Recent Approaches to Chicano History

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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, the location of their research in the East or Midwest, Chicano 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 rights 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 illuminated... the sources of differentiation within the Chicano community, past and present. More important, recent research confirms 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 experience of Chicanos. Third, the conceptualization of Chicano history in such terms exaggerated the continuities in Chicano/mexicano culture and obscured its discontinuities and variation. Fourth, a tendency toward local community studies inhibited a geographically comparative view.

As a consequence, the theme of victimization ran through much of the historical literature on Chicanos. Not surprisingly, occupational charts revealed the historic downward mobility of most Chicanos in the face of Anglo ascendancy. For those Mexicans who held property, landholding patterns after 1848 exposed frequent dispossession at the hands of venal Anglo lawyers, a racist judicial system, and corrupt politicians. To complete the picture, many stressed the resistance offered 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 experience of Chicanos in the nineteenth century. For instance, the colonial framework 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 surpassed 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, received 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 Oakah Jones’s contribution on northern Mexico in the colonial period.

Other examples may be cited, but the conclusion was clear: the conceptualization 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 spilled 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, 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

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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 asccriptive 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..." modify the names of the greater importance of others, [naturally] 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 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."