

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE MEXICAN AND AMERICAN BORDERLANDS

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THE MEXICAN FRONTIER, 1821–1846: THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST UNDER MEXICO. By DAVID J. WEBER. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982. Pp. 416. \$19.95 hardcover, \$9.95 paperback.)

MEXICANO RESISTANCE IN THE SOUTHWEST: "THE SACRED RIGHT OF SELF-PRESERVATION." By ROBERT J. ROSENBAUM. (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981. Pp. 241. \$14.95.)

THE TEJANO COMMUNITY, 1836–1900. By ARNOLDO DE LEÓN, with a contribution by KENNETH L. STEWART. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982. Pp. 277. \$19.95.)

AL NORTE DEL RÍO BRAVO (PASADO LEJANO, 1600–1930). By JUAN GÓMEZ-QUIÑONES and DAVID MACIEL. (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno, 1981. Pp. 263.)

AL NORTE DEL RÍO BRAVO (PASADO INMEDIATO, 1930–1981). By DAVID MACIEL. (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno, 1981. Pp. 234.)

In 1921 Herbert Eugene Bolton defined a new arena for historical investigation called the Spanish borderlands.¹ The publication of Bolton's works and those of his students in subsequent years awakened scholars to the importance of the Mexican frontier as a historical bridge between Anglo and Latin America. Bolton's pioneering work set in motion historiographic movements that have taken unforeseen directions.

From the beginning, the history of the Spanish borderlands lacked a well-defined geographic focus and a unified thematic development. Research and teaching in the field up to the publication of John Bannon's *Spanish Borderlands Frontier* in 1960 had expanded to include the study of the Spanish explorations and settlements of Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida.² It was not clear whether this area should be conceived of primarily as an extension of Mexican history or as part of North American or U.S. history. The problem became more acute when scholars began to

consider the nineteenth- and twentieth-century development of this region.³ Those who have studied the recent history of this area from the perspective of the United States have since become identified as students of the American Southwest, while those who have maintained a Mexican perspective have seen themselves as historians of the Chicano experience.

The five books reviewed here are representative of the new directions that borderlands history has taken in the study of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Two general themes have been developed by this new scholarship: an investigation of the influence of the Mexican nation on the people residing in the territories north of the Rio Grande and an examination of the daily life and struggles of the population of Mexican heritage in the United States. Both these themes are synthetic in that they integrate both American and Mexican perspectives.

David Weber's work in this area may embody most clearly the promise of this new historiography. Prior to the publication of this latest work, Weber wrote books dealing with the Spanish borderlands as well as with Chicano history after 1848.⁴ *The Mexican Frontier* is one of fifteen volumes in the History of the American Frontier Series published by the University of New Mexico Press. It is a companion piece to John Bannon's history, continuing the story of the Spanish borderlands into the first half of the nineteenth century. Weber continues the Bolton tradition by analyzing Spanish frontier institutions, the missions, presidios, and pueblos during the Mexican era. He also continues the Bolton-Bannon tradition of interpreting the frontier in light of the policies and politics emanating from the central government in Mexico City. Weber has added new themes in his analysis of Anglo-American political and economic encroachments and in his description of the changes in the frontier's cultural and political life.

Weber's main thesis is that Mexican central government, in both its liberal and conservative cycles, tried unsuccessfully to pull the northern frontier provinces toward the center in order to integrate them into the national political economy. Frontier society nevertheless became increasingly marginal to Mexico, and the local authorities on the frontier became increasingly ambivalent about the Mexican state. By 1846, on the eve of the Mexican War, the border territories had become less Mexican and more American. They had forged strong economic ties with the American frontier and had developed a spirit of separatism.

Weber seeks to describe and analyze the frustrations and failures of the Mexican government as it tried to hold onto its border territories. This work is consequently more of an administrative history that seeks to explain the decay and decline of the Mexican state's power vis-à-vis the far north. Such a history would have been useful to the Mexican authorities had it been published in 1840. In fact, in light of the recent economic

growth and population explosion in the Mexican border region, the book may still be useful to Mexican planners in the 1980s, if indeed history can offer any lessons for the present.

The book is organized topically, treating various elements of the frontier dilemma: political changes, the decline of the church, secularization of mission lands, the enfeeblement of the military, Indian welfare, foreign encroachments, rebellions, and separatism. In researching each topic, Weber has consulted an impressive array of primary and secondary sources, summarized and clarified complex and confusing events, and developed new interpretations that will undoubtedly become standards for the field. Weber thus has broken new ground in this history survey.

One example of this new ground is his view of the role that Americans played in undermining Mexico's control of the Indian populations. Although the Mexican government continued Spain's policy of buying peace with hostile Indian groups through trade and presents, Mexico's military supremacy declined, and Indian raiding increased primarily because of the activities of the American traders, who provided new markets for stolen Mexican goods and new sources of ammunition and fire-power. Indian hostilities laid waste to the frontier defenses as far south as Chihuahua and made the region more vulnerable to a quick American conquest in 1847.

Weber argues convincingly that the Mexican frontier became an economic colony of the United States primarily because the Mexican state lacked the means and will to enforce regulatory legislation aimed at integrating the region into the nation. Corruption, smuggling, and a general laxity in enforcement undercut well-planned efforts by Mexican leaders to tap the north's economic potential. Mexican authorities knew that their control of the northern frontier depended on successful, large-scale colonization. Efforts to populate New Mexico and California with loyal subjects failed miserably partly because of the obstructions of the local officials but also because few Mexicanos wanted to migrate to the arid, impoverished, dangerous region. In Texas the population policy under the colonization laws backfired, resulting in the Texas rebellion.

The argument and analysis of *The Mexican Frontier* challenges the popular view of the Mexican era (1821–46) as a "golden age" of peace and contentment. By comparison, the Spanish era prior to 1810 may well have been arcadian. This somewhat pessimistic assessment of the Mexican frontier in the early nineteenth century derives from Weber's analysis of the failures of the Mexican government. The thesis of Mexican decline in the region, however, does not speak to the issue of the social and cultural vitality of the frontiersmen themselves. It would be erroneous to conclude that there was a parallel degeneration in Mexicano culture, and Weber himself suggests that this was not the case. The Mexicano of the

Southwest endured despite the central government's failures. The border region developed a distinctive culture typified by a hardy egalitarian ethos and a rugged adaptability. This last point is perhaps most forcefully driven home in the books by De León and Gómez-Quíñones, which discuss the culture and society of the nineteenth-century Mexicanos.

Robert Rosenbaum's book, *Mexicano Resistance in the Southwest*, deals with the consequences of Mexico's failure to integrate the frontier territories into the national life. He argues that Mexicanos after 1848 failed to develop a viable political movement to counter their new submerged status in the region primarily because they lacked a well-developed sense of nationalism. Rosenbaum analyzes the many irredentist and resistance movements that sprang up among the former Mexican citizens after the conclusion of the Mexican War and the annexation of the Mexican territories by the United States. Drawing on Eric Hobsbawm's work, he concludes that these movements were political failures because of the parochial limits of the peasant mentality. In his words, they failed because the Mexicanos "did not have the numbers, the tools or the conceptual frame with which to fight a modern nation" (p. 157).

I find some real problems in the argument of this thesis. Rosenbaum tends to overgeneralize about the extent to which Mexicanos, at least their leadership, were part of a peasant society. After all, a small, but significant, native capitalist class existed in most of the major towns in the Southwest prior to and after 1848. Clearly, not all Mexicano leaders were peasants unless one believes that the American ranchers and politicians in the Southwest were also preindustrial. Many Mexicano leaders shared the liberal ideology of the Americans. A realistic chance for political success never existed, at least as Rosenbaum has defined it. Everywhere (except in New Mexico and Arizona) Mexicanos were a numerical minority led by an elite that had strong ties to the American regime. The Americans controlled the courts, the police, the army, and the political system. Most importantly, the vast majority of Mexicanos had no interest in revolution or in rejoining the Mexican state.

The subtitle of Rosenbaum's book is *The Sacred Right of Self-Preservation*, which has been placed within quotation marks. In this instance, the subtheme is perhaps more important than the main thesis in showing how Mexicanos fought to preserve their culture and way of life. Rosenbaum has surveyed most of the resistance movements that arose in the Southwest after 1848, and in doing so, he has consulted a wide variety of primary and secondary sources, even using oral history techniques to capture the local flavor. Most of the conflicts he studies, however, have already been the subject of published monographs. The best-researched portions of the book are those sections dealing with political movements in New Mexico, in particular with the Gorras Blancas and El Partido del Pueblo Unido.

Rosenbaum's most significant contribution lies in bringing together in one volume and organizing under one theoretical frame the scattered record of violent resistance. One can read in a unified discussion about the social bandits in California, the Maxwell Land Grant and Lincoln County War in New Mexico, the Partido Liberal Mexicano in Texas, and a number of other quasi-revolutionary movements. This exercise is useful, if only to point out the fact that many Mexicanos resisted their conquerors with force. The reader may be misled, however, by the emphasis on violent action into concluding that rebelling was the only viable form of Mexicano resistance. The real strengths of Mexican American society were familial, community, and regional ties, not armed resistance. In the nineteenth century, accommodation and peaceful resistance were the most common Mexicano responses. In terms of the panorama of the Mexican American experience, the resistance movements were largely symbolic in significance. Social and cultural associations, community newspapers, fiestas, labor organizations, *mutualistas*, and a whole range of cultural activities were more important in the self-preservation of the Mexicano way of life than were the violent resistance movements.

The armed conflicts between Anglo and Mexicano in the nineteenth century may be interpreted as military and political failures, but on a folkloric level they were not. The examples of Juan "Cheno" Cortina, Aniceto Pizana, Juan Flores, and a host of other "revolutionary" leaders were to be mythologized by the common people in their songs and legends. This source provided inspiration for more mundane struggles, such as finding a job and feeding the family. Within what Rosenbaum identifies as the peasant imagination, these heroes would become larger-than-life examples of the persistence of the Mexicano spirit. Despite its controversial thesis and the dangers of its being misinterpreted, *Mexicano Resistance in the Southwest* is a useful book because it succeeds in emphasizing the autonomous presence of Mexicanos in the Southwest after 1848.

Arnaldo De León's work, *The Tejano Community, 1836–1900*, documents the less dramatic and less bloody aspects of the Mexicano struggle. He is largely concerned with "the world Tejanos made for themselves" (p. xi), the story of the ordinary people and their daily life. This book is primarily a social and cultural history, not a political one, although De León seeks to challenge the notion that Mexicanos were passive or apolitical. He shows that they had an active and diverse political involvement in Texas within the administrations of the city, county, and state governments. In general, Tejanos (meaning the population of Mexican descent in Texas) followed an accommodationist, rather than a revolutionary, path.

De León depicts the vitality of Tejano society by presenting de-

tailed ethnographic descriptions of various facets of Tejano life: the work routines and life-styles of skilled and unskilled workers such as the *mes-teneros* (mustang breakers), *vaqueros* (cowboys), *pastores* (shepherds), *arrieros* (drovers), *vendedoros* (sellers), *barrileros* (barrel makers), and many others. He describes the diet, dress, dwellings, songs, fiestas, and folk religion, which together made up the rich culture of the Tejanos. The point De León is making is that the Mexicano way of life persisted in its integrity, not that the Mexicans became proletarianized or colonized, as has been emphasized by some historians. Indeed, their very segregation in rural and urban areas reinforced the strength of their community life. De León, along with Gómez-Quíñones, argues that many of the essential elements of the Tejano culture changed very slowly, if at all, during the nineteenth century.

In many areas, De León's study supplements Weber's analysis by adding a wealth of detail to the social life and customs of the Tejano borderlanders. He agrees with Weber that the Catholic Church as an institution declined in importance for many Tejanos prior to and after 1836, but he goes on to describe the diverse folk religion of the people that persisted despite the lack of formal ecclesiastical support: family altars, reenactments of *Las Posada* and *Los Pastores*, and the use of *curanderos* all continued, as did a lively spirituality and philosophy that mixed elements of the Indian, Spanish, and Anglo world views.

The chapter on folklore depicts an explicit link between the cultural beliefs and practices before and after the American conquest. Using the archives of the Texas Folklore Society, De León traces philosophical and poetic nuances that evolved in Tejano legends, myths, and songs. What emerges is a magnificent ethno-historical portrait of a living society in its totality. His point is that the Tejanos may have been oppressed economically, but not culturally. Instead, they evolved a bicultural society that blended American and Mexican traditions.

The Tejano Community is a good example of an interdisciplinary history that draws on the most recent work being done in folkloric and quantitative studies. Kenneth Stewart collaborated with De León in generating a data base sample of Tejanos and Anglos who were listed in the federal census schedules between 1850 and 1900. The statistical discussions are artfully integrated into the portrayal of daily life, customs, and beliefs. De León's interpretation of the documents and data results in a solid contribution to southwestern and Chicano history. In documenting how Tejano life endured despite the failures of the Mexican government and the Anglo-American political and economic oppressions, he links the Mexican period with the American period and provides a basis for evaluating the dynamics of cultural change.

Juan Gómez-Quíñones and David Maciel's books are Volumes 16 and 17 in a series on the history of Mexican labor that is being coordi-

nated by the Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and published by Siglo Veintiuno Press. The two books are the most recent Mexican publications by North American authors dealing with the northern frontier;⁵ their appearance represents a growing interest in the border region by the Mexican intellectual establishment. The two works trace the social and economic history of working-class Mexicanos north of the Río Bravo (Rio Grande) from 1620 to the present.

Gómez-Quiñones in Volume 16, *Al norte del Río Bravo (Pasado Lejano, 1600–1930)*, provides a broad conceptual analysis of the major historical forces that have affected the laborers of the Mexican north: the hispanicization and attempted assimilation of the Indians, persisting Mexican immigration, and the American military conquest and economic colonization. Like Weber, Gómez-Quiñones emphasizes that events on the northern frontier are best understood in terms of the political and economic development of the center. Unlike Weber, Gómez-Quiñones takes a more sanguine view of the Mexican failures to integrate this region within the nation. He is more concerned with the rhythms of Mexicano life in the borderlands. He argues accordingly that the northward movement of workers into the frontier region during the Spanish and Mexican eras represented an opportunity for individuals to escape political and economic coercion. Wages were higher, skilled labor more valuable, and workers generally better treated than in central Mexico. This migration continued with renewed vigor after 1848 so that by 1910, approximately one-half of the population of Mexican heritage in the Southwest were immigrants or descendants of immigrants. This point is important because Mexican immigration is usually considered to be significant as a primarily twentieth-century phenomenon.

One of the strongest features of this volume is its vivid description of the work routines of various types of laborers, much like De León's study. The reader learns of the techniques and organization involved in cattle and sheep raising, mining, droving, and similar activities. Like De León, Gómez-Quiñones argues that there was a basic continuity in custom and work from the Mexican to the American eras. Little changed in terms of the day-to-day activities of Mexicano laborers during the nineteenth century. Technological innovations had little impact on the everyday life of laborers prior to the turn of the century. While American capitalist expansion after 1848 disrupted traditional landholding patterns, and while conflicts with Anglo-Americans generated the violent resistance movements that are described by Rosenbaum, the social and cultural organizations of laborers were for Gómez-Quiñones facts of the greatest historical significance. *Mutualistas* and labor unions in the late nineteenth century were, he believes, the most effective expressions of working-class resistance and group solidarity.

The thesis developed is that despite regional differences, the Mexicano working class on both sides of the border was unified by important commonalities of culture, belief, work routines, family life, social and economic organization, and immigration. Thus, while regional variations in the history of the Mexicanos before and after 1848 are important, Gómez-Quiñones would argue that the similarities in their experience should not be ignored. Most were laborers whose prosaic lives changed slowly, and they remained essentially Mexican in a cultural sense.

The last part of Volume 16 and all of Volume 17 in the *Siglo Veintiuno* series are written by David Maciel. His task was to trace the history of Mexicano and Chicano labor movements from 1900 to the present. He carried out this assignment by researching hundreds of reports, newspapers, documents, and by conducting oral history interviews. The general theme he develops, through an examination of scores of labor organizations, strikes, and conflicts, is that Mexican Americans have had a long and active involvement within the American labor movement. His view is that Chicanos were not passive preindustrial peasants who accepted inequality and exploitation. On the contrary, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they formed hundreds of labor organizations to fight for better wages and working conditions.

Maciel argues that the Chicano labor movement has been influenced by a large number of actors whose influence has changed according to historical circumstances. American radicals like the Wobblies (IWW), Mexican revolutionaries such as Ramón Flores Magón's Partido Liberal Mexicano, Mexican labor organizations such as the Gran Círculo de Obreros Mexicanos, the Confederación Regional de Obreros Mexicanos, and more traditional American labor groups such as the Western Federation of Miners all played roles in developing the Chicano labor movement. At the same time, Maciel argues that Chicanos have generated their own labor movement by creating mutual aid societies and community social organizations.

In analyzing the history of Chicano labor activity during the period 1900–30, Maciel is careful to place their organizing activity within the broader context of changes in the American labor movement and economy. This context helps the reader understand that the Chicano's struggles were not isolated cases of local or regional resistance but part of a larger pattern of working-class activity. In this light, Mexican-American participation in the agricultural and mining strikes during the period 1900–20 were part of a nationwide conflict between labor and capital. The bloody Ludlow strike in 1914 was not only a significant event for American labor but a chapter in Chicano working-class history because almost half of those killed in the massacre of April 1914 were Mexicans or Chicanos. Maciel's major contribution is that he has made the Chicano

labor struggle more visible, thus providing a much-needed supplement to the standard works on American labor.

A continuing source of conflict in the period 1900–30 was wage and job discrimination. Employers tried to divide the working class by paying Mexicans and Chicanos lower wages and by giving them less desirable work. Many of the strikes in this period sought to eliminate this kind of discrimination. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) and even the United Mine Workers, however, were generally apathetic about these issues. Chicanos therefore had to take the initiative, as they did in the Imperial Valley cantaloupe strike in 1928. Another reaction to low wages and inferior working conditions was to move. Geographic mobility into and out of the urban barrios of the Southwest and Midwest became a way of life for the laborers of the 1920s as they searched for better opportunities. Mexican immigration had its complement of internal Chicano and Mexican urban-rural migration.

In Volume 17, the final one in the UNAM series, Maciel continues his analysis for the period from 1930 to the present. Of special note for both Volumes 16 and 17 are the bibliographies, by far the most complete ones compiled thus far on the history of Mexican and Chicano labor in the United States.⁶ In Volume 17, Maciel stresses the essential unity of the Mexicano working class on both sides of the border, as did Gómez-Quíñones in Volume 16. The Mexicanos in both the United States and Mexico ironically helped support with their labor the very imperialist system that kept them in a semicolonized condition. The reward for their labors, Maciel says, “was exploitation, institutional racism and exclusion from the American way of life” (p. 86).

On reading the chronicle of labor violence and organizing activity among the Chicanos and Mexicanos during the 1930s and 1940s, one is left to wonder whether the struggle could ever really have succeeded. The opposition of the owners, the government, and American labor unions were formidable obstacles. The Chicano labor struggle was probably doomed to strategic defeat if one accepts Maciel’s view that capitalism requires as a primary condition a large reserve of cheap, exploitable labor. On the other hand, a few real tactical victories were achieved, as Maciel points out, indicating that reform of the system was possible.

This volume is a useful resource for those who want to understand the dynamics of the Chicano labor movement. The reader learns that exclusion from the New Deal’s job programs and labor legislation (the Wagner Act) forced some Chicanos to join with radical labor leaders, the Communist party, and Mexican labor organizers. The AFL continued to exclude Chicanos from its councils and spent little time and money organizing Mexicans and Chicanos. This neglect forced Mexicanos and Chicanos to form independent unions such as the United Cannery and Agricultural and Packinghouse Workers of America in Texas. Some Mexi-

canos joined with renegade Anglo-American workers to strike for better wages and conditions, as occurred in the National Miner's Union strike in Walsenberg, Colorado. Chicanos were creative in overcoming obstacles, forming alliances, or going it alone as the situation dictated. They engaged in hundreds of strikes throughout the 1930s and 1940s in industrial and agricultural sectors of the economy. Much of Maciel's volume details the origin, motivation, tactics, and results of these strikes.

Maciel goes beyond a mere recounting of the complicated job actions to analyze the national and international political environment in which these struggles took place. The difficulties of the farm labor movement after World War II are seen in light of the growing cold war tensions and rising anticommunist hysteria. During the 1940s, the National Farmworkers Union fell victim to the McCarthy era, the anti-union, anti-communist sentiment within the federal government, and the active lobbying efforts of the Teamsters and growers.

This work brings the story of the southwestern Mexican laborers up to the present day. Maciel describes the urban labor union activity during the sixties, seventies, and eighties, including the Corpus Christi strike in 1969, the Farah strike in El Paso in 1972, and the activities of the Center for Autonomous Social Action (CASA) in Los Angeles up to 1980. In reviewing the twentieth century, Maciel concludes that the failures of Chicanos to achieve social justice within the American system have not been due to any lack of organization, ideas, or forceful leaders but to the very nature of the system itself. One would hope that these two Mexican volumes will also become available in English for a larger audience. Together they may constitute the most comprehensive and up-to-date survey of Chicano labor and unionization activity to appear thus far.

In sum, these five books demonstrate that scholars who want to understand the American Southwest and the Mexican frontier must inevitably transcend the boundaries between historical fields, national perspectives, and academic disciplines. In our own time, the region of the borderlands has become increasingly important in the political and economic life of both the United States and Mexico. The books reviewed here suggest that it will be impossible for future analysts to talk about the contemporary Southwest without giving serious consideration to the continuous historical presence of the Mexicanos and the Chicanos.

NOTES

1. Herbert Eugene Bolton, *The Spanish Borderlands: A Chronicle of Old Florida and the Southwest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921).
2. John Francis Bannon, *The Spanish Borderlands Frontier, 1513–1821*, (New York: Holt, Rinehardt, and Winston, 1960).
3. For an excellent discussion of the ambiguous place of borderlands history in Latin American historiography, see José Cuello, "Beyond the 'Borderlands' Is the North of Colonial Mexico: A Latin-Americanist Perspective to the Study of the Mexican North

- and the United States Southwest," *Proceedings of the Pacific Coast Council on Latin American Studies* 9 (1982): 1–24.
4. *Foreigners in Their Native Land: Historical Roots of the Mexican Americans*, edited by David J. Weber (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1973); also, *New Spain's Far Northern Frontier: Essays on Spain in the American West, 1540–1821* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979).
 5. See, for example, David J. Weber, *El México perdido: ensayos escogidos sobre el antiguo norte de México, 1540–1821* (Mexico: Sepsetentas, 1976); David Maciel and Patricia Bueno, *Aztlán: historia contemporánea del pueblo chicano* (Mexico: Sepsetentas, 1976). Survey histories of the Chicano recently published in Mexico are Carey McWilliams, *Al norte de México*, 4th ed. (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno, 1979); and Rudolfo Acuña, *América ocupada* (Mexico: Era, 1981).
 6. This bibliography can be supplemented with the one found in Juan Gómez-Quiñones, *The Development of the Mexican Working Class North of the Rio Bravo: Work and Culture among Laborers and Artisans, 1600–1900*, Popular Series no. 2 (Los Angeles: UCLA, Chicano Studies Research Center, 1982). The text of this work is a modified version of the Spanish text of the UNAM volume with an expanded bibliography.