trends in the United States economy, polity, 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); Mexican’s 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 salience 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 barrios and isolated rural colonias, they seemed to gradually disappear from the landscape, thereby fulfilling the prophesies 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 reversioning 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 restoring 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 presaged that of the conquer 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 Western 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
... 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. ...

... 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 Almaguer, 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, Chicanas and Mexicanas 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 agenda 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 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 unswerving 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 socially 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 for so 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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