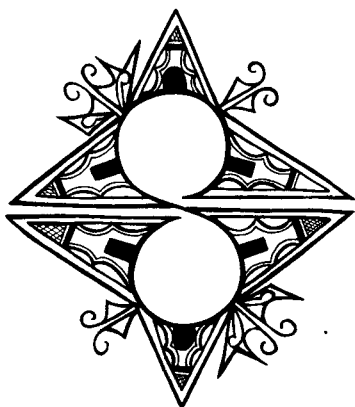


**The Historical  
Context of  
Undocumented  
Mexican Immigration  
to the United States**

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This paper is based on the assumptions that (1) the set of economic, social and political arrangements that characterize the structure of United States society involves the factors that have given shape to the immigration of Mexicans without a visa to the United States. This immigration from México should be conceived as a part of this whole, conditioned by the historical processes that have shaped United States society as a whole. (2) The study of those historical processes that have shaped the whole is a necessary step to understanding of the part.

Studying the whole presents a variety of problems of specificity, one of them is the criterion for the operationalization that requires the association between the whole and the part, and the other is the criterion for the validation of such an association. These should be viewed within a theoretical frame of reference which both problems are considered interrelated.

Both questions of operationalization and validation become problematic when one views them against what Weber calls "formal" and "substantial" rationality.<sup>1</sup> If the former concept can be grossly

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defined as the efficiency of the methods, judged by the accomplishment of given ends, and the latter concept in terms of the efficacy of the methods as judged by the ultimate values of a given social formation, then, the operationalization of the abstract "whole," should be conducted in terms of a "formal" rationality and the validation of those associations derived from this paper should be defined in terms of a "substantial" rationality.<sup>2</sup> The theoretical framework within which both types of rationality are conceived as mutually interrelated, implies the following specification:

1. Both the operationalization of the abstract "whole" and the subsequent method of analysis suggested in this paper derives from basic principles of historical materialism.<sup>3</sup>

2. The level of analysis of this paper is not meant to go beyond a level of plausibility, similar to that level of analysis that Weber defined with the term *Sinnhaft adäquat* (adequate at the level of meaning).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, there is no claim of causal relationships in the explicit or implicit associations derived from this paper.

3. The "substantive" rationality (from which the validation of the associations suggested in this paper should be judged) is conceived here as the liberation of the oppressed people of the world. In this sense, the validity of this paper's analysis is meant to imply a method of validation via *praxis*.<sup>5</sup> That is, a dialectical process within which the last instance of validation for social science is conceived as a revolutionary action.

As a method, historical materialism provides a way to operationalize the abstract "whole" in terms of the concept mode of production.<sup>6</sup> In very general terms that concept could be defined as a dialectical process of formations and transformations of social relationships, which derive from the way in which material goods are produced in a given time and place. If capitalism is conceived as a mode of production derived from historically qualitative changes in the forces and relations of production brought about by what is known as the "industrial revolution,"<sup>7</sup> then a further step can be taken in the operationalization of the "whole" under study in terms of time. Let's take as a point of departure the historical genesis of a new way of producing material goods which gave rise to a new type of relations of production and shaped the social formation into forces of production and social classes. In terms of space, let us take the United States as the focus of the capitalist mode of production under study.

Within this conceptual framework the subject of this paper could be restated as the immigration of Mexicans without documents of entry (visa) to the United States involves social relationships derived

from the relations of production that correspond to a capitalist mode of production in the United States. It could be added that such a mode of production is the result of a historical process of internal contradictions reflected in the relations of production. Therefore, immigration of Mexicans without a visa is a "part" that can only be understood by understanding the "whole," conceived as a capitalist mode of production in the United States in which that immigration is ascribed to a force of production corresponding to the working class. Following a methodological principle derived from the conceptual frame of reference for this paper, the analysis will focus on the historical process of capitalism in the United States from the years of the "industrial revolution" to the present.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Historical Context of Immigration to the United States**

New inventions and scientific discoveries of the late 18th century brought about, for the first time in this country, the possibilities of mass production. But mass production required the availability of a proportionally large number of workers. The new technology plus the great demand for human resources came to alter the set of roles that the immigrant could play as he entered the United States. As that demand was satisfied a rapid increase of immigration occurred. Thus, a new era of mass production came into being which was later to be known historically as the *industrial revolution*.

The third decade of the 19th century was no longer a time when the new immigrant could easily become a colonizer and owner of land resources. The role of entrepreneur began to demand more resources than those brought by the new immigrant and thus a situation of an increasingly greater gap developed between the economic resources of the "native" and those of the newcomer. Consequently, the new immigrant's chances of becoming an entrepreneur decreased as the role of becoming an employee increasingly became available as a result of mass production. Empirical evidence has been reported by economist Brindley Thomas of an association between rapid increase of immigration and economic growth of the United States as the latter was measured by the production of bituminous coal and mileage of railroad-ways added.<sup>9</sup> The process of economic expansion became both an effect and a cause of rapid increase of cheap labor through immigration. The greater the immigration (cheap labor) the greater the possibilities for economic expansion, thus the greater the demand for more cheap labor. This was the case during the time of the mass immigration of Irish which started in the third decade of the 19th century.<sup>10</sup> This was also the beginning of a paradox: on the one hand the

immigrant was welcomed as a worker and on the other hand he was rejected by being assigned an inferior status in the social structure.

Research findings reported by Thomas seem to throw some light on the "context of meaning" of immigration to the United States:

- a) In the first two upswings beginning in 1844 and 1863 incoming population preceded fixed capital investment.
- b) Throughout the period 1845–1913, except for the years 1869–1879, immigration preceded American building activity.
- c) The third wave of immigration, 1878–98, was on the whole determined by the course of American investment in railways . . . Taking into account the differences in the center of gravity in the two periods, we may claim that in each case the pace of the major component of American investment was governed by mass immigration from the over populated rural areas of Europe.<sup>11</sup>

If one adds to his conclusions some evidence reported to the fact that on the whole the influx of population to the United States has been determined by the conditions in this country, there seems to emerge a pattern of a rational policy followed by U.S. business in regard to immigration and investments.<sup>12</sup> This policy was expressed by Stephen A. Douglas, the apostle of "Squatter sovereignty," in 1845 when he declared that "a Pacific railway would have to progress gradually, from east to west, keeping up a connected chain of communication, and following the tide of immigration and the settlement of the country."<sup>13</sup>

A few years later William H. Holister from Santa Bárbara, California, one of the most powerful land owners in California, stated before a Congressional commission:

My experience in this State makes me put Chinamen entirely above others . . . I think that the future wealth of this country will be due to the advent of cheap labor.<sup>14</sup>

Based on contemporary sources and statistical reports a selection has been made of the largest immigrations to the United States during this period of time. The immigrations to be discussed bear as a constant the characteristics of being mostly of unskilled men and of being found in the reports as occupying the lowest paid occupations, having the lowest standards of living and having been the target of prejudice and discrimination in a given time in the history of the United States. These immigrations are from: (1) Ireland, (2) Germany, (3) Southern and Eastern Europe, (4) China, (5) Japan, (6) México.

*The Irish.* The Irish were the first of these ethnic groups to be labeled as dirty, stupid, riotous, corrupted, drunkardly and prone to violence, hence becoming undesirable members of the host society.<sup>15</sup> At the same time they were the ones occupying the lowest paid occupations.<sup>16</sup> An era of discrimination against the immigrant had come about. The immigrant was believed to be a person of lesser qualities than those believed to characterize what was conceived as "American" by the dominant groups of society. Since the immigrant was believed to be inferior he was deemed not qualified for the same positions and opportunities available for the group defined as "Americans."<sup>17</sup> The Irish became the first source of mass cheap labor required for economic expansion. The following account on the Irish concentration in Boston in the decade of the eighteen-forties and fifties illustrates this point:

From every part of the United States construction bosses in embarkments and water projects, tunnels, canals, and railroads called on Boston for the cheap manpower they knew was always available there. Thus the city's role as labor reservoir assumed national proportions: often the Boston Irish newspapers, in single issues, printed advertisements for more than 2,000 men wanted in widely scattered places.<sup>18</sup>

At the same time the Irish became the first ethnic group to be considered unassimilable to United States society.<sup>19</sup> A belief that Irish were of inferior qualities as human beings vis-à-vis the "natives" (they themselves descendants of earlier immigrants) was based on an ethnocentric perception of differences. Religious differences became the central criteria for self identifications for the "them" and the "we—the Americans."

Mass immigration after 1830 preceded an increase of industrial expansion which in turn was parallel to an increase of an industrial working class.<sup>20</sup> The interest in maintaining undisturbed a system of production already increasingly prosperous led to a search for means and ways of controlling the mass of workers. An ideology or a rationale for a justification of the low working conditions of industrial workers was provided by the intellectuals of the dominant groups of society. The physiocrats came first with the notion of "natural laws" of supply and demand to give shape to the conditions of the market. The worker was then taught to believe in the existence of those "natural laws" as regulating wages and working conditions in response to the supply and demand of labor force.

Most important was the corresponding belief that a "natural" interplay of supply and demand of labor force was independent of the employers' will and external to their personal relationship

with the workers. The belief in the externality and autonomy of *nature* as determining the living conditions of workers and employers led to an absolution of the employers' direct responsibility for the low standards of living of the workers. Responsibility for low wages and working conditions was placed outside the working relations of employers-employees, therefore, increasing the possibilities of maintenance of the prevailing system of production.

It is not by chance that a general attitude toward the new immigrant on the part of the native worker began to change almost simultaneously with the start of massive production and massive immigration in the decade of 1830. Those years marked the origin of the history of "nativists" movements in the United States.<sup>21</sup> Following the belief in the external laws of supply and demand the immigrant was seen as increasing the supply of labor force and, therefore, as intensifying the competition for jobs which were seen as scarce commodity. The powerlessness of the new immigrants vis-à-vis older immigrants of "native" workers, made it easier to displace the responsibility for low working conditions from the employers to the less powerful group available in the social structure of the time, namely, the immigrants. From then on a patterned belief was developed, i.e., jobs are a scarce commodity for which workers have to compete among themselves.

Sociologists have, for a long time, argued that competition is a form of conflict.<sup>22</sup> In the case of immigration to the United States that competition for jobs became a factor of division that placed workers against workers, therefore preventing the alliance and solidarity of those occupying the same role in the relations of production. Such a competition prevented the workers from realizing that there was a similarity of interests, i.e., the maximization of working conditions in their favor as opposed to the employers' interest of minimizing the cost of production and maximizing profits.

A competition for jobs based on a belief in the laws of supply and demand led to a conflict among workers themselves which had a greater intensity where the forces of power were unbalanced. That was the case of the conflict between native workers and immigrants in which failure to conform to the dominant values of the groups of the host society made the immigrant less powerful.

Among other factors, powerlessness of the immigrant was associated with a differential ability to take advantage of protective mechanisms that a social system provides for those who conform with its dominant values, i.e., ability to speak English, knowledge of how to manipulate rights and privileges, etc. Thus immigrants

who failed to conform with dominant values of United States society were vulnerable to any conflict with other groups structurally assimilated to the host society.

*The Germans.* After the Irish immigration, German immigration came in the late forties of the 19th century. They also were singled out as undesirables and as a threat to the United States system of values.<sup>23</sup> Those were the basic arguments of the increasingly stronger Nativist movements that were oriented toward the newcomers at the second third of the 19th century. The paradox that characterized Irish immigration a few years before was again present at the time of the German immigration. They were welcomed as cheap labor at the mines and construction industries and labeled as inferior, therefore, undesirable to become "Americans," therefore deserving the lowest paid occupations and the worst living conditions.<sup>24</sup>

Two widespread beliefs about the German immigration of the middle of the 19th century seem to be unwarranted under close scrutiny.<sup>25</sup> One is that German immigration to the United States was a consequence of the political events in Germany in 1848 and the other that the typical immigrant from the Germany of the 1850's was urban, liberal and educated. Thomas points out in this regard:

Close examination of the facts has shown that the districts from which the emigrant came were chiefly in Southwest Germany, particularly where the land was tilled as a rule in small holdings. The stress of the early fifties has its roots in an agrarian revolution which had been going on for decades. Pinning their hopes on the new methods of cultivation, many peasants had mortgaged their farms only to find themselves brought to the verge of ruin by the crop failures of the forties.<sup>26</sup>

Comparative studies of immigration show a clear similarity between the characteristics of the Irish and German immigrant of the middle of the 19th century, namely, that they were mostly unskilled laborers of peasant background.<sup>27</sup> The Germans also seem to have shared with the Irish the negative reaction of the host society as it is pointed out in the following account of nativism in the State of New York in the middle of the 19th century:

Probably the most important element in this antipathy was the pure contempt which men usually feel for those whose standards of life seem inferior. This feeling was felt towards all immigrants of the poorer class, irrespective of their race. To the mind of the average American the typical immigrant was a being unclean in habits, uncouth in speech, lax in the moralities, ignorant in mind, and unskilled in labor . . . The immigrant bore a stamp of social inequality.<sup>28</sup>

*Southern and Eastern Europeans.* A notable shifting of the source of immigration to the United States took place between 1895 and 1896. In 1895, 54.7 per cent of the immigrants came from the North and West of Europe, and 43.2 per cent from the South and East of Europe. The following year 40 per cent came from the North and West of Europe and 57 per cent came from the South and East of Europe.<sup>29</sup> The shift was gradually taking place from a 7.1 per cent of the immigration coming from Southern and Eastern Europe in the decade from 1871 to 1880, to a 71.9 per cent in the decade from 1901 to 1910. On the other hand the immigration from Northern and Western Europe had declined in the latter decade to a 21.8 per cent.

An interesting phenomenon took place as a consequence of this shifting. Consistent with the pattern which seems to have started with the Irish immigration, the new immigrant from Eastern Europe was the target of prejudice and discrimination at the same time that he was welcomed as cheap labor. A political issue emerged out of the increasing immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. At the same time a derogatory comparison between the "old" and the "new" immigration started at all levels of public opinion. Alleged qualities of the "old" immigration were opposed to racial characteristics deemed inferior of the "new" immigrant. The main argument was that whereas the "old" immigration had assimilated to the value system of United States society the "new" immigration was threatening United States society by lowering moral standards and negatively affecting the interests of the native workers by displacing them from jobs.<sup>30</sup>

A prevailing view among native workers at the beginning of the century is illustrated by a classification given by a steel worker:

By the Eastern European Immigration the labor force has been cleft horizontally into two great divisions, the upper stratum includes what is known in will parlance as the "English speaking men"; the lower contains the "hunkies" or "Ginnies." Or if you prefer, the former are the "white men," the latter the "foreigners." An "English speaking" man may be neither native American, nor English, nor Irish. He may be one of these, or he may be German, Scandinavian or Dutch. It is sufficient if the land of his birth be somewhere west of the Russian Empire or North of Austria-Hungary. A "hunki" is not necessary a Hungarian. He may belong to any of the slavic races. "Ginny" seems to include all the "hunkies" with the Italians thrown in.<sup>31</sup>

A similar derogatory classification is present in the Report of the Immigration Commission, known as the Dillingham Commission, in reference to the "new" immigration. A prevailing view of the Com-



missioners is illustrated by one of the social scientist members of the panel of the Dillingham Commission:

It is undoubtedly true that the availability of the large supply of recent immigrant labor prevented the increase in wages which otherwise would have resulted during recent years from the increased demand for labor. The low standards of the Southern and Eastern European, his ready acceptance of a low wage and existing working conditions, his lack of permanent interest in the occupation and community in which he has been employed, his attitude toward labor organizations, his slow progress toward assimilation, and his willingness seemingly to accept indefinitely without protest certain wages and conditions of employment, have rendered it extremely difficult for the older classes of employees to secure improvements in conditions or advancement in wages since the arrival in considerable numbers of Southern and Eastern European wage earners.<sup>32</sup>

Research on organized labor shows that trade unions in the United States started almost simultaneously with the beginning of the Southern and Eastern Immigration. It is noteworthy to see the shift of views on organized labor before and after the decade of 1870 to 1880. Before 1870 Nativists movements attacked immigrants for their attempt to organize in unions. This was considered "unAmerican."<sup>33</sup> At the turn of the century immigrants were attacked precisely for the opposite, namely, of being reluctant to enter into unions.<sup>34</sup> The increase of the number of strikes as a consequence of greater class consciousness brought about by organized labor, parallel to the inflow of "new" immigrants, makes plausible the following hypothesis: industrial employers had to look for a new source of cheap labor once the labor force available started to organize and demand better wages and working conditions. Once a new source of cheap labor was secured it became important to reinforce the beliefs that the "new" immigrant worker was an enemy of the "old" immigrant worker by blaming the former for the low standards of living of the latter, that is, putting "old" immigrant workers against "new" immigrant workers and preventing, by this conflict, their mutual solidarity. At the same time legitimizing negative stereotypes of the new immigrants by supporting an ideology of racial superiority of the "nordics" vis-à-vis the races from the rest of the world. In support of this hypothesis there is evidence that unions became an instrument of monopoly of jobs for certain groups of workers creating division among the working class rather than consciousness and solidarity.<sup>35</sup> A good illustration of the powerful enterprise of legitimization of racial differences and "a different morality" between the "old" and the "new" immigration is the voluminous report of the Dillingham Commission which in the name of science

supported the arguments that deemed inferior the races of the "new" immigrants.<sup>36</sup>

Immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe thus came to supply the cheap labor necessary for economic expansion of the United States capital. The following remarks seem to give support to that argument:

At a time when there was a remarkable advance in real investment and income the index number of the full-time real wages of unskilled workers in manufacturing fell from 114 in 1897-9 to 101 in 1910-13. There was a premium on processes needing a relatively large quantity of low-grade labour; industries adopting these processes expanded rapidly, their products fell in price, and a number of them found that they no longer required protective tariffs. The introduction of automatic machines eliminated human skill over a wide field was stimulated by the incursion of such a considerable volume of cheap labor.<sup>37</sup>

*The Chinese.* Chinese immigration to the West Coast responded to a similar pattern of economic expansion and a corresponding demand for cheap labor. A new factor came to determine the relationships between dominant groups and this new immigration on the West Coast. This new factor was the color of the skin. Racial characteristics of Chinese were considered as the criteria to define Chinese as inferior to the White race. Chinese in turn were believed to be competing for jobs and legal rights which were a privilege only for "Americans," as defined by the dominant groups. At one point in time the Chinese immigrant began to acquire property, therefore moving out of the low social position to which they were assigned as a source of cheap labor. As a consequence they came to be conceived as a real threat to United States values. From an imputation of inferiority similar to the other cases of immigration, dominant groups established an innovation in immigrant-"American" relations, namely a campaign for the exclusion of Chinese immigrants from United States society.

This campaign ranged from massive murdering of Chinese to legal prohibitions enacted specifically for Chinese people.<sup>38</sup> This campaign finally succeeded with the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1881. It is not by chance that we find the most fervent exclusionists of this campaign among workers of Irish background.

It has been argued that those who are located in the social structure closer to those lowest positions in the hierarchical arrangement of society tend to show more conspicuously the negative values (prejudices) against "minority" groups.<sup>39</sup> Those who show a lesser upward mobility in an occupational scale according to prevalent values of society become more vulnerable to beliefs of

being threatened by those who have been socially labeled as outsiders (immigrants). This explains how native workers in particular the second generation of immigrants have distinguished themselves as the most fervent "nativists" and "exclusionists" in the history of those movements in the United States.

The case of native workers involvement in exclusionist activities against Chinese immigrants in California during the last third of the 19th century, shows a new development in the patterns of social relations between immigrants and those who Milton Gordon conceptualized as "structurally assimilated Americans."<sup>40</sup> Negative orientation of active workers toward immigrants became a labor relations issue as did better wages and the acquisition of power positions in the political structure. Native workers demanded, as a group, the exclusion of the Chinese out of the country. Since that negative orientation prevented solidarity among workers of different ethnic backgrounds by placing earlier immigrants against new immigrants, the exclusionist campaign became functional for a control of the workers by those interested in the maintenance of the prevailing system of production. But previous conditions of labor relations changed with the increasingly strong adoption of Chinese exclusion as a workers' issue manifested as a labor demand. Social values of superiority which had been functional for employers' interests, suddenly became a source of solidarity among *native* workers.<sup>41</sup> This solidarity allowed workers to organize a political party, "The Workingmen's Party," through which, for the first time in the history of labor in the United States, workers gained enough political strength to participate in a Constitutional Convention (California, 1879). A paradoxical situation arose. Workers' organizations that had demanded better wages and working conditions prior to the formation of the Workingmen's Party in California, had been consistently unsuccessful in their labor demands. Those demands were not supported by the values of the dominant groups. On the contrary, the workers' efforts to improve their living conditions through labor organizations were made to appear as illegitimate demands. Organizing efforts of the past were labeled as work of "outside agitators" and demands for better working conditions were associated with socialistic ideas which according to the powerful "Know Nothing Party" were aimed to destroy the best qualities that distinguished "American" society. Therefore, labor organization was consistently destroyed. Suddenly, native workers in the State of California found themselves demanding the exclusion of Chinese based on an ideology of racial superiority deemed legitimate by the dominant groups of society. This activity made the

city of San Francisco the most unionized region of the United States.<sup>42</sup>

The roots of United States unionism had been established and the old belief in the immigrant as the enemy of native workers' interest acquired a permanent status in trade union policies.<sup>43</sup> A search for restrictions on immigration by trade unions was originated not in a protection of class interests but as a means to negotiate in-group benefits for selected types of workers. At this juncture trade unionism became instrumental in the prevention of class consciousness of workers across trades and modes of production by becoming a closed structure of allocation of privileged jobs. By an internationalization of racist beliefs of superiority held by the dominant groups of society, trade unions became instrumental in the perpetuation of a system of exploitation of a new immigrant on the basis of a belief of his inferiority.

Labor demands like an eight-hour working journey and better wages, made by the Workingmen's Party in 1879, in California, did not succeed. Nevertheless, the Chinese Exclusion Act enacted in 1882, barring all immigration from China, was celebrated as a triumph of the native workers. For the first time a working organization (of "native Americans") had the illusion of political power by obtaining federal legislation that was believed to protect working group interests.

*The Japanese.* Statistics on Japanese immigration show how the source of cheap labor was simply shifted from China to Japan. Japanese immigrants became the substitutes for the Chinese in the labor required by the economic expansion of the West Coast. The same paradoxical pattern initiated at the time of the industrial revolution with the Irish immigration was present again.

The Japanese were called, "corrupted," "malicious," "clannish," "dangerous," etc. But these labels were used only after he had been welcomed as a new source of cheap labor. Similar to the Irish, Germans and Chinese, the Japanese immigrant was exploited and assigned the lowest position in the social stratification system. Also similar to previous immigrant groups, the Japanese were blamed for the low standards of living of the native workers and were considered of an inferior race.<sup>44</sup> Nativist campaigns in California with such slogans as "swat the Jap" and the state legislation which stripped the rights of Japanese from acquiring property, serve to illustrate the consistent pattern of discrimination against the new immigrant.

Japanese immigration was put to an end as a response to similar pressures which ended Chinese immigration. A "Gentlemen's Agreement" between the United States and the Japanese government was the form adopted for the exclusion of Japanese immigration.

At the time of the Japanese immigration to the West Coast a new immigrant group came to the scene on the East Coast. They were Southern and Eastern Europeans who came to supply the demand for cheap labor required in the East and Midwest.<sup>45</sup>

The development of new technologies for industry and the internal migration of Blacks to the Northeast reduced the demand for foreign unskilled labor in that area of the country, but still there was a need for unskilled, cheap labor for the economical expansion of agriculture. Therefore, the quota system of the immigration laws of 1921 and 1924 left a door open through which the need for cheap labor could be satisfied. Countries of the Western Hemisphere were exempted from the quotas. (México was deliberately exempted from the quota system, and reserved for future demands of cheap labor.) After the exclusion of Japanese immigration, a search for cheap labor resorted to the Phillipines. Immigration from this country followed the same fate as previous ones by the enactment of legislation that established an "Asian barred zone" for immigration.<sup>46</sup>

### **The Mexican Worker Without Visa or the Making Up of a Source of Cheap Labor**

The creation of the Border Patrol in 1924 made necessary a greater distinction between those who cross the border legally and those who violated the immigration laws.<sup>47</sup> The mission of the Border Patrol was enforcement of the immigration laws which up to this date were either misunderstood or ignored by the Mexican immigrant who in the absence of an official to sanction him upon his entry to the United States does not really identify himself as a law breaker. The Border Patrol became a reference point to the Mexican worker without visa (w.v.) as to the legal consequences in the violation of the immigration laws. Previous to the creation of the Border Patrol, it was only necessary for the Mexican worker (w.v.) not to implicate himself in any action involving the intervention of the police or the judicial authorities in order to consider himself completely safe on the U.S. streets and roads and fairly free to choose the most convenient work.<sup>48</sup> Only a judge could decree his deportation. Generally speaking deportation came as a con-

sequence not so much of having entered without visa, but rather from having become involved in some criminal offense.

The creation of the Border Patrol was accompanied by a new administrative procedure which accelerated the expulsion of the Mexican worker (w.v.) which, previous to this time, was made through deportation. This new administrative procedure is called "voluntary departure." A Mexican worker (w.v.) who has been apprehended is required to demonstrate his legal status in the country. If he cannot demonstrate this status he is subject to deportation. If the Mexican worker (w.v.) however, wishes to avoid being deported, he is invited to leave the country voluntarily. If he refuses this invitation, theoretically he should be taken before a judge in order to prove his legal entry. If he cannot prove legal entry he is then subject to deportation.

The decade 1921 to 1930 marks a very important change in the history of the Mexican worker (w.v.). His status was changed in 1924 from being one of many migratory workers almost certain that his entry without visa would not bring any sanction, to that of a fugitive from the law who had to constantly hide in order not to be apprehended and expelled from the country. He became labeled as a "wetback."

The establishment of the Border Patrol was accompanied by an organized form of smugglers. These have been called by various names: "smuggler," "man-snatcher," "coyote," "enganchista," or "pasador." The "smuggler" has usually been a Mexican and he operates by keeping abreast of the demand for labor in the United States, particularly agricultural labor along the border, and many times he acts as an agent or labor contractor.<sup>49</sup> If he acts as an agent or contractor he is paid so much a head for each worker. He crosses the border into México, secures his workers and assures them that he knows the best crossing sites. Sometimes this means that there will be less vigilance at the sites or sometimes it means that he has made an arrangement with the Border Patrol.<sup>50</sup> None of these promises on the part of the smuggler need necessarily be true in order to get the men to follow him. The price for his services are paid in advance. In 1926 it was less than \$18.50. Our own investigation in 1969 suggests that the price to the smuggler varies between \$200 to \$300.<sup>51</sup> Some of the workers do in fact cross safely, that is without being apprehended, and find work as promised by the smuggler. More often than not, however, the Mexican worker (w.v.) is apprehended before he finds work.<sup>52</sup>

The establishment of the Border Patrol in 1924, modified not only the interaction between the Mexican worker (w.v.) and the U.S.

authorities, but also modified the pattern of interaction between him and his employer. After the establishment of the Border Patrol a new factor came into being, namely the factor of being apprehended and thus returned to México. Thus, the threat of being turned in presented a new dimension to the disadvantage of the Mexican worker (w.v.). Since anyone can turn in an "illegal," such a threat began to narrow down the social contacts which the Mexican worker (w.v.) might establish, with the exception that he must always have some relationship to the employer. The implicit or explicit threat of being turned in even by the employer, brings a new element into the situation with regard to wages and working conditions. In a real sense the Mexican worker (w.v.) is at the mercy of the employer, the alternatives of accepting or not accepting a job are not necessarily open to the Mexican worker (w.v.) because an employer can in fact insist that the wages and working conditions be accepted by the worker (w.v.) or face the possibility of being turned in to the Border Patrol. How common this is is difficult to ascertain but such instances have been reported by Saunders and Leonard, Hadley and Jones.<sup>53</sup> Seventeen out of 493 Mexican workers (w.v.) interviewed by the author in 1969 complained of the employer having turned them in to the Border Patrol without having paid their salaries. Fourteen were working in Texas, two in California and one in Arizona. The following illustrates a situation with regard to the relationships between the Border Patrol, the interests of the employer in obtaining cheap labor, and the exploitation of the Mexican worker (w.v.)

The wetback who finds agricultural employment in the Valley frequently does not have an enviable lot, even in terms of local standards.<sup>54</sup>

His hours are long, his wages low . . . His work day may vary in a length from eight to twelve hours. His time is completely at the disposal of the employer. His productivity for an hour is probably less than that for the citizen laborers, but he will work longer and more steadily than the citizens. He is usually afraid to protest against working conditions and will accept fairly low wages without comment. He seldom bargains for his services, but accepts the rates offered by the employer . . . It is a common belief among those familiar with working conditions in Valley that it is the wetbacks' docility, even more than the low wages he works for, that makes him so attractive as a worker. At least it can be stated with assurance that the illegal status of the wetback in the U.S. provides a powerful club that can be brandished over his head at any time. And, it is not difficult for an employer to see that a recalcitrant wetback is rapidly deported to México.<sup>55</sup>

The depression of the 1930's brought about a number of measures which affected immigration from México. Perhaps the most serious of these was what has been called "operation deportation"

realized in 1930. Although no statistics were kept for this operation, the general procedure was to require all those suspected of being alien to prove that they were born in the United States.<sup>56</sup> The person who could not satisfy this requirement was expelled from the country under the administrative procedure of "voluntary departure." This was done in order to reduce the number of employed during the Depression as well as the large number of people who were on welfare. This procedure also proved to be a hardship for many Mexicans who had in fact left México as emigrants as long as twenty years before and who suddenly found themselves expelled from the United States.

Many inhabitants of the urban areas along the border blamed the Mexican worker (w.v.) for all their problems without giving much thought to the position of the growers which was summarized eloquently by then U.S. Vice President John Garner "In order to make profit out of this (agri-business) you have to have cheap labor."<sup>57</sup> A similar position was expressed by Senator McCarran who suggested that the legislators should look at the situation realistically in terms of the interests of the farmers and their need for the wetback.

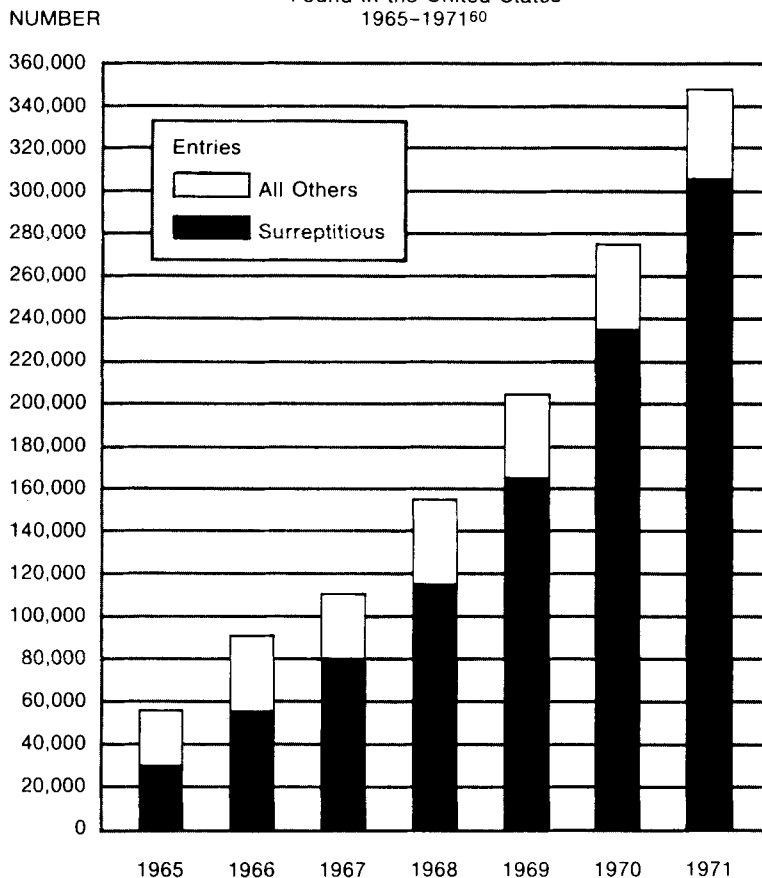
Many workers' organizations exerted pressure on the U.S. Government to stem the flow of Mexican illegal immigrants, as well as the bracero, and the commuter. The claim being that all of these population movements had an adverse effect on wages and working conditions and standards of living for the domestic population.

Finally, President Eisenhower asked Attorney General Brownell who had visited the region to propose a plan. The plan turned out to be that General Joseph May Swing was named Commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, in charge of the "Operation Wetback."<sup>58</sup> In July of 1954, General Swing presented his accomplishments to a group of employers in South Texas and said: "Operation Wetback was pursued with military efficiency and the result was that over a million wetbacks were expelled from the country in 1954."<sup>59</sup>

At the end of 1956, some people considered that the problem of the Mexican worker (w.v.) was a thing of history. But as we move through the years we find that while there was a great decrease in the number of Mexican workers (w.v.), from 1954 to 1959 again we see an increase up to the present time as shown in the following graph.



**GRAPH 1**  
 Deportable Mexican Aliens  
 Found in the United States  
 1965-1971<sup>60</sup>



One might in fact suggest that if agricultural production was so dependent on Mexican workers (w.v.) then presumably "Operation Wetback" would have brought about an economic catastrophe to the border region. Other things happened and the economic catastrophe was not realized: (1) The process of legalizing Mexican workers (w.v.) and converting them into braceros; (2) many of them who were expelled as illegals came back as braceros, legally. "Operation Wetback" may have dried out a pool of cheap labor within the United States but it certainly augmented the pool of cheap labor across the border in México.

## Law, Power and Discrimination

The decade between the 1930's and the 1940's was a period in which it became obvious that the supply of labor in the Southwest whether with or without a visa, was obviously based in México. It was during this period also that the prejudices and the discrimination towards this labor was in a sense institutionalized. That is to say that the attitudes, the values, and the norms related to that source of cheap labor were legitimized. A deputy sheriff appearing before the LaFollette Committee hearings, illustrates the point:

We protect our farmers here in Kern County . . . they are our best people . . . they keep the country going . . . but the Mexicans are trash. They have no standard for living. We herd them like pigs.<sup>61</sup>

In this eloquent declaration one could find an illustration of the factors which have given shape to the interactive process between Mexican immigrant and dominant groups of a society where cheap labor is needed. Without elaboration these factors are:

- (1) The need to protect the interests of the growers.
- (2) The value judgments which justify the protection of these interests.
- (3) The power of the growers as they are "protected."
- (4) The justification to treat Mexicans in whatever manner is necessary.
- (5) The powerlessness of the Mexican immigrant.
- (6) The prejudicial attitudes and the discriminatory behavior directed toward the Mexicans.

Others quoted before (Saunders and Leonard, Hadley, and Galarza), have pointed out and documented the prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behavior which could be summarized as an exploitation of cheap labor.

Our point is that such exploitation can only be understood in its present when its past is analyzed. Note for example:

Mr. Chairman, here is the whole problem in the nutshell. Farming is not a profitable industry in this country, and, in order to make money out of this, you have to have cheap labor . . . in order to allow land owners now to make a profit on their farms, they want to get the cheapest labor they can find, and if they can get the Mexican labor it enables them to make a profit. That is the way it is along the border and I imagine that is the way it is anywhere else.<sup>62</sup>

The above quotation was taken from John Garner, Vice-President of the United States. This statement from such a high official of the U.S. Government suggests the degree of influence of dominant

groups in U.S. society in regard to immigration. The attitude seems to be a consistent factor through time as illustrated by Senator McCarran who some twenty-seven years later declared:

... Senator (Elender), I think you will agree with me that on this side of the border there is a desire for these wetbacks ... Last year when we had the Appropriations Bill up, the item that might have prevented them from coming over to some extent, was stricken from the bill ... we might just as well face this thing realistically. The agricultural people, the farmer along the Mexican side of the border in California, in Arizona, in Texas ... want this help. They want this farm labor. They just cannot get along without it.<sup>63</sup>

This again illustrates the institutionalization of patterns of exploitation of cheap labor with regard to Mexicans. There seems to be little regard in these statements as to the morality or immorality involved in the actions taken by high government officials in procuring Mexican immigration (illegal by their own definition) for the agricultural entrepreneurs and certainly not much regard as to the legality or illegality of the action. Thus, Mexican immigration and the hiring of those without visa seems to be taken for granted in the economic situation along the border.

In the meantime it seems as if the growers viewed the situation of the Mexican worker (w.v.) as a question of supply and demand. Expressed in these terms, Senator McCarran presumably did not view the reduction of wages over time as anything bad. As a matter of fact in a study of the Fabens community near El Paso in 1969, the growers still talk about their provisions of jobs to Mexicans who without these jobs, would undoubtedly be starving in México.<sup>64</sup> Gamio found that in 1926 the average wage for the Mexican farm worker immigrant was \$2.50 to \$6.00 per day in California and \$1.50 to \$2.00 a day in Texas.<sup>65</sup> Saunders and Leonard found in 1950, that the average wage of the Mexican worker (w.v.) in the Lower Rio Grande Valley was \$2.50 for a twelve hour day.<sup>66</sup> This then means that twenty-four years later the grower of south Texas increased wages approximately 35% whereas the profits for agribusiness in the same region of the Lower Rio Grande Valley between 1920 and 1950 increased 1000%.<sup>67</sup> In view of this situation it is no wonder that domestic workers have raised questions about the lowering wages and the unemployment and displacement of the domestics with the importation of Mexican workers (w.v.).

One of the most tragic roles which the Mexican immigrant, particularly the one without visa, has had to play is that of strikebreaker. This has been true of those who have worked in agriculture in the border area, in the mines of the Southwest, and in the industrial

setting in the Great Lake areas. The result of this has been an unfortunately hostile relationship between domestic workers and alien workers, a situation which has favored the employers by separating groups of workers. In many instances it has separated Chicanos from Mexicans to the advantage of the employer. Thus, a generally hostile situation has come to pass between Chicanos and Mexicans from which the employer is the only part who profits.

### **A Final Comment on the Meaning of the Mexican Immigration Without Visa**

Looking at interests as a source of motivations, let's focus on the juncture where they shape action; that is, at the interaction between Mexican workers (w.v.) and other members of United States society.

A distinction will be made between group interests related to the presence of the Mexican worker (w.v.) and group interests related only to each society member's role independent of the presence of the Mexican worker (w.v.). The latter would be those interests pertaining to the maintenance of the role played by actors of each group, i.e., (1) Chicano farm worker's role interest would be to maximize wages; (2) farmer's (Mexican worker's employer) role interest would be to maximize profit; (3) law maker's role interest would be to provide legislation that meets the necessities of his constituencies and the country; (4) law enforcer's (border patrol) role interest would be to enforce immigration laws. On the other hand, group interests related to the presence of Mexican workers (w.v.) seems to indicate a different dimension of each actor's role, i.e., for (1) to stop the flux of Mexican workers (w.v.) in order to avoid their competition for jobs and in order to increase bargaining power vis-à-vis the farmer; (2) to maximize profits by the use of the Mexican worker's cheap labor; (3) to gain political support from the farmers by protecting their interests; (4) to enforce immigration laws selectively.

Such a distinction of interests seems to help in understanding some of the contradictions in the Mexican phenomenon under analysis like (1) a condemnation of the Mexican worker (w.v.) by defining him as a criminal and, at the same time, maintaining a demand for his labor force, reflected in a steadily increasing flux of Mexican workers (w.v.) each year;<sup>68</sup> (2) penalizing a worker from México for being in the United States without a visa but not penalizing a farmer for hiring the former (U.S. Congress, 8 U.S.C.-1952); (3) maintaining an agency for the enforcement of immigration laws

and at the same time exerting budget limitations and/or political pressures to prevent a successful enforcement of the law.<sup>69</sup>

These are some of the contradictions that become apparent in the case of Mexican immigration (w.v.), but they are nothing less than reflections of contradictions in the capitalist mode of production at large. This is particularly obvious when we see the conflict of interest between the farmer and the Chicano farm worker (each tries to maximize his economic gains at the expense of the other) and when we see the presence of the Mexican worker (w.v.) kept undercover as a veil hiding deeper conflict. Indeed, when the role of the latter is introduced in agricultural production, we see a different conflict of interest taking place, namely, that between the Chicano worker and his brother Mexican worker, the former blaming the latter for lowering working conditions and standards of living.

The nature of the two conflicts should be differentiated. Whereas the conflict of interests between the Chicano farm worker and the farmer is determined by the position each one plays in a particular mode of agricultural production, the conflict between the Chicano worker and the Mexican worker is seen as determined in reality, i.e., wages and working conditions are determined by external laws of supply and demand independently of employers' will; the Mexican worker (w.v.) *causes* low wages and low standards of living for the farm worker, etc. Further basis to support this point would be the realization that the conflicts "created" by the workers without a visa would disappear if the employers did not hire them.

Another aspect derived from our discussion of group interest is the realization that each specified interest and respective action is supported by power. Since the groups themselves reflect status differentials, it is that difference of power (and possible collisions of power) that gives form to the interaction. Furthermore, the power legitimization of these actions sustains the existing form against any possible transformation.

Power differences among the various actors are a result of their ability to manipulate or influence interaction in the direction of their interests.<sup>70</sup> In this interpretation, the employer of the Mexican worker without a visa is clearly the most powerful actor since he is able to influence all other actors. On the other extreme of power differences is the Mexican worker (w.v.). He clearly appears at a disadvantage. As an "outsider" he has no legitimacy. He is not eligible for any public assistance or for the benefits of an eventual "moral entrepreneur" since he is not eligible to stay in the country, unless he is in jail. He is also not eligible for other benefits due

to the stigma of having been once a deviant of immigration laws. This technically might prevent him from acquiring legal residence or citizenship in the U.S. The Mexican worker (w.v.) has only the original motivation that made him cross the border (survival) and a new one resulting from a societal definition of him as a criminal (not to be caught) which becomes another element of pure survival. As an outsider with such elemental interests he dares not complain. The only possible protest comes when his survival is in jeopardy and his only course of action is to return to México.<sup>71</sup>

## Notes

1. Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, edited by Guenther Ross and Claus Wittich, (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), pp. 85–86.
2. Marx uses this concept in a more restricted sense than "society" in reference to a social structure shaped by the relations of production that correspond to a mode of production historically given. The concept implies the existence of forces of production or social classes; each one with corresponding interests and values. For a more detailed explanation of the concept see Louis Althusser, *Pour Marx*, (Paris: Maspero, 1968).
3. Grossly defined, historical materialism is a research method suggested by Marx in which focus is placed upon the way in which material goods are produced in a given society. The economic, social and political processes that develop through time give shape to what Marx calls the *mode of production* which in turn is used as a criterion to classify historical periods.
4. See Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gessellschaft*, Vol. III of the *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik*, (Tubingen: Verlag von J.C.B. Mohr, 1925), pg. 5.
5. This concept is explained by Marx in greater depth in *Los Manuscritos de 1844, Las Tesis sobre Feuerbach, La Ideología Alemana* and in *La Sagrada Familia*. Other sources for the understanding of this concept are: Henri Lefevbre, *Sociología de Marx*, Spanish translation by Juan Ramón-Capella, (Barcelona: Ediciones Península, 1969); Guy Besse, "La Práctica Social, Fuente y Criterio del Conocimiento," in *Lecciones de Filosofía Marxista*, Roger Garaudy (ed.), (México: Editorial Grijalbo, 1966); Charles Frankel, "Theory and Practice in Marx' Thought," in International Social Council, UNESCO, *Marx and Contemporary Scientific Thought*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1969); and Cesare Luporini, "Problemas Filosófiques et Epistemológicos," in *Marx and Contemporary Scientific Thought*, *ibid.*
6. See Marta Harnecker, *Los Conceptos Elementales del Materialismo Histórico* (México: Editorial Siglo XXI, 1972), pg. 91.
7. See Louis Althusser and E. Balibar, *Para Leer el Capital* (México: Editorial Siglo XXI, 1969), pg. 114.
8. See Nelson M. Blake, *A History of American Life and Thought*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), pg. 133.
9. Brindley Thomas, *Migration and Economic Growth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954).
10. *Ibid.*, pg. 93.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 162–163.
12. Harry Jerome, *Migrations and Business Cycles* (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1926), pg. 208.
13. Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants, 1790–1865: A Study in Acculturation* (Harvard University Press, 1941), see Chapter III.
14. As quoted by Roger Daniels and Harry L. Kitano, *American Racism: Exploration on the Nature of Prejudice* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), pg. 44.
15. Carl Wittke, "Immigration Policy Prior to World War I," in *The Annals*, Thorsten Sellin, ed., (Philadelphia: American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, 1949).
16. See Isaac Hourwich, *Immigration and Labour* (New York: E.P. Putnam's Sons, 1912), pp. 166–172; Ross A. Eckler and Jack Zoltnick, "Immigration and Labor Force," in *The Annals*, *op. cit.*, pg. 16; Thomas, *op. cit.*, pg. 83.
17. Hourwich, *op. cit.*, pg. 73.
18. Handlin, *op. cit.*, pg. 76.
19. Wittke, *op. cit.*
20. Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 159–160.
21. John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860–1925* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1955), see Chapter I.
22. See Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, translated, edited and

with an introduction by Kurt H. Wolf (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1950).

23. Hourwich, op. cit., pg. 231; Philip Davis, *Immigration and Americanization* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1920) pg. 7.

24. Wittke, op. cit., pg. 9.

25. Marcus L. Hansen, "The Revolution of 1848 and German Emigration," in *Journal of Economic and Business History*, (August, 1930), pp. 630 f.f.

26. Thomas, op. cit., pg. 95.

27. Hourwich, op. cit., pg. 67.

28. As quoted by Hourwich, op. cit., pg. 73.

29. U.S. Senate Immigration Commission (Dillingham Commission) *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, Vol. 3 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1911), pg. 8.

30. Hourwich, op. cit., pp. 18–19.

31. As quoted by Hourwich, op. cit., pg. 164.

32. Jeremiah W. Jenks and W. Jett Lauck, *The Immigration Problem* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1912), pp. 195–196.

33. Hourwich, op. cit., pg. 339.

34. Jenks and Lauck, op. cit., pg. 192.

35. Hourwich, op. cit., pp. 346–347.

36. In support of that implication made by the Dillingham Commission Report, see Jenks and Lauck, op. cit.

37. Thomas, op. cit., pp. 165–166.

38. Daniels and Kitano, op. cit., pp. 37–39.

39. See the treatment of this phenomenon given by Carey McWilliams in *Factories in the Fields* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1939).

40. Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

41. Elmer C. Sanmayer, *The Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1939), pg. 47.

42. Daniels and Kitano, op. cit., pg. 38.

43. Mary Ritter Beard, *The American Labor Movement* (New York: McMillan, 1937), pp. 57–58.

44. Daniels and Kitano, op. cit., pp. 45–66.

45. Hourwich, op. cit., pp. 167–172.

46. Daniels and Kitano, op. cit., pp. 66–68.

47. Lamar B. Jones, "Mexican American Labor Problems in Texas," Ph.D. dissertation, microfilm (Austin: University of Texas, 1965), pg. 15.

48. Jones, op. cit., pg. 16.

49. Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero History* (Santa Bárbara, California: McNally and Loftin, 1964), pg. 60.

50. Jorge A. Bustamante, "El 'Espalda Mojada': Reporte de un Observador Participante," in *Revista Mexicana de Ciencia Política*, forthcoming.

51. See Julian Samora, *Los Mojados, The Wetback Story* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), pg. 75.

52. Ibid.

53. Lyle Saunders and Olen F. Leonard, *The Wetback in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas*, Inter-American Education Occasional Papers, No. 7 (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1951). Eleanor M. Hadley, "A Critical Analysis of the Wetback Problem," in *Law and Contemporary Problems*, Vol. 21, (Spring 1956), pp. 334–357. Jones, op. cit.

54. We must point out that the "local standards" to which Saunders and Leonard are comparing the "non-enviable" lot of the Mexican worker (w.v.) in that area, were found to be the lowest in the United States with the sole exception of some Indian reservations in surrounding areas. See Western Hemisphere Immigration Hearings, *The Report of the Select Commission on Western Hemisphere Immigration* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), pp. 113–130.

55. Saunders and Leonard, op. cit., pp. 54–55.



56. Jones, op. cit., pg. 18.
57. Ibid.
58. Samora, op. cit., pp. 51-55.
59. Ibid.
60. Taken from The Texas Good Neighbor Commission, *Texas Migrant Labor, Annual Report 1971* (Austin: The Texas Good Neighbor Commission), pg. 14.
61. Carey McWilliams, *North from Mexico: The Spanish Speaking People of the United States* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1949), pg. 191.
62. U.S. Congress, *Hearings Before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, 1926* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1926), pp. 20-23.
63. U.S. Senate, Subcommittee of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary S. 1917, *Appropriations Hearings 1953*, pg. 123 (Senator McCarran).
64. Samora, op. cit., pp. 98-99.
65. Manuel Gamio, *Mexican Immigration to the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), see Table XVI, figures for agriculture.
66. Saunders and Leonard, op. cit., pp. 16-17.
67. Ibid.
68. Samora, op. cit., pp. 196-197.
69. Hadley, op. cit., pg. 348.
70. Cf. William Gamson, *Power and Discontent* (Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey Press, Inc., 1968).
71. Jorge A. Bustamante, "The 'Wetback' as Deviant: An Application of Labeling Theory," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (January 1972).