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Criminalization and Migration Policies: Changes in the Process of Racial Stratification and Stigmatization of the Mexican Origin Population Based in the United States (1954-2001)

Criminalización y políticas migratorias: Cambios en el proceso de estratificación racial y estigmatización de la población de origen mexicano radicada en los Estados Unidos (1954-2001)

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ABSTRACT

This article sets out to analyze, from a historical perspective, changes in the process of racial stratification and stigmatization of people of Mexican origin living in the United States. Through an exploration of the bibliographic and documentary evidence of changes in US immigration policies with respect to Mexico during the second half of the twentieth century, three different historical periods were identified; 1954-1964, 1965-1985, and 1986-2001. Social changes taking place in these periods resulted in the consolidation of this population as one of the main ethnic minorities in the US; however, these changes did not succeed in eliminating the racial stigmatization imposed on Mexican immigrants (and later, Hispanic immigrants) by the dominant White culture since the second half of the nineteenth century. This has been consistently reflected in the current policies implemented by US immigration authorities along the border with Mexico.

Keywords: 1. Mexican immigration, 2. racial stratification, 3. stigmatization, 4. immigration policies, 5. Mexico-United States border.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo tiene como objetivo analizar desde una perspectiva histórica los cambios en el proceso de estratificación racial y estigmatización de la población de origen mexicano radicada en Estados Unidos. A partir de una exploración bibliográfica y documental de las modificaciones en las políticas migratorias estadounidenses con respecto a su frontera sur durante la segunda mitad del siglo XX, se identificaron tres periodos históricos distintos: 1954-1964, 1965-1985 y 1986-2001. Los cambios sociales presentados en estos periodos históricos permitieron que esta población se consolidara como una de las principales minorías étnicas de ese país, sin embargo, esto no logró eliminar la estigmatización racial que le fue impuesta al inmigrante mexicano (y posteriormente, hispano) por la cultura blanca dominante desde la segunda mitad del siglo XIX. Lo anterior se ha reflejado de manera constante en las actuales políticas que las autoridades migratorias estadounidenses han implementado en la frontera con México.

Palabras clave: 1. migración mexicana, 2. estratificación racial, 3. estigmatización, 4. políticas migratorias, 5. frontera México-Estados Unidos.

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INTRODUCTION

Racial stratification and stigmatization have been constant practices in US society, although over time their forms and patterns have evolved with respect to the various ethnic groups that coexist in the nation. The phenomenon of Mexican citizens migrating to the United States and living in that country has historically been a central theme informing both countries' foreign relations policies. However, due to the strong political and economic disparities between Mexico and the US, Mexican authorities have maintained a cautious, weak diplomatic stance toward the issue of protecting their nationals in the United States, whereas United States authorities have used their strength to control immigrants' lives and their entry into the country.

The historical period proposed for the present analysis (1954-2001) marks a turning point in the behavior of this migratory flow, and a key time during which a series of important changes can be identified. In the early 1940s, the Mexican government's capacity for negotiation with its US counterpart was relatively solid. Institutionalization of the Bracero Program had entailed recognition of a bi-national social problem that required a series of joint actions to be taken in order to resolve the problem. However, this had changed by the mid-1950s, since after the Second World War, the Mexican government lost much of its diplomatic negotiating ability.

The rise of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement in 1954 and the subsequent appearance of the UFW labor movement in the political landscape in central and southern California in the mid 1960s made its way into American society, making it clear that immigration was an issue that had to be resolved internally. Amid this new landscape, various Mexican American organizations gained political recognition as part of American society, while they sought to differentiate themselves from first-generation immigrants, particularly undocumented workers. In the 1960s and 1970s, Mexican American or Chicano associations lobbied different elements of the US government to prevent and control Mexican immigration to the United States; these actions triggered the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act.

Nevertheless, although these political and cultural changes in American society granted established Mexican Americans higher status than first-generation Hispanic immigrants, they were unable to fully escape racial stratification. US immigration policies in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have maintained the spirit of racial stratification, and while they have improved the living conditions of Mexican Americans, these policies have criminalized first-generation immigrants even further.

Racial stratification of immigrants

According to Omi and Winant (2015), the predominantly White dominant American culture assigns value to minority groups based on their identity, separating them and diminishing

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their status, maintaining control over them using, for example, skin color and other cultural differences such as religion and language. This mechanism regulates freedom of movement within society and has a psychological impact on the oppressed individual, which makes them perceive themselves as an inferior being, an attribute that ends up becoming part of the identity that holds the group together. This process, by which a homogeneous identity is constructed for a given ethnic group, is termed a "racial project" by Omi and Winant (2015), and the hierarchization of these groups within a racialized society is termed "racial stratification."

It should be understood that a racial project is "simultaneously an interpretation, representation or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particularly racial lines" (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 125). In other words, the racial project defines and grants identity to the subordinate group, while at the same time it determines an individual's possibilities of well-being. Racial stratification determines hierarchical status with respect to the dominant culture, but also with respect to other groups. This clarification is relevant because not all racialized and diminished groups are at the same level in the racial stratification, which can generate conflicts among racialized groups themselves, which in turn perpetuates their inferiority status vis-à-vis the dominant group.[2]

According to Martinot (2010), the concept of race as we know it today is part of a mechanism of European domination established in the Americas in the sixteenth century, whose purpose was to preserve a colonial system that enabled domination by the European colonizers. Although the current concept of race arises from mercantilism, it has been fundamental in the development of capitalism and the process of capital accumulation that is linked to being white. Western European nations wholly dominated the Atlantic trade routes from the sixteenth century on, ensuring the creation of a worldwide colonial system in which nations such as France, England, Spain, and Portugal politically and economically subdued the indigenous populations of the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Oceania.

The establishment of the European colonial system in the New World gave rise to modernity, understood as the domination of Western European cultural values at the global level. Not only did white skin become synonymous with progress and economic well-being – while populations with darker skins, or non-Whites, were classified as subordinate groups – but the adoption of Western values by non-White groups also served as a control mechanism to establish a hierarchy among and within these groups. Although they could not achieve the status of the whites who dominated them, a higher status would place them above other members of their group. The process by which the racialized individual acquires the social values of the dominant stratum has been termed *whiteness* by Echevarría (2016).

[2] These structures, in turn, are nuanced by other dominance mechanisms, such as class, gender, or sexual orientation, as proposed in the intersectionality theory developed by Crenshaw (1989).

A salient characteristic of American society has been the migratory flows it has received from different parts of the world, yet since the creation of the Thirteen Colonies, the predominant culture in the United States has been shaped by populations of European origin, especially by those who are white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant (WASP), imposing their dominance over populations of Native American and African origin. Native American peoples were subjected to policies of isolation and extermination, and Africans were part of the cheap slave labor on which US expansionism, in terms of both territory and of economy, was based following the independence of the United States.

Other migratory flows from different parts of the world arrived during the course of the nineteenth century. People from China and other parts of Asia began to arrive on the west coast, especially in California, many of them manual laborers in the agricultural, mining, and railroad industries. On the east coast, the immigrants were mainly of European origin from traditionally Catholic countries such as Italy, Ireland, and Poland, and from Eastern Europe, including Armenia, Russia, and Ukraine; most of these immigrants were part of a class of urban wage-earning workers (Bustamante, 1997).

Although both Chinese and European Catholic immigrants were initially racialized, Asians were assigned to a lower racial stratum than immigrants of European origin. While white immigrants from Europe gradually gained acceptance as an integral element of the dominant American culture during the course of the nineteenth century, Chinese immigrants did not experience the same fortune, being instead victims of the xenophobic sentiments expressed by Americans of European origin. By 1882, this rejection was reflected in federal immigration policies that prohibited the entry of people from China into the United States, which encouraged the lynching and expulsion of people of Chinese origin[3] regardless of whether they were US citizens or not (Lee, 2015).

With the legal abolition of slavery in the southern United States following the end of the Civil War (1861–1865), the living conditions of the black population were not substantially changed, since they continued to be marginalized. As a result, many of these groups abandoned the farms and plantations, and moved to large cities, both in the North and West, to become part of the urban proletariat along with poor whites.

It was this, along with the agroindustrial expansion in the southwestern United States at the end of the nineteenth century, that drew Mexican-born workers into the labor market in states such as Texas and California. This in turn led to a patron–peon relationship, which has been described by Ngai as an "import colonialism" policy, by which a process of economic and political domination was created through the seasonal migration of Mexican peasant farm workers to the United States (Ngai, 2014).

[3] It should be noted that a considerable number of the expelled "Chinese" were first or second-generation immigrants from other countries such as Japan and Korea, who according to the racializing criteria of the time were also considered Chinese by the criterion of the dominant culture due to the physical characteristics they had in common (Lee, 2015).

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From the 1880s on, the railways between Mexico and the United States facilitated systematic access by Mexican peasant workers to the American labor market that was highly stratified, fostering a stereotypical vision of Mexican workers (Foley, 1999). As with other groups, the racial stratum assigned to the "Mexican" worker in the United States overrides categories of nationality or citizenship; in other words, from the traditional white, English viewpoint, the "Mexican" worker is assigned the status of foreigner, even if he or she is born in the United States and therefore has legal citizenship. Migrant workers, who show a marked pattern of circular migration,[4] and the Mexican American communities whose homes are in the United States have both been perceived by Americans of European origin to be unpatriotic individuals without roots in the United States, and therefore deserving of mistrust. These opinions grow more intense during periods of economic crisis or when the unemployment rate increases (De León, 1983; Menchaca, 2001).

In this context, a large part of the Mexican population and people of Mexican origin in the southwestern United States adopted a variety of mechanisms to deal with the racial stratification imposed on them. Some groups isolated themselves in closed communities, appealing to a mutualistic tradition in which feelings of discrimination created a "Mexican unity" that transcended political positions or religious beliefs, since they were all part of "the Mexican people" ("*la raza mexicana*"). Another type of Mexican American organization, such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and The American GI Forum (AGIF), considered that the "right" path was to pursue assimilation into the dominant white culture, so that they would eventually be accepted as fully entitled citizens of the United States; that is, they sought to *whiten* themselves.[5]

Among the "Mexican" population living in the United States from the mid-nineteenth century to the present,[6] the ethno-racial hierarchy has been marked by cultural and linguistic aspects rather than by skin color, which is why some of these groups –mainly urban, lighter-skinned Mexican Americans– try to escape racial stratification by disavowing the Spanish language and adopting the traditions of white culture. An example of this can be seen in the cover of the September 1963 official magazine of the LULAC, which shows a cartoon of a mother comforting a crying child with the caption in Spanish, "*No llores, mi hijita, pronto aprenderás inglés y los demás niños te comprenderán… serán tus amiguitos… y jugarán contigo*" (Don't cry, my little one, soon you'll learn English, and the other children will

[4] This pattern of migration was broken during the Reagan administration in the 1980s after the border was fortified against illegal crossing (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2009).
[5] Founded in 1929 in Corpus Christi, Texas, LULAC is the oldest Mexican American Civil Rights organization in the United States. AGIF is an American Hispanic veterans' organization founded in 1948 in Corpus Christi to promote political participation and social integration of the Hispanic community in the United States (Márquez, 1993).
[6] Referring to the perception of English American racial "Mexicanness" in which any individual of Hispanic or Latin American descent is considered Mexican regardless of nationality, even if he or she is a legal citizen of the United States.

understand you… they'll be your friends… and they will play with you…) (League of United Latin American Citizens, 1963, p. 1)

In the mid-twentieth century, Mexican American communities gradually abandoned isolation as a strategy within their communities to embrace a discourse of homogenization and assimilation with English White American culture, seeking to differentiate themselves from first-generation Mexican immigrants, especially the undocumented workers (Menchaca, 2001; Foley, 1999). Even though this strategy failed to rid them of their "non-white" status linked to the racial project, they managed to go up a step on the racial ladder, ranking hierarchically below whites, but above first-generation Latin American immigrants.

Chicano or Mexican: The beginning of the rupture (1954-1964)

The 1950s saw major changes around the world. The defeat of fascism at the end of World War II and the emergence of a new political organization at the global level unleashed a succession of social decolonization movements throughout much of the world and a critique of the dominant racial paradigm in the United States. Both academia and civil society gradually began to pay attention to the critical voices raised against the system of segregation of minorities, which they called "internal colonialism" (Gutiérrez, 2004). Although the first public demonstrations challenging the racial segregation system in the United States were begun by African-American groups, these ideas permeated other racialized groups, such as Asians and Latin Americans.

It was in this context that the struggle for Civil Rights in the United States was made possible, a struggle that succeeded in changing the views of a large number of Americans with regard to racial segregation policies. This change in the American social conscience led to a restructuring of the strategy for confronting the racial project imposed on the Mexican American community. The strategy of segregation was abandoned in favor of a struggle for acceptance as an integral part of American culture. They began to cultivate a "Chicano identity" distinguished from that of the first-generation Mexican immigrant, but not completely absorbing the dominant white culture.

The concept of "Chicano identity" depends in large part on an individual notion that seeks a balance between acceptance as part of American society and embracing the ideals and values of Mexican culture. "Chicano consciousness" is an ambiguous concept that needs to be analyzed in more depth (Arce, 1981). Groups such as the "*Boinas Cafés*" (Brown Berets), LULAC, and the United Farm Workers (UFW) were part of the Chicano movements of the 1960s and 1970s, but they had different ideas about what Chicanismo meant. Yet they did agree that they sought acceptance as part of American society and distance from the Mexican first-generation immigrant community, especially from the mutualist and Mexicanist groups that had proliferated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and led to the formation of ghettos.

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The agricultural wing of the Chicano movement was particularly critical of migration of Mexican laborers to the United States. During the 1950s and 1960s, they opposed the farm labor import agreement signed between the Mexican and United States governments, known as the Bracero Program (PB),[7] arguing that it was part of a strategy to lower the wages of domestic farm workers, who were mostly of Mexican origin. From the 1950s on, various Mexican American farm worker groups associated with the Community Service Organization (CSO) opposed the *guest worker* program.

Subsequently, since the founding of the National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) in California in 1962,[8] later renamed United Farm Workers (UFW), opposition by workers of Mexican origin in the United States to the immigration of workers from Mexico has been successful in winning support from a large part of the American population, including poor and middle-class white workers whose jobs were also threatened by the constant migratory flow from Mexico. The American public began to view the Bracero Program as a corrupt, harmful system. The harm emerged from two aspects: it exploited and suppressed Mexican migrant workers, and at the same time allowed large American farm producers to maintain low wages at the expense of domestic farm workers.

These criticisms of the Bracero Program were brought before the United States Congress from representatives of different sides of the agricultural industry, trade unions as well as large American agribusinesses, who promoted new bills to bring an end to the program. With these proposals, the labor movements sought to limit the flow of workers from Mexico hired under the program and thus to raise the salaries of Mexican American farm workers. However, representatives of the large landowners tried to restrict the Mexican government's ability to act in defense of the workers, increasing the precariousness of migrant workers' working conditions (García Searcy, 2017). In other words, although both groups were against the Bracero Program, their aims were not only different, but contradictory.

By the mid-1950s, the original economic emergency that had prompted the Bracero Program had eased. The Mexican government was becoming increasingly dependent on exporting labor, whereas the United States was under strong pressure to end the program. This led to a series of unilateral actions by US immigration authorities aimed at making migration more precarious, and which served to put pressure on the Mexican government to approve the renewal of hiring contracts with less favorable working conditions for the Mexican workers (García Searcy, 2017).

[7] The Bracero Program actually consisted of a series of labor agreements (each with different characteristics) signed between 1942 and 1964 by the Mexican and United States governments to allow and regulate Mexican men migrating to work in the United States for low wages, mainly in the agricultural industry (Durand, 2007).

[8] Union organization founded by César Chávez and Dolores Huerta in the Central Valley of California, splitting off the agricultural wing of the CSO.

These measures included Operation Wetback in the summer of 1954, which was a militarized mass deportation of undocumented Mexican workers. The operation was highly publicized by most of the US media. The result was that it fed a perception among the American public of a "Mexican threat" in which "hordes of savages" from Mexico were entering the United States to "steal jobs" from US taxpayers. At the same time, in the United States Congress, proposals for S.3660 and S.3661 were discussed. These bills would have provided a number of legal loopholes exempting employers who hired undocumented workers from penalty (Kang, 2017). However, the proposed bills were not passed due to the intervention of congressmen with ties to US farm unions. This revealed the two-faced discourse disseminated by the mass media, which survives to the present day: the migrant worker is stigmatized and criminalized, while attempts are made to absolve the employer of all responsibility (Kang, 2017).

Unlike the African American Civil Rights Movement, which was mainly urban in nature and extended throughout much of the country, membership in its Chicano or Mexican American counterpart in the early 1960s was concentrated principally in rural areas in the southwestern United States (particularly California and Texas). Staunch opposition to the Bracero Program and undocumented immigration from Mexico remained one of the central axes of the Chicano struggle, especially among trade unionists, since workers of Mexican origin were mostly in the farming valleys of central and southern California and eastern Texas, and worked mainly at different jobs in the agricultural industry.

It was not until the late 1960s, after the close of the Bracero Program, that student-oriented and urban middle-class Chicano movements gained strength, especially in the cities of Los Angeles and San Antonio. Starting from Texas, Mexican American political organizations such as LULAC penetrated the Democratic Party, carrying some of its most prominent members to Congress and other important public positions at both the local and federal levels. Meanwhile, in California the social struggle was mostly associated with UFW union activism, which resulted in considerable ideological influence at the national level both in farm worker groups and in Chicano urban student associations such as M.E.Ch.A. (*Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán*) and *Boinas Cafés* (Brown berets).

An alliance in gestation (1965-1985)

Although the end of the Bracero Program in 1964 was expected to bring about more employment for American workers and increased wages, the hoped-for changes did not materialize for American farm workers. Wages for migrant farm workers increased only 2 percent in 1965, while the price of fresh produce in the supermarkets increased by an average of 9.1 percent and canned produce by 6.2 percent, even though the increase in the number of US-born farm workers hired in the same year was 5 percent less than in 1964 (US Department of Labor, 1966). This was largely due to the fact that former Bracero Program workers stayed in their jobs in the United States although they were now undocumented.

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At the same time, the flow of Mexican labor migration continued without abating, especially undocumented immigrants. These followed the same pattern as the Bracero workers; that is, mainly male, and circular migration (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2009, pp. 10-11). During this period, the border patrol became the organization that oversaw the migration flow. Border surveillance by US immigration authorities remained linked to agricultural cycles in the region; during the season of high labor demand, immigration controls were relaxed, allowing irregular entry of Mexican workers. When demand decreased, immigrant detention operations intensified (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2009).

After the Bracero Program ended, the United States Congress passed a new immigration law in 1965 that limited and controlled the entry of temporary workers by establishing a quota of 300 000 temporary work permits (H-2 visa)[9] per year in total, instead of 20 000 per country as had been proposed in previous years. In theory, this measure gave some advantage to migrants from countries that were farther away and more densely populated, such as China and Vietnam, over nearer neighbors such as Mexico and Canada. However, in practice the policy did not affect the flow of Mexican workers, since although a considerable number of them entered the United States on H-2 temporary work visas, the majority did so by the undocumented route (Espenshade, 1995).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the undocumented immigration flow increased along the southern border of the United States, anti-immigrant discourse took hold among senior UFW leaders. The union advocated for a decrease in the flow of undocumented Mexican immigration at the southern border of the United States, organizing protests against the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the Border Patrol for allowing undocumented migrants to cross in areas adjacent to the border zone, mainly the Imperial Valley in California and the Rio Grande Valley in Texas (Griswold del Castillo, 1995; Burns, 2011).

These positions polarized UFW members, since a significant number were themselves undocumented immigrants from Mexico. This led to the departure of a large number of these union members who had Mexican nationality and undocumented status in the United States. According to Griswold del Castillo, “The proportion of undocumented and documented Mexican immigrants who were active in the early UFW actions varied, ranging from more than 70 percent in the Imperial Valley, adjacent to Mexico, to less than 30 percent in strikes in Florida and northern California” (1995, p. 185).

One of the most notorious cases of opposition to undocumented immigration by the UFW occurred in Yuma County in October, 1974. During a strike in the area, members of the union patrolled the border to prevent undocumented immigrants from being hired as scabs, which resulted in violent confrontations between the migrants and members of the UFW, sparking a diplomatic conflict between Mexico and the United States.

[9] Visas were divided into H-2A for agricultural workers and H-2B for non-agricultural workers.

As a result of this incident, the UFW significantly reduced its strike and patrol activities, but maintained its anti-immigrant stance by supporting legal initiatives aimed at increasing border patrols in order to stem the flow of undocumented migrants from Mexico. Among these can be highlighted the relationship cultivated between union movements such as the UFW and Democratic Congressman Peter W. Rodino, who pushed for a bill to penalize employers who hired undocumented workers.

Although the bill was not passed by the US Congress at the time, it laid the foundations for subsequent reforms of the immigration system (Alarcón Acosta, 2016).[10] The irony is that this anti-immigrant stance first came out of movements on the left, in contrast to the politicized perception of the immigration issue in the United States today. This shows the complexity of the phenomenon and changes in political interests over time.

After the end of the Bracero Program, the porous border policy followed by the United States immigration authorities from 1965 to the end of the 1970s led to a gradual increase in the number of undocumented immigrants. The normalization of irregular migratory flows from Mexico from the second half of the 1960s on stimulated the escalation of a media discourse that spoke of a "Mexican invasion" or a "Latin threat." American public opinion turned increasingly in favor of militarization and reinforcement of the country's southern border. According to Massey, this sentiment nourished a feedback loop that kept the bureaucratic law enforcement machinery growing, even though there was no real increase in illegal immigration (Massey, 2016).

At the beginning of the Carter administration, in August 1977, a legislative package aimed at solving the "problem" of undocumented immigration was promoted by the Executive. It proposed increasing the quota for immigrants from the neighboring countries (Mexico and Canada) while sanctioning employers who hired undocumented workers. The proposal caused a strong division in the US Congress, and the bill was vetoed by both the agroindustrial lobby and Mexican American activist associations, but for opposite reasons. While some groups in the agroindustrial sector spoke out against Carter's proposals because of the possible sanctions they would face if they hired undocumented workers, associations such as LULAC considered that an increase in the quota for migrant workers entering the United States would adversely affect the standard of living of Mexican American workers (Márquez, 1993).

The debate in Congress revived the interest in creating "comprehensive policies" for immigration in the United States, and in 1979 the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy was created. The commission's 16 members included academics, members of Congress, and activists, and its mandate was to study existing legislation regarding immigration policy, evaluate its consequences, and propose new legislation based on research. The commission's work was released at the beginning of the Reagan administration

[10] Such as the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which would be passed and come into effect in 1986.

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in a final report prepared in May 1981 (U.S. Senate, 1981), which proposed increasing border patrol financing and issuing a larger number of H-2 visas for unskilled temporary agricultural workers. In response to the report, in March 1982, Senator Alan K. Simpson and Congressman Romano Mazzoli proposed sanctions against employers who hired undocumented workers, and at the same time extended the H-2 visa program, in line with the Carter administration's proposal. However, the proposal was not approved due to opposition from both agroindustrial interests and farm workers' unions.

During the Reagan presidency (1981-1989), increasingly precarious and uncertain economic prospects for the American middle and lower classes caused the migrant community to be blamed for most of the ills afflicting the American economy. This had the result of increasing resentment of immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, which led to the approval of increasingly hard-line immigration policies and incited a process of fortifying and militarizing the border. Taking into account the political and economic context, representatives of farm unions and agribusiness interests used the Simpson-Mazzoli bill as a basis for reaching a joint immigration agreement, which resulted in the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). The agreement approved tightening border security policy in exchange for an amnesty for undocumented immigrants.

The unrelenting precariousness of irregular border crossing conditions along the southern border and the hardening of the immigration quota system against Mexicans and Central Americans broke the pattern of temporary, circular, predominantly male migration; permanent and family immigration now came to the fore (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2009). The changes made in US immigration policies from 1986 onward changed the conditions of border crossing for migrants and consolidated the Mexican American community as an integral element of the array of ethnic minorities in the United States, widening the gap between the established community and first-generation immigrants.

Farm worker activist groups in the 1960s and 1970s did not so much follow a strategy of trying to eliminate or change the racial structure as they sought to escape from it. The discourse about modifying or doing away with the racial structure fell to the first-generation immigrants. This argument was used to legitimize anti-immigrant political discourse during the Reagan administration, feeding the perception that every immigrant from the south, whether Mexican or Central American, is undocumented and therefore to be viewed as a criminal. The transformation of migratory flows led in turn to the diversification of jobs filled by immigrants, shifting them increasingly toward the urban, industrial, and service sectors.

Segregating and criminalizing the Mexican immigrant (1986-2001)

From 1986 on, a new political elite favorable to the neoliberal policies promoted by the US and UK governments gained control of the governing party in Mexico (PRI). One of its first moves was to join the General Agreement on Tariffs and Customs (GATT), abandoning the economic model of industrialization by import substitution (ISI) for a free-market policy

where the majority of consumer goods would come from abroad, mainly the United States and Europe.

According to the neoliberal discourse, this change in Mexico's economic policy would integrate the Mexican market into a global economy to compete freely with Europe and the United States. However, it resulted in a large part of the Mexican agricultural and industrial sector being abandoned, leaving millions of Mexicans with precarious employment or without jobs altogether since it was cheaper to import food, technology, and other consumer goods than to produce them in Mexico. At the same time, Central America was experiencing a violent epoch of political and economic instability due to a wave of civil wars in the region fueled by tensions carried over from the final phase of the Cold War and US military interventions (Morales-Gamboa, 2003).

Meanwhile, in the United States, the neoliberal measures imposed by Ronald Reagan did not seem to benefit the bulk of the American population; "By 1983, national unemployment had increased by 9 percent, the dollar had lost 6 percent of its value in 1970, poverty had increased by 15 percent, average income had decreased by 2 percent, and the increase in inequality had accelerated" (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2009, p.98). As mentioned previously, the Reagan administration resorted to the old scapegoat strategy of blaming undocumented immigrants and an ongoing flow of drugs through the southern border for many of the social and economic problems in the United States in an effort to reduce the crisis of legitimacy and expand his electoral base for future reelection.

The war on drugs, initiated during the Reagan administration, consolidated the militarization of the Mexican border[11] by involving the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in border control activities. This, together with an increase in migratory flows from Central America at the end of the decade due to the interventionist policies of the United States in the region, resulted in the American popular imagination linking undocumented immigration along the southern border with the danger to national security inherent in drug trafficking.

This discourse was used in a political campaign strategy that assured Reagan's re-election for another presidential term, which gave way to an immigration policy that converged with criminal justice measures, called by some authors *crimmigration*. This is one of the characteristics of current immigration policy in the United States, and has been used particularly against Latin American immigrants. The latter ethnic group has been overrepresented in the statistics on repatriation carried out by the United States immigration authorities during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Armenta, 2016).

[11] Some authors, however, argue that the process of militarizing the border began in the final years of the Carter administration, subsequent to the Border Patrol budget and personnel increase that started in 1978 (Nevins, 2002).

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In 1988, after an election tainted by accusations of fraud, Carlos Salinas de Gortari became president of Mexico. He had a doctorate in economics from Harvard, which ensured that neoliberal policy would continue to reign in Mexico. The following year, Republican candidate George H. W. Bush was elected as president of the United States and held office from 1989 to 1993. Diplomatic, political, and business relations between the Bush and Salinas administrations were intense and marked by media optimism, especially on the Mexican side, where an often-repeated refrain was that Mexico *was on the cusp of entering the first world* (Meyer, 2004).

Yet economic disparities in Mexico continued to widen. Privatization and economic liberalization policies generated an atmosphere of optimism in certain middle class urban sectors who could now acquire new products and technologies from abroad, but at the cost of no job protection for the most marginalized sectors of the urban population. Moreover, a policy of abandoning agricultural production favored large farms and marginalized small landowners (Orrantia-Bustos & González-Estrada, 2006).

In January 1992, when the US and Mexico were in negotiations to sign the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Canada, the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service), together with the Border Patrol, launched an operation in the San Diego border area. They installed new border walls and security mechanisms to prevent undocumented entry to the United States through the traditional crossing areas. Groups of migrants who had practiced circular migration found themselves unable to return to their jobs in the United States after visiting their communities of origin in Mexico for the holidays. They gathered near the border crossing in San Ysidro and entered the United States *en masse*. The event was filmed by Border Patrol agents and shown by media within and outside the United States, reinforcing the perception that the US had lost control over its border with Mexico (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2009).

This episode marked the beginning of a series of immigration control operations carried out from 1992 to 1994[12] by US immigration authorities against the background of NAFTA negotiations. These operations could be interpreted as mechanisms to pressure the Mexican government to accept unfavorable conditions for Mexico within NAFTA.

Some political authorities, both local and federal, as well as Republican Party members, especially the governor of California, Pete Wilson,[13] advocated not only an increase in the

[12] A period that would include the final year of the Republican George H. W. Bush administration and the first two of Democrat Bill Clinton (1993-1997 and 1997-2000), which clearly demonstrates the continuity of immigration policies transcending the differences between the two hegemonic political parties in the United States (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2009).

[13] Peter Barton Wilson is a Republican politician who served as mayor of San Diego County (1971-1983), federal senator (1983-1990), and governor of California (1991-1999). Wilson was best known for promoting anti-immigrant policies, especially relating to the Mexican border (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2009).

border security budget, but also tougher immigration policies to stop the flow of undocumented immigration through the southern border. This was strongly supported by conservative media in the United States, who repeatedly broadcast reports about the "immigration crisis" along the Mexican border and the "invasion" of undocumented migrants (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2009; Nevins, 2002).

In July 1993, as the final NAFTA negotiations were taking place, the administration of President Clinton responded to media pressure from political opponents by announcing initiatives to increase border security by authorizing an increase in the Border Patrol budget and hiring 600 new agents.

Subsequently, two operations were carried out to detain undocumented migrants along the southern border. The first, in September 1993, was in the El Paso, Texas area, and was known as Operation Blockade/Hold-The-Line.[14] The second was carried out in the San Diego area a year later, in September 1994, and was called Operation Gatekeeper. Both the El Paso and San Diego operations were successful within the United States as a public image strategy, and contributed to the increase in anti-immigrant sentiment at the southern border. The perception that IRCA had failed in its goal of curbing undocumented immigration was one of the reasons for the popularity of these measures, not only among English Americans but also among Americans of Mexican descent (Nevins, 2002).

In contrast to Operation Blockade/Hold-The-Line carried out in El Paso, which was launched by surprise due to its hurried implementation, Operation Gatekeeper was launched with deliberation in a particular political context. Congressman Richard L. Mountjoy, a member of the California State Assembly, introduced Proposition 187 to the state legislature as a ballot initiative, and it was submitted for public vote together with the 1994 California gubernatorial election.

Passage of Proposition187 would grant law enforcement authorities the right to detain any person suspected of being an undocumented immigrant, and if they were, to report them directly to the INS for incarceration and subsequent deportation, as well as denying them basic state services such as health care and education. This initiative was one of the guiding principles of Wilson's election campaign when he ran for reelection as governor of California for the Republican Party.

As a result, on election day, Wilson was re-elected with 55.2 percent of the vote, compared to 40.6 percent for his main challenger, Kathleen Brown. Proposition 187, however, was approved by 59 percent of the votes, compared to 41 percent who voted against it (The Field Institute, 1995). Although the proposed law was approved by a majority of California voters,

[14] Although it was officially argued that the operation was unilaterally organized by the head of the El Paso Border Patrol sector without express authorization from the federal executive, it increased Clinton's popularity in the more conservative sectors of American society, leading to the federal administration bringing in a tougher immigration policy (Massey, 2016).

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on December 14, 1994 Federal Judge Mariana Pfaelzer, who resided in Los Angeles, ruled the bill unconstitutional and contrary to federal immigration guidelines. Although it had been approved, it never came into force.

Nevertheless, Wilson's re-election and the approval of Proposition 187 by the majority of the electorate demonstrated how strongly divided California society was about immigration. Of the 62 % of registered voters who participated in the election, 63% of non-Hispanic whites voted in favor of the proposition, compared to 23% of Latinos. In addition, according to electoral registers, 81 percent of voters self-described themselves as non-Hispanic whites, while only 8 percent of voters described themselves as Latinos. This did not reflect the known distribution of the population at that time, in which 57 percent considered themselves non-Hispanic whites and 26 percent Latinos (Jones, 1995). It means that not only were white groups, which are usually the most favored by racializing political structures in the United States, over-represented, but also that a considerable proportion of people of Latin origin were sympathetic to anti-immigrant discourse. Although they were not a majority in California, they exercised their right to vote.

The political instability experienced in Mexico in 1994 and 1995 increased white Americans' distrust of immigrants from Mexico who lived in the United States. The international media perpetuated the image of Mexico, and by extension, of Mexicans as an unstable barbaric nation (Alarcón Acosta, 2016). This generated distrust of immigration from the southern border. By the mid-1990s, a growing proportion of American citizens supported tougher measures against undocumented immigration, and the United States federal government gradually changed its discourse as the presidential election period of 1996 drew near, since President Clinton was seeking reelection (Alarcón Acosta, 2016).

As a result, the United States Congress approved a set of laws and legal reforms that included the Legal Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act PL 104-208 (US Congress, 1996a), the Antiterrorism Effective Death Penalty and Public Security Act PL 104-132 (US Congress, 1996b), and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act PL: 104-193 (US Congress, 1996c). These laws took effect in 1997 and made living conditions precarious for undocumented immigrants in the United States.

The legislation criminalized labor immigration, implemented mechanisms for rapid expulsion of undocumented migrants, denied them the right to a hearing, severely penalized undocumented immigrants and limited the assistance provided to them by certain social assistance programs. As a complement to these measures, the US federal government invested 150 million dollars in strengthening the INS investigation system and hired more INS and Border Patrol agents. A biometric control system was also installed at bridge border crossing points, and a triple wall was constructed on the San Diego-Tijuana border (Mungía Salazar, 2015).

Implementation of these immigration measures increased Clinton's popularity, securing the vote of nearly half the voters. However, following his reelection, the federal executive

and the media reduced their anti-immigrant discourse, so that by the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s, few media outlets were talking any more about "the Mexican invasion," and it had become a marginal issue to the media. Even so, the legacy of the 1996 reforms remained and deportations were ongoing, forcing immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, to live in fear, segregated from the rest of American society.

The 2000 US presidential election was marked by a close and controversial win by Republican candidate George W. Bush (2001-2005 and 2005-2009) over Al Gore, who had been vice president during the Clinton administration. The same year, Vicente Fox Quesada (2000–2006), was elected as the first PAN president of Mexico. The two countries drew closer during the first months of the new administrations, migration along the shared border being one of the main topics on the bilateral agenda. The issue of immigration had become almost completely ignored during Clinton's second term, but now media in both countries were finally talking about the possibility of a bilateral immigration agreement.

However, this opportunity was cut short when a new element erupted onto the international geopolitical map. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 brought a sharp change to the international scene. The US Congress approved the USA PATRIOT Act PL 107-56 (US Congress, 2001), which established a number of reforms to the national security system, implemented more robust and sophisticated internal surveillance mechanisms, and violated the individual rights and civil liberties of its citizens.

The former INS became Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the agency in charge of enforcing immigration laws and investigating criminal and terrorist activities committed by foreigners on United States soil. ICE became part of the newly created Department of Homeland Security (DHS), a government agency that would be responsible for all activities concerning internal security. The change in emphasis in the discourse on borders as a matter of national security encouraged the process of *securitization,*[15] increasing security protocols at border ports and airports. It linked undocumented immigration with the fight against terrorism, increasing the stigmatization of ethnic groups, especially migrants from the Middle East and Latin America, while promoting an immigration model that was more repressive towards these groups (Treviño Rangel, 2016).

CONCLUSIONS

Over the nearly 50 years analyzed in this article, we can glimpse how migration between Mexico and the United States has undergone a series of ruptures and continuities. The

[15] The term *securitization* is derived from the word "security" and refers to discourse that draws a connection between issues of security and social problems that do not necessarily originate from security issues. In this way, it tends to criminalize minorities or marginalized groups. In this case, the link is with Mexican and Central American migrants, who are considered a threat to national security (Salazar & Rojas, 2011).

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analysis began with the emergence of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement and its link with immigration policies, and saw how these interests began to intertwine with those of agroindustry owners and representatives of conservative white movements, generating an anti-immigrant sentiment that divided a faction of the Chicano social struggle and reinforced the prejudices of the English white ruling class.

This alliance between groups of Mexican Americans and the dominant white class, which begun in the 1960s and 1970s, became more evident with the passing of time. The anti-immigrant rhetoric promoted by UFW leaders was increasingly similar to the dominant racial discourse, and generated political alliances between Mexican American farm worker unions and representatives of the agroindustrial sector. As a result of these alliances, Congress developed immigration policy proposals that criminalized both the entry of undocumented people and the hiring of workers without a work permit. However, these approaches failed to materialize due to some of the interests between the two groups being incompatible, since agroindustry owners refused to penalize farmers and producers who hired undocumented workers.

In the mid-1980s, thanks to the efforts of Congressmen Alan K. Simpson (Republican) and Romano Mazzoli (Democrat), an agreement was reached that would benefit both parties. Thus, although the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) criminalized undocumented immigration by militarizing the border, it was accompanied by an amnesty process for undocumented workers, even though it did not penalize employers for hiring them. The IRCA finally managed to consolidate and legitimize a significant segment of the Mexican American population as one of the minorities who, although they lacked the structural privileges of the white ruling classes, were part of American society and therefore awarded higher status in the racial hierarchy than the undocumented population or first-generation immigrants. Moreover, it was accomplished without disrupting the interests of the large farm producers.

In other words, once the IRCA was in effect (1986), anti-Latino-immigrant discourse could be detached from the Mexican American community. It was also in this decade that due to both the amnesty policy and the increase in immigration from Central America, the terms “Mexican” or “Mexican American” began to be discontinued in favor of “Hispanic” or “Latino,” reflecting the more diverse national origins of this population.

The “Latino” community, although *othered*, became an integral part of the United States – unlike recent Latin American immigrants, who remained systematically overlooked. However, other intersectional elements such as income, education, and level of assimilation into the dominant American culture were involved in this stratification process. Thus some groups, usually from higher socioeconomic strata, were more readily accepted by the dominant white culture.

A process of stigmatizing the first generation of Latin American immigrants took place from 1986 to 2001, aimed particularly at those in lower socio-economic strata. This was

manifested in the enactment of laws criminalizing them, following discourse linking them to border security problems, especially organized crime, as well as gradually stripping them of their basic human rights. The incessant media escalation of racial prejudice against the first-generation immigrant population is part of a historical continuum in which the immigrant (in this case, the immigrant from the southern border) is used as a scapegoat and accused of a great part of the economic and social ills afflicting American society.

The "immigrant crisis," as it has been called, has not been the fault of the immigrants themselves, but of the hierarchical power structures that have constantly benefited the white economic elites of the United States. Persistent media harassment and the increasing severity of immigration laws are part of a power structure (the "racial project") that guarantees the political dominance of white English elites over ethnic minorities in the United States.

Although the analysis shows marked differences among the various federal administrations associated with the two main political parties in the United States in regard to immigration issues, both parties fueled the stigmatization of immigrants of Latin American origin. Republicans actively proposed and approved measures to criminalize undocumented immigrants, while the Democrats contributed "passively" by ignoring immigration issues and maintaining the criminalizing immigration policies approved by Republican administrations. While the Democrats' contribution does not imply that they approved of restrictive immigration policies and racially tainted mass deportations during their administrations, a decrease can be observed in the intensity of anti-immigrant discourse by federal authorities during Democratic years. What is undeniable is the continuous political leverage of immigration issues, both during elections and during times of economic and political crisis in the United States.

Lacking political rights and at risk of deportation, the undocumented immigrant becomes the ideal scapegoat to bear the blame for economic disparities and social problems in the United States. However, despite the increased acceptance of the "Latino" population by the dominant white culture, these populations were not able to entirely escape being racialized. Although its members were able to achieve a higher stratum than the first-generation immigrant population, the Latin population in the United States continues to be segregated and viewed with greater distrust than other racialized groups.

Hardened immigration policies along the southern border since 2001 have increased stigmatization of people of Latin American origin living in the United States, regardless of their immigration status. Border securitization measures have intensified the criminalization of Latin American immigrants since the 1980s, giving rise to the wave of anti-immigrant policies that has characterized the first years of the twenty-first century.

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