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Anti-Hispanic Sentiment and U.S.-Mexican Relations

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Title: Anti-Hispanic Sentiment and U.S.-Mexican Relations

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Abstract: Even though U.S.-Mexican relations during the mid-nineteenth century make up a tiny sliver of American history, they point to deeply racist attitudes towards Mexicans (and Hispanic people in general) that are still salient in the United States today. These attitudes came as a result of racist assumptions and rhetoric in our early government institutions, remained because of the construction of racist language in laws and treaties, and worsened as lawmakers and law-enforcement carried out written policy in real-life, letting their own racist attitudes creep into the real-life application of the laws. Today, we are in danger of perpetuating this process. Revisiting Trump's comments about Mexicans from his 2016 presidential campaign, it's easy to see parallels to the very sentiments that U.S.-Mexican relations were founded upon, and they beg the question: Has U.S. policy evolved? The answer to that is beyond the scope of this essay, but looking at Calhoun's and Trump's comments side-by-side, there's clearly room for pessimism.

Late one warm July evening, a sea of thousands of people stood packed into an enormous sports arena in Cleveland, Ohio. The rambunctious crowd joined together in a rumbling chant that could be heard well-outside the walls of the giant stadium. *Build that wall! Build that wall! Build that wall!* The mass of people droned on louder and louder, angrily chanting the phrase before their orange-haired leader. He had just captivated his audience by warning them of the dangers that lurked on the other side of the United States-Mexico border, asserting that it was imperative that a physical barrier—a huge and secure wall—separate the United States from the people of Mexico, whom he described as rapists and monsters. On the campaign trail in 2016, now President Donald Trump [explained](#) that, “when Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best,” going on to state that Mexicans “have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.”

Anti-hispanic sentiment, however, did not begin with Donald Trump, but with the British colonists that settled on the east coast during the colonial period. These men would become the founders of our country and would pave the way for anti-Hispanic sentiment in the United States through their first interactions with the country of Mexico. Convictions of the inferiority of Mexicans were firmly held by nineteenth-century policy makers, and these convictions largely influenced the beginnings of U.S. policy towards Mexico that started shortly after Mexico declared independence from Spain in 1821. This early racism towards Mexicans seeped into policy and real-life implementation of policy and might have been what initiated the long road of racism and discrimination seen towards the Mexican people and so evident in the campaign rhetoric of Donald Trump.

Note that official relations with Mexico began with the annexation of Texas in 1845, but the United States did interact with Mexico prior to the Texas issue. Very shortly after Mexico declared independence, the U.S. and Mexican diplomats gathered to confirm borders between the two states and to create and sign the Treaty of Limits (1828). That treaty, however, was mainly just for show, as its stipulations were never actually followed or enforced. Most Americans living near the border ignored the Treaty of Limits. In fact, beginning even before the treaty was signed, Stephen F. Austin and other Americans began settling in modern-day Texas, then Mexican territory, and the signing of the Treaty of Limits did nothing to impede this settlement. Thus, the U.S. did not shape how it would handle relations with Mexico with the 1828 treaty, but rather with its treatment of the Texas territory, the eventual U.S.-Mexican war that began in 1846, and the creation and implementation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended the war in 1848.

It was through these three events that U.S.-Mexican relations began, relations that were deeply rooted in racism towards the Mexican people. This racism was bolstered by anti-Spanish attitudes that Anglo-Saxon Europeans had held and brought to eighteenth century America. It’s important to make a distinction between the anti-Spanish sentiments of early Europeans and the anti-Hispanic sentiments prevalent in the early days of the United States. Unlike the Spaniards of Europe, Mexicans were not viewed as backwards because they were Catholic, as John Pinheiro argues (Pinheiro 2003, 69-96). Rather, Americans believed that Mexicans were of an inferior and weaker *race* which allowed them to be subjected to the backward and ungodly Catholicism of the Spanish. That the Spanish were able to colonize Mexico proved Mexican inferiority in the eyes of Americans and bolstered anti-Hispanic sentiments within the United States.

Subsequently, racism bled into foreign policy debates regarding Mexico in the years that shaped fledgling U.S.-Mexican relations. It found its way into the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and its resulting domestic laws. Ian Hanley Lopez argues that “law not only constructs race but race constructs law: racial conflicts distort the drafting and implementation of laws” (Castro 2013, 303). Thus, racism towards Mexicans distorted the drafting of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and influenced its implementation. Racism towards Mexicans, therefore, became a cornerstone of foreign policy and domestic laws during the foundational period (1840s -1850s) of U.S. relations with Mexico.

Pinheiro gives a direct counterargument to mine: that relations with Mexico during the 1840s and 1850s were most strongly influenced by anti-Catholicism, not racism or racial purity. He argues that the Manifest Destiny was wrought with anti-Catholic rhetoric and beliefs, and that these beliefs heavily informed decisions made regarding the annexation of Texas and the ending of the U.S.-Mexican war. Pinheiro is correct in pointing out the obvious discrimination towards Catholics that occurred in the United States around the time of the war with Mexico. He explains how anti-Catholicism “formed part of the popular cultural/religious/political drive for territorial aggrandizement known as ‘Manifest Destiny’.” It’s also true that Manifest Destiny was largely motivated by the spread of the Protestant faith, particularly to combat the influx of Catholic Irish and German immigrants and the possible incorporation of Mexicans who were Catholic as a result of being under Spanish rule (Pinheiro 2003, 72). Pinheiro puts too much emphasis, however, on anti-Catholic motivations as they relate to the foreign policy towards Mexico. It was not because Mexicans were Catholic that many American representatives and senators felt such alarm at the prospect of them becoming citizens. It was the Mexican skin color, not the Mexican religion, that so distorted U.S. governmental officials’ views of Mexicans, and, it was believed that their race had caused them to fall victim to the talons of the Catholic church. As Connecticut Congressman Truman Smith explained, the “mixed race” of Mexican citizens resulted in their subjugation “under the control of the clergy in an extraordinary degree” (Pinheiro 2003, 89).

The Texas issue dated all the way back to the time when Stephen F. Austin and other Americans were settling in the Mexican territory of Texas. As Henry Clay pointed out in 1820 on the subject of Texas, the question was not by whose religion Texas would be populated, “the question was, by whose race it shall be peopled”(Pinheiro 2003, 79). As Pinheiro goes on to brilliantly highlight, American officials focused their attention with striking precision on the Mexican race. He provides an abundance of comments from senators and congressmen made during debates on the annexation of Texas and ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that were blatantly racist. For example, Senator James Buchanan declared during the 1st session of the 28th Congress that “our race of men can never be subjected to the imbecile and indolent Mexican race” (78). During that same session, Senator Robert J. Walker of Mississippi called Mexicans on the border of Arkansas and Louisiana “a fanatical colored population” and stated that “mixed races” should not “subdue and govern the American race in Texas” (79). Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina declared at the 30th Congress during the ratification process for the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that “ours is the government of the white man” (88). He also asked his fellow senators, “Are we to associate ourselves as equals, companions, and fellow citizens to the Indian and mixed races of Mexico?” (Castro 2013, 315). He answered by considering “such associations as degrading to ourselves and fatal to our institutions.” The rhetoric from U.S.

statesmen was clear: Mexicans were inferior to Americans because their skin color was not white.

Rhetorical evidence from congressional debates, however, does not prove that the actual text of any laws were racist in nature or implementation. Examination of the actual treaty from the end of the war and the subsequent application of its provisions does, however, show that the treaty was founded on racist assumptions and implemented with malice towards the people of Mexico due to their nonwhite skin. The first example of this was with the creation and employment of Article XI of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which dealt with the capture of Mexican citizens by Native Americans and stated that “it is solemnly agreed that all such incursions shall be forcibly restrained by the Government of the United States whensoever this may be necessary” (Article XI). Furthermore, it stated that:

“in the event of any person or persons, captured within Mexican territory by Indians, being carried into the territory of the United States, the Government of the latter engages and binds itself, in the most solemn manner, so soon as it shall know of such captives being within its territory, and shall be able so to do, through the faithful exercise of its influence and power, to rescue them and return them to their country. or deliver them to the agent or representative of the Mexican Government.” (Article XI)

Castro discusses how this article was inherently racist in its writing and in its implementation. The actual text is completely void of any substance: it failed to create a lead agency for the enforcement of anti-captivity stipulations, did not provide uniform rescue protocols or establish definitive jurisdictional authority, and it failed to provide any concrete punitive sanctions for those in violation of the stipulations. Article XI was vague and imprecise, a direct result of the racist attitudes that U.S. policymakers held towards Mexican Indians. As Castro puts it, “such malleable treaty features” and “internal weaknesses” were caused by U.S. officials’ belief that Mexican Indians were a weak race, incapable of continuing their extensive captive-taking once the U.S. became involved. The truth of the matter was, however, that Mexican Indian tribes operating around the Mexican borderlands were formidable, precise, and clandestine and no match for the lack of U.S. resources and efforts that went into the enforcement of the policy (Castro 2013, 324). The writers of the Treaty wrote racism directly into Article XI by grossly underestimating the capacity of Mexican natives, and those discriminatory attitudes became apparent when the treaty stipulations could not be carried out.

Furthermore, the United States did not take implementation of the captive-taking stipulations seriously. Rescuing Mexican prisoners (and thereby following the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo) was not a priority for the United States, as was evidenced by the thousands of Mexican citizens still held captive by Mexican natives almost thirty years after the treaty went into effect. For the United States, the racism was two-fold: the writing of the treaty operated on racist attitudes toward the capturers, Mexican Indians, with the belief that the inferior non-white Mexican natives could be easily and swiftly stopped by U.S. intervention, and it functioned to further oppress Mexican captives whose safety was of low-priority because of the color of their skin. To the United States, captive-taking was merely “a race war between two retrograde people,” an assumption that perfectly captures the bigotry inherent in the treaty (Castro 2013, 327).

Martha Menchaca speaks about the racialization of another part of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Articles VIII and IX. Combined, these articles guaranteed that any Mexican citizens residing in territories won from Mexico would automatically be made citizens of the United States (within one year if they did not denounce said citizenship) and would be admitted “to the enjoyment of all the rights of citizens of the United States, according to the principles of the Constitution.” Had the United States strictly enforced the article, Mexicans would have enjoyed full citizenship in the new territory of the United States. The U.S. government, however, left the enforcement of the citizenship stipulations up to the individual states according to Article 4, Section 2 of the United States Constitution. As Menchaca notes, the new states of California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas “violated the treaty with respect to the citizenship articles and refused to extend Mexicans full political rights on the basis that the majority population was not white” (Menchaca 2001, 217). What followed for the next several decades was a racial order that cast non-white Mexicans and Mexican natives at the bottom of the social hierarchy, just above black slaves. Mexicans were subjected to racist marriage laws, voting laws, land-ownership laws, and generally regarded as second-class people, as Menchaca so carefully describes in her book.

Even though U.S.-Mexican relations during the mid-nineteenth century make up a tiny sliver of American history, they point to deeply racist attitudes towards Mexicans (and Hispanic people in general) that are still salient in the United States today. These attitudes came as a result of racist assumptions and rhetoric in our early government institutions, remained because of the construction of racist language in laws and treaties, and worsened as lawmakers and law-enforcement carried out written policy in real-life, letting their own racist attitudes creep into the real-life application of the laws. Today, we are in danger of perpetuating this process. Revisiting Trump’s comments about Mexicans from his 2016 presidential campaign, it’s easy to see parallels to the very sentiments that U.S.-Mexican relations were founded upon, and they beg the question: Has U.S. policy evolved? The answer to that is beyond the scope of this essay, but looking at Calhoun’s and Trump’s comments side-by-side, there’s clearly room for pessimism.

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