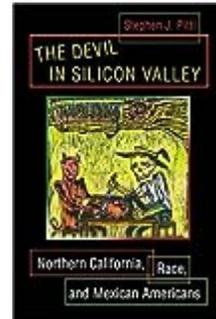




Stephen J. Pitti. *The Devil in Silicon Valley: Northern California, Race, and Mexican Americans.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003. 320 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-09287-4.



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Published on H-California (June, 2003)

Unmasking the Devil: The Mexican Experience in the Silicon Valley

Unmasking the Devil: The Mexican Experience in the Silicon Valley

In *The Devil in Silicon Valley*, Stephen J. Pitti places Mexican Americans at the center of the history of California's Santa Clara Valley, a history shaped by a "devil" of racist ideologies that privileges whites and oppresses Mexicans. Examining the period from Spanish settlement in 1776 to the present day, Pitti uses this community study to make broader and important suggestions about California's history, placing labor relationships constructed along racial lines at the center of the development of the San Jose region. The author also uses his subjects to illuminate the important role played by migration, both to and from the area, in the Valley's economic growth as well as in Mexican American cultural and political responses to their condition. The result is a "counterhistory" that rejects the dominant, boosterist vision of Silicon Valley and challenges us to view racist, exploitative labor relations as the underpinnings of modern California.

Pitti argues that from the beginnings of Spanish settlement in the Santa Clara Valley in the late eighteenth

century, the region's rulers relied on racial divisions to control their workforce and bring the Valley into world markets. Using archival records, the author shows how both the Spanish and the Mexican regimes used force to maintain this arrangement, establishing a pattern of exploitation and violence in labor relations that intensified with the American conquest in 1848. The Americans, Pitti states, brought "the devil's language" to the Valley in the 1840s: "white Americans over the Mexican and Indian populations that stood in their path" (p. 26). He uses the dispossession of the Californios as an example of how white Americans universalized the Mexican populations, replacing pre-1848 class differences with a racial hierarchy.

The mercury mines at New Almaden serve Pitti as an early and foundational example of the oppression faced by Mexicans in an Americanized Santa Clara Valley. Pitti uses the mines to show the central role of Mexican workers in the industrial west, and shows the transnational nature of their struggle for economic and social justice. In 1862, when Mexico battled for its independence against French invaders, the Mexicans of New

Almaden rallied their community around the Mexican nation and used that sense of collective identity to inform their own battle against the Quicksilver Management Company, operators of the New Almaden mines. Indeed, this chapter is perhaps Pitti's strongest, with excellent archival research contributing to a well-written reconstruction of the life of Mexican workers at New Almaden, giving life and illustration to the broader analytic themes interwoven into the narrative.

Pitti develops his arguments about the role of migration most strongly when he shifts his focus to the early twentieth century. The Mexican Revolution that begins in 1910 initiated a new wave of migration from Mexico to the Santa Clara Valley, which "triggered processes of cultural change" (p. 82) that bound people from disparate parts of Mexico together along the route from their homes to Northern California. Pitti offers an important analysis of how migration also served the "devil" of discrimination, as white Americans responded to the migrants by emphasizing citizenship as a condition of employment and full entry into mainstream society.

The author shifts his focus in the chapters on the Great Depression and the later twentieth century. The discussion of a race-based labor system and the role of migration are subsumed to Pitti's description of the organizational and activist responses of Mexicans to economic distress and continued racism. Mexicans joined with other marginalized groups in the Santa Clara Valley, including Filipinos and Japanese, and organized to improve working conditions with help from CIO organizers. After World War II, Mexican Americans worked through groups such as the National Farm Labor Union and the Community Services Organization (CSO) to improve their living conditions, and Pitti does an excellent job of using oral histories supplemented by labor archives to show the varied forms of resistance to Mexicans' continued oppression. Indeed, these later chapters provide important insights into the history of Mexican activism in postwar California, showing their roots in Depression-era organizing as well as the linkages between regions within the Golden State. The Santa Clara Valley, in its rapid transition from an agricultural to a high-tech economy in the 1950s and 1960s, exhibits unique qualities that shed light on how these organizations had to frame their appeals to the Mexican American community, as well as the divergent paths of activism that community pursued in its fight for justice. Pitti rightly criticizes "Chicano historians who have slouched towards hagiography in representing the heady politics of the 1960s" (p. 186) and instead asserts that the panoply of groups that replaced

the CSO in that time failed to achieve significant change in the condition of Mexican Americans. Pitti's willingness to critically examine the Chicano civil rights movement, seeking its strengths and weaknesses, is an important step in the developing historiography of the broader civil rights movement, seeking to place it in a historical context and broadening the field of vision beyond the more radical, attention-grabbing groups while accepting their contributions to the campaign for justice.

The Devil in Silicon Valley makes extensive use of oral histories and dozens of interviews that the author conducted with Mexican Americans living in San Jose, and these personal stories exert a powerful influence on the text itself, bringing a richness of individual and community history to this study. The personal stories that Pitti has gathered help to humanize his subjects as well as the discrimination and violence they have endured without losing sight of his analytic goals. This is an important book for a number of reasons, particularly its historical and transnational perspective on the history of Mexican Americans in Northern California. By reaching back to the period of Spanish and Mexican rule and contrasting that with the American conquest, Pitti is able to show the centrality of racialized ideologies of labor to the development of the Santa Clara Valley and, by implication, the American West. The author's analysis of migration complements other studies of the impact of population movements on California, such as Marilyn Johnson's *Second Gold Rush* and James Gregory's *American Exodus*, which argue that twentieth-century migrations have profoundly shaped California's political and social development. Pitti's contribution is to extend this analysis of migration to the entirety of California's period of European settlement. The later chapters ought to have spent more time dealing with the issue of migration and how it continued to play into racialized labor systems, particularly in the 1990s debates over immigration. I would have been interested to see how Pitti compares the citizenship-based response to early-twentieth-century migration to the similar response seen at the end of the century to Mexican migrants. However, Pitti's insights into Mexican labor and justice organizing presented in those chapters are of great value. *The Devil in Silicon Valley* presents a reinterpretation of Silicon Valley that is lively and illuminating, yet also ambivalent, suggesting that the vaunted "New Economy" still functions under the old, discriminatory rules. By centralizing the role of Mexican Americans in Northern California, the author has made an important contribution to Latino history as well as that of California and the American West.

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Citation: Robert Cruickshank. Review of Pitti, Stephen J., *The Devil in Silicon Valley: Northern California, Race, and Mexican Americans*. H-California, H-Net Reviews. June, 2003.

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