

Laborers, Citizens, or Aliens? American Perceptions of Mexican Immigrants

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IN the early twentieth century, the United States confronted accelerating immigration by setting country-specific immigration quotas for European and Asian countries. However, by the 1920s, the United States had not yet established any quotas for countries in the western hemisphere. As more and more Mexicans immigrated to the United States, residents of New York City and Los Angeles anticipated different repercussions of a Mexican quota, based upon the role of Mexican immigrants in each city. Despite the two cities' distinct relationships with Mexican immigrants, New Yorkers and Los Angelenos called upon similar racial prejudices in the debate over Mexican immigration. Two contrasting newspaper articles from the late 1920s display the dominant American ideology filtered through each city's unique history and identity. The *Los Angeles Times*' "Our Mexican Residents" supported the large number of Mexican immigrants because of California's reliance upon Mexican labor, while the *New York Times*' "Immigration from Mexico and Canada" protested the influx of Mexican immigrants due to their ancestry, "alienness," and low socioeconomic status.¹ Though these two articles defend opposing opinions on the issue of Mexican immigration, they reflect similar beliefs regarding Mexicans' role in society, their race, and their foreignness. The *New York Times* communicates simpler prejudices due to New York City's distant connections to Mexico, while the *Los Angeles Times* expresses prejudices entangled in Los Angeles' possessive relationship with Mexico and its familiarity with racial distinctions between Mexicans. Nevertheless, both cities reveal the same underlying racism toward Mexican immigrants and reluctance to accept these immigrants as equal to American citizens.

Many Anglo Californians were proponents of Mexican immigrants, praising them as hardworking, obedient laborers. In *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond*, Nevins illustrates Mexicans' place in Californian society in the 1920s by quoting the manager of the Los Angeles Agricultural Department, who stated, "No labor that has ever come to the United States is more satisfactory under righteous treatment. The Mexican as a result of years of servitude, has always looked upon his employer as his patron and upon himself as part of the establishment."² Californians valued Mexicans as laborers in the same way that farmers valued plows: they were not inherently valuable, but simply equipment necessary to make progress and raise Americans' quality of life. Speaking against the quota system before Congress, a respected Californian doctor further dehumanized Mexican immigrants while simultaneously supporting their presence in America by comparing them to "a group of intelligent collie dogs" whose sole purpose was to "perform the big majority of our rough work, agriculture, building, and street labor."³

The *Los Angeles Times* voiced this same type of backwards support for Mexican immigration, employing dehumanizing logic in order to "defend" Mexicans. In its 1927 article "Our Mexican Residents," the *LA Times* built a case in favor of Mexican immigration in what was meant to be a scathing rebuttal to a *Washington Post* article that condemned the one million Mexicans in America as "an undesirable element."⁴ The *LA Times* proclaimed that Los Angeles county was entirely reliant upon the "industrial and dependable immigrants from Mexico...for the tremendous initial labor of

¹Since no author is attributed to either article, the newspapers themselves will be used as the authors.

²Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 136.

³Nevins, 132.

⁴For brevity, the *Los Angeles Times* will be abbreviated as the *LA Times*.

digging the foundations for our great buildings, laying our hundreds of miles of sewers and electric conduits, [and] making and repairing our widely extended thoroughfares and the highways that lead into the city from all directions.”⁵ Though the article staunchly defended Mexican immigrants against the *Washington Post’s* “tirades against Mexicans,” it attributed no positive qualities to Mexican immigrants apart from their labor. Additionally, the article awarded non-immigrant Los Angeles citizens ownership over Mexican immigrants, repeatedly using the possessive word “our” to show that Mexicans labored in Los Angeles county for the Americans who lived there, but the buildings, sewers, and highways that resulted from their labor were always “ours,” Americans’, even though “they,” Mexicans, were the primary physical laborers. Even the article’s title, “Our Mexican Residents,” claimed the Mexican immigrants themselves as Los Angeles’ property. Concealed under the *LA Times’* grateful praise for Mexican laborers lies the reality that Los Angelenos accepted Mexicans into their city, but the immigrants were expected to sacrifice their autonomy, the fruits of their labor, and even their own bodies in exchange for residence, with no prospect of achieving equal social standing to American-born citizens.

Both articles display Americans’ racist views that contributed to the belief that Mexican immigrants lacked human value, though the *LA Times* demonstrates more familiarity with Mexicans’ racial backgrounds. The *LA Times* highlighted southern California’s close relationship with Mexicans by differentiating between “desirable” and “undesirable” groups of Mexicans with different ancestries. The undesirable group encompassed Mexicans of Native American descent, since, as Nevins explains, Anglo Californians viewed indigenous people as “the lowest level of humankind imaginable,” a people who were “the extreme incarnation of all that was both uncivilized and heathen.”⁶ Such degrading prejudice against Native Americans resulted from a century of settling the frontier of the American West, displacing the “savage” Native Americans in the name of Western expansion and Manifest Destiny. In striking contrast to the hostility directed toward Mexicans of Native American descent, Californians accepted and even respected the often-wealthy Mexicans of Spanish descent. In “Our Mexican Residents,” the *LA Times* venerated “those fine old families of Southern California, who are of Mexican birth or descent and who are and always have been counted among our best citizens.” These families had almost exclusively Spanish ancestry, which separated and elevated them from the poorer, more recently immigrated laborers of Native American descent. Social class and economic status emphasized racial distinctions, and the *LA Times* respected the established, affluent Spanish families, while placing poor immigrants of Native American heritage into the “class with which we [Los Angeles county] would be perfectly willing to dispense.”

In contrast to the *LA Times’* Spanish versus Native-American Mexicans, the *New York Times* made generalizations about all Mexican immigrants in its 1928 article “Immigration from Mexico and Canada.” As the *LA Times* pointed out in “Our Mexican Immigrants,” in the late 1920s more than 175,000 Mexican-born people lived in Los Angeles county, while fewer than 500 lived in Washington, D.C. Since the Northeast was not a common destination for Mexican immigrants in the early twentieth century, New Yorkers lacked the firsthand experiential awareness that was engrained into Los Angeles society as a result of living among hundreds of thousands of Mexican immigrants.⁷ Consequently, the *NY Times’* “Immigration from Mexico and Canada” disparaged Mexican immigrants as a single group because they possessed “a high percentage of American Indian blood,” not noting that some Mexicans were only of Spanish descent.⁸ Though both newspapers’ discrimination against Mexicans originated from a deep-seated racism against Native Americans,

⁵“Our Mexican Residents,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 25, 1927, A4. All future information attributed to “Our Mexican Residents” is from this article.

⁶Nevins, 133.

⁷For brevity, the *New York Times* will be abbreviated as the *NY Times*.

⁸“Immigration from Mexico and Canada,” *New York Times*, November 29, 1928, 26. All future information attributed to “Immigration from Mexico and Canada” is from this article.

Los Angelenos distinguished between racial groups of Mexican immigrants with which New Yorkers were less familiar. As a result, New Yorkers condemned all Mexican immigrants, while Los Angelenos respected immigrants with Spanish ancestry and focused their denigration toward immigrants with Native American ancestry.

Because New Yorkers more strongly associated all Mexican immigrants with Native Americans, the *NY Times* portrayed Mexicans as a group that was incapable of assimilating into American society. Reflecting centuries of national and historical racism paired with a lack of awareness of the intimate relationship between Mexico and the border states, the *NY Times* asserted, “It is folly to pretend that the more recently arrived Mexicans, who are largely of Indian blood, can be absorbed and incorporated into the American race.”⁹ With their strong ties to Mexico, Los Angelenos recoiled from such broadly critical claims, even towards the group of immigrants that they respected least. Anglo Californians were not eager to integrate with Mexico, but they recognized the impracticality of nebulous, negative statements against millions of people. In “Our Mexican Residents,” the *LA Times* attacked such broad condemnation of Mexicans, admonishing specifically the *Washington Post* but also more generally the uninvolved yet vocal Northeast, “Sweeping assertions always are likely to contain an element of falsity.” The *LA Times* persevered in its possessiveness of Mexicans against the Northeast, lashing out defensively, “What do Washington editors know about Mexican immigration...? Would not Los Angeles county, which has had long and ample experience as to this matter...be better qualified to judge of Mexican merits or demerits...?” Los Angeles’ long history with Mexican immigrants made the city deeply conscious of its own border culture. Furthermore, the closeness between southern California and Mexico led to Los Angelenos’ conviction that Northeast newspapers such as the *Washington Post* and the *NY Times* had no business commenting on Mexican immigration when those cities had never experienced the extent of the relationship between the two countries along their shared border.

The *NY Times* continued to expose New Yorkers’ prejudice and unfamiliarity with US-Mexico border culture by harshly discriminating against Mexicans based on their apparent “alienness.” In “Immigration from Mexico and Canada,” the *NY Times*’ perception of alienness was rooted in Mexicans’ alleged Native American ancestry, but their darker skin and Spanish language contributed to the *NY Times*’ notion of their foreignness as well. Further emphasizing its Anglo authorship and bias, the *NY Times* identified with white-skinned, European-heritage, English-speaking Canadians, who escaped the prejudice directed towards the more racially foreign Mexicans. In the article, the *NY Times* expressed its lopsided sentiments that dehumanized Mexican immigrants but embraced Canadians as equals. Though both countries shared borders thousands of miles long with the United States, the *NY Times* said Canadians were “living under the same skies” as Americans, while Mexicans “belong[ed] to an alien race.” Los Angeles residents, living 125 miles from the US-Mexico border but 1000 miles from the US-Canada border, likely felt that Mexico shared their skies but Canada did not. The *NY Times* continued, noting that Canada was “closely connected with American life in a dozen ways,” but Mexicans “created low standards of living.” Again, since Mexicans built most of the transportation and city infrastructure in Los Angeles, its residents were pleased with Mexicans’ contribution to the city’s standards of living. Also notable in its contrast to the *LA Times*, despite the article’s acknowledgement of Mexicans’ labor in the United States, the *NY Times* did not lay claim to immigrants as the *LA Times*’ “Our Mexican Immigrants” did. Both articles addressed the topic of immigrants entering the United States, but the *NY Times* never used the word “our”; its article was titled “Immigration from Mexico and Canada,” not “Our Mexican and Canadian Immigrants.” The *NY Times*’ statements about the United States’ relationship to its bordering nations were grounded in racist prejudices formed from a distance, rather than through direct experience with each country’s immigrant population in border regions.

⁹Nevins, 131.

Ultimately, New Yorkers and Los Angelenos harbored similar racial and socioeconomic prejudices toward Mexican immigrants, though the two cities displayed them at different levels of racialized complexity. The *NY Times*' "Immigration from Mexico and Canada" reflects New Yorkers' inexperienced but opinionated views of Mexicans as unassimilable and inferior due to their Native American ancestry. Though the article acknowledged the necessity of Mexicans for labor in the border states, it considered Mexicans in a rudimentary way and from a distance because Mexican immigrants were not a group that significantly affected New York City. In contrast, the *LA Times*' "Our Mexican Residents" displays Los Angelenos' border culture and possessive feelings towards Mexico, along with their greater knowledge of Mexican racial heritage, which led them to selectively disparage immigrants with Native American ancestry. Each city's journalism illustrates how its own relationship to Mexican immigrants in the 1920s was grounded in the city's geography, history, and society. Yet despite these regional differences, the two cities were ultimately united in denying Mexicans equal status and respect to American-born citizens.