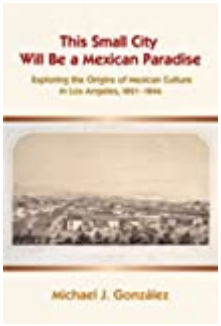
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Michael J. GonzÒÂ¡lez. *This Small City Will Be a Mexican Paradise: Exploring the Origins of Mexican Culture in Los Angeles, 1821-1846.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005. x + 254 pp. $22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8263-3607-1.

Reviewed by Anne Hyde (Southwest Studies, Colorado College)

Published on H-Urban (March, 2006)

Liberalism, Racism, and Theory in Early California

Michael GonzÃ¡lez has written an important book that will probably annoy many historians, but also one that they won't be able to put down. Anyone interested in nationalism, race and ethnic relations, early California, or present-day immigration issues should read this book. GonzÃ¡lez, an associate professor of history at San Diego University, has combined deep research in early California archives and a sophisticated use of literary theory to ask important questions about what Mexicans and "Californios" wanted from their lives in the small city of Los Angeles. By focusing on their ambitions and fears about life in an isolated outpost of a new Mexican nation, GonzÃ¡lez makes a fascinating assessment of the developing identity of Los Angelenos in the years before the Mexican War.

The book is innovative (and probably controversial) in two ways. First, his argument upends most of what we think about "Californios" and their idyllic pastoral lives. Basically, GonzÃ¡lez argues that Mexican Los Angelenos did not hope to be either independent or connected to the United States, but rather they wanted to build California in the image of a liberal Mexico. Liberalism in Mexico, of course, involved specific ideas about constitutions, nations, and a unified people which might never have been possible in a colonial outpost. This desire to be part of the Mexican mainland and political ideology led, however, to a series of behaviors and choices around how to deal with local native people that were hardly "liberal." Second, the author structures the book, very elegantly, around a complicated reading of a single document, a petition sent from the citizens of Los Angeles to Governor Pio Pico. The petition, written only four months before the United States invaded Mexico in 1846, allows GonzÃ¡lez a window into the hopes and fears of a relatively broad swath of Los Angeles' residents. Beginning with "Indians" and ending with "Extermination," he chooses a significant word from the petition as title for each chapter and uses those words to inspect what Mexican Californians said, but also to consider what they meant.

Now, moving into the realm of assigning meaning and intent to people who lived nearly two hundred years ago and who left few written records is dangerous for a historian. However, I found his approach appealing because of his honesty about the relative paucity of sources

and the fact that educated imagination and wise use of theory may be the only way to build a story about this place and time. Because GonzÃ¡lez is also a skilled social historian, he uses the bits and pieces of data he found in the town council, the *ayuntamiento*, and court records, tax records, and in the personal papers, libraries, and memoirs of people in both California and Mexico very effectively.

As a reader, I followed GonzÃ¡lez very willingly into the realm of empathy for the world of early "Californios" and the cultural and ideological challenges they faced. His description of the tension between developing new liberal ideas and behaviors about work, education, and familial relationships and upholding traditional values espoused by Mexican culture and the Catholic Church rang true. "Californios" faced the same transitions as English workers and the rising American middle classes, classically depicted by E.P. Thompson and Mary Ryan.[1] However, as for other people undergoing such cultural and social changes, the path was not entirely smooth for Mexican "Californios." They understood that to be good liberals they should value work more than pleasure, but, then pleasure was â¦ well, pleasurable.

And, very important to GonzÃ¡lez's argument, much of this concern around pleasure centered on local Indians. Native Californians, always around 25 percent of the population, but representing a wide range of groups, some of whom had been mission Indians and some of whom had not, were essential to the livelihood and well-being of Los Angelenos. They produced food and exportable goods, provided a great deal of labor, and served as household servants. At the same time, these people constantly violated new liberal conceptions about self-restraint, enjoying fiestas replete with drinking and immodest behavior, and even more threatening, occasionally rebelling against and even killing their "Californio" neighbors and masters. GonzÃ¡lez argues that the biggest problem for "Californios" who wanted to be good Mexicans was that they also found great temptation to become Indians. Here, we have to accept a set of jumps in logic. Gonzalez knows from newspaper reports and court proceedings that many "Californios" participated in fiestas, drank to excess, and engaged in immodest behavior. He also knows that many people read liberal texts that celebrated the values of the French and Mexican revolutions and taught their children strict rules of behavior. But no one seems to have left any record about how they felt about this disjuncture between behavior and belief.

GonzÃ¡lez believes that the racially charged and extreme ways in which the "Californios" reacted toward Indians can be explained by just such disjunctures. And, I think I believe it too. In several chapters with titles like "Excesses" and "Exterminate," he outlines how Los Angelenos captured, disciplined, enslaved, and distinguished themselves from the Indians. Here Gonzalez is at his best as a social historian, using military reports, property records and wills, and court proceedings as evidence of the number of captives and the ways in which they were treated. I am entirely convinced of the rather striking efforts Mexican "Californios" made to enslave and punish and quarantine Indians. However, the next step, when GonzÃ¡lez wants us to conclude that for these aspiring liberals in remote California, the only way to establish themselves as good Mexicans was to exterminate the Indians, may be too big a leap. His last chapter, where he denotes the desire that Los Angelenos had to build a new liberal vision is based on the existence of a few textbooks, journals, and published speeches. No doubt these ideas floated around Alta California but how much they affected the complex stew of culture there is unclear. How liberal Los Angelenos wanted to be remains an open question. How they behaved toward native peoples is not.

Michael GonzÃ¡lez has provided us with an evocative and disturbing picture of early Los Angeles. He reminds us that California "was never an innocent place" (p. 189). He ends his book with a warning that we should heed. There is some relationship between liberal nationalism and racial extermination. And, as hard as Los Angelenos tried, they could not create peace with discipline and brutality, a lesson that we should learn ourselves.

Note

[1]. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban

Citation: Anne Hyde. Review of GonzÖÂ¡lez, Michael J., *This Small City Will Be a Mexican Paradise: Exploring the Origins of Mexican Culture in Los Angeles, 1821-1846.* H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. March, 2006.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11524

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.