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Steel Barrio: The Great Mexican Migration to South Chicago, 1915-1940

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Michael Innis-Jiménez’s *Steel Barrio* adds to a very welcome growing body of historical scholarship on Mexican Americans in the Midwest. He documents the Mexican immigrants who settled in South Chicago in the years between World War I and World War II. As the largest city in the Midwest and the third largest metropolis in the country, Chicago has been the site of much recent historical inquiry. Innis-Jiménez follows the path of traditional immigrant and ethnic histories of other groups such as Italians, Poles, and Irish. The South Chicago neighborhood he studies housed and employed many of these immigrants in the local steel mills for decades. In exploring the experiences of Mexicans, Innis-Jiménez is interested in “how Mexicans persisted in the steel barrio despite the steel mills” (6).

*Steel Barrio* begins with the Mexican Revolution that prompted so many Mexicans to leave their homes and head north in search of political stability and economic security. A number of factors attracted Mexicans to the region and the nation’s extensive railroad system made it possible for many solos, or unattached men, as well as families, to try their luck in the ostensibly higher-paying factories and mills of Chicago. As Innis-Jiménez notes, “the 1919 steel strike and Chicago race riots, the Mexican Revolution and Cristero Rebellion, as well as legislation that restricted [European] immigration. … separately and together, created conditions that favored the migration of large numbers of Mexicans to Chicago” (20).

The book captures the circuitous paths that many migrants took to arrive in South Chicago. Many men and families began their journeys as betabeleros or beet workers in places like Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Iowa. Others followed the railroads, doing track maintenance work in Kansas and elsewhere. Regardless of the industry they followed, most were recruited by enganchistas, or labor recruiters, who lured migrants with exaggerated stories of good work conditions and even better pay. As single men and families tired of the itinerant nature of migrant farm labor or the railroad circuit, some chose to settle in South Chicago, where the billowing smokestacks of the steel mills beckoned with calls of better wages and more stable employment. Such favorable conditions, however, were more imagined than real, as migrants found that steel work was harsh and brutal and as the last hired, Mexicans were often the first fired or laid off during downturns. Moreover, Mexicans discovered that there were limits to their upward mobility, as employers often kept them in the lowest paid, unskilled, and most difficult jobs.

Housing patterns also figure prominently in this account. As might be expected, Mexican immigrants often had access to only the worst housing stock on the blocks closest to the mills. This area bore the brunt of the mills’ toxic pollution and thus experienced some of the worst environmental degradation. While Innis-Jiménez uses the term “environmental racism,” he never quite explains what he means or how exactly this represented racism. The communities surrounding the mills were occupied by European immigrants for decades before Mexicans arrived, and most workers and their families tried to escape to better living as soon as they could. Mexicans did not seem to experience this kind of mobility, however. This would be worth exploring further. Why weren’t Mexicans able to leave for better areas? Moreover, how do we account for the fact that Mexicans lived amongst very diverse immigrants at least initially, often boarding with Yugoslavians, Austrians, and Italians? To be sure, these neighborhoods experienced racial succession—as evidenced in one house that was exclusively Irish American in one census but occupied entirely by Mexicans ten years later. Still “environmental racism” does not seem to be an explanatory factor. More analysis of changes in housing patterns and more detail on just what the environment looked like would enrich the story.

The author describes Mexicans as being hostile to assimilation and Americanization efforts. Within this formulation, Mexican immigrants’ native practices and cultural celebrations are described as “resistant” to such efforts (116, 128). Traditional cultural practices, however, are not always politicized. Immigrants may have chosen to use native health remedies or to follow traditional social customs simply because they were easily available.
or most familiar, not necessarily because they were consciously defying and rejecting American alternatives. The assertion that “Mexicans equated discrimination and most assimilation efforts as not only an attack on them and their skin color but on their culture” (120, emphasis added) needs more supporting evidence. Direct quotes from Spanish-language newspapers, from Paul Taylor’s famous study of the region, or from other sources would make this claim more persuasive. Mexicans also reportedly “frowned on the use of English” (97) among their compatriots. Yet elsewhere the author notes that Mexican workers realized that “learning English was a critical key in order to advance” (80). The tensions and hostility toward Americanization then were not universal but perhaps contextually dependent. Innis-Jiménez is most convincing when he asserts that through their social and cultural activities Mexicans “sought to reinforce a sense of Mexican cultural solidarity, while simultaneously providing social and economic support for members of their community” (104).

As might be expected, Mexican immigrants made community in traditional ways—by establishing mutual aid societies, churches, small businesses, taking in boarders, and creating leisure opportunities amongst one another. Here, Innis-Jiménez shines in discussing the significance of leisure and recreation during the Great Depression when so many men were unemployed or underemployed. The proliferation of organized sports—baseball and basketball teams—is fascinating. Mexican immigrants also strategically accessed recreational resources at Protestant churches and social service centers when the local Catholic Church provided none.

More contextualization and comparative analysis with other contemporary immigrant groups would have been helpful, however. How did Mexicans’ everyday experiences differ from those of Eastern and Southern Europeans during this same time? Were they similar or did they vary significantly? Some coverage of the literature on these other immigrant groups would have been welcome. In some ways, many of the ideas, attitudes, and social practices of Mexicans were not very different from other immigrants at all. Conservative leaders in many immigrant communities promoted the retention of native language and advocated resisting assimilation and Americanization efforts to preserve native religious and cultural heritage. In this regard then, Mexicans were not exceptional. Yet in their reluctance to become U.S. citizens Mexicans did stand out. More than any other group, Mexicans were slow to give up their nationality and declare themselves U.S. citizens. This was the result of a number of factors, most important perhaps, the realization that American citizenship did not shield them from racism or discrimination.

By the epilogue the reader might wonder what happened to the steel mills and to the communities surrounding them. Anyone who has ventured to South Chicago in the last two decades would find it hard to believe that the area was once teeming with immigrant workers, clouded with the smoke of blast furnaces, and covered with the soot of the mills. The decline of the steel mills and the fate of local workers would have provided a compelling conclusion to this story. Still, Innis-Jiménez shows us that Mexican immigrants were not an incidental workforce in the steel mills. At Inland steel, for example, they made up nearly 35 percent of the workforce in 1926, making it the largest employer of Mexicans in the entire country (84). Students of U.S. history would do well to recognize that apart from being farm laborers in the early twentieth century, Mexican immigrants were also industrial workers. Innis-Jiménez does a fine job of telling their story.

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