position on the immigration question provided a good barometer of the extent to which Mexican American thinking on immigration had changed by the mid-1970s" (199). As well, an awakened Chicano identity and activism fostered cultural affinities with Mexican immigrants as immigration became a pivotal issue for Mexican Americans. Community activists Bert Corona and Soledad "Chole" Alatorre, who organized immigrants into an autonomous social welfare organization, "asserted that naturalization, and surely Americanization, was largely irrelevant in a society that refused to recognize the full rights of citizenship for its ethnic and racial minorities" (191). These strong oppositional positions crystallized during the 1970s and 1980s, as extremely restrictive immigration proposals surfaced. Mexican American organizations formed broad coalitions to collectively oppose such legislation and the scapegoating of immigrants.

One of Gutiérrez' major contributions to policy debates is his exploration of cultural and political identity within the relationship between Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants. Gutiérrez writes, "I came to believe that Mexican Americans' views about Mexican immigrants and immigration policy often reveal more about their own sense of ethnic and political identity than about their feelings concerning the immigration debate" (6). According to Gutiérrez, the discrimination which contributed to a collective Mexican identity in 19th century had a similar effect for Mexican American identity in the 20th century, and ultimately effected the change in political positions that culminated in widespread Mexican American organizational support of Mexican immigrants' rights. Gutiérrez thus interweaves the evolution of Mexican American identity with the evolution of Mexican

American civil rights organizations, and this identity's importance to community survival. As Gutiérrez argues, "The development among Mexican Americans of a sense of themselves as Mexican Americans provided a far more important defense against discriminatory practices than did armed resistance or the formation of formal voluntary organizations" (35). It must be mentioned, however, that although Gutiérrez successfully explores Mexican American identity construction in terms of Mexican immigration, he provides few insights into the identity of Mexican immigrants.

In all, Gutiérrez' history expands the discourse on immigration and critiques the use of ahistorical, simplistic and reductive arguments. He advances the premise that "to rail . . . that the United States has lost its sovereign right to secure its borders, without also acknowledging that the nation's leaders themselves have consistently abrogated that right, is to engage, at the very least, in selective memory" (212).

DAVID MANUEL HERNÁNDEZ
University of California, Berkeley