

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Francisco E. Balderrama, Raymond Rodriguez. *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995. ix + 283 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8263-1575-5; \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8263-1628-8.



Reviewed by Yolanda C. Leyva (Division of Behavioral and Cultural Sciences, The University of Texas at San Antonio)

Published on H-LatAm (June, 1996)

Decade of Betrayal is a book which accomplishes dual purposes. First, it fills a considerable gap in the historiography of Mexicans in the United States. Second, Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez have chosen a topic that is as relevant in today's world as it was in the 1930s. In the last several years, repatriation has resurfaced as public discussions examine the whys, wheres, and hows of reverse, frequently involuntary, migratory movements. Despite differences in specific historical circumstances such as motivations, government policies, and public reaction, expatriates returning home, whether Haitian, Afghan, or Mexican, share certain universal dilemmas and challenges. The governments involved, too, face similar difficulties and hurdles in responding to the entry of their repatriates. *Decade of Betrayal* provides critical insights into the dynamics of the repatriation process.

Decade of Betrayal adds much to our understanding of twentieth-century Mexican American history, yet it achieves much more. We must resist the tendency to categorize such works as "simply" ethnic history. Instead it is essential that we recognize the value of such studies in a more global sense. *Decade of Betrayal* explores issues of identity and citizenship and the resourceful ways in which people caught between two nations and two gov-

ernments can negotiate their lives. It is a work reflecting the transnational character of Mexican Americans. It is as much a work of U.S. history as a work illuminating Mexican history.

Using both Mexican and U.S. archival sources, Rodriguez and Balderrama succeed in painting a complex portrait of an important episode in Chicano/Mexicano history—the repatriation of what they conservatively estimate to be one million Mexicans and Mexican Americans during the 1930s. Increasing public hostility against all Mexicans, both foreign and U.S.-born, in conjunction with insensitive or at best inadequate government policies and programs created difficult, often tragic, circumstances for Mexican communities across the United States. Throughout their "telling of the story," the two historians emphasize the resiliency and ingenuity of Mexicans in the face of an overwhelming crisis.

The 1930s represents a fascinating time in Mexican American history—contradictory trends emerged and coalesced into a complicated community identity. On the one hand, Mexican Americans continued to develop an increasing sense of "American-ness" (a process already underway in the 1920s). At the same time, however, Anglo American workers, local, state, and federal governments, welfare programs, and labor unions increasingly

viewed and defined them more and more vocally as “foreigners.” Designated outsiders rather than “real” Americans, Mexican American communities found themselves on the defensive against intensifying attack. In response, many Mexicans turned to Mexico as a refuge.

Rodriguez and Balderrama place their work within a historiographical tradition well-known to scholars of twentieth-century Mexican American history. Although contemporary observers such as economist Paul Taylor, anthropologist Manuel Gamio, and sociologist Emory Bogardus noted the significance of the Mexican migration to the United States and the ensuing reverse migration more than sixty years ago, scholars did not explore repatriation in detail again until the 1970s. Among the most significant works produced in the 1970s were Abraham Hoffman’s *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression* (1974) and Mercedes Carreras de Velasco’s *Los Mexicanos Que Devolvio la Crisis* (1974). Although not devoted exclusively to the study of repatriation, Balderrama’s own 1982 *In Defense of La Raza: The Los Angeles Mexican Consulate and the Mexican Community, 1929-1936* added significantly to our understanding of the relationship between the Mexican government and the Mexican community in the United States. After more than a decade of apparent neglect, the 1990s has already seen the appearance of three works probing the complexities of Mexican American history during the depression decade. In addition to the work under review, Camille Guerin-Gonzalez’s *Mexican Workers and American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm labor, 1900-1939* (1994) focuses on Mexican American experiences in California. A significant aspect of this work is her analysis of the ideology that justified the massive expulsion of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. George J. Sanchez’s *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (1993) explores the “ambivalent Americanism” created by repatriation.

Rodriguez and Balderrama begin their book with a chapter titled “Immigration: Al Norte.” The chapter summarizes information already familiar to historians. Mexicans moved northward in search of employment and higher wages. The policies of the Porfiriato and the violence of the 1910 Revolution and its aftermath (which lasted through the 1920s) helped “push” Mexicans out of Mexico. Simultaneously, the economic development of the U.S. Southwest worked together with employer-held attitudes regarding Mexican workers (Mexicans were not only cheap but also temporary laborers) to create government policies and programs that stimulated Mexican mi-

gration to the United States. Herein lay the roots of the great betrayal. After decades of energetic recruitment by U.S. employers, with the support of the U.S. government, in the 1930s Mexicans suddenly found themselves pushed out of the United States, now considered burdens on the nation they had done so much for.

The following three chapters set the stage for the extensive repatriation. Rodriguez and Balderrama look at “The Family,” “Deportation,” and “Welfare” in order to depict the situation for Mexicans just prior to leaving. These chapters reflect two of the great strengths of the work. First, they continually focus on the intricacies of family relations in terms of gender, generation, and nationality. Mexican families are anything but monolithic in this story. Rather, we see women, men, and children emerge as characters with their own needs, desires, and points of view. And we begin to understand the difficulties of maintaining a family under the arduous circumstances created by the Great Depression. A second strength of the work is its wide-angle geographic view of the Mexican community in the United States. Balderrama and Rodriguez point to the diversity of Mexican Americans with illustrations drawn from Detroit and Chicago as well as throughout the Southwest.

Balderrama and Rodriguez concentrate much of their narrative on the Mexican family. By their doing so, the erroneous assumptions underlying government policies in the 1930s become glaringly apparent. Employers had long understood the importance of family among Mexican migrant workers and had “successfully exploited this feature in generating maximum profits” (p. 34). The very presence of family, however, transformed what had been initially a much more transient population into a population seeking permanency and stability. As time went by, the temporary nature of the Mexican population in the United States became more and more of a myth. The assumption that Mexican families comprised only foreigners was also faulty. Governments, both local and federal, assumed that deporting “Mexican” families would save money by cutting down on welfare payments paid to “undeserving” foreigners.

In reality, however, many “Mexican” families contained numerous U.S.-born members, eligible for the same benefits as any other American. Furthermore, government policies frequently resulted in the splitting up of families, which in turn meant that increasing numbers of Mexican Americans would then be forced onto relief. The authors point to the “cruel dilemmas” facing Mexicans—barred from employment by laws denying non-citizens

the chance to participate in public works projects and their opportunities in agricultural work also decreasing, Mexicans and Mexican Americans were more and more pushed into asking for relief, which in turn made them more visible candidates for repatriation or deportation. Despite these risks, however, many families chose to remain in the United States at the urging of their U.S.-born children. We have rarely heard the voices of these children, U.S. citizens by birth, but considered foreigners by the dominant society.

The chapter on "Repatriation" acts as a transition between the U.S. and Mexican sides of the story, and it turns many of our commonly held notions upside down, much as repatriation must have turned the world of the repatriates upside down as well. Mexicans who had moved to the United States in previous years with the belief that they would be there temporarily returned to Mexico with the belief that they had returned only temporarily. Rather than the image of a Mexican anticipating a short-term absence from *la patria*, we find Mexicans anticipating short stays in their land of birth. For their U.S.-born children, returning "home" meant moving to a foreign country with a different language and a different culture. For these children repatriation was not repatriation at all, but expatriation. Families were torn apart by the difficult decisions facing them and by their children's resistance to the move. Furthermore, immigrants returning to Mexico were returning to a changed nation. They themselves were changed.

As in the United States, the issue of repatriation provided substantial fare for nationalistic politicians. Also, as in the United States, the issue elicited a strong emotional reaction. In their chapter on "Revolutionary Mexico," the two historians report that repatriation "reawakened deeply embedded revolutionary sentiments for social justice, feelings of Mexicanismo, and a strong anti-American sentiment among the general populace" (p. 133). In their chapter "Colonization: Pan y Tierra," the authors explore the ways in which the Mexican government sought to both address the needs of the repatriates and assimilate them, seeking to build Mexico through their skills. These visions eventually failed, however, because of too few resources.

The chapter on "Adjustment: Agringados" continues the job of turning commonly held notions on their heads. The image of the "recien llegado," often used to identify a recent Mexican immigrant to the United States, refers instead to Mexicans recently arrived in Mexico, adjusting to life in their old country. The problems of readjustment

were great. Years of living in U.S. urban areas, for example, made it difficult for people returning to rural areas with few amenities. Women returning to a more conservative society found that their behavior and appearance were often viewed as scandalous. But perhaps the hardest hit of all were the children "without a country" who were viewed as "agringados" by the Mexicans and as "Mexicans" by Anglo Americans.

The conflict arising between the Mexicans who remained in Mexico and those who left only to return during the depression created the second betrayal. Betrayed by their adopted country, the repatriates were then spurned by their compatriots. The repatriates, the *recien llegados*, found that they were seen almost as outsiders, despite the fact that for years these *mexicanos en el extranjero* had been sending back to their families what amounted to millions of dollars. Where was "home" for these repatriates? Rodriguez and Balderrama characterize the mass repatriations of the 1930s as "the most significant and crucial events to befall Mexico de afuera residents during the twentieth century" (p. 222). Ironically, but not surprisingly, this tragic episode ended with the return of the repatriates as World War II created a labor shortage in the United States. Again, employers along with the U.S. government solicited the labor of Mexican workers.

Like all good historical studies, *Decade of Betrayal* both answers questions and raises new ones. This monograph points to several fertile areas of research. Although *Decade of Betrayal* covers a wide geographical area, there is still a need for more localized studies. For example, while Balderrama and Rodriguez mention the devastating effects of the reverse migration on border cities, the short- and long-term effects on binational communities remain largely unknown. What opportunities for cooperation and conflict arose as border cities such as Ciudad Juarez and El Paso tried to cope with the arrival of thousands of repatriates? Did the Mexican communities on both sides of the border identify with each other in the face of this crisis or did these conditions augment a sense of separateness?

This important study also points to some intriguing questions regarding citizenship and the definition of "American." What does the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of American citizens say about the United States itself? What is the relationship of the legal definition of citizenship to cultural citizenship?

What of the thousands of repatriates who returned to the United States in the 1940s and 1950s? How had the

experience changed them, their identity, their expectations of a nation that had only recently expelled them?

Finally, the mass repatriations of the 1930s were preceded by earlier waves of repatriation—the movement of Mexicans across the new boundary following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, the repatriation of Mexicans stimulated by the Mexican government’s land policies in the 1870s, and the repatriation of Mexicans during the 1920-21 depression. Despite their importance, we know very little about these earlier movements of Mexi-

cans back to Mexico.

Throughout the story told by Rodriguez and Balderrama we see people attempting to survive an immense crisis brought about by circumstances beyond their control. *Decade of Betrayal* is a book that succeeds in balancing tragedy and injustice with human hope and spirit.

Copyright (c) 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

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

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Yolanda C. Leyva. Review of Balderrama, Francisco E.; Rodriguez, Raymond, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. June, 1996.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=463>

Copyright © 1996 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.