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The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies
University of California, San Diego

**Demobilizing the Revolution: Migration, Repatriation,
and Colonization in Mexico, 1911-1940**

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Working Paper 26
November 2000

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During the summer of 1939 hundreds of Mexicans and Mexican Americans from Houston, Austin and a number of smaller towns in Texas packed their belongings, climbed aboard buses and trucks, and headed south to Matamoros, Tamaulipas, across the Rio Bravo from Brownsville, Texas.¹ They had been planning for this move since the Spring, when Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas sent Ramón Beteta and Manuel Gamio to their towns to offer them free land if they were willing to dedicate themselves to the hard work of clearing it and farming cotton on it. The colonists were met at the border by officials of Mexico's Secretary of Communications and Public Works, which was building an enormous irrigation zone in the hinterland around Matamoros. After a long day of digging their vehicles out of the mud, they arrived to their new home, the Campamento "18 de Marzo", soon to be known as "Valle Hermoso," or Beautiful Valley in English.

60 years later I made a similar trip, looking not for a homeland where I could build a prosperous future, but for the material I needed to write an anthropology dissertation about the post-World War Two political economy and culture of cotton production in the Mexican borderlands. But when I got to Valle Hermoso, now an agricultural town of more than 50,000, I felt in some ways as if it were still 1939. Festooned on the municipal palace were huge reproductions of photographs depicting

¹ This research was supported by funding from the SSRC, the Fulbright Program, the Rockefeller Archive Center and the New School for Social Research. The Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies at UCSD provided support for writing. The work has benefitted from discussions with Roberto Melville, Deborah Poole, Cirila Quintero, Emiko Saldívar and the compañeros at the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies. Responsibility for the content is, of course, mine.

the colonization of the region, and its subsequent cotton prosperity through the 1940s and 1950s. The Municipal President was the daughter of some of the original colonists to the region, and during my stay in Valle Hermoso I attended and participated in a half-dozen ceremonies that commemorated this story. Stages were erected in the main plaza with murals depicting scenes and important people from the colonization and cotton boom years. And there, standing mute and resolute over main street, oversized and painted a bright shiny gold, were President Lázaro Cárdenas and Engineer Eduardo Chávez, the men that enacted the policies of repatriation and colonization that led to the creation of the Valle Bajo Río Bravo.

These histories of repatriation, colonization and cotton prosperity are vivid among the inhabitants of Valle Hermoso, and they form an important part of the political culture of the region today. In this talk I will discuss the government policies and politics that underwrote that repatriation, colonization and prosperity. Numerous authors have discussed the repatriation of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans to Mexico during the 1930s. Most concentrate on events within the United States, and often frame return migration as a racist, nativist political project to kick people out of the United States.² This it was. Only a few, however, address the repatriation and colonization policies that were created by the Mexican government to bring people back to Mexico during the 1930s,³ and these often do not take into account a much longer history of government wishes and efforts to colonize migrants

² Hoffman, Abraham. 1974. *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures, 1929-1939*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press; Guerin-Gonzalez, Camille. 1994. *Mexican Workers and the American Dream: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

³ Carreras de Velasco, Mercedes. 1973. *Los Mexicanos que devolvió la crisis, 1929-1932*. Mexico, DF: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores.

that dates back at least to the first years of the Mexican Revolution.⁴ These blind spots may be due to the fact that return migration and repatriation are usually discussed in as a part of US history, are not considered in the context of the defining features of Mexican history during the 1910 to 1940 period: that is, the revolution, agrarian politics, and the formation of the postrevolutionary Mexican state.⁵

I suggest that we can move beyond these shortcomings by seeing the long history of Mexico's repatriation and colonization policies as an ongoing response by the state to resolve the social problems caused by capitalist development in rural Northern Mexico. In other words, we should see migration policies as an attempt to resolve what we can call "the agrarian question." To show how revolutionary activity was framed as an "agrarian question" by the emergent postrevolutionary state, I focus on the expansion of commercial cotton agriculture and the emergence of a politically unstable social formation characterized by a mass of highly mobile landless workers. Mexican migration policies were designed to demobilize these workers both spatially and politically, by establishing them as smallholding commercial farmers in irrigation districts.⁶

⁴ For a discussion of government repatriation efforts between 1916 and 1923 see, however: Cardoso, Lawrence. 1976. "Labor Emigration to the Southwest, 1916 to 1920: Mexican Attitudes and Policy." *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 79(4): 400-416; Cardoso, Lawrence. 1977. "La Repatriación de Braceros en la Epoca de Obregón" 1920-1923" *Historia Mexicana* 26(4): 576-95.

⁵ Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez have begun to flesh out our understanding of the Mexican government's role in the repatriation, or return migration, movements. Balderrama, Francisco and Raymond Rodríguez. 1995. *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. A forthcoming doctoral thesis by Fernando Alanís (El Colegio de México) promises an exhaustive analysis of the goals and achievements of the cardenista repatriation efforts (1935-1940).

⁶ Anguiano, Maria Eugenia. 1995. *Agricultura y Migración en el Valle de Mexicali*. Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte; Carr, Barry. 1973. "Las peculiaridades del norte mexicano: Ensayo de interpretación" *Historia Mexicana* 22(3): 321-46; Katz, Friedrich. 1974. "Labor Conditions on Porfirian Haciendas: Some Trends and Tendencies" *Hispanic American Historical Review* 54(1): 1-47; Lloyd, Jane-Dale. 1987. *El proceso de modernización capitalista en el noroeste de Chihuahua (1880-1910)* Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana; Meyers, William K. 1994. *Forge of Progress, Crucible of Revolt: The Origins of the Mexican Revolution in La Comarca Lagunera, 1880-1911*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press; Meyers, William K. 1998. "Seasons of Rebellion: Nature, Organization of Cotton Production and the Dynamics of Revolution" *Journal of Latin American Studies* 30: 63-94.

It should be stated from the beginning, however, that these policies led to the establishment of very few smallholding farmers in irrigation districts, compared to the number of Mexicans living in the United States or the number returning to Mexico. Nevertheless, the importance of the policies and projects in attracting Mexican workers back to the Mexico, and in shaping the regional societies that emerged within the bounds of these regional development projects should not be underestimated. The unsponsored return of Mexicans to their homes in Mexico is an aspect of repatriation that has not attracted enough attention, and regional histories of repatriation in Mexico - both state-sponsored and independently organized - are almost completely lacking.⁷

The Developmental Response to Revolution in the Borderlands

Historians debate whether the Mexican Revolution was more a response to economic factors such as land concentration and economic crisis, or a response to political centralization and state formation.⁸ Regardless of the emphasis, there is general agreement that in Northern Mexico the main actors in the revolution were agrarian working classes and a regional bourgeoisie, both the products of 30 years of rapid capitalist growth. As William Meyers shows, by the late 1880s the production of cotton on large industrial plantations in the Laguna had generated a mass of highly mobile, landless and underemployed workers. Between 1880 and the 1920s similar social effects of irrigated cotton production took shape in Mexicali and the Imperial Valley; the Yaqui and Mayo River valleys of

⁷ But see the forthcoming doctoral theses by Alanís, and Walsh, both of which deal with repatriation to the region of Matamoros, Tamaulipas.

⁸ Compare Hart (1987) with Knight (1985). Hart, John Mason. 1987. *Revolutionary Mexico: The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Knight, Alan. 1985. *The Mexican Revolution*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Sonora; the Fuerte river in Sinaloa; the Salt River Valley of Arizona; the El Paso/Ciudad Juarez area; the Lower Rio Grande/Bravo Valley of Texas and elsewhere. The workers moved about the borderlands following the harvests, what Carey McWilliams would later call “The Big Swing.”⁹ It was among these workers that the radical politics of the Industrial Workers of the World and the Partido Liberal Mexicano gained sway. And although plantation and mine owners throughout the binational borderlands depended on this labor force, they did not trust it.¹⁰

Despite owning-class wariness toward these workers, before the Revolution broke out around 1910 migrant labor was seen as a problem mostly when there was not enough of it to pick the crops. This attitude toward migration and labor was common in the industrialized countries during the late 19th and early twentieth centuries. The participants in the 1889 International Emigration Conference enshrined this Liberal ideology in their affirmation of “the right of the individual to the fundamental liberty accorded him by every civilized nation to come and go and dispose of his person and destinies as he pleases.”¹¹ Liberal, neoclassical thinkers felt that unhindered migration protected individual liberty, and

⁹ McWilliams, Carey. 1939. *Factories in the Field: the Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California*. Boston: Little, Brown and company; McWilliams, Carey. 1942. *Ill Fares the Land: Migrants and Migratory Labor in the United States*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

¹⁰ Cockcroft, James. 1968. *Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution*. Austin: University of Texas Press; Hart, John Mason. 1978. *Anarchism and the Mexican Working Class*. Austin: University of Texas press; Hernandez Padilla, Salvador. 1984. *El Magonismo: Historia de Una Pasión Libertaria, 1900-1922*. México: Ediciones Era; Raat, Dirk. 1981. *Revoltosos: Mexico's Rebels in the United States, 1903-1934*. College Station: Texas A&M Press; Sandos, James. 1994. *Rebellion in the Borderlands: Anarchism and the Plan of San Diego*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press; Weber, Debra. 1994. *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal*. Berkeley: University of California Press. For the Laguna cotton region see Meyers 1994; 1998. For the Mexicali region see Duffy-Turner, Ethel. 1981. *Revolution in Baja California: Ricardo Flores-Magon's High Noon*. Detroit: Blane-Ethridge Books; Blaisdell, Lowell. 1962. *The Desert Revolution: Baja California, 1911*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

¹¹ Carr Saunders, A.M. 1934. “Migration Policies and the Economic Crisis” *Foreign Affairs* 12(4): 664-676. Page 664. Carr Saunders states that “...on moral grounds the individual was entitled to freedom of movement, that on economic grounds labor, if free, would flow where it was required, and that in this manner the natural resources of the world would be exploited for the common good.”

allowed for more perfect labor markets, for laborers would move freely to follow jobs. In the United States this philosophy justified the movement of workers northward seeking higher wages.

The freedom of labor to move across national borders may have been beneficial to the industrialized countries, but it was seen as a threat by the leaders of less developed countries such as Mexico.¹² To secure laborers for cotton production in sparsely populated arid and semi-arid agricultural zones in the borderlands, cotton growers from the US and northern Mexico sent contractors to central Mexico. The higher wages offered in the United States threatened to create labor shortages in Mexico. Francisco Madero, who led the initial revolutionary movement against the rule of Porfirio Diaz, declared in his political statement *La Sucesión Presidencial* that the problem of migration was to be a central concern of the new government.¹³ Madero was a cotton hacendado from the Laguna, and he framed the problem as one of emigration and development: that is, the movement of workers to the United States posed a risk to production and prosperity in Mexico.

When rebellion erupted in the borderlands cotton zones, migration and development were recast as essentially political questions. No longer was the lack of workers the main issue; instead, the worry became their political volatility. The roots of this volatility among the migrant working class were interpreted to be mobility and landlessness. Thus the very geopolitical “freedom” of laborers, onto which Liberal thinkers pinned their hopes for development, came to be seen as a major threat to that development. These rebellious workers were too free: rootless and landless, their ideas and actions questioned the culture and institutions of national rule. A very similar position was taken at that time by

¹² Aboites, Luis. 1995. *Norte Precario: Poblamiento y colonización en México (1760-1940)*. Mexico: El Colegio de México/CIESAS ; Keremetisis, Dawn. 1973. *La industria textil en Mexico en el siglo XIX*. Mexico: Septsetentas.

¹³ Madero, Francisco. nd. *La sucesión presidencial en 1910*. México: Editorial Nacional. See Aboites (1995): 25.

the US federal government in relation to the agricultural workers in California. The US Army sent spies among them to root out labor organizers and radicals, and the state built labor camps which it hoped would reduce what Don Mitchell has called their “subversive mobility”.¹⁴

In 1911 the President of Mexico responded to a PLM and IWW organized rebellion in Mexicali by sending a commission to the region to study the possibility of settling Mexican migrant workers from the Laguna or the United States as colonists there.¹⁵ It was felt that by rooting migrants in Mexican national space and placing them in control of property a national civic culture would grow among them. Nothing came of this or a number of similar plans, mostly because the Mexican government barely existed between 1910 and 1920, and was completely unable to dedicate resources to development projects.

There were ideological reasons for the failure as well, however. Mexico’s rulers shared a liberal, evolutionist philosophy in which economic growth and increased political stability were envisioned as the result of a natural process of development that the state should not intervene in too greatly. Instead of the state, the agents responsible for development were to be the repatriated middle-class Mexican farmers themselves. Of course, the fact that there were no such farmers, but only migrant workers and plantation owners, was the problem of development in the first place. Nevertheless, these early repatriation and colonization plans show that while the Mexican government viewed migrants as an economic necessity and then as a political threat, they also viewed them as a potential resource; as agents of development. This last attitude would grow in importance through the 1920s and 1930s, and we shall return to discuss it more fully.

¹⁴ Mitchell, Don. 1996. *The Lie of the Land*. McWilliams 1939; McWilliams 1942.

The number of migrants increased hugely between 1910 and 1920, due both to the push of the revolutionary disturbances in Mexico, and an expansion of production in the Southwest US during the First World War. Cotton in particular experienced a dramatic surge in the Mexicali/Imperial Valley area, the Salt River area of Arizona, and South and West Texas, as cotton prices quadrupled between 1915 and 1920.¹⁶ The Elephant Butte dam near El Paso went on line in 1916, and by 1924 about 30,000 hectares of cotton were planted there.¹⁷ Near the West Texas towns of Lubbock and Amarillo, well water irrigation caused cotton production to rise from 9240 bales in 1909 to 554,000 bales in 1923.¹⁸ Mexicali's production went from 2800 hectares in 1908, to 40,000 hectares in 1920.¹⁹ All of this cotton was grown on large plantations or farms, and picked by migrant workers.

The revolutionary generals who led the victorious forces to power in Mexico in 1920 and took on the business of rebuilding the federal government's power were from the border state of Sonora. They were quite familiar with the kind of commercial agricultural development experienced in the borderlands, and desirous of the growth it generated. However, they also felt that it was the floating population created by commercial agriculture that destabilized society. The development task, as they saw it, was to wed social stability to economic growth; to establish commercial agriculture without migrant labor.

¹⁵ Kerig 1988: This information comes from the Archive of the Colorado River Land Company.

¹⁶ Foley (Foley, Neil. 1997. *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press) writes about the Corpus Christi area of South Texas. McWilliams (1942: 72-75) mentions the changes wrought in Arizona. Anguiano (1995) and Kerig (1988) describe the expansion of cotton in the Imperial Valley and Mexicali.

¹⁷ *International Cotton Bulletin* Vol. 3: 269. US Bureau of Land Reclamation. (1936). *Rio Grande Federal Reclamation Project: New Mexico-Texas*. Washington DC: US Government Printing Office.

¹⁸ *International Cotton Bulletin* Vol. 3.

Irrigation offered the hope of realizing this objective. By creating new irrigation zones and colonizing them with small farmers, the government would replace the large plantations and their voracious hunger for migrant labor. Mexicans in the United States came to be seen as a key ingredient of this agricultural development plan. While in the early 1920s some Mexican engineers still held the century-old predilection for European immigrants²⁰, in the nationalist climate of postrevolutionary Mexico, state officials increasingly thought of Mexicans living in “*el otro lado*” as perfect candidates for colonization. They were skilled in modern industrial agricultural production techniques, and many in the government felt they were more socially, economically and culturally advanced than their compatriots in central or southern Mexico.²¹ They were Mexicans that had the presumed advantages of foreigners, but were not considered a threat to the racial or cultural unity of the nation. In one sweeping movement, the Sonoran generals seriously restricted immigration, persecuted Chinese immigrants from positions of state and federal power²², and turned to the Mexicans in the US as their new colonists of choice to resolve the agrarian question and lead national development.

In 1922 President Obregón made two efforts to settle repatriados who were being thrown out of work in the US by a post-war depression, and were returning because of the cessation of revolutionary hostilities. First, he ordered a small amount of land expropriated from the Colorado River land Company in Mexicali, and charged Baja California Governor Jose Lugo with finding middle-class

¹⁹ Kerig, Dorothy Pierson. 1988. *Yankee Enclave: The Colorado River Land Company and Mexican Agrarian Reform in Baja California*. PhD Dissertation, UC Irvine. Page 481.

²⁰ Dozal, Fortunato. 1923. *La Irrigación en Mexico*. Mexico: Empresa Editorial de Ingeniería y Arquitectura, S.A.

²¹ Manuel Gamio's many writings reflect the constellation of social, cultural and biological factors within his concept of development. For example: Gamio, Manuel. 1987 [1935]. *Hacia un Mexico nuevo: Problemas Sociales*. Mexico: Instituto Nacional Indigenista.

repatriados to colonize the land and grow cotton.²³ Once again, the effort failed due to the fact that it was precisely the lack of middle-class farmers among the repatriados that drove the government to try to settle and ‘develop’ them. The limited amount of financial support for the project also contributed to its doom.

Although the government had almost no resources in the early 1920s, Obregón did manage to find financial backing for a project to colonize a cotton-growing irrigation zone in Oaxaca with repatriated workers. Obregón rejected numerous requests for federal support for projects, but this one addressed two crucial development issues. First, it promised to increase national cotton production at a time when the national textile industry was threatened with fiber shortages due to a severe drought in the Laguna.²⁴ And on the political front, it promised to take care of some of the many migrant workers who were thrown out of work by the postwar depression, and were massing on the Mexican side of the border. While the project’s leaders were organizing land purchases in Oaxaca, a convoy of 700 families was heading south across the border at Ciudad Juarez, on their way to the colonization zone in Pinotepa. Once there, they were to be given 5 hectares each to grow cotton, an amount which they could farm individually, and that would not generate any need for migrant workers. The project was ill-planned and failed for a variety of reasons, but represents an important first attempt by the government

²² Hu DeHart, Eveleyn. 1980. “Immigrants to a Developing Society: The Chines in Northern Mexico, 1875-1932” *Journal of Arizona History*, vol 21, 49-86; Renique, Gerardo. 2000. “Race, Mestizaje and Nationalism: Sonora’s Anti-Chinese Movement and State Formation in Post-Revolutionary Mexico.” MS.

²³ For Obregón-period development efforts in Mexicali see: Kerig 1988: 202-237.

²⁴ Cardoso (Cardoso, Lawrence. 1977. “La Repatriación de Braceros en la Epoca de Obregón” 1920-1923” *Historia Mexicana* 26(4): 576-95) on the requests in Obregón’s archive. On the scarcity of fiber in Mexico see: “Mexico” *International Cotton Bulletin* 1923: 399.

to address the “agrarian question” posed by the revolution with a development strategy based in irrigation, cotton and the colonization of repatriated Mexican workers.²⁵

Two linked laws were passed by the government of Plutarco Elias Calles in 1926 that marked a turning point for the migration and colonization policies of the Mexican state. The first, the “Ley Federal de Aguas”, created the Comisión Nacional de Irrigación and put it in charge of building irrigation systems. The second was the “Ley Federal de Colonización”, which made the irrigation of irrigable lands compulsory, and the colonization of irrigable lands by local agricultural workers and repatriados a priority.²⁶ These laws represent a change in the government’s philosophy and practice of development. Rather than hoping that colonists and migrants would develop themselves through a process of evolution, this state placed itself in charge of making that development happen, through an enormous program of spending on irrigation and colonization.²⁷

The 1926 laws were formulated within an international political and economic context of water use and cotton production. In 1928, the new developmental state dedicated a full 7.4% of its budget to the construction and colonization of irrigation systems on the rivers that drained into the Río Bravo/Grande: the Río Conchos; the Río Salado and the Río San Juan. This development strategy had both political and economic objectives. Politically, it was a real effort to resolve social tensions in northern Mexico by settling landless and mobile agricultural workers, as well as those who had been

²⁵ For information about the Oaxaca colonization project the papers in the Archivo General de la Nación, Ramo Presidentes, Fondo Obregón/Calles, 803-4-31. Also AGN; Obregon/Calles; 823-O-4. For clues to its failure, see: Gamio, Manuel. 1937. “Sugestiones Sobre la Colonización de los Territorios.” Secretaría de Educación Pública; Instituto de Orientación Socialista; 5382/13.

²⁶ Aboites. Luis. 1987. *La irrigacion revolucionaria*. Mexico: SEP. See also “Ley Federal de Colonización” *Irrigación en México*. 1930. Part 1, Vol 1(5): 74-5; Part 2, Vol 1(6): 89-90.

²⁷ As Aboites puts it, this was “un programa permanente de modernización del campo mexicano, haciendo el Estado el rector de tal modernización.” Aboites 1987: 13.

turned into sharecroppers or renters. Economically, the irrigation and colonization program was designed to recapture and use the labor of Mexicans and the water of the international rivers, both of which were contributing to a vertiginous economic growth in the Southwest United States.

The struggle for the control of the international rivers has been described at length by historians. Beginning in the early 1920s officials of the new Mexican state sought to renegotiate a water treaty signed in 1906 which ceded much of Mexico's rights to the Waters of the Rio Bravo/Grande to the United States. Mexico also sought to secure a significant share of the Río Colorado, which watered the Imperial Valley/Mexicali region before emptying into the Gulf of California. By building dams on the tributaries of the Rio Bravo/Grande, Mexico could both use the water for its own development, and place the agriculture of South Texas in peril, thereby forcing the US to cede rights to the water of the Colorado.

Perhaps moved by hydraulic theories of state formation, many scholars who study irrigation assume that state control of water, and the people who use that water, is an end in itself. But the water of the Mexico-US borderlands was important to the postrevolutionary Mexican government because it was an indispensable element in commercial agriculture, specifically, cotton agriculture. The US had produced 75% or more of the world's cotton throughout the nineteenth century, financing its territorial expansion and industrialization with cotton exports to the industrial countries of Europe. Despite European efforts to diversify their sources of the fiber and create new ones, at the outbreak of the first world war they were still very much dependent on US cotton.

Before the war the US was a debtor nation, and relied on cotton exports to finance its debt.²⁸ When the war ended the US was a lending country, not only exporting raw materials to Europe, but also exporting the capital Europeans needed to buy those materials. Furthermore, the US erected a tariff structure to protect American industries, which made it impossible for industrial countries to pay their debts by exporting manufactures to the US.²⁹ Eager to avoid spending what little gold and inflated dollars they had after the war, Europe stepped up its efforts to purchase cheaper cotton produced outside of the old cotton belt of the US.³⁰ In response to these conditions, cotton production boomed in countries such as Australia, Brazil, Turkey, Egypt, Peru and Mexico.³¹ Peru doubled production between 1915 and 1926; Brazil tripled its land dedicated to cotton between 1915 and 1924.

Eager to cash in on the opportunity produced by this shift in the global political economy of cotton, Mexico's leaders planned cotton production for the new northern irrigation districts. Cotton, it was imagined, would enable the colonists of those districts to pay for the costs of building and maintaining the irrigation systems. Cotton production would also lead to the creation of processing industries such as gins, oil presses and soap factories. The social landscape of haciendas and landless semi-proletarianized agricultural workers that gave rise to the revolution would be wiped away by this new industrialized agrarian society of smallholding cotton farmers and industrial workers.

Migration Studies, Manuel Gamio, and Regional Development

²⁸ Clayton, William. 1929-1930. "What Price Cotton?" *International Cotton Bulletin*. Volume 8: 475-480. Page 476

²⁹ Clayton, William. 1930-1931. "The Struggle for the World's Cotton Markets" *International Cotton Bulletin*., Volume 9: 345-351. Page 349.

³⁰ Roberts, Richard. 1996. *Two Worlds of Cotton*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

³¹ Cox, A.B. 1926-1927. "New Cotton Areas for Old" *International Cotton Bulletin*. Volume 5: 554-561. Page 556.

While the political economy of cotton, labor and water drove both the evolution of borderlands society and developmental efforts by the state to guide that evolution, the particular shape of the repatriation and colonization policies written into the 1926 Federal laws were influenced by international discussions concerning migration. Since the turn of the century immigration restriction was debated in the US Congress, and a number of studies were commissioned by the government to ascertain the economic, social and biological effects of migration to the United States. This was a time when the field of eugenics was powerful in the social and natural sciences, and much of the discussion revolved around whether and to what degree migration resulted in the improvement or deterioration of national racial stocks. Eugenists such as Charles Davenport and Harry Laughlin received funding from the Carnegie Institute in Washington to study the ways that social planning and policy-making could be used to improve the physical and mental qualities of the population in the United States. On his stationary, Laughlin boasted the title of “expert eugenics agent of the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization of the House of Representatives.” Critics of race science included one of the founders of American Anthropology, Franz Boas, who also submitted evidence to the House Committee on Immigration. Boas insisted on the immateriality of races and a clear separation between the physical aspects of humans and their mental or cultural aspects.

The depression following the first world war heightened anti-immigration sentiment, and Congress made headway on a new restrictionist immigration law, which would be published in 1924. In an effort to promote scientific discussion of the topic, in 1922 the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences created a Committee on Scientific Problems of Human Migration, and asked it to study “the complex migration situation resulting from the World War and from the virtual

elimination of space as a barrier to movements of man and to race intermixture.”³² This NRC committee was, in effect, a renamed version of an earlier “Committee on Race Characteristics”, and it was disbanded when it failed both to move beyond psychological and biological approaches to race, and to address questions of migration from the perspective of the Social Sciences. Confronted with this failure, in 1923 a group of social scientists led by Charles Merriam of the University of Chicago founded the Social Science Research Council, and, with funding from the Rockefeller family, took as its first project that of studying the “Scientific Aspects of Human Migration.”³³ In May of 1924 the SSRC Migration Committee decided that funding research on “Mexican immigration” was one of its central objectives.

As these things work, it was through a number of personal connections that Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio was entrusted with conducting this SSRC-funded research on Mexican migrants in the United States. Gamio was friends with Robert Redfield, then a PhD student at Chicago, who was also the son-in-law of Chicago Sociologist Robert Park. Gamio was also friendly with John Merriam, director of the Carnegie Institute in Washington, whose brother Charles founded the SSRC. Charles Merriam was a professor at Chicago, as were Fay-Cooper Cole and Edith Abbott - anthropologists sitting on the SSRC’s Migration Studies committee. In 1925, Gamio submitted a proposal titled “Antecedents and Conditions of Mexican Population in the United States and the

³² Yerkes, Robert. 1924. “The Work of Committee on Scientific Problems of Human Migration, National Research Council” *The Journal of Personnel Research* 3(6).

³³ For a discussion of Migration Studies within the NRC and the SSRC, see chapter 3 of the forthcoming dissertation by Casey Walsh: “Cotton, State Formation and Regional Political Culture” New School University. The information for this discussion comes from the archives of the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial and the Social Science Research Council, Rockefeller Archive Center, Tarrytown, New York.

formation of a Program for the Definite and Scientific Study of the Problem”, in which Redfield was listed as a supplementary investigator.

Gamio was already quite an accomplished anthropologist, having worked for many years before the revolution in the National Museum of Mexico. He received his PhD under Franz Boas at Columbia, and together they founded an anthropology school in Mexico in the early 1910s. At the height of the revolution in 1916, he published the famous book *Forjando Patria*, in which he argued that good government in Mexico could only be constructed on the basis of anthropological knowledge of the country’s inhabitants. He succeeded in creating an anthropology department in the Secretary of Agriculture, with a mission to conduct regional studies as a preliminary step for regional agricultural development projects. However, Gamio was unable to carry out this program of regional studies, due to a conflict with the postrevolutionary government of Plutarco Elias Calles that not only got him fired, but forced him to carry a gun in 1924 and 1925.

The Mexican government’s Irrigation and Colonization legislation was formulated in 1925, at the same time that the SSRC was searching for someone to conduct research on Mexican migrants. Gamio, looking for a job that would take him away from the dangers of Mexico City, focused his development-oriented anthropology on a new object of study: Mexican migrant workers. From 1926 to 1931 he conducted research throughout the Southwest United States and Mexico, and published a number of articles and books.

As the Federal Government’s National Irrigation Commission moved forward with its plans to build regional irrigated development zones in Northern Mexico and colonize them with repatriados, two of Manuel Gamio’s concepts were especially important. First, Gamio insisted that development was a interconnected economic, political, social, cultural and biological process. The role of the state was to

encourage all aspects of this development in an “integral” manner. Second, Gamio fixed the region as the spatial domain of this “integral” development intervention.

Like many Latin American thinkers, Gamio inherited an idea of evolution which originated in the theories of the French biologist J.B. de Monet Lamarck. Lamarck held that the human body could be changed by environmental factors during the course of an individual’s life.³⁴ This current of Lamarckian thought found resonance among Franz Boas and his followers, who argued against the iron laws of heredity that the eugenists used to construct their white supremacist hierarchies.³⁵ In his study for the Congressional Immigration Committee, Boas argued that the environment in the United States resulted in significant differences between the head shapes of foreign-raised immigrants and their children raised in the US.³⁶ Gamio used these ideas to argue that cultural factors such as diet, health care, education and sanitation could be manipulated to change the biological development of Mexicans.³⁷

The other aspect of Gamio’s thinking that took form in the irrigation projects of northern Mexico was his spatial analysis of cultural and biological development. Since his Teotihuacan study and his days with the Secretary of Agriculture, Manuel Gamio insisted that development projects should have a regional scope, and that developmental anthropology should focus on regional studies. This transferred easily to his suggestions for the colonization of the northern irrigation zones with repatriados.

³⁴ Leys Stepan, Nancy. 1987. *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender and Nation in Latin America*. Ithica: Cornell University Press.

³⁵ Kuper, Adam. 1988. *The Invention of Primitive Society*. London: Routledge.

³⁶ Kuper, Adam. 1988.

³⁷ “(The) standard of living of more than 12 million people is deficient or semideficient, from the material point of view, which brings as a consequence the abnormality of its development in all aspects and principally in the biological....The manner to resolve such an inconvenient situation consists not only in procuring the economic improval of this great mass, but also in teaching it to elevate its level of material culture.” Gamio, Manuel. 1935: 57-59. (My translation)

These zones were to be regional productive systems integrating agriculture and industry, and Gamio suggested that “integral regional studies” be done to prepare for their construction and colonization.

Such a study was indeed done for the government’s flagship irrigation project, the Don Martin system on the Rio Salado. The study outlines the land tenure system in the area, its rainfall and soil types, and the railroad connections and markets for its products. It also cites Manuel Gamio extensively in a discussion of migration and the possibilities of colonizing the newly irrigated lands with repatriados from the United States.³⁸

Integral development came together with the focus on the region in Gamio’s formulation of the anthropological concept of “acculturation” or “culture contact”, which was enjoying popularity during the 1920s and 1930s. Studies of acculturation sought to describe the dynamics of how groups interacted, sometimes seeing the influence as mutual, and sometimes seeing it as imperial domination. Robert Redfield’s studies of the “folk-urban continuum” in Tepotzlan, Morelos, and the Yucatan are perhaps the best-known example of American anthropological studies of acculturation.³⁹

Gamio had, since the revolution, advocated developmental intervention by the federal government in the realm of culture. He was a key actor in government efforts to “acculturate” the indigenous groups of Mexico through formal education programs, but he also sought to acculturate Mexicans through the colonization of the Irrigation systems with repatriados. For migrant workers, the United States played the role of a “giant university, in which a million compatriots of the uncultured

³⁸ CNI. 1930. *Estudio Agrícola y Económico, Sistema de Riego “Río Salado”*. Mexico: Editorial Cultura. Pages 177-191. Gamio also published his proposals for using repatriados as colonists as “Appendix VII: Causes for the Failure of Repatriation and Colonization Enterprises and Suggestions by Which this May be Avoided.” in Gamio, Manuel. 1930. *Mexican Immigration to the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

³⁹ Vincent, Joan. 1990. *Anthropology and Politics: Visions, Traditions, and Trends*. Arizona: University of Arizona Press. Pages 197-212. What is not recognized is the influence of Gamio’s work on Redfield.

classes learned to temper their character, to integrally raise their cultural level, to provide for their material needs and save at least 10 million dollars...” Unfortunately, migrants who returned to Mexico during the 1920s and 1930s with all these material and cultural resources did not automatically bring prosperity to themselves and those around them. Gamio argued that this was because the process of “acculturation” was working the wrong way: that the repatriados fell to the level of those around them, instead of raising others to their level.⁴⁰

To assure positive acculturation, Gamio suggested that the repatriates be colonized in relatively isolated zones, and be given the full, integrated, material and cultural support of the government. He also believed that in order to reduce the risk of a “negative” acculturation, these colonists should be settled where they would have contact with a local population that was already socially, culturally, economically and biologically well-developed. Along with many others, Gamio believed that northern Mexicans were more civilized than their compatriates in the center and south. An engineer for the CNI reflected this point of view when he wrote:

Los moradores de la región se asemejan en todo a los del resto de la frontera de los Estados de Nuevo Leon y Tamaulipas; son de ascendencia Hispánica, blancos, barbados, de facciones caucásicas, altos y robustos....En resumen los moradores han crecido en un ambiente sano, espiritual y materialmente, y es indudable que la irrigación les traerá incontables beneficios que sabrán aprovechar.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Gamio, Manuel. 1935[1987]. “Los Repatriados y la Educación de las Masas Incultas” *Hacia un Mexico nuevo: Problemas sociales*. Mexico: Instituto Nacional Indigenista.

⁴¹ Brambila, Alejandro. 1930. *Estudio Agrícola del Proyecto de Riego de Santa Gertrudis, Tamaulipas*. Mexico: CNI. Pages 22-23.

The people of northern Mexico were considered by Gamio and the engineers of the Irrigation Commission to be a force of biological and cultural development for Mexico.

They felt that the locals and the repatriados would mutually reinforce their biological, cultural, political and socio-economic progressiveness by building regional development schemes in northern Mexico. So that is what the Mexican government did.

The Colonization of Repatriados in the Borderlands

The Sistema Nacional de Riego #4, also known as the Don Martín or Rio Salado system, received a good number of colonists repatriated from Texas. In the late 1920s news of the government's desire to repatriate colonists was spread by the Secretary of Foreign Relations throughout the Mexican and Mexican-American communities of Texas. Those that acted on the offer were sold land in the irrigation district, and went about planting cotton, which the government supported with credit from its official banks. By 1931 268 colonists were settled, a majority of them repatriados.⁴² Despite the government desire to settle small farmers, much of the land in the Don Martin system was held in parcels of 50 to 100 hectareas, with the owners living elsewhere and the cotton farmed by migrant workers. Under this regime of land and labor, by 1934 the region was producing some 17 thousand bales of cotton, but the problem of migration was only made worse.⁴³

⁴² "La Colonización de los Sistemas Nacionales de Riego" 1931. *Irrigación en México* 2(6): page 526.

⁴³ Secretaría de Agricultura y Fomento. 1935. *Estadísticas Sobre el Algodón. Década 1925-1934*. Mexico: SAF. Page 35.

That same year, 1934, President Lazaro Cárdenas came to power. Cárdenas continued the federal government's commitment to irrigated agricultural development and repatriation, but also sought to dismantle the large farms in the irrigation systems and establish instead regional societies of truly smallholding ejidatarios. Land reforms were carried out in the Don Martin system, and ejidos were created. These land reforms were motivated in part by his ideological commitment to creating a rural "sociedad sin clases", to use a favorite slogan of the time. The reforms also allowed him to cement federal power through alliances with local and regional populations. Agricultural workers who did not receive land in the ejidos of Don Martín were promised parcels in the Matamoros region in Tamaulipas.

In 1937 the Cardenas government carried out massive land reforms in Mexico's two main cotton-producing regions, the Laguna and Mexicali. Almost overnight the government found itself in charge of more than half of Mexico's cotton production, and Cardenas enlisted the help of Houston cotton magnate William Clayton in financing the crop. Clayton was already seeking to expand his business outside of the US, where New Deal cotton policies were limiting production, and he agreed to finance Mexican cotton through the government banks. With financing secured, Cárdenas moved forward with a plan to expand national cotton exports tenfold, by building a cotton producing irrigation zone in the Lower Rio Bravo/Grande Valley around the town of Matamoros, Tamaulipas.

Gamio had a strong influence in the shape that development took in the Bajo Rio Bravo. He was one of a group of intellectuals who wrote the planks of the government's platform - the "Six-Year plan" - concerning migration, repatriation and colonization, and he also produced a preliminary study of the region before it was colonized. Furthermore, from his position as the head of the Department of Demographics in the Secretaria de Gobernacion, he travelled to Texas to actively recruit small cotton farmers for the new cotton zone. The perceived cultural and material resources of those repatriados

were seen as the key to development in Matamoros. In order to assure a positive process of acculturation, they were isolated on lands far removed from the more densely inhabited banks of the Rio Grande, and were provided with credit, tools, education, cooperative social and economic organizations, and the other ingredients of “integral” regional development.

After Cárdenas left office repatriation slipped off the agenda of the Mexican government. The postrevolutionary goal to create a large commercial agricultural sector in northern Mexico was achieved by the 1940s. Repatriados helped make cotton the single most important export commodity in Mexico during the late 1940s and 1950s. The vision of smallholder society that animated the government from 1920 to 1940 gave way to one that placed large landholdings at the center of agricultural development. For example, when the agricultural zone around Matamoros expanded during the 1940s, these new lands were held as large private properties, rather than as ejidos or smallholdings.⁴⁴

Of course, the extremely limited number of repatriados and landless campesinos settled in the irrigation zones did nothing to reduce the Mexican population in the United States, and the expansion of cotton production on large properties reinvigorated the demand for migrant wage labor. This time, instead of seeking to settle these migrant workers, the government tried to manage their movements through institutions such as the bracero program. When an accord regulating migrant labor was signed between the US and Mexico in 1944, Mexico’s Foreign Relations Minister, Ezequiel Padilla told the press that it was designed to both protect Mexican workers, and to assure that Mexico’s agricultural zones would also have sufficient labor.⁴⁵ People in Valle Hermoso clearly remember that migrant cotton

⁴⁴ Martínez Cerda, Carlos. 1954. *El algodón en la región de Matamoros, Tamaulipas*. Mexico: Banco Nacional de Crédito Ejidal.

⁴⁵ *Heraldo de Brownsville* (6-15-44); (6-16-44); (7-2-44).

pickers were required to obtain a letter from their employer certifying that they had indeed worked in the Mexican harvest before they were allowed to cross the border legally.

By 1940 the revolutionary tendencies of rural Mexican society had been largely demobilized through land reform and the passage of time, and the unsettled working classes of the borderlands did not pose a threat to political stability. In fact, for the perhaps 80 thousand migrant workers trucked in yearly from the mountain villages of the Sierra Madre Oriental to pick the crop in Matamoros, cotton income allowed them to survive the rest of the year in a subsistence mode. Rather than end migration, after 1940 the Mexican government simply sought to ensure Mexico's access to the migrant labor force it needed to keep its commercial agriculture going strong. Once again, as it had been in the late 19th century, the problem of migrant labor was framed mostly in terms of its scarcity.

Comparative Conclusions

During the 1920s and 1930s a model of development based in irrigation, colonization and cotton production was common throughout the world. With irrigation technology national and colonial governments were able to open up new lands to the production of cotton, and settle farmers on those lands. The semi-arid areas which were most appropriate for irrigation usually had low population densities, which facilitated expropriations and the remapping of regional geography. These areas were usually far from large centers of population and industry, and cotton, because it was a non-perishable cash crop could be transported large distances and still reap large profits. Cotton agriculture also appealed to developers because it provided what Albert Hirschman might call "forward linkages" to processing industries such as gins and oil presses. Given the favorable economic conditions for

producing cotton outside the United States after the First World War, many countries did indeed launch such projects.

The problem of supplying labor for cotton production was often addressed with policies to regulate migration and colonization on both national and international levels. Because of its proximity to the United States, and the particularities of its revolutionary and agrarian history, Mexico set migration and colonization policies that privileged repatriados and other landless agricultural workers in Northern Mexico. In Australia, where there was little available labor for agriculture, leaders sought to divide its irrigated cotton zones into parcels that could be “cultivated by a man himself, by a man and his family, or brothers and sisters without the interposition of the constant changes and dislocations of Australian wage and labor conditions.”⁴⁶ In the British Sudan in 1925, an irrigation project known as the Gezira Scheme was created that depended on an army of workers from nearby villages to pick the crop.⁴⁷ Similar irrigation schemes were concocted by the French colonial government in west Africa.⁴⁸ Rapid industrialization in the Soviet Union during the twenties and thirties depended on the opening of large cotton farms around the Aral Sea, which must have required the importation of an enormous amount of labor from somewhere.

What policies of migration and colonization did these various governments use to provide the labor needed for these cotton development schemes? How did these policies underwrite programs of agrarian reform or industrialization? What were the social effects of those policies? How did

⁴⁶ Healy, Nicolas Dillon. 1923. *Australian Cotton: Its Growth and Consequence*. Sydney: Australasian Publishing Company Ltd. Page 14.

⁴⁷ Bernal, Victoria. 1991. *Cultivating Workers: Peasants and Capitalism in a Sudanese Village*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁴⁸ Roberts, Richard. 1996. *Two Worlds of Cotton*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

transnational models designed to guide development and migration take shape in particular nations or regions? I suggest that if we make comparisons of policies, projects or experiences of migration, we remember to ask these kinds of questions, and answer them by investigating the historical contexts in which such policies, projects and experiences happen.