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HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF INEQUALITIES: MEXICANS AND ANGLO-AMERICANS IN CALIFORNIA

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— Abstract—

This paper explores economic and social inequalities between Mexicans and Anglo-Americans in the state of California during the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century. Our results suggest that discrimination against Mexican immigrants and Mexican-American population has ancient precedents, and is rooted in racialized social relations as well as in the structure of labor relations –at least since the territory of California was annexed to the United States in 1848.

The complexity and depth of the problem of economic and social inequality of the Mexican population in the United States is discussed, taking as a starting point the border delimitation between both countries after de Mexico- United States war (1846-1848)7. As a consequence of this event, power relations, and, therefore, institutions, laws, and social practices were reconfigured in such a way that Mexican population previously inhabiting that territory ended up at a disadvantage vis-a-vis Anglo-American population.

The arrival of Mexican immigrants at the beginning of the 20th century intensified the hostility against Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants, and at the same time produced a further segmentation of the labor market. Thus, the low-skilled and low-paid occupations in California --already performed by so called “non-white workers” (Mexican Americans, African-Americans, and Asian immigrants) evolved into a niche for Mexican immigrant labor.

Keywords

History; Mexican immigrants; Mexican-Americans; Anglo-Americans; social and labor inequalities; California.

Although the public speeches and attitudes against Mexicans living and working in the United States have recently became the object of public interest, the relationship between Mexicans and Americans has historically been characterized by inequality and conflict. In California, the relationship between these social groups was structured on the settlement patterns of the Mexican and American populations, as well as on the conflict over the distribution of the territory and its resources.

The conflicting relationship between these groups, which in a few years saw their social, political and economic position changed, was ultimately resolved in favor of Anglo-Americans –once they had a national reference that allowed them to appeal to rights as US citizens. Moreover, the social relations and unequal material conditions shaped the class structure of nineteenth-century California agricultural capitalism, where Mexicans became the working population; employed in the less qualified activities and paid lower salaries, while Anglo-Americans gradually appropriated the land and became the owners of the agricultural plantations.

The conditions of economic and social inequality between the US and the Mexican population (immigrants and Mexican descent)[1] continue, but this inequality is the result of a historical process that, for the case in question, arose in the configuration of agricultural capitalism. This article aims to show the tense relationship that has historically been established between Mexicans and Anglo-Americans. This, we argue, will help us understand that the current conditions of the Mexican population in California are the product of structural and historical disadvantages found in the state and federal laws, a mechanism to justify the occupational and social segregation of "non-white" populations, among them the Mexicans who lived in California before the annexation by the United States.

METHOD

Our research is based on documentary review and historical studies on California in its Mexican period, during its annexation to the United States and in the period after that: from the 19th century to the beginning of the

1 According to the Pew Hispanic Center, in 2009, the national percentage of the population living in poverty in the United States was 14.0, considering only the population of Latino origin amounted to 25.3 percent and in the population of Mexican origin it was 27.7 percent; highest percentage between Latinos or Hispanics groups (Pew Hispanic Ceter, 2009, 2011).

20th century. Our approach is inserted in the Historical Sociology studies (Skocpol, 1984), which relies on historical sources and documents to analyze the configuration of social and labor inequalities. This is not properly a historiographic study, but a sociological study that is based on documents on the state of California and some of its counties. The review of the literature and the consultation of documents were carried out in different libraries of the metropolitan area of Los Angeles, California, during 2012, as part of a larger research that was developed as a PhD dissertation.

CALIFORNIA: A TERRITORY IN CONFLICT

The North of Mexico, as it is well known, was a region of late colonization by Spain, given the lack of interest that the Spanish kingdom had in this territory. It was only until the discovery of important mines that settling advanced towards the North. The population that settled in these territories was much smaller compared to the population established in Central Mexico. For example, in the first population census, conducted in 1781, the Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Ángeles, Alta California, reported 46 inhabitants among men, women and children. This was the population that founded the place, today known as Los Angeles, California (Weber, 1973).

The growth rates of the population remained low, so by 1821, with the Independence of Mexico, the territory did not have enough population or resources to shape the new independent government, not to mention the administrative staff required to delimit the border. The distance from the North to the Center of Mexico, combined with the problems related with the building of a national government, left the economic and political processes of the Mexican North adrift. Such processes were strongly influenced by the commercial opening (of 1821) with the United States and by American expansionist policies initiated in 1845 by President James K. Polk.

The commercial opening began with the Independence of Mexico. During the colonial period, the Spanish authorities banned trade with the English colonies. After Independence, California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas intensified their commercial exchange with the American population. This led to the establishment of small border businesses whose owners were Anglo-Americans; to the increase of the expeditions in search of valuable natural resources, and to the settlement of American colonies in Mexican territory (Weber, 1988).

Gradually, Americans established settlements that, in some places, surpassed Mexican population. As early as 1828, Manuel Mier y Terán warned of the

danger of a secession from Texas, not only because of the numbers reached by the American population, but also because of the independence displayed by the settlements in matters related to legislation, economy and security. The measures proposed by the Mexican government to control the immigration of Anglo-Americans included, paradoxically, assimilation policies for Anglo-Americans settlers, the closing of borders to US immigration, the promotion of European immigration, and repopulation with Mexicans. However, none of these measures were implemented, and in 1836 Texas became independent. Latter, in 1848, after the Mexico- U.S. war, the remaining territories of the Mexican North were lost[2].

In California, the share of the population represented by Americans before the annexation to the United States was smaller. The loocal elites, mainly formed by Mexicans and Spaniards, had qualms regarding being part of the United States. Thus, the definitive separation of California, unlike that of Texas, was more the result of the war than a political decision of the elites (Weber, 1976, 1988).

CITIZENS OF NOWHERE: MEXICANS IN CALIFORNIA

By the Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty (signed on February 2, 1848), the US government committed itself to respect the rights of Mexicans in the United States and to grant American citizenship to those that requested it. Nevertheless, when the Treaty was ratified on May 30, 1848, articles IX and X, corresponding to citizenship and land ownership, were modified.

Implementation of Article IX, regarding US citizenship for Mexicans, was conditioned on the "judgment of the United States Congress." Article X was completely deleted. The article dealt with the prtection of the private and collective property of Mexicans. The reason given to eliminate article X was that the recognition of land grants made by the Mexican government did not need a special reference in the law, since American courts would uphold them, according to the law of the United States, *as long as* people had the "legitimate titles" granted "under Mexican law until May 13, 1846, in California and New Mexico, and until March 2, 1836 in Texas" (Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, 1848).

2 The definitive separation was made through the Treaty of Peace, Friendship, Limits and Definitive Arrangement between the United Mexican States and the United States of America (or Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty).

These modifications to the Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty, plus the laws stipulated in the Constitution of the State of California and the Constitution of the United States, became the legal sustenance to deny Mexican citizenship to the Mexicans and to take away their lands, as will be shown in the following sections.

NEW DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES

During the period of the Spanish colony, resources in California were not evenly distributed. This asymmetry in the possession of resources and goods was reconfigured with the annexation of California to the United States. Although the Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty stipulated some rights for Mexicans, after 1848 the dynamics of re-appropriation of resources such as land, affected indigenous Mexicans, and Mexicans of indigenous and of Spanish descent, because the majority of them did not have the written property titles endorsed by Mexican law, so it was impossible to prove ownership in US courts. While citizenship rights were claimed by and for "American citizens"; anyone who wanted to obtain this citizenship had to meet the federal yardstick: to be a "free" and "white" person[3]. In this way, "race" was a criterion to exclude all people considered "non-white".

The White/Black dichotomous relationship that prevails in the discussions on racism in the United States, in California took another content and it was transformed into a white/non-white dichotomy. The “non-white” category included Mexicans, Asians, African-Americans, and Indians.

Between the population that inhabited California before its annexation, there was a group who were granted US citizenship, and it was formed by people of Spanish descent and Spaniards that settled in the region, and whose "whiteness" came from their European origin. They had accumulated large tracts of land during the Spanish rule and in the brief period since the Independence, and they quickly joined the new California elite through marriage alliances, especially of women (daughters of Spaniards) with American men (Almaguer, 1994). But most of the population was made up of Indians, mestizos and mixed race, their "non-whiteness" derived from their indigenous and/or African heritage. This population did not possess

3 Criteria stipulated in the first Naturalization Act of 1790 and in force until 1952, when they were abolished with the Walter-McCarran Act.

large tracts of land since the Spanish colonial period, and occupied the lower strata in the new agricultural capitalist order of California (Menchaca, 1995).

The argument for denying US citizenship to "non-white" Mexicans was based on their being descendants of indigenous people. Like Native Americans, it was claimed, they already had a set of rights. In this sense, only "White Mexicans" could be considered as candidates to obtain US citizenship. This interpretation of the laws left a large part of the Mexican population without protection, because Native American Indians were not considered American citizens and lacked political rights (Menchaca, 1995, p.19).

The economic decline of the Mexican population was not a homogenous process. In some towns and counties the resistance of Mexicans delayed the loss of economic and political power until the end of the 19th century. But at the beginning of the 20th century, precarious conditions for Mexicans were widespread. In Santa Bárbara, for example, between 1848 and 1873 the economic and political power remained in the hands of a group of Mexicans because this population was greater than American population. The change occurred when the demographic composition was reversed, the economy based on the ranch was dismantled, and reforms were implemented in the electoral districts that undermined the electoral representation of Mexicans. Thus, the election of 1873 was the watershed of the loss of political power of the Mexican population, because all public offices were occupied by Anglo-Americans (Camarillo, 1979, p.46).

THE LOSS OF ECONOMIC POWER AND THE CONTROL OF RESOURCES

Since the times when California was part of Mexico, after Independence, economic asymmetries began to take shape between Americans and Mexicans, because in the years that followed the disappearance of the Spanish mercantile system, many of the economic activities of the border like hunting with traps, producing cotton, cutting and selling wood and selling manufactured products were in the hands of Anglo-Americans. They had more capital, means of transport and access to markets, but the natural resources extracted in this period were still from Mexico. However, the lack of a legal system that regulated the use of natural resources made California a paradise of excessive extraction (Weber, 1988).

Later, once the territory of California was annexed to the United States, the rights over the resources changed. Disputes over land were the most

important, since Mexicans were left without legal protection to guarantee their ownership of the land.

The California Land Commission (CLC) and the courts requested both the indigenous population and private owners (descendants of Spaniards) to show legal property title and register them under US law. In Santa Paula, the land of the indigenous population whose property could not be endorsed with documents of ownership and registered by California Land Commission were considered as public domain (available to the United States government) and became eligible for redistribution. Mexican owners of ranchs shared the same fate as the indigenous groups. By 1869, the CLC certified only one property in Santa Paula and invalidated all other property rights of the Mexican people (Menchaca, 1995).

The Mexican-Californian elite also saw their properties drastically reduced between 1848 and 1880. These lands were transferred, on a massive scale, from Mexicans' hands to the hands of Americans, specially since the Federal Land Law of 1851, which provided the California Land Commission with legal powers to verify the property titles of Spaniards and Mexicans (Almaguer, 1994, p. 66).

In this way, Mexicans –including the California owners who made up the elite in the Mexican period, saw their properties shrink due to the high costs involved in defending ownership in the US courts, the duration of the process (up to 10 years until the ruling was issued), the fees of the lawyers, and the changes in economic production. Thus, at the end of the 19th century, Mexicans became landless farmers and Americans became the owners of land and capital. By the early twentieth century, most Mexicans were incorporated into low-wage jobs in Californian agriculture (Menchaca, 1995).

ECONOMIC STRUCTURE AND LABOR SEGREGATION

In the new class structure of California, Americans occupied the highest positions and the Mexican population experienced a sudden decline, because the forms of production changed from a pastoral agricultural system to an agricultural capitalist system. The loss of land accelerated the dismantling of Mexican and Spanish institutions, and Americans gained full control of the new social, political and economic institutions (Menchaca, 1995).

By 1880 the economy was already capitalist and the agro-pastoral activities that Mexicans carried out began to be insufficient for the survival of the families, so men migrated to places where the ovine cattle was concentrated,

especially in the shearing season, while women joined the labor market as domestic workers in American households (Camarillo, 1979).

Thus, the pastoral agricultural production system was replaced by a capitalist agricultural system, where the lowest labor positions were for Mexicans and the other minorities considered as non-White. Without ranches as a unit of economic and social production, Mexicans were unable to subsist on their own and came to depend on the salaried work (Menchaca, 1995).

The jobs were also assigned with "racial" criteria, and thus the lowest positions within the new socioeconomic structure were assigned to Mexicans, Indians and Asians. For example, in Ventura County, by 1870 the majority of Mexican, Indian, and Chinese men were employed in low-skilled activities. The percentage of "White" workers in this type of economic activity was 17.6, for Mexicans it was 60.2 percent, for Indians 90.5 percent, and for Chinese workers 100 percent. In contrast, in the 1900 census, in the same county it was recorded that 95.0 percent of agricultural entrepreneurs were "White" people (Almaguer, 1994, p. 189).

The new structure of the Californian society was conformed with a high economic and social inequality that was justified by the prevailing racist prejudices at the time, resulting in an acute social segregation for all "non-White" minorities, so that housing, schools and services were of lower quality in Mexican neighborhoods and these were separated from the settlements of Americans (Bogardus, 1930).

These were the conditions in which the Mexican immigrants who arrived at the beginning of the 20th century as demanded by the development of infrastructure in the southwest (Loyo, 1969) were inserted. The immigrant population, on the one hand, restructured the labor market by joining the low-skilled and low-wage occupations that, as we have shown, were already assigned to the population of Mexican origin (non-immigrant). And, on the other, the social relations between groups (Mexican immigrants, Mexican-Americans and Anglo-Americans) became even tenser: exacerbation of hostility against Mexicans (immigrants and Mexican-Americans) and competition for low-skilled jobs among Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans (Gutiérrez, 1995).

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, this article shows how the historical processes of California are characterized by a tense and unequal relationship between the two groups that

have been in continuous contact in the same territory: Mexicans (of indigenous, African and/or Spanish descent) and the Anglo-American. This last group increased its presence in Mexican territory since the Mexican Independence, because the abolition of the Spanish restrictions on trade increased commercial exchange at the border. Anglo-Americans set up businesses in this territory and, gradually, established permanent familiar settlements in the north of Mexico. Later, with the annexation of California to the United States, these inequalities became greater because Mexicans inhabitants lost a set of rights; including the right to property and US citizenship rights.

The change of production system, from an agro-pastoral system to an agricultural capitalist system, completely transformed the relationship between Americans and Mexicans, the former occupying the highest social positions and the latter the lowest. So, by the beginning of the 20th century, Mexicans' conditions of poverty were widespread, although, as has been pointed out, for the descendants of Spaniards this situation was completely different.

This allows to problematize the analysis of the criteria that explain the economic and social inequality, since, as has been documented in this paper, inequalities have different configurations. In this case, they are rooted in the racist prejudices of the time and in the structure of classes of agricultural capitalism. The "race", as a criterion of inequality, preceded the class criterion in California. Many of the jobs were assigned according to physical traits rather than people's skills and knowledge. However, both criteria are strongly imbricated and it is not possible to understand the current conditions of the Mexican immigrant population if it is not understood how the population of Mexican origin was stigmatized and segregated since the 19th century, due to their physical appearance and their different cultural practices.

In these precarious conditions, and in an environment of racial discrimination against the Mexican population, the first Mexican immigrants were inserted at the beginning of the 20th century, entering in a previously segmented labor market and taking even lower employment positions. The Mexican immigrant population expanded the sectors of the lower working class (segregated and stigmatized) and competed with the other (non-white) minorities for low-skilled jobs.

The atmosphere of hostility that prevailed in the second half of the nineteenth century against the non-migrant Mexican population, was exacerbated by the arrival of Mexican immigrants in the 20th century. On the one hand, strained social relations between groups and, on the other, reproduced a set of prejudices that operate as social constraints for immigrants today. Therefore, the current problems of the population

of Mexican and immigrant origin in the United States, which include low levels of schooling, low wages, uninsured population, housing in separate neighborhoods[4] and discrimination, are not only explained by the structure of the international labor market, nor by the unskilled labor force of immigrants, but by the unequal historical relations of California society that have been reproduced in different ways.

4 See Current Population Survey, 2010, United States Census.

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