“Patronage and Progress: The Bracero Program from the Perspective of Mexico”


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During the 1980s, record migration levels and intensified policy debates stimulated an outpouring of scholarship on Mexican immigration to the United States.¹ Since then, social scientists and journalists on both sides of the border have examined emigration’s multifaceted effects on contemporary Mexico. Historians of Mexico have yet to follow their lead. While award-winning histories about those immigrants’ experience *within* the United States abound, scholars continue to neglect the historical impact of emigration and return migration on Mexico itself.²

¹. Research funding for this project came from a Fulbright Faculty Research Fellowship (2007) from the U.S. Department of Education and a Research Support Funds Grant (2006) from the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at Indiana University Purdue University-Indianapolis. This chapter benefited from the provocative questions offered by colleagues at the Newberry Conference on Labor History Across the Americas and the inspiration and editorial advice of Julie Greene. Gracias a todos.

². An important exception is the sociologist David Fitzgerald’s *A Nation of Emigrants: How Mexico Manages Its Migration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
Indeed, historians of migration devote more attention to the immigrants who settled in late
nineteenth and twentieth century Mexico than the emigrants who departed in ever greater
streams. As a result, leading textbook surveys devote cursory attention to the issue, reducing
emigration to an effect of rural poverty rather than a process of great complexity, magnitude and
consequence in its own right. Contemporaries knew otherwise. From the 1920s onward,
emigration regularly dominated headlines and policy debates, while Mexican films and folk
ballads taught lessons about the promises and pitfalls of life in the USA, the almost singular
destination of the Mexico’s emigrants. By the early twenty-first century, Mexico became the


4. Claire Fox, The Fence and the River: Culture and Politics at the US-Mexico Border (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Maria Herrera-Sobek, Northward Bound: The Mexican Immigrant Experience in Ballad and Song (Bloomington: University of Indiana
word’s leading emigrant-sending nation. Consistent with both historical and contemporary precedents, this evolution into an emigrant nation owed a good deal to state policy.  

This essay examines the most consequential of these federal government initiatives: the Bracero Program, a migratory labor agreement that Mexico first negotiated with the United States during World War Two. The Bracero Program began as a bilateral response to fears of labor scarcity and food shortages, as native-born farm workers abandoned the fields for military service or industrial jobs. While some wartime migrants labored on railway maintenance crews, the majority were contractually restricted to the harvesting of crops. These braceros, as seasonal labor migrants became known, were hailed by Mexico’s government and by host communities for their heroic contribution to the economic mobilization. However, what began as a temporary ‘guest worker’ policy proved so successful - from the perspective of growers, both governments, and the migrants themselves - that it lasted until 1964. Indeed, more braceros arrived each year in the 1950s than during the war years combined and the Bracero Program became the USA’s largest experiment to date with the importation of foreign contract labor.


6. The US government issued nearly 5 million contracts to bracero migrants, with annual averages peaking at more than 400,000 in the mid-1950s. At least as many undocumented migrants, unable or unwilling to secure bracero permits, ventured north during the same period. Details on the program’s origins, implementation, and effects in both Mexico and the US in
In the US, early twenty-first century debates about ‘immigration reform’ and talk of another large-scale guest worker program have renewed attention to the neglected history of the braceros. Cautionary tales about the program’s negative effects abound. Building upon the observations of contemporary critics, historians of agricultural labor highlight the Bracero Program’s detrimental consequences for farm workers in the US. Real wages stagnated, and in some cases fell. Living and working conditions barely improved, despite greater government oversight. The nascent unionization of the 1930s was stymied too, as the agricultural labor force became more transitory, dispersed, seasonal, and deportable. The setbacks experienced by farm labor contrast markedly with the organizational and socioeconomic gains made by industrial workers during these decades of postwar American prosperity.\(^7\) The staggering poverty discovered in farm worker communities by the early 1960s thus lent credence to charges that the Bracero Program was little more than a system of “imported colonialism,” as one AFL-CIO

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official called it. The migrant farm workers so celebrated for their wartime contribution to American agriculture came to be seen as “The Slaves We Rent.” Today the Bracero Program is frequently demonized on the Internet as a system of “legalized slavery,” an expression borrowed from Lee G. William, a US Department of Labor officer who supervised bracero employment. These critical views of the Bracero Program parallel those heard in Mexico, then and today.

A labor policy that prompted a largely regional debate in the United States evoked a national outcry in the braceros’ homeland. The Bracero Program became the most controversial policy implemented by the state in the 1940s and 1950s. For many, the state’s pro-emigration policy was an affront to national dignity. How, the critics demanded, could the government encourage hard-working young men to abandon the homeland and go north to be exploited by gringo farmers on lands that were once Mexican? Moreover, they claimed, aspiring braceros were bribed by venal officials, shipped north in cattle cars, and then sent back with little to show for their labor except some new boots and meager savings. Today, due to lawsuits by former braceros, Mexicans also know that corrupt bureaucrats in Mexico City made off with the compulsory savings that was deducted from their pay. Meanwhile, for the government’s


9. The claims are subject to distortion, since the mandatory deductions ended by 1949.
opponents, the ‘bracero problem’ exposed flaws in the state’s domestic policy. For the critics, emigration was symptomatic of a failed revolution.

Scholars of US labor, immigration, and Chicano history have researched diverse facets of the Bracero Program, from its diplomatic origins and legal implications, to its economic, cultural and demographic effects on the American West. This essay examines the Bracero Program from the Mexican perspective, analyzing less the program’s critics than its influential supporters, be they renowned scholars and statesmen or leaders of Mexico’s once powerful union movement. It first analyzes migration policy up to and during the Bracero Program. We explore why the federal government perceived and promoted migration to the United States as a means


of achieving human and material progress at home. Meanwhile, migration permits became sources of political patronage allocated by the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party to working-class beneficiaries in central-western states like Jalisco, in Mexico’s emigrant-sending heartland. We hear why the strongest defenders of the program remain its alleged victims: the former braceros themselves. In their recollections, the hardships confronted and sacrifices made barely tarnish the benefits that seasonal migration offered: good pay, frequently decent treatment, and the opportunity to improve their families’ lives upon return.  

11 Seen from the perspective of Jalisco, we understand how a guest worker program that undermined conditions for farm workers in the US produced beneficial returns for Mexican communities, where the Bracero Program nurtured and sanctioned a culture of migration that persists to this day.

**Citizens on a Mission**

Throughout its 22-year history, the Bracero Program remained a product of both US domestic policy and foreign relations. A powerful American agricultural lobby first pressured a divided US Congress to consider the program. Claims of labor shortages by southwestern growers - and favorable responses from policymakers - were hardly novel. What made this accord unprecedented were its scale and the decision by the US government to assume the role of labor contractor itself. Once approved it fell upon a reluctant State Department to negotiate the

bilateral agreement with its Mexican counterparts. Some American diplomats initially feared that any discrimination against migrants would undermine the Good Neighbor Policy and wartime cooperation. But US immigration officials learned in the early twentieth century that migrants returned home with “a distinct affection for the United States.” The US Ambassador arrived to the same upbeat conclusion about the braceros: “The knowledge they are receiving of our customs, habits and ways of living will bring a greater appreciation of our culture and our problems, which should add to a better understanding of our country. The effects of these programs will long outlive the war conditions that make them necessary.”12 By the 1950s, as anti-Americanism swept much of Latin America, social scientists discovered that braceros indeed developed positive views of the US. The migration accord was therefore defended during the Cold War as an effective antidote to communism.13

The Mexican government proved less reluctant about the proposal. Officials from the labor and foreign affairs ministries astutely negotiated a migratory accord with all the advantages


that their wartime bargaining power then offered. They were determined that migrants no longer suffer the racist abuses and coerced deportations their predecessors had in the 1920s and early 1930s. Officials justified the program as a legal means of regulating migration and safeguarding emigrants from the dangers posed by human traffickers and illegal immigration, which escalated in the early 1940s. “It would be great if a country never faced the periodic need to permit its campesinos’ departure,” wrote Jaime Torres Bodet, Mexico’s Secretary of Foreign Relations. “But it would be foolish not to guarantee adequate working - and living - conditions while they carry out their tasks.”

As a temporary guest worker program that offered contractual guarantees on wages, working conditions, living standards, and return transportation - regulations that would be enforced by Mexican labor inspectors within the US - the Bracero Program marked a radical departure from past labor migrations. These protective clauses and the mechanisms to enforce them explain why Americans sympathetic to migrant workers initially endorsed the policy; and why the program’s greatest beneficiaries, the growers, remained its most shameful critics. No one foresaw the extent to which the program’s expansion in the


Mexico also cooperated without reluctance in US deportation programs during the 1940s and 1950s, despite the burdens posed by hundreds of thousands of returning deportees. Despite repeated attempts, Mexico failed to convince US policymakers to legislate penalties for employers of undocumented labor.

1950s would undermine the capacity to enforce bracero rights in rural America.

For Mexico, therefore, the potential benefits were several. The bilateral accord promised fair treatment and a safe return. The ostensible exclusion of skilled workers and *ejidatarios* (land grant recipients) would avert domestic labor and food shortages. Mexican officials also insisted on a punitive clause permitting its consuls to blacklist regions whose growers or merchants discriminated against migrant workers. By 1951, they had sanctioned the states of Texas and Idaho and dozens of counties in the Mississippi Delta for unchecked cases of discrimination and contract violations.¹⁶ Finally, both Mexican authorities and US diplomats enveloped the program in the rhetoric of wartime solidarity. While Mexico’s industrial workers waged their “battle for production” in the mines and mills, the braceros headed north to contribute further to the Allied cause. According to one pro-government newspaper, the nation was not “simply an exporter of human labor resources.” Rather, the Bracero Program made Mexico “a valuable ally of the democracies in the fight against the totalitarian powers.” Therefore, “These workers must be considered not as immigrants but as Mexican citizens on a mission.”¹⁷ Perhaps most importantly, as seasonal migrants they were destined to come home. Policymakers therefore highlighted the potential benefits of return migration to justify a program that far outlasted the struggle against totalitarianism.


¹⁷ Messersmith, Mexico City, July16, 1942, NARA: RG 84, 850.4, box 352; *El Nacional*, Mexico City, Feb. 4, 1943 (quoted).
Seen from the perspective of Mexico City, the Bracero Program marked the culmination of a forty-year debate on the ‘problem’ of emigration. Since the 1920s, the issue posed a real dilemma for post-revolutionary governments. After all, in the years that preceded the 1910 revolution, the old regime’s critics blamed the policies of Porfirio Diaz for the “depopulation of Mexico.” “By the thousands our compatriots have had to cross the homeland’s border,” the Partido Liberal Mexicano charged, “fleeing plunder and tyranny. This evil must be solved and it will, by the government that offers expatriates the means to return to their birthplace.” In 1906, these revolutionary activists demanded land reform and state-subsidized repatriation to get the emigrants back home and working on their own farms. Their proposal became official policy in the early 1930s. But by then the devastating effects of revolution and civil war in Mexico - and active recruitment by US employers - caused emigration to reach unprecedented levels.

The 1920s therefore witnessed the first meaningful debates among Mexican intellectuals and statesmen on the issue of emigration. Many cited the negative consequences on Mexico’s post-revolutionary economic reconstruction: the fear of labor shortages, the loss of ambitious and hardworking youth, pressures to raise wages, and so forth. In the northern industrial capital of Monterrey, for example, local employers grew alarmed when US labor contractors recruited skilled Mexican workers from the steel mill and railway shops in the early 1920s. In response,


20. Michael Snodgrass, Deference and Defiance in Monterrey: Workers, Paternalism,
the state posted propaganda in northbound trains warning aspiring braceros of the dangers posed by deceitful contractors and undocumented migration. The press in major sending regions cooperated with hardship stories about economic exploitation and racial discrimination. Consular officials often authored the reports, and some returned home to write scathing critiques meant to counter an emerging theory that migrants benefitted from their sojourn to the modern, industrial north.²¹

At the same time, more influential statesmen and scholars offered upbeat arguments in support of emigration. One 1922 report circulated by an anonymous consular official compared Mexican migrants to the more established Italian community. He argued that with proper guidance from the state, Mexicans would enter industry, learn new skills, organize themselves abroad, and remit their earnings through immigrant savings banks. Indeed, not unlike some modern development specialists, Italian statesmen regarded emigrant remittances as means to achieve a national balance of payments and to promote regional economic growth.²²

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²¹. Alfonso Fábila, El problema de la emigración de obreros y campesinos mexicanos (Mexico: Talleres Gráficas, 1928); Enrique Santibáñez, Ensayo acerca de la inmigración mexicana en los Estados Unidos (San Antonio, TX: Clegg, 1930).

²². Consular report in Archivo General de la Nación (Mexico City): Ramo Obregón-Calles, 711-M-30, which cites Prime Minister Luzzatti on emigration’s positive effects on Italy’s development. See also Choate, Emigrant Nation, 70-78; Dino Cinel, The National Integration of Italian Return Migrants, 1870-1929 (Cambridge, 1991); Donald Terry and Steven Wilson, Beyond Small Change: Making Migrant Remittances Count (Washington: Inter-American...
comparative perspective became common amongst pro-emigrant statesmen such as Jaime Torres Bodet, the diplomat who helped negotiate the original Bracero Program. From his perspective, seasonal migrations to the United States were as beneficial to Mexico as the northern flight of Spanish and Italian workers into postwar Western Europe. Meanwhile, policymakers would highlight the effects of return migration to defend the Bracero Program from its domestic critics.

Here is where the intellectual and political influence of the famed Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio becomes apparent. In 1926-27, Gamio undertook a survey of Mexican immigrants in the US. The relevance of the study - one of the first sponsored by the Social Science Research Council - rested on Gamio’s twin focus: on the migrants’ ongoing connections to their homeland and the subsequent effects of their return. His flawed methodology - just 76 subjects, many from middle-class backgrounds - skewed the results. But what mattered was his conclusion: that the experience was beneficial for both Mexico and its migrants, despite the hardships and abuses they suffered. In fact, Gamio’s study found evidence that emigration achieved the very ends sought by post-revolutionary policymakers at home. The “bitter humiliations” of racism, for example, strengthened one’s national identity. “It is a notable fact,” he reported, that migrants “learn immediately what their patria means, and they always think of it and speak of it with love.” Gamio collected evidence of remittances, discovered the migrants’ western Mexican origins, and observed them returning with better clothes, tools, and farm implements. Emigration also promoted state projects to educate and uplift the rural masses.


23. Torres Bodet, La victoria sin alas, 510.
Migrants improved their diets, hygiene, and housing standards. They developed “discipline and steady habits of work,” “learned to handle machinery,” and they realized a degree of social mobility. Most importantly, they would bring these new aspirations and behavioral traits home and work to achieve a better life upon return. Gamio’s own migration policy proposals foreshadowed the very demands that Mexican officials brought to the table when they negotiated the Bracero Program. By the 1940s, Gamio not only advised migration policymakers. His research set the terms by which the state defended its controversial policy.

No Mexican wartime (and then postwar) policy received greater media attention - and more sustained criticism - than the Bracero Program. Domestic opposition was “so unfavorable and widespread,” one US diplomat wrote, “that a real tribute must be paid to the Mexican Government for its adherence to the program in the face of such public criticism.” Critics came from across the political spectrum. Nationalists and leftists decried a system that sent ambitious men to perform demeaning tasks as yet another form of neo-colonial exploitation by gringo capitalists, one that deepened Mexico’s economic dependency. Church officials feared emigration’s effects on families back home and accurately warned of the braceros’ exposure to both Protestant missionaries and an immoral atmosphere of drinking, gambling and prostitution.


26. Messersmith, Mexico City Embassy, May 18, 1944, NARA: RG 84, 850.4, box 488.
at the labor camps. No aspect of the program aroused stronger condemnation in the Mexican press than that which the State Department had feared: the racist mistreatment of the braceros in the United States. The issue, one American official noted, “is enough to make all Mexicans see red and it is practically the only subject on which Mexicans of all classes and all political persuasions seem to agree. It has been used by both leftist and rightist newspapers to attack the US.”

Muckraking press exposés dramatized the discriminatory abuses faced by braceros abroad and the inability of Mexican or US officials to fully enforce contractual guarantees on wages, housing, food provision, and so on. Many blamed the injustice as much on recalcitrant growers as on the complacency of Mexican consulates. Among such critics was the politically-powerful Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), whose leaders pressured the state to better enforce bracero rights after their investigators learned of a corrupt consul who discouraged a union drive among railroad braceros.

Publicly, however, the CTM fully endorsed a program that delivered significant benefits to many Mexican workers.

Mexico’s federal government responded by lauding its emigration policy as a progressive precedent. Editorials in the state-owned press correctly emphasized that this “collective contract for agricultural laborers” extended legal protections to farm labor for the first time in US history. The Bracero Program therefore promised the “liberation” of native-born workers as well.


Labor Department officials confided to Mexico’s Denver consul that it bolstered their efforts to pressure American agribusiness to improve labor conditions.) Most importantly, the government insisted, this post-revolutionary generation of migrants were not the hapless victims or docile peasants that critics assumed: “The Mexican worker, now accustomed to being treated as a human being within his own country, and to demanding the rights guaranteed by advanced labor laws, will never subject himself to those old forms of work that were more like slavery than free labor.”

This proved true. Bracero recruits knew their rights before departing - or learned them up north - and protested their abrogation. Mexico’s Foreign Relations Ministry archives hold hundreds of files documenting bracero protests and successful efforts to redress their grievances. Consular officials recovered lost wages, fined employers, and blacklisted entire counties for violating the accord. Effective enforcement declined as the program’s growth in the 1950s outgrew the consular offices’ reach. But braceros continued to resist what they perceived as contractual violations through formal claims, wildcat stoppages, or by skipping out to return home or seek better jobs elsewhere.

Meanwhile, despite the shortcomings, demand for bracero contracts always outpaced the supply.

From its inception, one American historian recalled, “the tremendous news [of the


Bracero Program] caused something like a gold rush.” Each year thereafter the federal government received hundreds of letters and telegrams - from desperate farmers, small-town mayors, or union locals - pleading for migration permits for themselves, their communities, or their rank-and-file members. Its appeal proved strongest in the traditional sending states of west-central Mexico, where the revolutionary government’s policies of agrarian reform and anticlericalism had violently divided communities one generation earlier. By the 1950s, the region’s mining towns, communal farms, and blue-collar neighborhoods were sending thousands of braceros north each year. They went with the official blessing of both the state and its allies in the union movement, which endorsed emigration in the very terms set by Gamio two decades earlier. “Thousands of men who left here impoverished, badly dressed, [and] poorly fed will return ... in possession of a fair sum of money [and] a greater appreciation of work,” the CTM’s official paper believed. “These Mexicans have seen the world now, and will not be too willing to return to their former life, to villages without electricity, without drinking water, without libraries, but well provided with taverns and priests.” Having served in el Norte as “citizens on a mission,” these agents of change were coming home “to serve as a fighting brigade in the struggle for Mexico’s economic awakening.”

Back Home in Jalisco


The western state of Jalisco is the birthplace of such quintessential Mexican traditions as mariachi music, tequila, and rodeo cowboys (charros). It also known in Mexico as a producer of emigrants. During the Bracero Program, Jalisco and the neighboring states of Guanajuato, Michoacán and Zacatecas sent about 45 percent of legal migrants north.33 That was because the federal government allocated these traditional sending states a disproportionate share of bracero permits. Exactly why these states received large bracero quotas remains unstated in the archival sources. The policy appears to reflect a mix of historical continuity, popular demand, and socioeconomic and demographic calculations. Firstly, here is where a culture of Mexican migration first took root in the early twentieth century. In the 1920s, Paul Taylor found that nearly 70 percent of the Mexican immigrants surveyed in Chicago and Northwest Indiana hailed from this region, far from the sparsely populated northern border. (The finding so intrigued Taylor that he ventured to Jalisco to research a pioneering study on the sending community of Arandas.)34 Then, when the federal government announced the first bracero contracting in 1943, tens of thousands of men from these states traveled to Mexico City and overwhelmed the


recruitment center. By 1946, authorities relocated the processing centers to Irapuato (Guanajuato) and Guadalajara (Jalisco), before US pressure led to their establishment in northern railway hubs like Monterrey. Finally, among the thousands who petitioned Mexican presidents for bracero permisos are a disproportionate number from these states. By the late 1940s, municipal officials in depressed mining villages and drought-stricken farm towns were seconding their constituents’ requests.35

Early in the program’s development, state officials also developed a formula to calculate quotas based on local agricultural needs and labor supplies. The complex model accounted for commodities produced, hectares planted, land tenancy patterns, and population density. Yet no figures accompanied the formula, so it remains unclear whether such calculations resulted in the disproportionate quotas. In their studies of rural development, Sandos and Cross offer the best historical analysis of the economic and labor market conditions that created a vast pool of potential emigrants in the region. After 1910, three decades of revolutionary violence and agrarian reform caused a decline of full-time hacienda employment and a shift to subsistence farming. But post-revolutionary governments failed to deliver sufficient credit, irrigation, or extension services to land grant communities (ejidos) or small farmers. Rather than address local agrarian grievances, the state’s Green Revolution bypassed this sending region to promote

highly-capitalized commercial agriculture in northern Mexico. Thus after a lull in the 1930s, pressures to migrate resumed, especially among the sons of small landholders during a period of mounting population growth. The Bracero Program thus offered one way out of this development dilemma. Meanwhile, this region where Catholic rebels (*Cristeros*) fought the federal army in the 1920s became the geographic heartland of another anti-government movement, the Sinarquistas, by the early 1940s. “By quickly moving discontented young men out of the region and into the US,” Sandos and Cross argue, “the Mexican government began to diffuse the Sinarquista movement at its base.”

Most observers assumed, like Manuel Gamio argued decades earlier, that “emigration acts as a real safety-valve for men out of work.” Keeping “would-be immigrants” home, Gamio suggested, would foster high unemployment and then “social struggle… disorder and conflict.” The safety valve thesis dates back to early twentieth century studies of westward migration and European immigration to the United States. In Mexico’s case, contemporary social scientists - their perspectives shaped by Cold War fears of Latin American revolution - concurred that migration alleviated the social stresses left unresolved by state development policies. “Politically and socially,” one landmark study noted, “the exodus of discontented, hungry


campesinos served as a safety valve throughout the bracero program’s history.”

Did state officials utilize the Bracero Program to maintain rural peace through emigration? Government infiltrators considered the neo-fascist Sinarquistas to be a militant, well-organized movement with a large and highly-disciplined base among the “humble classes” of western Mexico. But no evidence links their departure to an explicit state policy of targeted migrations. When asked, old-timers in Jalisco scoff at the suggestion that state officials utilized bracero quotas toward such political ends. Sinarquismo, they note, had disappeared once large-scale contracting began in the early 1950s. Meanwhile states like Jalisco received a disproportionate share of bracero quotas into the 1960s while Guerrero and Morelos were allotted a pittance, despite the postwar re-emergence of agrarian radicalism in that region closer to Mexico City. Those states got military repression rather than bracero quotas.

It is worth noting that the government allocated few bracero quotas to the Los Altos


(Highlands) region of Jalisco - a stronghold of both the Cristero rebellion and the Sinarquista movement. Those it received went to cronies of local political bosses. So many young *alteño* migrants did as their fathers and grandfathers and headed north on their own, *de alambre*, as they referred to their illegal migration ‘across the wire’ at Arizona or California. It was easy then.

When he headed north for the first time in 1955, the first English expression that Gerardo López learned was “go ahead,” the words a Border Patrol agent spoke while encouraging his entry. By the 1950s, former migrants recall, the *alteños* could tap into migratory networks dating to the 1920s that led men from Valle de Guadalupe to Santa Monica, or those from the nearby village of Mezcala to San Francisco. Those contracted as braceros often abandoned field work to head to these cities. They attribute their undocumented migrations not to desperation but their own resistance to the Bracero Program. In their minds, a bracero contract offered only hard labor in the fields, imposed contractual limits on their mobility, and, they believed, discounted the cost of the food and housing provided by employers. So they maintained their independence and shunned the costs and long wait that acquiring bracero contracts entailed.


42. See Snodgrass, “The Bracero Program, 1942-1964” for the hardships migrants enduring during the bracero recruitment process in Mexico. Interviews with Guadalupe Romo, Tepatitlán, Jalisco, Apr. 9, 2007; Manuel y Rogelio Rodríguez Pulido, San José de Gracia,
To the extent that the Bracero Program served political ends, it did so not by offering prized bracero contracts to potential dissidents but by awarding friends and members of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) as it built its nationwide political machine. In Jalisco, the Bracero Program offered a means for municipal officials to enrich themselves and maintain a base of support in a region that historically harbored strong anti-government sentiments. The bracero contract – a fairly well-paid if short-term stint in the US – served as one form of patronage that an erstwhile PRI boss could deliver to his constituents or their sons, be they from a merchant family or a nearby farm. Cronyism and self-enrichment became endemic among a new generation of ejido leaders, union bosses, and low-level government functionaries in post-revolutionary Mexico. The Bracero Program simply offered small-town mayors or their underlings the chance to sell permits, reward their allies, and supplement their salaries. Indeed a black market in contracts flourished, despite press exposes of corruption and the occasional investigation by Mexico’s Interior Ministry into such scandals. Aspiring braceros accepted paying the bribe as one of the many costs of migration.

The Bracero Program functioned differently in the Valles region of Jalisco. Here the PRI utilized it not to enrich corrupt functionaries but to reward the working-class members of the ‘revolutionary family,’ as the ruling party referred to its coalition with organized workers and


peasants. In the region to the south and west of Guadalajara is where Jalisco’s semiarid high plains give way to well-watered forests and lush fields planted with corn, peanuts, and, most famously, sugar cane. The workers and peasants of this semitropical zone benefitted more from that state’s post-revolutionary land and labor reforms than any others in Jalisco. In the mid-1930s, agrarian activists won their struggle for lands once owned by the region’s wealthiest planters. By 1941, the sugar mill workers succeeded in their own battle for union recognition. The mill workers secured significant benefits over the next decade: eight-hour days, better wages, company housing, and better schools for their kids. Their union locals dominated municipal politics over the coming decades. During the Bracero Program, the state allocated more contracts per capita to the region’s sugar workers and communal farmers than to any part of Jalisco. Their case demonstrates that the government used the migratory agreement to reward the ostensibly loyal (male) beneficiaries of its land and labor reforms.

That favoritism became evident in 1945. Men from Jalisco were still prohibited by the

44. Based on interviews with former braceros and mill workers from Ameca, Tala, and Villa Corona, Jalisco.

45. How and when the gendered migration became policy remains unclear. But family migration countered the needs of growers - who wanted seasonal, mobile workers who they could house cheaply in barracks - and the Mexican state, which expected migrants to return. The majority did, because they had family back home: ninety percent were 21-45 years old, two thirds were married, and at least half were fathers. Figures from Archivo Histórico Jalisco, Gobernación, caja 16/17, 1952.
state government – which feared harmful labor shortages – from being contracted as braceros (although thousands ventured individually to Mexico City and achieved that very goal). So at the behest of union leaders in the Ameca Valley, the federal Labor Department secured the governor’s approval to contract 2,000 sugar workers. Their departure caused no harm to the local economy because the prime bracero contracting months of May through October coincided with the sugar industry’s *tiempo muerto*, the down season between harvests. Whatever one’s rank in the occupational hierarchy, nearly all workers migrated, for earnings in the fields of California surpassed even the relatively high rates offered by the mill. So it was that the sugar workers of towns like Ameca and Tala became braceros, and privileged ones at that. For several years in the late 1940s, the union boss Filemón Avalos convinced migration authorities to process his men right in Ameca’s town square. That privilege did not last long. But in contrast to so many braceros from Jalisco, the mill workers never paid a mayor or union boss for a contract. And their union hired buses to transport them to the contracting center in Sonora, alleviating another financial burden that most hard-pressed braceros (and their families) shouldered themselves. So while contemporary social scientists – and the state’s critics - asserted the ‘safety-valve’ thesis frequently during the 1950s and 1960s, it seems that in fact the program sought to achieve distinct political ends: rewarding the state’s allies in the labor movement. As a result, a culture of migration took root in this region of Jalisco where no prior tradition existed.

The Bracero Program marked a watershed in Jalisco’s emigration history. It consolidated the dependence of dozens of rural communities (and several Guadalajara neighborhoods) upon seasonal migration and channeled their labor disproportionately into commercial agriculture. It therefore altered the nascent emigration patterns of the 1920s by steering the state’s migrants
away from Midwestern cities and industry and into the fields of California and Texas. Finally, it dramatically increased the sheer number of migrants departing. Take undocumented departures into account - they met or exceeded bracero permits issued - and during the 1950s at least thirty percent of working-age males from Jalisco labored in the US each year. But what were return migration’s immediate and long-terms effects on the braceros, their families, and the communities that sent them north? We know that, over the past 100 years, their ‘migradolares’ have financed land acquisition and home construction, and made possible the purchase of tractors, trucks, and consumer goods otherwise unavailable to Mexico’s rural poor. Unlike the 1920s, Jorge Durand notes, migrants who returned from bracero contracts found Jalisco to be more stable, prosperous, and therefore suitable for investment. But how many returnees managed to invest in productive enterprises? Moreover, policymakers envisioned that emigration would produce a cultural transformation of the countryside, not just produce capital for small-scale investments. Did it?

In subsequent years, social scientists who studied sending communities in western Mexico found evidence to both confirm and counter Manuel Gamio’s forecast. Nathan


Whetton’s pioneering ethnography asserted that migrants acquired new “habits of diet and dress and new ideas concerning agriculture.” But, he went on, “some are restless and reluctant to settle down again in the same isolated villages from which they migrated, and some of those are moving into Mexico City.”

Twenty years later, when bracero migrations had become a lifestyle in rural Michoacán villages, Belshaw found limited effects on the rural economy. As one bracero commented, “I found that I can live better and I learned something about cultivation, but I found that I can do nothing because there they have resources and here one has nothing.” Belshaw concurred that the braceros learned few agricultural skills that applied to their smallholding agrarian lifestyles. But villagers did become “new men.” “They acquired a new dignity and self respect, sloughed off their fatalism, and began to realize it was in their power to change things.” Those who benefitted most consistently in economic terms were local merchants. The braceros that parlayed their stints abroad into new careers at home did so as carpenters, cargo haulers, or barbers, investing their savings into the tools of new trades. But what most impressed ethnographers who studied rural Mexican villages were the migrants’ new attitudes, which ranged from greater self-reliance to a lessening of deference toward “the political leader or the rural patron,” as studies of return migrants in early 20th century Italy also find.


Visit any town square in small-town Jalisco today and one is certain to encounter veteran braceros willing to share their experiences with a mix of reluctance, authority, pride, and nostalgia. When queried, the former migrants who collaborated in this study initially shrugged off the possibility that their emigration produced the positive results promised by state policymakers. Some recall leaving home with no great ilusiones (goals) other than to find work or seek adventure. The bracero contracts offered an escape from Mexican village life and promised better wages for steady work, all of which appealed to the landless sharecroppers or farmers’ sons who dominated Jalisco’s male population. “We did not improve ourselves at all,” Javier Salazar recalled of himself and his fellow Amecans. “We didn’t advance at all…that was just a dream.” Aurora Medina’s father first left her family of 18 children when she was ten years old. Laid off from the sugar mill, he earned his first bracero contract as compensation from the Mexican labor officials. He returned sporadically over the next ten years and rarely with

_Village: Social Change in Rural Mexico_ (Boston, 1971).

50. The following paragraphs rely upon 40 interviews conducted by the author in 2007 and 2008 in western Mexico. I use them here as empirical evidence and to illuminate the experiences, values, and traditions that shaped individual memories and collective identities in this emigrant-sending region. The frank and ultimately positive recollections that former migrants express are consistent with evidence from bracero oral histories collected elsewhere. The most far-reaching is the Bracero History Archive (http://braceroarchive.org), an online collection of more than 500 interviews collected by the University of Texas-El Paso’s Institute of Oral History in conjunction with the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History.
anything more than used clothes for his kids. As for savings, Aurora surmised with a tone of embarrassment that, “Well either he didn’t save much or who knows what.” When interviewed, former braceros’ wives and widows are typically first to admit that a husbands’ vices abroad often determined a family’s ability to benefit. Guadalupe Gonzalez’s husband, for example, took a liking to cards and left his earnings at the gambling tables that flourished in bracero labor camps. Women back home, meanwhile, fed their kids by cleaning homes, vending food, and (when possible) moving back to their parents’ house. “All that time he was struggling up there,” Maria Rodriguez recalled, “we were struggling down here as well.”

While many seemed reluctant at first, the former braceros interviewed for this project admit, often at the insistence of their wives, that they indeed harbored clear objectives upon departing for El Norte. Landless laborers and sharecroppers dreamed of buying a parcel of land. Some realized their dream. But most left with more modest goals and built upon their accomplishments as the Bracero Program proceeded. As Mexican presidents boasted in their state-of-the-nation reports, the braceros collectively earned considerable sums. (By the mid-1950s, total remittances were Mexico’s third-greatest source of foreign exchange after mining and tourism.) They dedicated those savings toward countless ends. Migrants returned with gifts for themselves and wives: radios, sewing machines, boots, hats, perfume, and cloth. What


52. Ngai, Impossible Subjects, 143.
remained got them through the next few months. Many paid off debts and set money aside for next year’s journey. Labor migrations allowed some of Jalisco’s rural poor to avoid debt altogether, a universal but often unattainable dream of agrarian peoples everywhere. It is easy to underestimate how profound a change seemingly meager savings could offer. As a former bracero pointed out, there was no industry and only poorly-paid farm labor available in Guanajuato by the 1950s. The region around San Francisco del Rincón, near the Jalisco border, had seen its hat weaving industry decline in the preceding decade. Therefore “everyone around here benefitted greatly from the braceros.” This was a moment, Viviana Gómez recalled, when “hunger disappeared from this place.”

Braceros from places like San Francisco or the neighboring Los Altos region of Jalisco were frequently second- and third-generation migrants and they capitalized on the lessons of their forefathers. Lupe Romo recalled that of his twelve classmates back in the hamlet of Valle de Guadalupe, nine ended up studying English with him at the same night school in Santa Monica. Many would stay on in Los Angeles to labor in the building trades or in landscaping. They saved and purchased property back home - as well as in formerly working-class neighborhoods in Santa Monica and San Francisco - and finally retired to comfortable lives in Tepatitlán, the now-prosperous county seat. Romo attributed this exceptional story of success to his village’s history of emigration, one that the region’s braceros were uniquely qualified to capitalize upon. They were expected to not just return with savings, but to achieve mobility as a
result of the migrations. Many learned to stay on or skipped out of contracts, moving to urban California, and saving considerable sums. Eustacio Franco recollects that he saved an average of $US1,800 annually in the 1950s, working in the fields or in construction. During ten years of bracero and undocumented labor, the one-time sharecropper saved for family maintenance, then invested in dairy cows, and eventually purchased his own small ranch. Several braceros from Tepatitlán earned fame and helped stimulate further migrations when they returned, bought land, and planted the area’s first peach and apple orchards. Emigration became and remains such an ingrained and lived feature of alteño identity, that today the region’s booming agribusiness and textile industries depend on immigrants from Central America.

Those who departed the Valles region, on the other hand, left with distinct goals. The sugar workers of Ameca typically applied their earnings toward urban real estate, purchasing lots or renovating their homes. Those who migrated from the region’s many ejidos harbored other goals. Bicycles became ubiquitous, many residents recall, for they offered a quick and modern means to get out to the nearby fields. (Mexican farmers typically lived on the outskirts of town.) Few realized Gamio’s vision of peasants investing in tractors. Why would they, when most farmed no more than ten to twenty acres? But farmers replaced their old donkeys with a pair of horses and, when they saved more, retired the horses for more costly but “smarter, more peaceful and durable” teams of oxen. They could then purchase larger and more effective steel ploughs.

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55. Interview with Pedro Dominguez Arrellano, San Francisco del Rincón, Guanajuato,
Other ejidatarios invested their savings just as state agriculture officials expected: purchasing hybrid seeds or the newly-available fertilizers. Javier Salazar added that his earnings allowed him to modernize his agricultural practices without recourse to the government’s agricultural credit bank, which he recalled for its high interest rates. Material change thus came to the countryside in gradual and piecemeal fashion. However, it resulted in greater agricultural productivity and in easier working lives on the small farms and ejidos of Ameca. Here, then, we find that the Bracero Program was less a reflection of a failed agrarian reform policy than a means by which it might succeed.  

From its inception its proponents marketed the Bracero Program to a critical public as a means to uplift the rural masses. Gamio, after all, devoted more of his influential research to the cultural consequences of emigration than the issue of remittances. Ideally, braceros were expected to work, observe, learn, and return to apply their newfound knowledge. Many understood that the goal was to improve life at home. “The idea was to progress,” Jesus Amezquita recalled, “to buy a little parcel of land, some cows, and to make oneself a capitalist.” This, he noted was not a simple task and many invested their savings in land to only lose it for they lacked “administration skills.” When asked what they learned, most former braceros first chuckle at the notion. They recall laboring in strawberry fields or on lettuce farms, acquiring


knowledge that meant little for those without land, sufficient water, or regional markets. But upon further reflection (or additional queries) most former braceros recognize that their migrations did produce new knowledge and cultural change back home. Few braceros earned enough to invest in tractors. But they gained experience in handling and repairing them and capitalized on that as the region’s large landowners began investing in farm machinery in the later 1950s. “Emigration elevated the culture of this region,” Francisco Romo says confidently and proudly of his hometown, Tepatitlán. “We brought great ideas back from there,” Javier Salazar remembered. The ejidatario not only returned home with some financial resources. He learned to appreciate the new hybrid seeds and how to sow them to maximize and conserve costly fertilizers. Others returned to plant new crops, like the onions and potatoes they harvested in Michigan, less to market them than to improve their own diets.58

Change came to the braceros’ homes and communities as well as their lands. When asked, Javier Salazar noted that he learned from observation as he ventured into the farm towns of California’s Central Valley or befriended Mexican-American families who invited him into their homes. He noted their clean and paved floors, their neat dress and appearances. He saw that they insisted on sending their children to school. Not all braceros ventured north with the same sense of adventure and curiosity. But those who did learned and brought the lessons home. Nearly all braceros from Ameca, for example, returned to invest their earnings in home purchases or improvements. “That is what cultura is,” claimed Francisco Gonzalez, “having a

bathroom, a real roof, and a tile floor.” “[Emigration] was a huge learning experience and it brought profound change.” Ameca, he concluded “escaped from its stagnation” as a result of the braceros. In nearby Tala, the former mill worker Manolo Zavala observed that, after migrating north, “We began to open our eyes a little more.” Subsistence farming, cane cutting and sugar mill labor were no longer sufficient to achieve the new expectations generated by the bracero experience. “We all wanted concrete houses after we saw how they lived up there….And now it was possible thanks to money from [the US].” Sugar mill workers like Zavala saw considerable improvements in their lives with unionization in the early 1940s. Over the next two decades, the union pressured the mill to build a vast Colonia Obrera of worker housing, a modern school, and community recreation center. But not all locals enjoyed the privilege of mill work. Thus winning bracero contracts helped the mill’s vast contingent of seasonal contract workers or the region’s cane-farming ejidatarios to aspire to the same opportunities as the well-paid union mill workers.

Former braceros attribute these cultural changes to their emigrations and experiences. But their hometowns were subjected to various external influences that may, had the Bracero Program ended with the war, have arrived regardless. Over the course of the 1950s, once isolated districts in the Los Altos and Valles regions of Jalisco saw the arrival of paved highways from Guadalajara, electricity to the county seats, more secondary schools, radio, even the mobile cinemas that the US Consulate sent out to teach the locals about modern agriculture, hygiene,

and housing. So the winds of change came from many directions. But the braceros’
experience abroad certainly left them more open to new ideas and outlooks than they otherwise
might have been. “It was a massive success (un exitazo)” Juan Jose Zepeda believes, “because
we really became civilized.” Offering a metaphorical conclusion, he then added that, “We left as
a bunch of illiterate hicks and came back wearing eyeglasses and with pens in our shirt
pockets.”

The Bracero Program brought great change to the sending communities of Jalisco and its
neighboring states. The effects were like those experienced in the emigrant-sending regions of
southern Europe, where the state sanctioned the emigration and return migration of native sons
well into the twentieth century. The Bracero Program did not, perhaps, result in the changes
that Manuel Gamio and like-minded policymakers promised. After all, Gamio focused his
investigation on settlers in urban America, emigrants like Francisco Gonzalez’s father. He left
Jalisco in the 1920s to work in the railway yards and then a restaurant in downtown Chicago.
Thirty years later, he left his wife in charge of the family’s store and headed north again as a
bracero. In eighteen months, his father saved enough to build a new home. But he drew a clear
and unfavorable distinction between 1920s Chicago and postwar Arizona. “Up there [in

60. US Consulate program in Archivo Municipal de Arandas (Jalisco), Dec. 1951, box 2.
Caroline Brettell, *Anthropology and Migration: Essays on Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and
Identity* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003).
Illinois],” his father told González, “we lived like people; we were clean and wore suits...not like some animals out in the cotton fields.” The Bracero Program renewed migratory flows but it altered the experience by consolidating a link between farm work and Mexican emigration. Of course, thousands of emigrants resisted their relegation to field labor and skipped their contracts in search of urban employment. However, most accepted the contractual terms established by the binational accord in return for the steady work, wages, or adventure that the bracero program promised and frequently delivered. Moreover, most braceros returned home with positive recollections that contrast markedly with the Bracero Program’s depiction as a form of ‘legalized slavery,’ a view as common in the 1960s as on the Internet today. This of course reflects a tendency among oral history interviewees to recall the past with a sense of nostalgia. But from their perspective, seasonal labor in the fields of El Norte permitted them to maintain their families, make their lands more productive, and to open their eyes to a world beyond their hardscrabble villages and neighborhoods. The benefits they gained from that experience, and the lessons it taught to their children, helped to institutionalize the culture of migration for which western Mexico is so renowned today.

The Bracero Program ended where it began, in the halls of the US Congress. The bill to terminate it unilaterally - Mexico had no say in the matter - passed by a mere seventeen votes, despite a groundswell of concern for the plight of migrant workers. No sooner did it end when Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers launched the first successful effort to organize field laborers in postwar US history. Meanwhile, the last braceros returned to Mexico when the 1964 harvest concluded. More than twenty years had passed since thousands of eager young men
departed the Mexico City train station as ‘citizens on a mission.’ A generation later, migrants returned to a nation living through a ‘Mexican Miracle’ of sustained economic growth and political stability. During the Bracero Program’s twenty-two year run, their homeland evolved into a model of Third World development, an industrializing nation of modern cities that soon hosted the 1968 Summer Olympic Games. By then, urban Mexico exerted a greater pull on rural migrants than the fields of El Norte. But that nation’s unprecedented rate of population growth - one of the world’s highest - alarmed policymakers who otherwise took pride in the state’s capacity to develop jobs at home. In 1965, Mexico initiated the Border Industrialization Program, a new binational agreement that gave birth to the sprawling assembly plants near the US-Mexican border known as maquiladoras. But they developed slowly and, contrary to their planners’ vision, they preferred to hire young women rather than the men who once migrated. So when Mexico’s miracle of growth ended abruptly, in 1982, communities whose ties to the migrant trail dated to the Bracero Program headed north from Mexico once again. The former guest workers now invited themselves. But their renewed exodus built on a migratory culture that twenty-two years of bilateral, state-sanctioned emigration had institutionalized in Mexico’s traditional sending states.