Gender, Labor, and Capitalism in U.S.-Mexican Relations, 1942-2000

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This thesis titled
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This thesis explores how throughout the twentieth century, the U.S. government worked closely with American businesses and the Mexican government to favor profitability over the social conditions of Mexican workers in the Bracero Program (1942-1964) and the Border Industrialization Program, or BIP (1964-2000). In both programs, Mexico’s Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) tailored each program to American employers’ ideals of the most cost-efficient, most productive, and least resistant workforce for each individual program by exploiting gender. While in the Bracero Program, U.S. farmers favored single, male laborers, in the BIP, U.S. employers preferred single, female workers. The author conducted a series of oral history interviews with former braceros and maquiladora workers in order to draw comparisons between their experiences under U.S. capitalism in the twentieth century. Under each program, male braceros and female maquiladora workers shared similar experiences with low wages, substandard living conditions, and other human rights violations.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Historical Context of U.S.-Mexican Relations</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The PRI</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Establishment of the U.S.-Mexico Border</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Porfiriato</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration Patterns during the Revolution, Prohibition, and the Great Depression</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration, the Bracero Program, and the Border Industrialization Program</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration, IRCA, and NAFTA</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: The Bracero Program</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Start of the Program</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Regulations</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.-Mexican Negotiations</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Structure of the Program</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The El Paso Riot of 1948</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “Wetback” Problem</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The El Paso Valley Cotton Association Boycott of 1953</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation Wetback of 1953-1955</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Map of U.S.-Mexico border region and its cities</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Map of Mexican territory before U.S.-Mexico War, 1834</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Map of Mexican territory after U.S.-Mexico War, 1853</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Map of Mexican states</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mexican immigration to the U.S.</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Comparing U.S. and Mexican industrial wages</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Mexican employees in maquiladoras</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Total number of maquiladoras in Mexico</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Throughout the twentieth century, the U.S. government worked closely with American businesses and the Latin American elite to create what Thomas O’Brien calls the “century of U.S. capitalism in Latin America.”\(^1\) As O’Brien explains, “It is this intensifying effort by U.S. corporations to transform Latin America that has distinguished the twentieth century in U.S. relations with Latin America.”\(^2\) Specifically, Mexico presently shares an economic relationship with the U.S. that dates back to the eighteenth century. Almost from the beginning of its interaction with the U.S., Mexico consistently relied on U.S. capital to support its economic development. In the twentieth century, Mexico’s Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) depended on the U.S. to provide its citizens with employment under the Bracero Program (1942-1964) and the Border Industrialization Program, or BIP (1964-2000). In both programs, the PRI cultivated a “docile” Mexican workforce while manipulating gender in order to meet market demands and sustain its economic relationship with the U.S. Through U.S. capitalism, the PRI tailored each program to American employers’ ideals of the most cost-efficient, most productive, and least resistant workforce by exploiting gender. In that same vein, Leslie Salzinger states, “Globalization has many components, but a central impetus for the process as a whole is capital’s increased capacity to move in search of better—cheaper,


\(^2\) Ibid, viii.
more malleable, more highly skilled—workers. Insofar as these assessments are made in terms of gender, gender becomes a central feature of the process.”

Under the Bracero Program, the U.S. exclusively contracted Mexican men to work on farms and railroads. The U.S. never included women in the program, even though farmers had previously hired Mexican men, women, and children in family units to harvest crops during the 1920s. Nevertheless, American farmers and the U.S. government favored young single males to participate in the program, claiming that they were more suitable for agricultural work than females. In addition, American farmers considered Mexicans to be the cheapest, most submissive, and most disposable source of labor, and therefore, the most desirable employees. Mexican consulates ensured the farmers a submissive source of labor by pressuring the *braceros* to passively obey their employers. When the Bracero Program ended in 1964, a group of Mexican entrepreneurs, with support from the PRI, created the BIP to provide jobs for the


7 Carlos Marentes, interviewed by author, El Paso, Texas, July 22, 2008.
thousands of braceros who returned to Mexico.\(^8\) However, from the beginning of the program, U.S. corporations hired a majority of women. Although U.S. employers had not deemed women productive enough for farm labor under the Bracero Program, they favored them for industrial work. Mexico’s strong cultural tradition of *machismo* influenced American companies’ perception of Mexican women as passive and docile—qualities that they considered more favorable in *maquiladora* employees.\(^9\) Under both programs, American employers’ perceptions of Mexican laborers as being “docile” were central in their exploitation of them. At the same time, employers targeted specific genders for each program in order to maximize production. From the employers’ perspective, males were ideal for agricultural labor but not for industrial labor, even though the PRI created the BIP to supply employment for the braceros. Meanwhile, U.S. employers deemed females the most desirable for *maquiladora* work but undesirable for agricultural work, even though they had previously hired them in the 1920s for harvest labor. Under the Bracero Program and the BIP, the PRI adapted the programs according to U.S. demands for cheap, gendered, and passive workforces.

In both programs, the U.S. government, American corporations, and the PRI jointly favored profitability over the social conditions of the workers. The theoretical framework for my research encompasses a pattern in U.S.-Mexican historical relations, of


\(^9\) *Machismo* is a cultural aspect in which males dominate both public and private sectors of society. Latin America maintains a strong tradition of *machismo* in the present day.
a blatant disregard for humanity in favor of productivity. Other scholars have expressed similar ideas concerning capitalism’s influence over state policy decisions. For example, Justin Akers Chacón and Mike Davis state, “Corporate capitalism dictates that state policy decisions favor profitability over social sustainability—the interests of corporations and investors over those of workers, indigenous peoples, the world’s poor, and the environment.” Under the Bracero Program and the BIP, Mexican laborers experienced human rights violations, such as racial and sexual discrimination, low wages, substandard living conditions, adverse working conditions, and in some cases, violence at the hands of American employers. My research explains how the Bracero Program and the BIP embody the capitalist principle of favoring profitability over laborers’ social wellbeing.

The Bracero Program began in 1942 as an effort to compensate for an absent American male labor force during World War II. The U.S. and Mexican governments agreed to legalize Mexican immigration to the U.S. for temporary work on American farms and railroads. While older scholarship looks upon the Bracero Program as a success for both Mexicans and Americans, in recent years historians have viewed it as a failure for Mexicans in particular. When founded, the program included several protections for the bracero workers with regard to wages and working conditions.

earlier studies assume that those regulations were followed, more recent literature reveals that the Bracero Program failed to protect Mexican workers.

Prior to the program’s start, Mexicans had a reputation for being the cheapest, most temporary labor source for U.S. farms.\textsuperscript{11} Since Mexico was close by, many white Americans assumed that Mexicans would never stay in the U.S. permanently. Historian Camille Guerin-Gonzales states that farmers perceived Mexicans as “birds of passage” who could be easily transported back and forth between the U.S. and Mexico.\textsuperscript{12} According to historian Kitty Calavita, the U.S. saw its advantage in the Bracero Program thusly: “The demand for migratory workers [was] thus essentially twofold: To be ready to go to work when needed; to be gone when not needed.”\textsuperscript{13} The workers’ temporary status made them disposable and therefore easily exploitable.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, the Bracero Program was tailor-made to the farmers’ demands, and many ignored the program’s formal regulations.\textsuperscript{15} As a result, \textit{braceros} frequently complained of substandard food and housing, inadequate wages, appalling working conditions, and insufficient work. If

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Guerin-Gonzales, \textit{Mexican Workers and American Dreams}.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Kitty Calavita, \textit{Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.} (Routledge: New York, 1992), 21.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Guerin-Gonzales, \textit{Mexican Workers and American Dreams}, 15-16.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Calavita, \textit{Inside the State}, 42.
\end{itemize}
the braceros spoke out against their employers, they were often threatened with deportation.16

Recent literature concerning the Bracero Program describes how American farmers’ perception of Mexicans as submissive facilitated bracero exploitation. According to Guerin-Gonzales, farmers described Mexican laborers as “docile and…and orderly law-abiding” employees.17 Farmers’ labeling of braceros as “docile” created a separation based on class and race between the American farmers and the Mexican laborers. In relation to class divisions, several texts concerning the Bracero Program reference Karl Marx’s description of the capitalist labor process in order to analyze the relationship between Mexican workers and American farmers.18 For instance, Richard L. Mize, Jr. argues, “The Bracero Program was instrumental in the development and expansion of a fully capitalist labor process.”19 In addition, Akers Chacón and Davis reference the Bracero Program as a twentieth-century caste system.20

Most scholars agree that the program encouraged Mexico’s economic reliance on the U.S., as well as illegal Mexican immigration. According to Richard B. Craig, the “flow of laborers [from Mexico] fostered [a great] economic dependence on the United

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16 Akers Chacón and Davis, No One is Illegal.

17 Guerin-Gonzales, Mexican Workers and American Dreams, 52.


20 Akers Chacón and Davis. No One is Illegal.
Soon after the U.S. and Mexico enacted the Bracero Program, Mexicans’ desperation for employment became quite evident. Workers who were able to secure labor contracts with the U.S. government traveled to the border, while others crossed the border illegally. So many illegal immigrants crossed to participate in the program that by 1952 approximately 1.5 million illegal Mexican immigrants were working in the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) officials and American farmers even encouraged braceros’ illegal migration to the U.S. In fact, upon farmers’ requests, INS officials frequently “legalized” illegal Mexican workers after they crossed the border. Calculita argues, “The INS was critical, for in its capacity as official gatekeeper, it controlled entries, departures, and bracero desertions, giving the agency substantial power, not only over the braceros themselves, but ultimately over the entire program.” As a result, the number of approved Mexican visas ballooned from 6,372 in 1951 to 50,772 in 1955, with 42 percent of the visas going to “agricultural laborers.” The culmination of this “legalization” practice occurred in 1948 in El Paso, Texas, when a riot broke out after INS officials and American farmers encouraged Mexicans to cross the border.  

23 Ibid, 115-116.  
25 Ibid, 1.  
26 Ibid.
border illegally. The same thing happened later in 1954 in Mexicali, Baja California.\footnote{Cohen, “Caught in the Middle,” 116.}

Even though farmers had become highly dependent on the labor provided by illegal Mexican immigrants, when popular criticism of illegal immigration mounted, the government expelled illegal Mexican immigrants, or “wetbacks,” from American soil in “Operation Wetback” in 1954.\footnote{Craig, \textit{The Bracero Program}.} In the process, they deported two million Mexicans, many of which were U.S. citizens of Mexican heritage.\footnote{David E. Lorey. \textit{The U.S.-Mexican Border in the Twentieth Century} (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1999), 121.}

As the program continued, the Department of Labor put increasing pressure on the regulation of housing, wages, and transportation for the \textit{braceros} after observing violations of the program’s regulations on farms. Consequently, many American farmers did not wish to continue the program.\footnote{Craig, \textit{The Bracero Program}, 151.} Eventually, anti-\textit{bracero} interest groups in Congress acted to terminate the program in 1964.\footnote{Ibid.}

After the Bracero Program ended, the Mexican government allowed foreign companies to establish factories (\textit{maquiladoras}) along the U.S.-Mexico border in order to revive industry and relieve mass unemployment that occurred as a result of the Bracero Program’s end.\footnote{Cravey, \textit{Women and Work in Mexico’s Maquiladoras},11.}

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\footnote{Cohen, “Caught in the Middle,” 116.}
\footnote{Craig, \textit{The Bracero Program}.}
\footnote{David E. Lorey. \textit{The U.S.-Mexican Border in the Twentieth Century} (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1999), 121.}
\footnote{Craig, \textit{The Bracero Program}, 151.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Cravey, \textit{Women and Work in Mexico’s Maquiladoras},11.}
Constitution, which prohibited foreign ownership of property in Mexico.\textsuperscript{33} In the 1960s under PRI President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, the Mexican government relaxed laws regarding foreign capital that were established as part of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). Díaz Ordaz expressed desires to develop Mexico’s economy, noting, “Let us make our country economically free so that it may be politically free.”\textsuperscript{34} Like many other PRI presidents, Díaz Ordaz believed that it was essential to employ foreign investment in order to achieve economic development, or in his words, “economic freedom.” For Díaz Ordaz, including foreign investment in the BIP was crucial to its success.

While the \textit{maquiladoras} certainly relieved some of the region’s unemployment, they also received much criticism from both American and Mexican audiences. From the American perspective, \textit{maquiladoras} exported American jobs to Mexico and assembled products at a lower price than U.S.-based factories could afford, thus making it more difficult for them to compete in the global market.\textsuperscript{35} Meanwhile, Mexicans criticized the \textit{maquiladoras} because of the low wages, long hours, and unsafe working conditions. In addition, the young female workers experienced sexual harassment, bullying, verbal abuse, and other forms of intimidation.\textsuperscript{36}


\textsuperscript{34} Leslie Sklair, \textit{Assembling for Development: The Maquila Industry in Mexico and the United States} (University of California, San Diego: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, 1993), 30.


Even though the maquiladoras originated to absorb the returning male braceros, women initially made up between 80 and 90 percent of the maquiladora workforce.\textsuperscript{37} Employers in the maquiladoras traditionally hired single young women, usually age 16 through 28.\textsuperscript{38} While they claimed to hire them for their “dexterity and patience for detailed manual work,” sources also cite other reasons.\textsuperscript{39} According to many sources, employers hired women because of their “natural patience” and passivity, and because they more likely to tolerate abusive working conditions than men.\textsuperscript{40} According Leslie Salzinger, maquiladora investors claimed to hire women because they “show respect and obedience to persons in authority, especially men…[and they] follow orders willingly.”\textsuperscript{41}

Sources also criticize the maquiladoras’ tendencies to undervalue female labor in the industry. Most researchers agree that the official minimum wage serves as both a floor and a ceiling for maquiladora workers’ earnings.\textsuperscript{42} Typically the women who worked in the maquiladoras provided most of the household income, and still do. For


\textsuperscript{38} Salzinger, \textit{Genders in Production}, 11.


\textsuperscript{40} Salzinger, \textit{Genders in Production}. Abell, “Endangering Women’s Health for Profit.” Sklair, \textit{Assembling for Development}.

\textsuperscript{41} Salzinger, \textit{Genders in Production}, 37.

example, as of 1997 in Matamoros, 75 percent of women workers provided more than half of their family’s income. However, maquiladora owners continued to argue that for women, “a worker’s wage need not be a living wage.” In Mexico, even though women entered the workforce, they continued to be treated as though their primary responsibility was domestic and their work as paid labor had secondary importance.

Since a majority of women worked in the maquiladoras, they dealt with issues (and still do) that are more prevalent among a female workforce, such as pregnancy discrimination and sexual harassment. Existing maquiladora literature is highly critical of these practices. Companies used pregnancy discrimination to cut costs, since Mexican law required companies to provide their employees with paid maternity leave. In the application process, employers utilized pregnancy testing and inquired about menstruation and sexual activity. Pregnant applicants were not hired. Furthermore, maquiladoras were known for mistreating pregnant employees and forcing them to


44 Ibid.


46 Cravey, Women and Work in Mexico’s Maquiladoras, 135.

“resign.”48 In addition to pregnancy discrimination, employers used sexual harassment and violence as a way to intimidate female employees.49

Maquiladora workers experienced harsh physical working conditions that caused a series of major health problems, particularly reproductive health problems. For example, the high exposure to toxic chemicals in the factories caused many women to have menstrual irregularities, miscarriages, and children with birth defects.50 People in the communities surrounding the maquiladoras were also exposed to toxic chemicals in their water supplies. Many residents stored their water in 55-gallon drums that had been disposed of or sold by factories. Often, the factories used the drums to store chemicals, and some of the containers had warning labels in English that dangerous chemical residues made the barrels unsafe for storing water.51 Thus, maquiladora workers and their families were exposed to dangerous chemicals in their homes if not their workplaces.

The U.S.-Mexico border became invisible due to the presence of the maquiladoras in the region, as goods and capital passed freely between the two countries. Hence, the BIP was a stepping stone toward the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, which encouraged free trade between Mexico, 

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49 Abell, “Endangering Women’s Health for Profit,” 596.

50 Ibid, 598.

51 Cravey, Women and Work in Mexico’s Maquiladoras, 98.
Canada, and the U.S. NAFTA has received a substantial amount of criticism from scholars. According to political scientist Roderic Ai Camp, some analysts have argued that NAFTA decreased Mexico’s national sovereignty, saying “a decline in state sovereignty, engineered by international agreements, limits the country’s ability to protect ordinary citizens’ interests.” In other words, by relying on U.S. capital for economic development, Mexico undermines its ability to protect its own citizens from being exploited by U.S. employers (like in the Bracero Program and the BIP as well). Another criticism is that neoliberal agreements like NAFTA do not mutually benefit all of the parties involved—they only deepen the disparity in the distribution of wealth.53 According to Robert Joe Stout, every year since 1994, when NAFTA took effect, more Mexicans have fallen below the poverty level and more Mexicans entrepreneurs have become some of the world’s top multi-billionaires. NAFTA encouraged a greater disparity between the rich and the poor and promoted economic integration between the U.S. and Mexico, a process well underway under the Bracero Program and the BIP, decades before NAFTA.

Both the maquiladoras and the Bracero Program are symbols of twentieth-century U.S. capitalism in Mexico. In both programs, the U.S. government, American employers


53 Akers Chacón and Davis. No One is Illegal.

and the PRI worked together to maximize production and minimize costs by creating
gender-specific programs. As a result, Mexican laborers experienced human rights
violations. In this work, I develop a unique comparative analysis of Mexican female
laborers’ experiences in the *maquiladora* industry and male laborers’ experiences under
the Bracero Program in order to investigate the historical impacts of gender-focused U.S.
capitalism on Mexican laborers in the twentieth century. In the summer of 2008, I went
to El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua to conduct a series of interviews with
former *braceros* and *maquiladora* workers. Throughout the course of five weeks, I
interviewed seven former *maquiladora* workers, six former *braceros*, and five experts
from various fields. Each interview ranged from twenty minutes to two and a half hours.
By conducting interviews with former *braceros* and *maquiladora* workers, I was able to
understand the programs on a personal, human level. During my stay in El Paso, I also
collected pictures, contracts, and transcripts of interviews with former *braceros* from El
Paso’s Center for Agricultural Workers’ private oral history archives. My use of oral
history serves as a distinctive human testimony to U.S.-Mexican relations, as I interpret
the programs’ historical significance from the perspectives of the Mexican laborers
themselves.

In addition to conducting interviews, I collected information from newspapers on
microfilm at the University of Texas at El Paso’s (UTEP) library and the El Paso Public
Library. By combining oral history with primary and secondary sources, I will draw
comparisons between *braceros*’ and *maquiladora* workers’ experiences under U.S.
capitalism. While other scholars have typically focused on one program or the other, my
research uniquely draws comparisons between the two programs. In doing so, I am able to analyze how the PRI manipulated gender in order to comply with U.S. demands for cheap and productive labor in these two programs. In addition, my use of oral history enlivens the workers’ historical narrative. In Chapter 1, I outline the historical background of U.S.-Mexican relations in order to provide a historical context for the following chapters. In Chapter 2, I describe the Bracero Program and the ways in which American farmers, the U.S. government, and the PRI worked together to exploit bracero labor. Chapter 3 encompasses the means by which U.S. corporations, with the PRI’s endorsement, took advantage of undervalued female Mexican labor in the maquiladoras. Finally, Chapter 4 describes the similarities between both programs, based on the premise that they both utilized U.S. capital through gendered lines in order to exploit Mexican laborers and create economic interdependency between the U.S. and Mexico.
CHAPTER 1: HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF U.S.-MEXICAN RELATIONS

For the past two hundred years, the U.S. and Mexico have shared a close diplomatic relationship maintained primarily through strong economic ties. Since the late nineteenth century, Mexico has consistently relied on foreign investment, mostly from the U.S., as a means to realize economic growth. In that context, the U.S.-Mexico border region has gone through periods of booms and busts during which millions of Mexicans have either settled in Mexico’s northern border towns or crossed to the U.S. in search of better economic opportunities. The Porfiriato (1876-1911), the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), Prohibition (1919-1933), the Bracero Program (1942-1964), the establishment of maquiladoras (1960s), the passing of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986 through U.S. Congress, and the inception of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, have drawn Mexicans to the northern border in search of U.S. employment, thus contributing to the current migration patterns in the U.S.-Mexico border region. In particular, the Bracero Program, due to its economic appeal to Mexicans, caused a huge influx of migration to the U.S., both legal and illegal, that has continued ever since the program’s inauguration in 1942 (see Figure 1).
Among other reasons, Mexico’s dependence on foreign capital has contributed to its failure to obtain status as a first-world country, and many of its citizens have left in search of better economic opportunities. Currently, Mexico exports the highest number of migrants in the world. Mexicans are lured northward by the higher wages that U.S. companies in both Mexico (maquiladoras in northern border towns) and the U.S. provide. In turn, U.S. farms and corporations have benefitted greatly from cheap Mexican labor. At the same time, American employers have benefitted from Mexican workers’ illegal work status, since it enables them to hire and fire workers on demand.

In addition to the draw of economic opportunities, many Mexicans find Mexico’s proximity to the U.S. convenient for seasonal return trips to their home country, which in turn increases the rate of migration. Mexican migrants have taken advantage of the economic opportunities that have emerged throughout history and migrated to the U.S.-Mexico border region in an effort to improve their standard of living and provide for their families. In this chapter, I will discuss the various historical events that have influenced the close economic relationship between the U.S. and Mexico, as well as the migration patterns in the U.S.-Mexico border region during the past two centuries. This chapter will explain the historical background of U.S.-Mexican relations from the turn of the eighteenth century through the end of the twentieth century. The history of U.S.-Mexican relations is key to understanding the historical context in which the Bracero Program (1942-1964) and the Border Industrialization Program (BIP, 1965-2000) began. The ending point of my research is 2000, when the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the governing political party in Mexico from 1929 to 2000, fell out of power. The PRI’s reign as the dominating political party ended when Vicente Fox, a member of the National Action Party (PAN), was elected as president in 2000.

The PRI

The U.S. and Mexico maintained close economic ties throughout the twentieth century largely due to the decisions and policies of the PRI. In general, the PRI implemented policies which encouraged Mexico’s dependence on foreign capital. In 1942, for example, President Manuel Avila Camacho agreed to implement the Bracero
Program, which encouraged Mexicans to seek employment in the U.S. Later, under Miguel Alemán (1946-1952) and Adolfo Ruíz (1952-1958), Mexico continued to rely on U.S. capital in order to fund industrialization and massive public projects. Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970) implemented the BIP in order to encourage foreign-owned corporations to establish factories (maquiladoras) in northern Mexico. In the 1980s, Mexico experienced its worst recession since the global depression in the 1930s.\(^{56}\) As a result, several PRI presidents implemented peso devaluations in order to pay off Mexico’s international debts. Later, Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) saw foreign capital as essential to Mexico’s economic recovery in the short term and international competition in the long term. Consequently, he turned to a free-trade agreement (NAFTA) with the U.S. and Canada to boost Mexico’s economy and increase international trade.

The Establishment of the U.S.-Mexico Border

The U.S. and Mexico’s diplomatic relations began long before the PRI promoted U.S. investment in Mexico—their earliest diplomatic exchanges concerned disputes over territory. The U.S.-Mexico borderlands have a long history of violence, prejudice, and conflict that dates back to shortly after the U.S. gained its independence from England in 1776. Most of the territory in the west at that time belonged to Mexico, but U.S. government officials expressed a desire to expand their territory west early on, which

inevitably caused conflict between the two nations. Soon after winning independence, U.S. government leaders like Thomas Jefferson began discussing ways in which the U.S. could acquire Spain’s American territories. Thomas Jefferson expressed a desire to acquire Mexican lands by saying:

Our confederacy must be viewed as the nest from which all America, North and South, is to be peopled. We should take care, too, not to think it for the best of that great continent to press too soon on the Spaniards. Those countries cannot be in better hands. My fear is that they [the Spaniards] are too feeble to hold them till our population can be sufficiently advanced to gain it from them piece by piece.

Within a few years, the U.S. government slowly began to acquire Mexico’s territories. In 1803 the U.S. purchased the Louisiana territory from France, who had acquired it from Spain years before. Later, Americans migrated into the Florida region which eventually forced New Spain to surrender its territory in 1819. The U.S. was eager to gain more territory, but Mexico refused to surrender any more land. So, the two countries signed a treaty in 1832 that stated that the lands west of Louisiana to the Pacific Ocean belonged to Mexico. However, soon after, Americans began to move into the Texas territory as they had before in Florida. In 1836 Anglo-Americans took control of Texas and declared Texas’ independence from Mexico through the Treaty of Velasco. Only a few years later, as a result of the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-1848), the U.S.

58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
acquired California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and portions of Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, and Oklahoma by ratifying the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848.\(^{61}\) In short, Mexico surrendered one-third of its territory to the U.S.\(^{62}\) Meanwhile, the U.S. gained additional fertile lands and abundant gold, silver, copper, and other valuable resources.\(^{63}\) In total, the U.S. gained 75 percent of Mexico’s natural resources.\(^{64}\) Even though the Mexican government was at a serious disadvantage in signing the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, not to agree to it would have meant continued American military occupation, an extended financial disaster for the Mexican government, and the probable loss of additional territory.\(^{65}\) In the end, the U.S. gained more of Mexico’s territory in the Gadsden Purchase of 1853.\(^{66}\) After years of war and conflict, followed by a series of treaties, the U.S. eventually succeeded in obtaining almost half of Mexico’s territory (See Figures 2 and 3).\(^{67}\)


\(^{65}\) Ibid, 8.


\(^{67}\) Martínez, *U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*, 45.
Figure 2: Map of Mexico before the U.S.-Mexico War, 1834.
Source Figure 2: Henry S. Tanner, cartographer, 1834.

Figure 3: Map of Mexico after the U.S.-Mexico War, 1853.
Source Figure 3: Carl Flemming, cartographer, 1853.
In less than twenty years, the U.S. government gained nearly half of Mexico’s land, even though it had recognized Mexico’s sovereignty of that land by signing a treaty in 1832. The U.S.’ successful seizure of Mexico’s territory set the tone for the next century of U.S.-Mexican diplomatic relations.

The Porfiriato

After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, conflict ensued during the 1850s with raids and unlawful invasions of territory on both sides, with Mexicans usually enduring the majority of the attacks. Violence continued until the election of Mexican President Porfirio Díaz in 1876. When Díaz became president, he brought political stability to Mexico for the first time since Mexico’s independence in 1821. In addition, diplomatic relations between Mexico and the U.S. improved due to Díaz’s encouragement of foreign investment in Mexico. Díaz believed that Mexico’s modernization depended on the country’s ability to attract foreign capital; mostly from the U.S. His positivist motto of “Order and Progress” led to an average annual growth rate of 8 percent per year between 1884 and 1900. Mexico received so much investment from the U.S. during his reign

68 Martínez, U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, 45.


70 “Positivism” embodied political and economic policies which promoted economic growth through foreign investment. It was commonly practiced in Latin America at the turn of the twentieth century. The positivist motto was “Order and Progress.” Martínez, U.S.-Mexican Borderlands, xvi.

that by 1902, U.S. companies controlled 80 percent of Mexican railroad stock.\textsuperscript{72} As a result of foreign investment, Díaz brought economic growth throughout Mexico, particularly in the northern states. In fact, investment was so heavily concentrated in the north that in 1910, on the eve of his downfall, approximately one-fourth of the American capital invested in Mexico was concentrated in Coahuila, Nuevo León, Chihuahua, and Sonora (see Figure 4).\textsuperscript{73}

\textbf{Figure 4: Map of Mexican states.}

Source: Compiled by Bureau of Business Research from various sources.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid, 40.

\textsuperscript{73} Martínez, \textit{U.S.-Mexico Borderlands}, xvi.
As a result of foreign investment during the Porfiriato, railroads, mining, ranching, and agriculture expanded in the area and border towns emerged as important trade, transportation, and migration centers.74 Population growth accelerated along the railroads, and Díaz established a *zona libre*, or “free zone” of free trade in which consumers were allowed to purchase goods duty-free in the border region in 1885.75 In the *zona libre*, many Mexicans crossed to the American side to purchase the bulk of their consumer goods. In addition, Americans crossed to the Mexican side of the border to buy Parisian fashions, vegetables, fruits, and other foods.76 According to historian Miguel Tinker Salas, “For many *norteños*, progress and modernization became synonymous with commercial ties to the United States.”77 Thus, Mexican citizens became highly influenced by Díaz’s belief in foreign investment.

During the Porfiriato, migration into the U.S.-Mexico border region expanded. Cities along Mexico’s northern border swelled due to the increased economic investment and development in the area. As trade increased between the U.S. and Mexico, the northern states benefitted greatly due to their proximity to the *zona libre*, and Mexicans migrated to the northern border. Porfirio Díaz’s development of the Mexican railroad

74 Ibid, 85.


77 Ibid, 87.
brought about an unprecedented growth in the border region, as people moved closer to the railroads. Before the railroads, El Paso, Texas had a population of approximately 800, but after news of the railroad spread, the population of El Paso had doubled by 1880. Four decades later, El Paso reached a population of 80,000 due to the railroad’s success.\(^{78}\) Much of this success can be attributed to Mexico’s dependence on foreign investment.

At the same time that industry was expanding in northern Mexico, it was also growing in the southwestern region of the U.S. As the mining, railroad and agricultural sectors expanded in the southwestern U.S., the demand for labor increased, and more Mexicans began to migrate across the border to work.\(^{79}\) Between 1900 and 1930, more than a million Mexican immigrant workers traveled north to the U.S. to work as agricultural wage laborers.\(^{80}\) As a result, Mexican labor became so important to the southwestern U.S. economy that by 1912, Mexicans became the main source of labor on railroads west of Kansas City.\(^{81}\) This continued so that by 1929, Mexicans comprised 59.9 percent of the workforce in the nine largest railroad companies in the region.\(^{82}\) The U.S. and Mexico became increasingly dependent on one another, so much that the border

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\(^{79}\) Tinker Salas, “Sonora,” 88.


became nearly invisible in economic terms—Díaz’s positivist policies allowed labor, goods, and capital to flow freely across the transnational border.

Migration Patterns during the Revolution, Prohibition, and the Great Depression

Even though Díaz’s principle of “Order and Progress” brought great economic growth to Mexico’s northern border region, Mexican elite in the North became disillusioned with the Díaz administration’s exclusive politics.83 Thus, by the first decade of the twentieth century, some members of the elite began to push for reform and greater democracy.84 At the same time, Mexico’s economy declined as a result of a world financial crisis caused by a U.S. recession in 1907. A shortage of capital led to many bank failures and a fall in real wages.85 Later, Mexico experienced a subsistence crisis when a serious drought in 1907 led to the loss of one-half of the wheat harvest in Bajio (Mexico’s main wheat supplier). As a result, Mexico imported corn and wheat from abroad, and prices of commodities rose quickly.86 As tension rose regarding Mexico’s economic crisis, Díaz stated in an interview with foreign journalist James Creelman that he would step down as president of Mexico in 1910. However, Díaz ran for president again in the 1910 election. Fed up with Porfrian politics, Francisco Madero, a member of the northern elite, called for a revolution after the 1910 election. Mexican peasants

84 Ibid, 61.
85 Ibid, 61.
86 Ibid, 62.
who were negatively affected by the economic crisis supported Madero, and the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) began. As conflict ensued in the border region, local businesses failed and peaceful social exchanges between U.S. and Mexican border cities collapsed. However, the arms trade flourished as the value of legal exports of firearms increased from $270,832 in 1911 to $1.3 million in 1915. In addition, population movement and growth along the border increased as a result of the Revolution. Violence in the region, in combination with a U.S. economic boom caused by preparation for World War I, drew Mexicans to the U.S. Consequently, between 1900 and 1930, an estimated 10 percent of Mexico’s population migrated north to the U.S.

The border region experienced a period of expansion during Prohibition (1919-1933), which was followed by a contraction during the Great Depression (1930-1941). With the passing of the Volstead Act in 1919, Prohibition began, and American citizens crossed the border to enjoy gambling, liquor, and other services, including prostitution, which could not be legally obtained in the U.S. In addition, owners of U.S. bars,

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87 Most scholars mark the assassination of Venustiano Carranza (president, 1914-1920) in 1920 as the end of the “violent phase” of the Revolution.


91 Ibid, 69.

casinos, and related businesses moved their operations to Ciudad Juárez, Tijuana, and other Mexican border cities.\textsuperscript{93} As a result, during Prohibition, Ciudad Juárez, Tijuana, and other border cities transformed into what historian Oscar J. Martínez deemed “blatant centers of sin and degradation.”\textsuperscript{94} The border region experienced huge economic expansion and a population boom. Consequently, Mexican border towns were able to build strong infrastructure that included electricity, sewage, roads, bridges, bars, restaurants, theatres, and casinos as the cities’ economies expanded due to the large amounts of American capital and tourism that poured into Mexican border towns during Prohibition.\textsuperscript{95}

In the middle of Prohibition, the stock market crashed in October of 1929, and the Great Depression began shortly after. Business and industry collapsed in the U.S., and as a result, Mexico’s border towns suffered greatly due to a sharp decrease in tourism. During the Great Depression, hundreds of thousands of Americans became unemployed. As a result, the U.S. government deported more than one-half million Mexican migrant workers to Mexico in a mass repatriation. Many American citizens who were born of Mexican immigrants were forced to leave as well, and upon arrival in Mexico, Mexican-

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid, 46.


Americans were viewed as outsiders. Numerous Mexicans who had been repatriated stayed in the cities located along the northern border; therefore, the populations of cities in the region increased. The large number of repatriated Mexican immigrants who migrated to the border, in addition to the drastic decrease in economic tourism, severely devastated the U.S.-Mexico border region during the Great Depression.

Migration, the Bracero Program, and the Border Industrialization Program

Despite the Great Depression’s unsettling impact on the border region, conditions improved during World War II. After Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the U.S. joined the war and Mexican migration to the U.S. resumed. Soon after, the U.S. and Mexico implemented the Bracero Program in 1942, which began a new era of massive Mexican migration to the U.S. The program entailed an agreement between the U.S. government and the Mexican government that allowed temporary Mexican migration to the U.S. in an effort to compensate for the labor shortage that many American farms suffered as a result of World War II. The economic opportunities offered by the Bracero Program lured hundreds of thousands of Mexicans to the border.

Throughout the entire duration of the program, millions of Mexicans migrated to the U.S. on a temporary basis. At the time of the program’s peak between 1955 and

98 Ibid, 119-120.
1959, more than 400,000 *braceros* were admitted per year. As they migrated to the U.S. each year, the *braceros* and their families became increasingly dependent on the economic opportunities provided by the program. To start, the *braceros* remitted massive amounts of money back to their families in Mexico. Over time, families grew to count on the remittances that they received. The *braceros* themselves became accustomed to earning money in the U.S., and they eventually came to identify with the American way of life as well. As a result, many *braceros* chose to stay in the U.S. after the program ended. While some sought legal residency, many others stayed in the U.S. illegally.

After the Bracero Program ended in 1964, the Mexican government allowed foreign companies to establish export-based factories known as *maquiladoras* in Mexico’s northern border towns. As an incentive to attract foreign investors, the factories were able to export their goods duty-free. In this way, it was similar to the *zona libre* that Porfirio Díaz had created in the late nineteenth century. The Mexican government established the BIP in 1965 in order to relieve mass unemployment that occurred as a result of the Bracero Program’s termination. The export-based factories were meant to create jobs for the *braceros* who returned home to Mexico after the end of

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the program. However, very few braceros actually worked in the maquiladoras. In fact, when the factories were first established, the majority of their employees were female. Nevertheless, the U.S.-Mexico border region experienced another boom with the establishment of maquiladoras. From 1950 to 1990, the population of Mexico’s border states multiplied three and a half times, which was without a doubt due to the economic opportunities that the maquiladoras brought to the area.

Migration, IRCA, and NAFTA

While maquiladoras increased migration to Mexico’s northern border region, U.S. Congress’ passing of IRCA in 1986 augmented Mexicans’ legal migration to the U.S. Congress passed the new legislature in order to meet four main objectives: to control undocumented migration by granting amnesty to all immigrants living continuously in the U.S. since 1982; to expand the Border Patrol force; to issue temporary permits to ‘seasonal agricultural workers’ (SAW); and to enact employer sanction laws, which penalize U.S. employers who knowingly hire illegal foreign workers. Thereafter, a large number of illegal immigrants sought legal status through amnesty. While IRCA did create a large influx of legal immigration to the U.S., it did not decrease illegal immigration. Despite Congress’ efforts to eradicate the problems


104 Lorey, The U.S.-Mexican Border in the Twentieth Century, 118.

caused by illegal immigration, IRCA created new problems. A new industry emerged and became popular among illegal immigrants seeking work in the U.S.—the production of false work documents. Thus, illegal immigrants created new ways to navigate the legal system’s restrictions, and within a year, illegal immigration was at pre-IRCA levels.  

A few years after the U.S. Congress passed IRCA in 1986, it passed a new piece of legislature into motion which concerned international trade. In 1994, the U.S., Mexico, and Canada implemented NAFTA, which encouraged trade and economic integration between the three countries by lowering regulations and tariffs on foreign trade. In the early 1980s, as neoliberal policies that preceded NAFTA became more common, Mexican migration had already begun to expand. After NAFTA, however, Mexican migration to the U.S. reached an unprecedented level of vitality (see Figure 5).  

106 Ibid, 17.

Figure 5: Mexican immigration to the U.S.

Source: Conapo estimates, based on the Current Population Survey, 2004

With regard to NAFTA’s economic impact on the border region, David E. Lorey states, “In general, businesses that benefited from freer trade were those that were already competitive, that is industries that were operating with great efficiency and were active in the global marketplace.”\textsuperscript{108} In other words, NAFTA benefitted the businesses that were already dominant in the market, which were mostly U.S. corporations. At the same time, the implementation of NAFTA encouraged the capitalist model, which emphasized maximizing production and profit while minimizing costs. The most common way of reducing costs is by hiring cheaper labor, which Mexico was able to provide to U.S. companies through both the \textit{maquiladoras} and immigration to the U.S. According to Delgado-Wise, in the case of American industry in the U.S. and Mexico as of 2005, “The

employed workforce total[ed] 15.9 million—14.2 million in the United States and 1.7 million in Mexico—of whom 2.9 million (18% of the total) [were] Mexican workers.”

In other words, one out of every five workers in the extended U.S. manufacturing system was a Mexican. Increased internationalization of production, as in the case of NAFTA, catalyzes mass migration, especially in cases in which a developing nation (i.e. Mexico) is located close to a developed, capitalist nation (i.e. the U.S.). Thus, evidence strongly suggests that NAFTA played a large part in increasing Mexican immigration to the U.S.

Throughout the past two centuries, migration within the U.S.-Mexico border region has expanded and contracted as a result of historical events that have changed the area’s conditions of trade and industry. Through it all, Mexico’s policy makers have remained consistent in their reliance on foreign capital in order to achieve economic development. While Porfirio Díaz used foreign capital to develop railroads and create a “free-trade zone” in the nineteenth century, the PRI worked with the U.S. to create programs like the Bracero Program, the BIP, and NAFTA in the twentieth century. The Porfiriato, Prohibition, the Bracero Program, the founding of maquiladoras, the passing of IRCA, and the introduction of NAFTA, contributed to the region’s economic


110 Raúl Delgado-Wise, and James M. Cypher. “The Strategic Role of Labor in Mexico’s Subordinated Integration into the U.S. Production System Under NAFTA.” (Ph.D. diss., University of Zacatecas, Zacatecas, Mexico, 2005).

expansion and subsequent population growth. In addition, violence in the northern border region during the Mexican Revolution, in combination with the U.S.’ economic boom at the start of World War I drew Mexicans northward to the U.S. Thus, economic opportunities have served as the main motivation for Mexicans’ migration to the U.S.-Mexico border region. While Porfirio Díaz’s *zona libre*, Prohibition, and *maquiladoras* promoted growth and migration to Mexico’s northern border region, the Mexican Revolution, the Bracero Program, IRCA, and NAFTA encouraged migration to the U.S. The Bracero Program and the BIP both had particularly strong effects on the incidence of Mexicans’ immigration to the U.S. In the present day, Mexicans continue to seek employment opportunities in the U.S. and the *maquiladoras* along Mexico’s northern border.
CHAPTER 2: THE BRACERO PROGRAM

In the twentieth century, the Bracero Program (1942-1964) was arguably the most significant historical circumstance that influenced Mexicans’ decisions to migrate northward to the U.S. for work. Throughout the duration of the program, Mexican laborers were lured by U.S. capital and the U.S. government to leave their homelands. They traveled by the thousands and flocked across the border. Violent riots broke out on two occasions as a result of their eagerness to secure employment: in 1948 in El Paso, Texas and in 1954 in Mexicali, Baja California Norte, Mexico. The Bracero Program was characterized by ongoing negotiations between the U.S. and Mexico. Their negotiations embodied a stark contrast between U.S. farmers’ need for cheap, dispensable labor and Mexican workers’ need for fair wages and working conditions. As a result of these divergent interests, the program proceeded as a large-scale game of tug-of-war between Mexican laborers and U.S. employers. The program went through a series of negotiations, in which the U.S. and Mexico frequently dropped the agreement altogether because they were unable to agree on wages, living conditions, and other aspects of the program. Historical events like the El Paso Riot, the El Paso Valley Cotton Association Boycott in 1953, the Mexicali Riot, and Operation Wetback of 1954 exemplify the program’s cyclical nature. As a result of these events, braceros, who were in need of employment regardless of the status of the bilateral agreement, often found themselves caught in the middle with little choice but to migrate to the U.S. illegally in order to support their families. This allowed farmers to take advantage of the situation and exploit the workers. American farmers often violated the program’s regulations
regarding wages and working conditions, especially during periods in which the program was suspended. In general, the Bracero Program, which eventually ended in 1964, represented a discriminatory period in the history of U.S.-Mexican relations, during which Mexican laborers were made the victims of a variety of human rights violations.

The Start of the Program

During World War II, American farms experienced a profound labor shortage as farm laborers joined the armed forces. In order to compensate for the labor shortage, American farmers recruited school boys, girl scouts, and college women to harvest crops. However, by late spring of 1942, farmers complained that they needed workers with better skills and more experience. They requested Mexican laborers, stating that they were “the only solution” for the shortage of farm labor.112 Thus, in 1942 the U.S. government approached the Mexican government with a proposal for a temporary labor program in which Mexican laborers would be contracted to work on a temporary basis on American farms and railroads. When the U.S. government first approached Mexico to propose the temporary-labor program, it appealed to the “domestically strong and popular government” of President Manuel Avila Camacho.113 During Avila Camacho’s term (1940-1946), the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) experienced significant change. The party was originally named the National Revolutionary Party (PNR) by Plutarco

112 El Paso Times, April 17, 1942.

Calles and his administration (1924-1928) in 1928. Later, under Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), the party was reorganized as the Revolutionary Mexican Party (PRM), which was a party of workers and peasants with a socialist and class-struggle appeal. However, at the end of Avila Camacho’s term, the party was restructured and renamed the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). According to political scientist Martin C. Needler, the restructured PRI under Avila Camacho was a party of “consensus, moderation, and stability.” The party’s name and basic framework have remained the same since that time. Under Avila Camacho’s administration, the Mexican government had few incentives to approve the Bracero Program—it feared that such a program would symbolize its inability to provide employment to its citizens, and accordingly, destabilize its domestic popularity. Thus, in the beginning stages of the Bracero Program, Mexico enjoyed a superior position in its negotiations with the U.S. American farmers were desperate for cheap, experienced, expendable labor, but Mexico’s Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs, Jaime Torres Bodet, dismissed the offer. He claimed that “Mexico was gearing up for an unprecedented industrialization and modernization of its agricultural sector. The country...would soon need all those working arms.”


115 Ibid, 12-17.

116 Ibid, 17.

117 Cohen, “Caught in the Middle,” 111.

118 Ibid, 112.
still haunted by the repatriations of the 1930s. Mexico feared that agreeing to the U.S.’ proposition would damage its popular political image, cause a labor shortage for its own agricultural sector, and give rise to another mass repatriation of its citizens. For these reasons, Mexico initially reacted with hesitation to the U.S. government’s proposal to export its labor northward, even on a temporary basis.

When Mexico announced its support for the Allies in 1942, the Mexican government changed its mind about the Bracero Program. Word spread through Mexico’s prominent newspaper, *Excélsior*, that Mexicans were desperately needed for work in the U.S. The Mexican government suggested that the migrants working in the “technologically superior” U.S. would learn modern agricultural skills and return to Mexico, thus modernizing the Mexican agricultural sector. As a result, on August 6, 1942, the U.S. State Department announced the Bracero Program, in which the U.S. and

119 During the 1930s, the Great Depression left many white Americans without jobs, while non-white immigrants remained employed in agricultural positions. Since Mexicans were regarded as “aliens,” they were forced to leave through repatriation. Between 1929 and 1932, more than 365,000 Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans were forced to leave the United States. Many American citizens who were born of Mexican immigrants were forced to leave as well, and upon arrival in Mexico, they were viewed as outsiders. Camille Guerin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 94-98.

120 Ironically, the Mexican government’s fears of another mass repatriation were realized during Operation Wetback of 1954, during which the U.S. government deported 2 million Mexicans (which included many U.S. citizens of Mexican heritage) to Mexico. David E. Lorey, *The U.S.-Mexican Border in the Twentieth Century* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1999), 121.

121 Ibid, 112.

122 Ibid, 113.
Mexico agreed to allow Mexican laborers to work temporarily on American farms and railroads.\textsuperscript{123}

Program Regulations

During negotiations, the U.S. and Mexico agreed upon certain regulations for the Bracero Program. The two nations agreed that Mexicans would be paid the prevailing wage for their work and be assured good living conditions. Also, the U.S. guaranteed that Mexicans would not be substitutes for other workers in order to reduce wages, Mexicans would not be drafted to join the U.S. army, and at the end of each individual’s contract, the \textit{braceros} would return home.\textsuperscript{124} American farmers agreed to pay for the \textit{braceros}’ transportation, and as a measure to protect U.S. laborers, the two nations agreed that the Mexican workers would enter the U.S. only when domestic labor was not available to meet the demand.\textsuperscript{125} The \textit{braceros} were guaranteed a minimum wage of \$0.30 per hour—a wage which American farmers disputed because “it wasn’t practical to pay harvest on an hourly basis.”\textsuperscript{126} American farmers preferred to pay their workers in piece wages.\textsuperscript{127} However, the piece wages gave the farmers an unfair advantage over the

\textsuperscript{123} \textit{El Continental}, August 7, 1942.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{125} \textit{New York Times}, August 17, 1942.

\textsuperscript{126} \textit{El Continental}, August 13, 1942.

\textsuperscript{127} A piece wage is an income paid per pound or acre of a harvested crop, rather than being paid by the hour. In his writings, Karl Marx described the way in which piece wages provided the capitalists with an unfair advantage over the bourgeoisie. According to Marx, “Piece wages…[are] the most fruitful source of
Mexican laborers. Most of the braceros were campesinos that came from Mexico’s interior regions, where they experienced poverty, had little access to education, and faced poor living conditions.\footnote{Campesino is a Spanish word that means “farm laborer” or “peasant.”} Therefore, since many of the braceros were not well-educated, many of them did not know how to measure a pound or an acre, the units by which they were most commonly paid in a piece wage. Consequently, from the braceros’ perspectives, it was difficult to decipher whether they were receiving their proper wages in a piece-wage system.\footnote{Carlos Marentes, interviewed by author, El Paso, Texas, July 22, 2008.} American farmers used the piece-wage system to their advantage in order to exploit the braceros.

Not only did American farmers determine the braceros’ wages, but they also controlled the braceros’ living conditions, since the farmers were responsible for providing housing for their workers. While regulations were set forth to ensure adequate amenities, they were not always properly enforced. Living conditions were often deemed unacceptable by both braceros and Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) inspectors alike. One former bracero recalled in an interview, “We slept on the floor.”\footnote{José Isabel Arredla Villa, Bracero Project Interviews, El Centro de los Trabajadores Agrícolas, El Paso, Texas, May 14, 2001.} Another stated, “[The barracks provided by the farmer] weren’t sanitary. There were up reductions in wages, and of frauds committed by the capitalists.” In his description of the capitalist labor process, Karl Marx stated that “the driving motive and determining purpose of capitalist production is…the greatest possible exploitation of labor-power by the capitalist.” Ronald L. Mize Jr., “Mexican Contract Workers and the U.S. Capitalist Agricultural Labor Process: The Formative Era, 1942-1964,” \textit{Rural Sociology} 71 (March 2006): 92-93.
to 200 people [living] in one barrack, and there weren’t any bathrooms.”\textsuperscript{131} Meanwhile, another former \textit{bracero} remarked, “We lived, 50 people in one shack, with two bathrooms and we bathed ourselves in a tub, one right after the other.”\textsuperscript{132} Finally, others complained of being too cold, not having enough to eat, not having any privacy, not being given enough work to survive (i.e. being contracted to work 48 hours per week but only working 10 or 12 hours per week), living in canvas tents or barracks made of old wood covered with black cardboard, and living with 20 other people in one room.\textsuperscript{133} When asked if the pay that they received was sufficient for the work that they did, the former \textit{braceros} overwhelmingly said “no.”\textsuperscript{134}

\textsuperscript{131} Alfredo Antuna Macias, \textit{Bracero Project Interviews}, El Centro de los Trabajadores Agrícolas, El Paso, Texas, October 11, 1999.


\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Bracero Project Interviews}, El Centro de los Trabajadores Agrícolas, El Paso, Texas.
U.S.-Mexican Negotiations

Throughout the duration of the Bracero Program (1942-1964), negotiations between the U.S. and Mexico reflected both Mexicans’ desperation for employment and American farmers’ desire for cheap, dispensable labor. The program experienced cycles of negotiations between the two neighboring nations, and while Mexico enjoyed a position of superiority in its initial stages, the Mexican laborers’ intense need for work soon became apparent as thousands flocked to the border with the hope of securing bracero status and crossing to the U.S. As a result, Mexico lost its bargaining power. Thereafter, the U.S. maintained its position as the dominant party in negotiations. In both 1948 and 1954, riots broke out when the U.S. took complete control of the program’s rules and regulations by encouraging braceros to cross the Río Grande without the Mexican government’s approval. As these circumstances suggest, the diplomatic power dynamic between the U.S. and Mexico remained fundamentally influenced by both Mexicans’ need for U.S. capital and Americans’ need for Mexican labor.

Mexico’s initial advantage over American farmers became evident during the first harvest season in which braceros were admitted into the U.S. to work. American farmers were desperate for adequate labor. In California, for example, farmers employed 200 inmates from San Quentin Prison to harvest their crops.135 In Buffalo, New York, American farmers recruited farmhands, which included school children, to gather the majority of their harvest. However, according to the New York Times, farmers

desperately needed 10,000 farmhands to harvest the peach and tomato crops, which they claimed would be too difficult for the school children to pick.\textsuperscript{136} They were awaiting the arrival of Mexican laborers and complained that the immigration procedures took too long. The state of Texas, meanwhile, was blacklisted from the program by the Mexican government until 1949 due to Texan farmers’ past discriminatory practices against Mexican workers. As a result, Texas suffered the most from the lack of sufficient laborers in 1942. While neighboring Arizona farmers employed skilled Mexican farm laborers to harvest their crops, Texan farmers had to resort to hiring inexperienced school children and women to pick their crops. Even with women and school children working in the fields, farmers in Texas still suffered a labor shortage; many of their crops were left to rot in the fields.\textsuperscript{137} The farmers’ desperation for labor played an important role in determining the way in which the program began.

While Mexico clearly held the initial advantage in negotiations, as the supply of laborers increased with Mexicans’ immigration to the U.S., American farmers’ desperation for skilled laborers diminished, and the U.S. took control of the program’s terms. Mexicans desperately needed money and employment. After 1942, as the program expanded, the supply of Mexican laborers seeking employment sharply increased. The inauguration of the program coincided with an influx in Mexican illegal immigration to the U.S. Mexicans who were able to secure labor contracts with the U.S.

\textsuperscript{136} \textit{New York Times}, August 30, 1942.

\textsuperscript{137} \textit{El Paso Times}, October 15, 1942.
government traveled to the border, and others sneaked across the border illegally.138 By 1952, approximately 1.5 million illegal Mexican immigrants were working in the U.S.139 Practices by the U.S.’ own INS encouraged illegal immigration. During the Bracero Program, the border patrol was notorious for its failure to detain and deport illegal farm workers, especially during the harvest season and at other times when there was a high demand for labor.140 If farmers requested more labor, INS was known to “legalize” illegal workers once they crossed the border, even without formal permission from the U.S. Labor Department. Particularly between 1947 and 1954, many braceros were undocumented workers who had been legalized by INS once they crossed the border.141 During the summer of 1947, when only 31,331 braceros were formally imported, INS legalized 55,000 undocumented workers in Texas alone.142 Immigration officials were able to control the labor supply according to the demands of the farmers. As the labor supply increased, American farmers were better able to control the conditions of employment to their advantage, and Mexico’s bargaining power diminished.

139 Ibid, 115-116.
140 Ibid, 224.
142 Ibid, 24.
The Structure of the Program

Throughout its duration, the Bracero Program encouraged illegal immigration to the U.S. There was a conflict of interest when it came to the location of the recruiting centers in Mexico. The Mexican government’s priority was to provide employment to the neediest populations, so it was important for it to establish recruitment centers in impoverished states. However, American farmers were interested in reducing transportation costs and delays in hiring workers, and so they favored locating recruiting centers at the border. Thus, despite the objections raised by Mexican officials, the U.S. and Mexico initially agreed to allow border recruitment. The recruitment centers’ close proximity to the border therefore facilitated illegal immigration to the U.S.\(^{143}\) As the program continued, American farmers began to hire Mexican workers with or without papers, which encouraged Mexicans to come to the U.S. to work, regardless of their legal status.

The Bracero Program underwent periods of cyclical migration, since braceros were contracted for up to six-month periods under U.S. government sponsorship.\(^{144}\) In other words, they had no legal right to immigrate on a permanent basis as a legal permanent resident. When the six-month contracts expired, the workers returned to


Mexico and reapplied for another six-month contract.\textsuperscript{145} Given that the program did not guarantee the workers that they would be able to return to the U.S. to work upon termination of their contracts, there was a strong incentive for the \textit{braceros} to stay without legal documents.\textsuperscript{146}

The program maintained its wartime status until 1947, two years after the war ended. Upon its inception, the program was government-regulated, but when it ended its “wartime” status in 1947, the program’s regulations switched to an individual growers’ basis, meaning that individual American farmers, rather than the U.S. government, determined wages and working conditions. Under the new arrangement, contract abuse was more common and legal protections were rarely enforced.\textsuperscript{147}

It was not unusual for \textit{braceros} to be paid less than minimum wage and to live in dismal conditions.\textsuperscript{148} More specifically, a minimum hourly wage was not specified, there was no minimum piece-rate guaranteed (the rate at which a worker is paid for each bushel, pound, etc.), and the former unemployment payment of $3 per day that had been stipulated in the government-to-government contract was not included.\textsuperscript{149} Also, according to Kitty Calavita, “In some cases, \textit{braceros} were charged for room and board

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid, 177.

\textsuperscript{146} Basok, “He Came, He Saw, He…Stayed,” 223.

\textsuperscript{147} Craig, \textit{The Bracero Program}, 68.

\textsuperscript{148} Basok, “He Came, He Saw, He…Stayed,” 216.

\textsuperscript{149} Craig, \textit{The Bracero Program}, 54.
during…slack periods, which they had to pay off out of their future wages, creating a system that some have likened to debt bondage.”\textsuperscript{150} Farmers constantly used intimidation and in some cases outright violence against \textit{braceros} in order to motivate them to work. Some believed that \textit{braceros} performed better if they were threatened or warned that contract renewals depended on satisfactory work records.\textsuperscript{151} As a result of the substandard conditions and poor treatment, many Mexicans deserted their positions and American farmers were left with fewer workers. Many deserters then sought employment at other locations, but without the appropriate documents. The Mexican government grew weary of the new arrangement and pushed for a return to the government-to-government contracting, which they believed would reduce abuses of the contracts.\textsuperscript{152} Finally, in 1951, the U.S. Congress passed Public Law 78, in which the U.S. and Mexico agreed on a revival of the government-to-government arrangements. Yet, however promising it seemed on the surface, Public Law 78 did not stipulate any fines or criminal punishment of any kind against farmers who employed undocumented workers.\textsuperscript{153} Thus, although it may have provided more solid regulation with regard to wages and working conditions, Public Law 78 did not discourage employers to hire illegal immigrants, which consequently intensified the Bracero Program’s impact on

\textsuperscript{150} Calavita, \textit{Inside the State}, 43.


\textsuperscript{152} Craig, \textit{The Bracero Program}, 68.

\textsuperscript{153} Calavita, \textit{Inside the State}, 44.
Mexicans’ illegal immigration to the U.S. The rate of illegal immigration was so intense during the program that on one infamous occasion, a riot broke out as thousands of migrants, who were provoked by INS and American farmers, crossed to the U.S. illegally.

The El Paso Riot of 1948

In October of 1948, at El Paso, Texas, 7,000 braceros rushed across the Río Grande from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico. American farmers and INS authorities encouraged them to cross the river after Mexico withdrew its participation in the Bracero Program when the U.S. rejected its requests for higher salaries for cotton pickers. In Mexico, cotton pickers earned $2.50 for every 100 pounds of picked cotton, which was the same as what they were being paid in the U.S. However, the Mexican government proposed that its nationals be paid $3 for the first 100 pounds of cotton, $4 for the second 100 pounds, and $5 for the third 100 pounds. American farmers did not want to accept the new terms, and the U.S. government accused the Mexican government of having violated the existing work agreement by attempting to change the terms of the contract. Thereafter, Mexico suspended its contract with the U.S., even though it had planned to send 50,000 men to work in the U.S. When INS authorities and American

155 El Continental, October 15, 1948.
156 El Continental, October 17, 1948.
157 El Continental, October 20, 1948.
farmers encouraged *braceros* to cross the border illegally, Mexican government officials protested. They said that by allowing Mexican workers to cross illegally, the U.S. government violated the two nations’ 1948 agreement.\(^{158}\)

Even though INS assisted American farmers by allowing Mexican laborers to cross the border illegally, they still attempted to regulate the *braceros*’ wages. INS authorities warned the farmers that if they tried to take advantage of the situation and pay *braceros* $1.50 per 100 pounds of picked cotton instead of the normal $2.50 per 100 pounds, they would move the *braceros* somewhere else.\(^{159}\) Nevertheless, despite the warning, farmers violated the conditions set forth by INS. Within a matter of days, Immigration officials took illegally-entered *braceros* away from farmers after they found that they had failed to pay sufficient wages or provide sanitary living conditions. Even though Texas was still blacklisted from participating in the program during that time, West Texas cotton growers took half of the Mexican workers who had entered illegally in the previous days.\(^{160}\) The large influx of Mexican labor allowed American farmers to take advantage of the situation, set their own conditions of employment, and in turn exploit the *braceros*.

The farmers, however, soon lost their advantageous position when the U.S. State Department began investigating the incident. On October 24, 1948, nine days after the

\(^{158}\) *El Continental*, October 19, 1948.

\(^{159}\) *El Continental*, October 17, 1948.

\(^{160}\) *El Paso Herald Post*, October 20, 1948.
negotiations had collapsed between the U.S. and Mexico, the U.S. State Department sent a letter of apology to the Mexican government. It admitted that INS’ failure to immediately return the braceros to Mexico upon crossing the border illegally was a blatant violation of Article 29 of the 1948 Bracero Agreement. In addition, the U.S. government agreed to return all of the 10,000 braceros who had crossed to the U.S. illegally amid the incident. Following the El Paso Riot, General Enrique Díaz Gonzalez, the Chief of Garrison in Ciudad Juárez, commented on the intensity of the event, saying: “Not even the entire Mexican Army could have stopped the avalanche of Mexican braceros who attempted to leave the country in search of better wages.” The riot demonstrated the power of Mexicans’ desperation for employment, and the way in which their anxiety undermined the Mexican government’s attempts to modify the program’s stipulations to their advantage. The constant cycles of negotiations between the two nations were characterized by an ongoing political discourse concerning the terms and conditions of the Bracero Program.

The “Wetback” Problem

As the program continued, so did negotiations. Shortly after the riot in 1948, Mexico requested that the braceros’ recruitment centers be moved from border locations to further inside Mexico’s interior, in an effort to control illegal migration. In 1949,

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162 El Continental, October 24, 1948.
163 El Continental, October 25, 1948.
80,000 men had traveled to the border in hopes of crossing into Texas illegally to work and as a result, Mexico’s northern regions suffered from a lack of harvest hands.164 Thus, in July of 1949, the U.S. obliged Mexico’s request by agreeing to recruit braceros in Chihuahua, Monterrey, and Hermosillo.165 American farmers objected to the agreement’s new regulations, since they were responsible for financing braceros’ transportation from the place of contract. In exchange for the U.S. agreeing to their request, Mexico removed Texas from its blacklist.166 The U.S. guaranteed no discrimination of workers under the new contract. However, even though Mexico could not blacklist Texas as an entire state in the new agreement, the U.S. allowed Mexican officials to identify specific counties which would not be allowed to participate in the program, due to past discriminatory practices.167

Two years after the braceros’ recruitment centers were moved to Mexico’s interior, the rate of Mexicans’ illegal immigration to the U.S. had not subsided. In September of 1951, the El Paso Herald Post reported that INS had intercepted half a million illegal Mexicans per year for the previous two years.168 These illegal Mexican immigrants, which were officially referred to as “wetbacks” in U.S. newspapers, were

168 El Paso Herald Post, September 6, 1951.
becoming a problem for the U.S. They created “unfair competition” for American workers, who required higher wages than their Mexican counterparts.\textsuperscript{169} By 1953, the “wetback problem” had still not been resolved. Mexican workers, desperate for food and work, continued to cross the border illegally on a daily basis. In El Paso, Texas, 100 “wetbacks” were being deported every day.\textsuperscript{170}

The El Paso Valley Cotton Association Boycott of 1953

Later in the program, farmers, particularly from the El Paso Valley, complained about the terms of the contract. Specifically, they disliked having to contract workers from within Mexico’s interior. They wanted to discard the current agreement because it only allowed \textit{braceros} to enter the U.S. temporarily. In its place, they wanted to create a new contract in which \textit{braceros} would be able to stay on a permanent basis, so they would not have to pay for their transportation. In response, Mexican officials opposed the farmers’ suggestions, saying that such a program would be more difficult to regulate, and would not allow Mexico to protect its workers. Instead, the \textit{braceros} would be left to the mercy of the contractors, who, according to Mexican officials, “were not always models of honesty and humanity, and they frequently exploited their employees by denying them pay of even the minimum wage.”\textsuperscript{171} Especially in Texas, farmers were notorious for insisting on paying the lowest wage possible. During a drought in 1953, in

\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{170} \textit{El Continental}, September 3, 1953.

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid.
which the El Paso Valley Cotton Association (EPVCA) offered to pay \textit{braceros} $1.50 per 100 pounds of cotton, even though the government required a minimum of $2.05 per 100 pounds.\textsuperscript{172} Mexico insisted that $2.05 per 100 pounds of cotton was more than a reasonable wage, since it was the same as what had been paid the previous year, and the prevailing wage in California, Arizona, and New Mexico was $3 per 100 pounds. Nevertheless, in September of 1953, the EPVCA, which consisted of 600 area farmers, decided to boycott the international contract between the U.S. and Mexico. They disagreed with Mexico’s demands for a minimum of $2.05 per 100 pounds of cotton and a $1,000 life insurance policy for each \textit{bracero}.\textsuperscript{173} They also wanted to recruit \textit{braceros} at the border instead of the interior, in order to eliminate the $32 that it cost to transport each \textit{bracero} from Mexico’s interior to the U.S.\textsuperscript{174} Even so, area farmers needed approximately 50,000 \textit{braceros} to pick their cotton crops.

Instead of hiring \textit{braceros} through the international contract, El Paso Valley farmers intended to hire illegal migrants until modifications were made to the formal agreement. Indeed, the rate of illegal immigration did increase during the time of the association’s boycott. In September of 1953, the El Paso area newspaper \textit{El Continental} reported that 300 “wetbacks” were detained in El Paso every day, which was a 50 percent

\textsuperscript{172} \textit{El Continental}, September 4, 1953.

\textsuperscript{173} \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, September 11, 1953.

\textsuperscript{174} \textit{El Continental}, September 12, 1953.
higher rate than the previous year.\footnote{El Continental, September 25, 1953.} As a result, immigration officials expected a great number of “wetbacks” to come into the area, even though farmers who hired them would be violating both international and domestic laws.\footnote{El Continental, September 15, 1953.} INS warned El Paso farmers that they would not be able to request tax deductions for their business if they hired illegal Mexican workers.\footnote{El Continental, October 3, 1953.} In response, EPVCA farmers complained that INS’ severe punishment against hiring “wetbacks” was part of a plan to obligate the farmers to agree to the Mexican government’s demands for fair wages and life insurance.\footnote{Ibid.}

Members of the EPVCA went to Washington, D.C. to request revisions to the international agreement. Among other things, the association requested a simpler way to admit \textit{braceros} into the U.S., elimination of “useless paperwork,” and modifications of some clauses of the contract that made \textit{braceros} more costly to the farmers.\footnote{El Continental, September 23, 1953.} Its requests were denied, and within a few weeks, the members of the EPVCA had no choice but to end their six-week boycott. Even while hiring “wetbacks,” farmers in the association still could not find enough workers to harvest their crops. Thus, they had to accept the terms of the existing \textit{bracero} agreement.\footnote{El Continental, October 3, 1953.} Nevertheless, they were determined to “carry on their fight with aggressiveness against any policy detrimental to
the farmer.”\textsuperscript{181} The members of the EPCVA attempted to undermine Mexico’s requests for better working conditions, but in this case, they failed.

**Operation Wetback of 1953-1955**

Following the EPVCA’s boycott of the Bracero Program, Mexicans’ illegal immigration to the U.S. continued. In November 1953, after the association agreed to end their boycott, 15,000 “wetbacks” were arrested on El Paso farms.\textsuperscript{182} As the “wetback” problem continued, so did INS’ efforts to relieve it. American workers were not able to compete with the cheap labor provided by the “wetbacks.” By the end of 1953, the U.S. government began “Operation Wetback” in an effort to drive out all of the illegal Mexican immigrants—by 1955, they had deported 2 million Mexicans (and many U.S. citizens of Mexican heritage).\textsuperscript{183} In the state of Texas, the Texas State Federation of Labor and the American GI Forum of Texas called for stricter enforcement of existing immigration laws, amendments to the laws, and more adequate appropriations for Border Patrol.\textsuperscript{184} During this time, Americans felt threatened by the high prevalence of “wetbacks” in the U.S., which was reflected in the American press. The *El Paso Herald Post* identified the “great ‘wetback’ invasion” as the cause of the spread of diseases like

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{181} *El Paso Times*, October 5, 1953.
\item \textsuperscript{182} *El Continental*, November 20, 1953.
\item \textsuperscript{183} David E. Lorey, *The U.S.-Mexican Border in the Twentieth Century: A History of Economic and Social Transformation* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1999), 121.
\item \textsuperscript{184} *El Paso Herald Post*, December 17, 1953.
\end{itemize}
tuberculosis, gonorrhea, and dysentery. In addition, it claimed that the mass migration of “wetbacks” into the U.S. were the source of depressed wages, lost businesses, and human misery.185 The newspaper identified one type of “wetback,” the pachuco, as the biggest cause of the problem, claiming that the pachuco “often [was] a criminal, smuggler, prostitute, homosexual, or marihuana peddler whose goal [was] a larger city to the north.”186 Americans felt that the illegal Mexican immigrants were more than a threat to their jobs—in their opinion, they threatened their health, morality, and even their lives.

Despite the U.S.’ efforts to expel illegal Mexican immigrants via Operation Wetback, the American agricultural system had become highly dependent on Mexican labor, especially in the southwest. For example, in 1959, braceros represented more than 75 percent of the total seasonal workforce in one southwestern state.187 American farmers’ dependence on cheap Mexican laborers, combined with INS’ faulty immigration regulations, provided growers an incentive to hire undocumented workers.

Due to the magnitude of the “wetback problem,” the U.S. and Mexico did not renew their annual contract in 1954. The contract expired on December 31, 1953, and within a few days, the U.S. decided to form a unilateral program in its stead. In the new program, the U.S. would recruit braceros in order to alleviate the labor shortage that would occur as a result of the bilateral program’s cancellation. Even though the U.S. and

185 Ibid.
186 Ibid.
187 Craig, The Bracero Program, 132.
Mexico could not come to an agreement, American farmers still needed the farm labor provided by the *braceros*.\textsuperscript{188} As part of the new program, the U.S. government guaranteed farmers that they would contract enough *braceros* that they would not have to hire “wetbacks.” Furthermore, those farmers who did hire “wetbacks” would lose their right to hire *braceros*. Also, the U.S. government told Border Patrol to double its forces in order to bar “wetbacks” from entering the country. Labor unions objected to the unilateral program, saying that without the cooperation of the Mexican government, the new program would discriminate against American laborers since they would not be able to compete with Mexican laborers’ wages. However, the U.S. government assured that no *braceros* would be recruited until the Department of Labor determined that there were an insufficient number of American workers to fill the farm labor positions.\textsuperscript{189}

William Prescott Allen, owner of the daily *Laredo Times*, went to Ciudad Juárez to investigate the situation between the U.S. and Mexico. In his investigation, he discovered that the U.S. had sent a fleet of planes to Mexico City as a gesture of friendship without any intentions of negotiating an agreement favorable to the *braceros*. Instead, the U.S. sent the planes in order to convince the Mexican government to allow *braceros* to leave Mexico in order to participate in the U.S.’ unilateral program. Allen responded to this incident in outrage, stating, “These two acts—to abandon negotiations and to send an aerial fleet—are the result of a total frustration and incompetence on our

\textsuperscript{188} *El Continental*, January 16, 1954.

\textsuperscript{189} Ibid.
part. Our (the U.S.’) action is only worthy of a totalitarian government.”

Furthermore, he remarked,

Our policy concerning the Mexican *braceros* has never been consistent. One day we receive them with open arms and the next day we put them in the penitentiary. We have been using *braceros* as if they were chess pawns and through this whole crisis…we have come defying Mexico’s rights, and affirming that we will contract the *braceros* in any which way [we please].

The U.S. did not succeed in persuading the Mexican government not to close its borders. On the contrary, Mexico doubled its Border Patrol, and called for troops from six northern states to patrol the border. Some American government officials doubted that closing the borders would be successful. Texas Representative Ken Regan commented, “I doubt if closing the border will be very effective. The Mexicans need the Yankee dollars and we need their labor.” U.S. government officials as well as American farmers knew that regardless of whether or not Mexico agreed with the program, *braceros* would come to work in the U.S. in any way that they could. This exemplifies how the U.S., being the provider of capital, held a powerful advantage in U.S.-Mexican relations. In response to the situation at hand, Mexican press referred to the U.S. government as a “slave driver.” Mexicans resented the fact that Mexico had little power in their negotiations on behalf of the *braceros*. Even so, on January 20, 1954,

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191 Ibid.
the U.S. and Mexico agreed to renew their bilateral agreement on a provisional basis, in the interest of improving their diplomatic relations.195

The Mexicali Riot of 1954

On January 24, 1954, while the U.S. and Mexico were negotiating the terms of their new bilateral agreement, a riot broke out on the California border. In Mexicali, Baja California Norte, violence erupted as the Mexican government established an “iron curtain” in order to prevent braceros from crossing to California to work.196 Mexican officials had contained Mexican workers by establishing a line of soldiers along the border in a 21-mile-long stretch to the east and west of Mexicali. They did not allow the braceros to cross the border because Mexico needed their labor and the government had not yet determined the full terms of its new agreement with the U.S. In the incident, the Mexican border patrol intercepted more than 8,000 braceros.197 Only 45 successfully climbed the 12-foot fence which prevented many others from crossing. Later, after not being able to cross, 500 braceros protested in front of the Palacio del Gobierno in Mexicali.198 In the next few days, Mexico hired thousands of firemen to patrol the border in order to prevent the braceros from crossing. When INS requested that the Mexican government allow 500 braceros to cross the border, Mexican officials obliged, despite

195 Ibid.
196 El Continental, January 24, 1954.
197 Ibid.
198 Ibid.
their previous attempts to prevent all braceros from crossing. However, when INS opened the border to allow the braceros to cross, 2,000 braceros rushed through, and many were trampled and injured in the process.\textsuperscript{199} Only 500 of the 2,000 were chosen by contract agencies, and the rest were subsequently returned to Mexicali.\textsuperscript{200} Following the riot, relations between the U.S. and Mexico were strained once again.

The End of the Program

The U.S. Department of Labor applied escalating pressure to the regulation of wages, working conditions, housing, and transportation for the bracero workers due to observations of adverse living and working conditions on American farms. This in turn alienated American farmers from desiring to continue the program.\textsuperscript{201} In 1961, the House of Representatives introduced an extension of the Bracero Program with new provisions which were designed to protect the jobs of American migratory farm workers. One of the new regulations prohibited Mexican laborers from operating power-driven harvesting, planting, or cultivating machinery, except in cases of hardship specified by the U.S. Department of Labor.\textsuperscript{202} This new specification had a particularly harsh effect on cotton farmers in the El Paso Valley. Farmers, having placed ads for 100 cotton picking drivers in the El Paso area, received responses from only 13 applicants, 7 of which were under-

\textsuperscript{199} El Continental, January 28, 1954.

\textsuperscript{200} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{201} Craig, The Bracero Program, 151.

\textsuperscript{202} El Paso Times, September 17, 1961.
The farmers therefore complained to the Department of Labor, who thereafter agreed to consider changing the regulations. Later, in 1962, the Department of Labor proposed increasing the minimum wage from an average of $.50 an hour to $.70 an hour for cotton pickers. American farmers reacted in protest. Farmers in the El Paso Valley warned that the proposal would “mechanize cotton production 100 percent and hand labor jobs [would] be lost forever.”

C.B. Ray, the executive Vice President and manager of the EPVCA stated regarding the proposed wage increase, “This kind of rate increase, from $.50 to $.70 minimum wage, would have another kind of adverse effect on workers—the total elimination of the very jobs that are involved in this rate question.”

American farmers concluded that it would be cheaper to use machinery and chemicals than it would be to pay the higher wages. This was the beginning of the end for the Bracero Program.

While the U.S. Labor Department’s new regulations cracked down on farmers, U.S. Congress felt pressure from American labor unions to end the program. The American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO) advocated the end of the Bracero Program because it was virtually impossible for farm workers to achieve any level of unionization as long as braceros were readily available in

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205 Ibid.
Eventually, anti-bracero interest groups in Congress acted to terminate the program, and it ended in 1964. Upon termination of the program, House Representative John I. Fogarty of Rhode Island, stated, “If any time has there been legislation of slave labor adopted by Congress, this is one of them.” According to the opinion of John I. Fogarty and many others, the Bracero Program was more than just a temporary labor program. Due to the farmers’ negation to comply with INS’ regulations, it was considered by many to be a slave labor program.

Mexico’s Loss is the United States’ Gain

For Mexico, the Bracero Program meant the loss of hundreds of thousands of its skilled workers every year and a severe loss of farm labor. In 1947, Mexican deputies began a national campaign to dissuade braceros from going to the U.S. to work. Since the program’s start in 1942, Mexico had lost thousands of skilled farm laborers to the Bracero Program. In Jalisco, Michoacán, and Guanajuato, farms suffered as braceros traveled north to seek employment in the U.S. In addition, many skilled workers such as carpenters, shoemakers, and masons left Mexico. Not only did Mexico suffer on a national level, but individual communities suffered as well. In an interview, human rights activist Carlos Marentes referenced a community in the state of Hidalgo which is

206 Basok, “He Came, He Saw, He…Stayed,” 222.
208 El Continental, September 30, 1947.
209 El Continental, October 20, 1948.
called “El Pueblo de las Mujeres Abandonadas” (The Town of the Abandoned Women). The community gained the title after most of the men who lived there migrated to the U.S. during the Bracero Program. Due to the program, Mexico experienced a profound loss of its skilled male labor, and in turn, so did its citizens.

The Lost Ahorros

As part of the program, the Mexican government proposed a *fondo del ahorro*, or savings fund, in an effort to give the *braceros* an incentive to return home, in the event of the program’s termination. It was also meant to allow *braceros* to save up enough money to be able to buy a tractor, some machinery, or a piece of land, in order to modernize Mexico’s agricultural system. So, as part of the Bracero Program, the *braceros’* employers deducted 10 percent of each worker’s pay from every paycheck. From there, they sent the money to the U.S. federal government, who deposited the money into an account for Mexico at the San Francisco Wells Fargo Bank. After that, the money was sent to Mexico City. When the program ended, the *braceros* were supposed to apply to the Mexican government to collect their money, but they never received it. According to Carlos Marentes, most of the *braceros* did not even know that there was a savings fund, or that they had to apply to receive their money back from the government when they returned home.\(^{211}\) According to Marentes,


\(^{211}\) Ibid.
We have more than 100,000 files [about braceros] here…None of the braceros that we have interviewed mentioned ever receiving any type of money. In fact, the braceros did not know about [the] 10 percent deduction. It was not until 1996, when we were having a celebration of the bracero here, that we told the braceros, ‘[Do] you remember [anything] about your bracero savings funds?’ And they were surprised to hear about [it].212

Also, Marentes stated that of all of the thousands of former braceros that he had talked to, he could recall only one case in which the bracero knew about the money. In this case, the bracero had developed a good relationship with his employer, who told him to apply for the money when he returned home to Mexico. However, when the bracero returned home to Aguascalientes, Mexico and attempted to apply for his savings, he never received it.213 There are many theories as to what happened to the money: some say the government spent it on Televisa, while others claim that it helped to build the Mexican Embassy in Washington, D.C. The most popular theory is that it helped to fund the PRI’s electoral process.214

In 1992, Marentes began investigating the lost savings and started a movement to petition the Mexican government to return money to the braceros. In 2005, the Mexican government, without admitting liability, agreed to pay $3,500 in compensation for braceros living in Mexico, but only 49,000 of the 212,000 applications received could provide documentation.215 In 2001, lawyers filed a lawsuit in California. The lawsuit

212 Ibid.
213 Ibid.
214 Ibid.
was dismissed twice, as courts judged whether too much time had passed and whether filing a lawsuit against the Mexican government would have standing in the U.S.\textsuperscript{216} Eventually, in October of 2008 the case in California was settled, awarding each \textit{bracero} or surviving heir $3,500.

However satisfying the retribution may have seemed, there were some drawbacks. For starters, each \textit{bracero} received the same amount, regardless of whether they participated in the Bracero Program for 10 months or 10 years.\textsuperscript{217} Also, the money offered did not include interest on the 32 million dollars that the Mexican government had held in its possession for nearly 50 years.\textsuperscript{218} Even after the government offered the money, the \textit{braceros} were made to endure a long and bureaucratic process in order to receive it. They had to produce their original contracts and worker’s permits and in many cases, the \textit{braceros} had not retained the records for the employment that they had held 50 years prior.\textsuperscript{219} In addition, many of the \textit{braceros} had died, and their family members were unable to find the documents in order to receive compensation. The disappearance of the savings funds demonstrates one more way in which the \textit{braceros} found themselves victims and objects of exploitation as a result of the Bracero Program.

\textsuperscript{216} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{217} Carlos Marentes, interviewed by author, El Paso, Texas, July 22, 2008.

\textsuperscript{218} \textit{New York Times}, October 18, 2008.

The Bracero Program saw human rights violations committed by the U.S. government, INS, American farmers, and the Mexican government alike. Both INS officials and braceros complained of farmers’ blatant violations of the program’s regulations established by the U.S. and Mexican governments. Regarding the program, Marentes stated, “It was a gross violation of human rights…There was no protection from the Mexican government.” Even when the Mexican government attempted to protect its workers, it failed, due to the workers’ desperation for employment. Various historical events, such as the El Paso Riot of 1948, the El Paso Valley Cotton Association Boycott in 1953, the Mexicali Riot of 1954, and Operation Wetback of 1954 demonstrated the ways in which the cyclical nature of the program victimized the braceros by forcing them to choose between employment and protection of their human rights. The disappearance of the savings funds demonstrates another way in which braceros were exploited by the parties involved. Despite the braceros’ experiences with human rights violations, most of them maintain an optimistic view of the program. When asked in their interviews if they thought the Bracero Program should be resumed, they overwhelmingly replied, “yes.” In the case of the braceros, their desperate need for work overpowered their sense of their own personal rights for humane treatment.

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221 Bracero Project Interviews, El Centro de los Trabajadores Agrícolas, El Paso, Texas.
CHAPTER 3: THE BORDER INDUSTRIALIZATION PROGRAM

When the Bracero Program ended in 1964, thousands of braceros flocked to the border region, unemployed. As a result, a group of Mexican entrepreneurs, with the support of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), created the maquiladora industry as an attempt to provide employment to the braceros and improve the economic conditions of Mexico’s northern border region.\(^{222}\) Under the Border Industrialization Program (BIP), the PRI and Mexican entrepreneurs invited foreign investors (mostly from the U.S.) to establish factories in the northern border region. U.S. investors were drawn to the maquiladora industry due to its cheap labor supply, tax cuts, and convenient location. Despite the PRI’s intentions to provide employment for the male braceros, U.S. corporations hired a majority of women from the start in order to secure, from their perspective, the cheapest, most submissive, and most productive source of labor for industrial work. U.S. corporations used a variety of threatening tactics such as sexual harassment, pregnancy discrimination, and physical violence in order to intimidate the female maquiladora workers. In addition, maquiladora workers experienced health risks due to their daily exposure to toxic chemicals in the factories; they also received too low of wages to pay for their living expenses. During the 1980s and 1990s, the PRI introduced a series of peso devaluations in hopes of paying off its national debt. As a result, the peso devaluations severely increased the prices of commodities, but maquiladora wages remained relatively static. In addition, since the maquiladora

\(^{222}\) Oscar Martinez, telephone interview by author, August 19, 2008.
industry was (and still is) highly dependent on U.S. corporations, it fluctuated with the changes in the U.S. economy. Consequently, during times of U.S. recession, plants often shut down, leaving thousands of unemployed workers in the border region. As a result, during times of peso devaluations and U.S. recessions, *maquiladora* workers frequently crossed to the U.S. in search of employment. During the BIP, the PRI adapted the program to U.S. corporations’ need for submissive, productive, disposable, and cheap labor, while ignoring Mexican labor law.

The Start of Mexico’s Border Industrialization Program

Prior to the program’s start, the government under President Adolfo López Mateos created the Programa Nacional Fronterizo (PRONAF) in 1961. It designed PRONAF in order to “beautify” Mexico’s border cities. The program funded the development of dams, roads, irrigation systems, electricity lines, potable water sources, and new sewage systems in Mexico’s northern states in order to attract Mexican investors and to welcome foreigners as well. Under PRONAF, the Mexican government

223 These investments, like the National Solidarity Program, (PRONASOL) also reinforced the Partido Revolucionario Institu.to’s (PRI) power in Mexico. The administration under President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) created PRONASOL, which was a program intended to encourage grassroots organization and local leadership. Under the program, thousands of farmers received loans; communities established rural medical clinics and renovated schools; students received scholarships. By 1993, the government had spent 33 billion pesos on the program. Critics of the program assert that it secured political power and control for Salinas de Gortari and the PRI. Roderic Ai Camp, *Politics in Mexico: The Democratic Transformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 248.

224 *El Paso Times*, November 18, 1965.

allowed tax-free international trade of machinery, equipment, spare parts, raw materials, and finished products. When PRONAF failed to attract sufficient foreign investment to the border region, President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz’s administration created the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) in 1964, which had strikingly similar objectives and stipulations to those of its predecessor.

When the Bracero Program ended in 1964, hundreds of thousands of Mexican laborers suddenly found themselves unemployed. While many braceros stayed in the U.S. to work, 200,000 men returned to Mexico. Some flocked to border towns, while others returned to their hometowns. Many braceros felt unneeded when they went home and found that their brothers had taken over the family farms. Those who returned home had very few opportunities and consequently opted to return to the border region to seek employment. As thousands of braceros migrated to border towns, the region experienced a period of mass unemployment. In order to relieve the unemployment in the border region and provide the braceros with new jobs, the Mexican government implemented the BIP, which allowed foreign companies to establish factories inside the Mexican border region.

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In order to attract ample foreign investment through the BIP, officials tailored the program’s regulations to fit foreign investors’ needs. To start, the BIP defied Mexico’s 1917 Constitution. \(^{230}\) Since 1917, Mexico had not allowed foreign ownership of land within 100 kilometers of her borders or 50 kilometers of her seacoasts. \(^{231}\) Under the BIP, although foreign companies were not allowed to own land, they were permitted to lease real estate within 60 miles of the border. \(^{232}\) Later on, government officials changed the program’s stipulations even further in order to cater to foreign investors. On April 30, 1971, the Mexican government allowed foreign investors to obtain property through trust agreements, which allowed the investors to obtain more permanent control of real property than they could have under lease agreements. Under the new set of regulations, companies could hold trust agreements of up to 30 years. At the end of the 30 years, the company had to sell its property to a Mexican national. \(^{233}\) The new stipulations allowed foreign investors to buy and sell Mexican land, which was an absolute violation of Mexico’s 1917 Constitution. Later on, Mexico’s government officials made further changes to the program on October 30, 1972, when President Luis Echeverría Alvarez extended the *maquiladora* program to include the entire nation of Mexico. \(^{234}\) The


\(^{231}\) Ibid.

\(^{232}\) *El Paso Times*, September 27, 1969.

Mexican governments’ decision to pass the new legislature allowed foreign investors to penetrate further into Mexico’s interior.

The Foreign Investors’ Benefits

In the latter part of the twentieth century, companies abroad began searching for ways to cut costs as competition among manufacturers increased. As foreign investors became aware of the advantages to holding production in Mexico, the maquiladora industry grew. A U.S. firm could send materials across the border, have them assembled by low-priced Mexican labor, and ship the finished product back to the U.S. at reduced-tariff rates. The only tax a U.S. firm would pay for importation was a “value-added tax.” A value-added tax applies to the value which is added to the product through the course of its production abroad, whereas normally taxes apply to the product’s entire value. Tax cuts offered foreign companies a significant incentive to move production operations to Mexico.

In addition to tax cuts, Mexico’s close proximity to the U.S. made it easy for companies to maintain low-cost, cohesive production. In fact, maquiladoras were often referred to as “twin plants” because they commonly had a “twin” plant in the U.S.—many times, a U.S. plant would be located directly across the border from its Mexican counterpart. For example, a maquiladora in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, might have a

234 Ibid, 10.
twin plant in El Paso, Texas. While the U.S. plants provided the supplies for assembly, workers in the Mexican factories assembled the final products. The twin plants’ immediate locations allowed U.S. companies to save on shipping costs.

The third and arguably most powerful incentive that encouraged U.S. companies to invest in Mexico’s maquiladoras was the low cost of labor. According to a 1969 El Paso Times article, the Twin Plan Concept was the “answer to American industry’s need for low-cost labor on labor-intensive items which have to compete with production from overseas.”236 When compared with El Pasoans, juarenses (a Ciudad Juárez resident) came at a much lower cost. In 1964, while in Ciudad Juárez the minimum wage was $2.40 per day, or $.30 per hour, the minimum wage in El Paso was $1.25 per hour.237 In other words, Juárez labor cost 20 to 25 percent of what it cost in El Paso.238 By 2000, the situation had not changed. While U.S. industrial workers earned an average of $14.61 per hour, Mexican maquiladora workers earned an average of $3.29.239 Thus, Mexicans who worked in manufacturing earned approximately 22 percent of their American counterparts. The ratio between Mexican and U.S. industrial wages suffered the greatest


discrepancy in 1985, when on average a Mexican *maquiladora* worker earned 5 percent of the typical American worker performing the same job (see Figure 6).

\[ \text{Figure 6: Comparing U.S. and Mexican industrial wages.} \]

Figure 6 demonstrates that the average wage for U.S. industrial workers steadily increased between 1965 and 2000. Meanwhile, although the average wage for Mexican


maquiladora workers gradually increased as well, it did not increase at the same rate as
the wage for American workers. Consequently, because of the reduced labor cost, plants
could afford to invest more money in quality control. Thus, American companies, who
were looking for a way to contend with their foreign competitors, took full advantage of
the Mexican maquiladoras’ low-cost labor, subsidized tariffs, and convenient locations.

As a result of all of the various benefits that maquiladoras provided to foreign
investors, the industry expanded consistently from its start in 1965 through 2000. In
1965, there were only 12 factories; by 1996 there were 2,200 plants in the border region.
During the same period of time, the number of employees increased from 3,000 to about
700,000 (see Figures 7 and 8).

![Maquiladora Employees, 1965-2000](image)

Figure 7: Mexican employees in the maquiladoras.

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Figures 7 and 8 demonstrate the power of the foreign investors’ incentives to move their operations abroad. Through the *maquiladoras*, the PRI had created a program similar to the Bracero Program, in that it relied on the U.S. to provide employment for its citizens.

**Women in the Maquiladoras**

While Mexico depended on the U.S. for jobs, the U.S. relied on Mexico for labor. As the U.S. and Mexico made the transition between the Bracero Program and the BIP, the labor pool experienced a shift in gender prevalence. U.S. businesses went from relying on a male-dominated workforce during the Bracero Program to utilizing a female-dominated workforce in the *maquiladoras*. When the BIP began, women made up
approximately 80 to 90 percent of the maquiladora workforce.\textsuperscript{244} This tendency toward a female-dominated workforce contradicted the PRI’s original intentions to provide jobs for the newly-unemployed braceros (who were all male). The shift in gender dominance is significant when assessing the dynamics of U.S. capitalism. As Leslie Salzinger states in her book \textit{Genders in Production}, “The mirage of guaranteed feminine productivity operates throughout the variegated field of transnational production, shaping hiring, labor control, and overall assessments of what is possible on global shop floors…[Consequently,] a reserve army of docile and dexterous young women [became the maquiladora industry’s] centerpiece.”\textsuperscript{245} “Feminine productivity” embodies the idea that young, docile, feminine subjects are most industrious in capitalist production settings. Salzinger argues that “feminine productivity” became central to the maquiladora industry’s entire production process for specific reasons.\textsuperscript{246} Incorporating “feminine productivity” principles into their operations allowed companies to maintain a submissive, easily-exploitable, and productive workforce.

According to several sources, Mexico’s strong tradition of machismo played a significant role in the maquiladoras’ hiring process.\textsuperscript{247} U.S. companies hired a majority

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{244} \textit{El Paso Times}, January 11, 1973.


\textsuperscript{246} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{247} Machismo is a cultural aspect in which males dominate both public and private sectors of society. Latin America maintains a strong tradition of machismo in the present day.\end{flushright}
of women because they believed they were more easily controlled than men. In that same vein, companies believed that women had lower career expectations than their male counterparts and were less likely to complain about jobs, ranking, and pay scales.\textsuperscript{248}

According to Mike Van Waas, a contributor to the \textit{El Paso Times} who conducted a study of the \textit{maquiladoras} in the late 1970s, “When women reach a certain age… they are forced out or invited to resign. That can’t be done with men. Women are easier to discipline. Mexico has a long history of female passivity and male dominance.”\textsuperscript{249}

Foreign companies were often familiar with Mexico’s tradition of \textit{machismo}, and used it to their advantage to cultivate a submissive labor force. For example, according to Van Waas’ research, many companies kept blacklists of “agitating employees” in order to maintain the industry’s passive workforce.\textsuperscript{250} Company authorities also used sexual harassment, intimidation, verbal abuse, and in some cases, rape and murder in order to intimidate female workers and uphold an obedient workforce.

In one incident, violence broke out at the American Hospital Supply Corporation in Ciudad Juárez when workers attempted to change labor unions. In September of 1980, workers wanted to switch from the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (Confederation of Mexican Workers, or CTM) to the Confederación Revolucionaria de Trabajadores (Confederation of Revolutionary Workers, or CRT) because they were

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\begin{itemize}
\item 249 Ibid.
\item 250 Ibid.
\end{itemize}
dissatisfied with the former labor union’s services.\footnote{The CTM is one of the oldest labor unions in Mexico. \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, September 26, 1980.} Under CTM, employees, who were mostly female, had been subjected to an increase in daily production quotas and a decrease in bonus pay.\footnote{\textit{El Paso Herald Post}, September 30, 1980.} The plant’s management disapproved of the employees’ attempt to switch labor unions and it tried to influence employees to stay with CTM. When employees refused to continue working with the labor union, members of CTM Boxers and Wrestlers Union and Taxistas Union came to the plant, and attacked the women by beating them with metal pipes. As a result, two of the employees had miscarriages and the company’s property was destroyed.\footnote{\textit{El Paso Herald Post}, September 26, 1980.} In this case, the labor union used extreme tactics to cultivate a submissive workforce.

In a similar incident, employees of the Convertors de México took over the plant in Ciudad Juárez and closed down its operations when two rival unions could not come to an agreement in their negotiations. Just as in the incident at the American Hospital Supply Corporation, the two labor unions were disputing a decrease in bonus pay and an increase in the workers’ daily quota. Violence broke out in the course of the employees’ protest, and as a result, 14 people were injured.\footnote{\textit{El Paso Herald Post}, October 21, 1980.} In both cases, violence erupted due to employees’ dissatisfaction with working conditions. Just like the \textit{braceros, maquiladora} workers were caught in the middle of the conflict between the parties in negotiations.
In addition to suffering violence, women who worked in the *maquiladoras* also experienced increased social ills such as prostitution, illegitimate births, and deterioration of traditionally strong family relationships. In 1972, the *El Paso Herald Post* reported that social ills among women working in Ciudad Juárez’s *maquiladoras* increased as a result of the overcrowding in the border region, combined with unfulfilled job expectations.\(^{255}\)

Before the arrival of *maquiladoras* in the 1960s, there were few job opportunities for women in Mexico. According to *maquiladora* pioneer Jaime Bermudez, “It used to be that women here stayed home to have babies or take care of them. Only if the family was going through a financial hardship did a woman have to work.”\(^{256}\) Before the *maquiladoras*, women worked in hair salons, pharmacies, department stores, or bars. The *maquiladoras* provided women with semi-skilled and skilled jobs, which offered them greater financial freedom. Even so, the majority of working-class women never became executives. In 1981, the *El Paso Times* featured a special report about Ana Maria Vegas, who was one of the few female *maquiladora* executives in Mexico at the time. She was the managing director of 3 plants for Vestiduras Fronterizas. The *El Paso Times* reported that while 90 percent of Vestiduras’ hourly workers were women, only 35 percent of management were women with college degrees.\(^{257}\) A later survey performed


\(^{256}\) *El Paso Herald Post*, February 19, 1996.

\(^{257}\) *El Paso Times*, August 30, 1981.
in 1995 by the Mexican Institute of Information, Geography, and Statistics showed that women made up 48.2 percent of Ciudad Juárez’s total maquiladora workforce, while men made up 51.8 percent. However, most women held production and assembly line jobs, while 40 percent of the men in the industry were administrators, professionals, or technicians.\textsuperscript{258} Miguel Angel Calderón, the executive director of the Juárez Chamber of Industry and Manufacturing, stated, “The problem is that to be a manager or a department head you need a professional background and a college education. Not until a large number of women take advantage of educational opportunities will their presence in the top echelons of the plants increase.”\textsuperscript{259} Many of the maquiladoras offered in-house training and education programs or provided scholarships to outside schools, but mostly men took advantage of those programs. Women were still expected to take primary responsibility for childcare in their households, so taking classes in addition to working full-time was very difficult for most women with children to achieve. According to María Guadalupe Alvarez, an official with the center-left Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD), “Women may be productive members of society, but they are still expected to be housewives. They must get the children ready for school before leaving for work, and to cook meals and do chores upon their return.”\textsuperscript{260} Even though the maquiladora industry provided women with more job opportunities, it also added to their existing

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{258} El Paso Herald Post, February 19, 1996.
\item \textsuperscript{259} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{260} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
responsibilities. The industry did not demonstrate significant change in Mexican societal expectations for women’s roles in the family.

Men in the Maquiladoras

While the industry started with an 80-percent female workforce, by the 1990s, women made up only half of the industry’s labor force. More men began working in the maquiladoras as the industry expanded and began to include jobs requiring higher skill levels. As the BIP began, most industries had consisted of textiles, apparel, furniture, toys, electronics, and food processing items—all low skill level occupations which plant executives deemed more suitable for females.\(^{261}\) However, the industry experienced major changes in the mid-1970s. Bill Mitchell, marketing manager of the Bermudez Industrial Park in Juárez, described the changes in 1977:

> There has been tremendous progress in the makeup of twin plants. Initially, about 100 percent of the plants required little skills. They were the hand assembly type of operations such as apparel industries. But today, the personality of the twin plants has changed to where more and more have sophisticated machinery that requires much more skill to operate.\(^{262}\) As the maquiladora industry evolved, companies required higher skill levels, most of which were men. At the same time, the industry expanded at a hurried pace. In 1984, it experienced a record boom as the number of plants in Ciudad Juárez increased from 152 to 175.\(^{263}\) Two new industrial parks opened, and other existing plants expanded their


\(^{262}\) *El Paso Times*, October 20, 1977.

operations. As a result, industry in Ciudad Juárez created 10,000 new jobs. Other Mexican border towns experienced similar booms due to expansions in *maquiladora* operations and a total of 75,000 new jobs were created.\textsuperscript{264} During the expansion, companies found it more and more difficult to find qualified workers to perform the skilled labor. As a result, employers resorted to hiring even more men. Twin plants in Ciudad Juárez lured workers away from construction sites with offers of reduced working hours, food, transportation, and even Michael Jackson albums.\textsuperscript{265} Although *maquiladora* pay was low, workers were enticed by better working conditions, benefits, and job security. As a result, the number of men in the industry more than doubled, rising from 7,500 in 1983 to 16,500 in 1984.\textsuperscript{266}

### 1980s Industrial Expansion

When the *maquiladora* industry expanded in 1984, the employment market became flooded. At the same time, Mexico’s economy experienced a period of inflation when the PRI instituted peso devaluations to pay off its national debt, which devalued *maquiladora* wages. The reduction of workers’ wages, in combination with the flooded job market, contributed to high turnover rates.\textsuperscript{267} In 1984, the *El Paso Times* reported

\textsuperscript{264} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{265} *El Paso Herald Post*, August 1, 1984.

\textsuperscript{266} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{267} “Turnover” refers to the number of people hired within a period of time to replace those who have left a workforce.
that 30 out of 90 workers at Camni International Clothing Factory in Ciudad Juárez did not show up for work on a Monday. 20 of those 30 workers never returned. During that time, approximately 10 out of 90 workers were replaced each week at Camni International.268 Ellwyn Stoddard, a professor specializing in border issues at the University of Texas, El Paso (UTEP), estimates that *maquiladoras* in Ciudad Juárez at the time had a turnover rate ranging between 119 and 158 percent.269 According to Stoddard, one year prior, a turnover rate of 14 percent was high.270 By 1989, the situation had not improved. The average *maquiladora* in Ciudad Juárez replaced 12 percent of its workers per month, or 150 percent annually—this was 10 times the turnover rate of a factory in El Paso.271

The *maquiladora* industry’s 1980s expansion not only caused high turnover rates, but it also increased rates of illegal migration to the U.S. As the *maquiladora* industry expanded and more jobs became available, people migrated from the interior of Mexico to the border in search of work. If they were turned down for positions at *maquiladoras*, they often crossed the border illegally.272 Donald Huddle, an economist, said at the time, “*Maquiladoras*…in Juárez serve as magnets to impoverished Mexicans from the


269 Ibid.

270 Ibid.


interior…When they arrive in Juárez and are unable to work in the twin plants, they cross the border and work for what would be low wages to Americans but are good wages to them.\textsuperscript{273} In one case reported by the \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, Balvina Garcia, a single mother of three, moved to Ciudad Juárez from Mexico City in hopes of earning sufficient wages at a \textit{maquiladora}. At her \textit{maquiladora} job, she made $18 per week, which was not enough to pay for food and clothing, since prices for commodities increased 306 percent, due to the peso devaluations.\textsuperscript{274} Milk prices alone had increased 186 percent.\textsuperscript{275} Since her \textit{maquiladora} wages did not cover her family’s basic living expenses, Garcia made plans to clean houses in El Paso instead.\textsuperscript{276} The \textit{El Paso Herald Post} reported in 1987 that many women were quitting their \textit{maquiladora} jobs to work as maids for $30 per week in the U.S.\textsuperscript{277} The industry’s boom in 1984 caused a variety of changes in the \textit{maquiladoras}.

The \textit{Maquiladora} Industry’s Phases

The \textit{maquiladora} industry went through various phases in the twentieth century, most of which correlated with fluctuations in the U.S. economy. From the mid-1960s to 1973-1974 the U.S.’ recession practically brought foreign investment to an abrupt halt.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{273} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{274} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{275} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{276} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
Later, from 1975 until 1982, Mexico’s economic crisis worsened and dramatic peso devaluations occurred. From 1982 until 1994, the ongoing decline in the peso’s value greatly accelerated *maquiladora* investment.\textsuperscript{278} The fourth and final phase (1994 to 2000) saw the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and substantial growth in the industry. Since Vicente Fox’s election in 2000 caused a significant change in Mexico’s political climate, the focus of my research ends in 2000. The framework of these phases indicates that the industry’s developmental patterns were highly reflective of the fluctuations in the U.S. economy, the condition of the Mexican economy, and the PRI’s industrialization policies.\textsuperscript{279}

As U.S. companies moved their production operations to Mexico, the *maquiladora* industry became increasingly dependent on U.S. capital. During times of recession in the U.S., many Mexican plants shut down permanently, workers were laid off, and workers’ wages were depressed. During the first decade of the industry, which was marked by modest growth, the peso held its value rather consistently and hourly wages increased moderately. Between 1970 and 1975, average hourly rates increased from $.63 to $.78.\textsuperscript{280} Soon, though, the industry began to experience some rather dramatic changes, as the U.S. experienced a recession. During a six-month span in 1975,


\textsuperscript{280} Sklair, *Assembling for Development*, 72.
employment in Mexico’s twin plants dropped from 80,000 to 45,000.\textsuperscript{281} Beginning in 1976, the Mexican government was forced to enact a series of peso devaluations in order to become more competitive with other nations and attract the foreign investment it needed to pay off its debts.\textsuperscript{282} In 1975, the peso-dollar exchange rate was 12.5 to 1; by 1981, it had decreased to 24.6 to 1.\textsuperscript{283} In 1982, under pressure to bolster the Mexican economy, President José López Portillo enacted another series of peso devaluations. At the beginning of 1982, the exchange rate was 26 pesos to $1, and by the end of the year, it was 100 to $1. However, the hourly wage for \textit{maquiladora} workers climbed by only 8 pesos during this period. In turn, these measures caused a dramatic decline in the real cost of labor, which dropped from $1.53 to about $.76 per hour. The next president, Miguel de la Madrid, continued the currency devaluations, and by 1988 the exchange rate was 2,257 pesos to $1.\textsuperscript{284} Despite the dramatic increases in inflation during this period, limits on minimum-wage increases kept wages from increasing along with commodity prices.\textsuperscript{285} The minimum wage for \textit{maquiladora} laborers remained between $.70 and $.80 per hour between 1983 and 1988, which was about the same it had been in 1970.\textsuperscript{286}

\textsuperscript{281} \textit{El Paso Times}, July 6, 1975.


\textsuperscript{283} Sklair, \textit{Assembling for Development}, 40.

\textsuperscript{284} Ibid, 72.

\textsuperscript{285} Cockroft, \textit{Mexico}, 260.

\textsuperscript{286} Sklair, \textit{Assembling for Development}, 72.
1983 on, the stable erosion of real wages made Mexican workers some of the lowest paid in the world. In 1989, they earned less than workers in most Caribbean nations and many Asian countries.\textsuperscript{287} Between 1990 and 1993, amid another U.S. recession, the number of \textit{maquiladoras} in Ciudad Juárez declined from 290 to 245.\textsuperscript{288} Mexico devalued the peso again in the 1990s, which boosted \textit{maquiladoras}’ profits by slashing the cost of labor by 40 percent.\textsuperscript{289} The peso devaluations presented foreign investors with a distinct competitive edge at the expense of Mexican laborers.

Following NAFTA’s introduction in 1994, the \textit{maquiladora} industry entered its final phase in the twentieth century. Mexico’s objective in pursuing NAFTA was to guarantee access to the U.S. consumer market (which was 25 times larger than Mexico’s own domestic market), since almost two-thirds of Mexico’s trade was with the U.S.\textsuperscript{290} NAFTA was implemented in 1994, and a year later, the \textit{maquiladora} industry saw a large increase in production. In Ciudad Juárez, factories added 2 million square feet of factory space within 10 months in 1995.\textsuperscript{291} The industry continued to grow until 2000 (and


\textsuperscript{288} \textit{El Paso Times}, July 2, 1995.

\textsuperscript{289} \textit{El Paso Times}, April 8, 1995.


\textsuperscript{291} \textit{El Paso Times}, July 2, 1995.
The *maquiladora* industry’s various phases reflect the close economic relationship that the U.S. and Mexico shared in the latter part of the twentieth century.

**Economic Integration**

*Maquiladora* industrialists encouraged the close economic relationship of the U.S. and Mexico. Mexico, and particularly its border cities, became highly dependent on the industry for survival. José Quevado, representative of Ministry of Tourism in Ciudad Juárez said, “Let’s not kid ourselves. The twin plant operations are the economic lifeline of the city.”

Early on, the industry had an impact. Less than 10 years after the program’s implementation, exports produced by the BIP represented 20 percent of Mexico’s total exports. Frederico Barrios, the general manager of the Mexican Industrial Development Board in Ciudad Juárez, said that Mexico had become the largest consumer of U.S. components, in large part due to the *maquiladoras*.

By the 1970s, the *maquiladoras* had already made a significant impact on Mexico’s trade with the U.S.

The industry made its most visible impact on border town economies. Retail sales in almost all U.S. cities on the border became closely tied to incomes in northern Mexico. In 1974, the *El Paso Herald Post* reported that Mexican border residents spent up to 75 percent of their income in the U.S. As a result, U.S. border towns experienced an

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294 Ibid.
increase in real estate values.\textsuperscript{295} Also, the industry created jobs on both sides of the border. In 1976, 23,000 people were employed in the \textit{maquiladoras} in Ciudad Juárez; almost one-third of all families in Juárez had at least one family member who worked in the \textit{maquiladoras}.\textsuperscript{296} Between 1977 and 1985, one of every three manufacturing and construction jobs created in the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez area was related to the \textit{maquiladora} industry.\textsuperscript{297} At the same time, three of every four new jobs created in El Paso between 1981 and 1985 were connected to the \textit{maquiladora} industry.\textsuperscript{298} By 1995, the \textit{maquiladoras} provided 600,000 jobs to Mexicans and brought in $7 billion in foreign currency per year—a feat which Mexico achieved through economic interdependency with the U.S.\textsuperscript{299}

In the case of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, the \textit{maquiladoras} proved to be important for both cities’ economies. The twin plants in Ciudad Juárez pumped an estimated $1 billion into El Paso’s economy per year by purchasing supplies from twin plants.\textsuperscript{300} At the same time, Juárez \textit{maquiladoras} accounted for 70 percent of the 36 million square feet of warehouse space in El Paso in 1995.\textsuperscript{301} Also, before the peso

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{295} \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, June 20, 1974.

\textsuperscript{296} \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, November 5, 1976.


\textsuperscript{298} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{299} \textit{El Paso Times}, April 8, 1995.

\textsuperscript{300} \textit{El Paso Times}, July 2, 1995.

\textsuperscript{301} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
devaluation in the 1990s, Mexican *maquiladora* workers spent their paychecks in El Paso because they believed that U.S. products were superior to Mexican equivalents. When Carlos Salinas de Gortari introduced peso devaluations, Mexico’s buying power declined by 40 percent. As a result, *juarenses* spent less of their paychecks in El Paso and the city’s economy suffered. 302 In 1996, Don Michie, a marketing scholar, reported that 60 percent of El Paso’s economy was tied to trade with Mexico, and 90 percent of that trade was *maquiladora*-related. 303 *Maquiladoras* became central to border cities’ economies in both the U.S. and Mexico as they encouraged trade and economic integration between the two nations.

U.S. Labor Unions and Maquiladoras

The *maquiladora* industry has provided many U.S. companies with economic benefits, but has received much criticism from U.S. labor unions. American critics claim that the *maquiladoras* undercut American industry by exporting jobs to Mexico and creating inequitable competition for local companies. Organized labor in the U.S. criticized the *maquiladoras* by calling them a “job steal.” 304 As a result of U.S. labor unions’ objections to the industry, the U.S. Tariff Commission held two weeks of hearings in May 1970 in order to examine the BIP’s export tax regulations. U.S. labor unions asked the commission to investigate the industry because they felt that some U.S.

302 Ibid.


304 Ibid.
companies were moving their operations across the border in order to profit from cheaper labor costs.\textsuperscript{305} The hearings did not yield any change, much to the labor unions’ disappointment.

Later, in 1972, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) approached the Senate Finance Committee with a proposal for the Burke-Hartke Foreign Trade and Investment Act, which aimed to end U.S. corporations’ participation in the \textit{maquiladora} industry.\textsuperscript{306} The Senate Finance Committee examined the legitimacy of the foreign value-added taxes that were commonly practiced in the \textit{maquiladora} industry. However, the AFL-CIO failed in its attempt to end U.S. corporations’ participation in the BIP.

Another labor union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Association’s (ACWA), publicly criticized U.S. companies’ involvement in the \textit{maquiladora} industry in 1974 when the ACWA president Murray H. Finley denounced the twin plant concept as a means of exploiting cheap labor in Juárez. The union planned to have a nationwide demonstration to protest the importation of clothing from countries with cheaper labor. According to the \textit{El Paso Herald Post}, ACWA members made $4.05 per hour at that time, while garment workers in Mexico earned only $.40 per hour.\textsuperscript{307} Despite the

\textsuperscript{305} \textit{El Paso Times}, May 19, 1970.


industry’s economic benefits to U.S. companies, U.S. labor unions like ACWA and AFL-CIO criticized it for undercutting American jobs and exploiting Mexico’s cheap labor.

The *maquiladora* industry marked an ongoing trend in twentieth-century U.S. and Mexican relations, in which the PRI consistently relied on U.S. capital for economic development. By all measures, the industry, although open to foreign investors from all over the globe, is unshakably tied to the U.S. The BIP’s various phases demonstrated the U.S. economy’s influence on the industry, since many of its slumps correlated with U.S. recessions. It also encouraged economic integration between U.S. and Mexican border cities, as in the case of Ciudad Juárez and El Paso. On a global level, it promoted free trade and economic interdependence between the U.S. and Mexico. U.S. companies took advantage of the benefits offered by the *maquiladoras*, and as a result, the industry consistently held connections to the U.S. economy throughout the twentieth century. In order to attract foreign investment and maintain positive diplomatic relations with the U.S., the PRI allowed U.S. corporations to select their labor through gendered lines in order to create their ideal workforce. In addition, the PRI ignored the corporations’ violations of Mexican labor law and introduced peso devaluations in order to pay off its national debts, which negatively affected the *maquiladora* workers. Under the BIP, the PRI adapted its economic policies to favor profitability over the social conditions of its citizens.
CHAPTER 4: BRACEROS AND MAQUILADORA WORKERS

Both the Bracero Program and the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) exemplify the ways in which the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the U.S. government, and U.S. corporations collaborated in the twentieth century to maximize profits and minimize costs by disregarding the social conditions of male and female Mexican laborers. The PRI adapted both programs along gendered lines in order to provide the U.S. with its ideal workers for each individual program. Under the Bracero Program, U.S. farmers preferred males for agricultural labor, while under the BIP, U.S. corporations favored females for industrial work. In both cases, gender influenced U.S. employers’ perceptions of workers’ productivity. In addition, employers viewed male \textit{braceros} and female \textit{maquiladora} workers as the cheapest and most docile (and therefore the most easily exploited) source of labor. As a result, \textit{braceros} and \textit{maquiladora} workers had similar experiences with regard to working conditions, wages, living conditions, and human rights. Workers’ attempts to resist exploitation were often met with threats of deportation, verbal mockery, or physical violence, which stimulated the employers’ success in securing cheap, docile labor in order to maximize profits in both programs. While \textit{braceros} endured threats of deportation and racial discrimination, \textit{maquiladora} workers experienced sexual harassment and pregnancy discrimination. In both the \textit{maquiladora} industry, which is primarily dominated by a female workforce, and the Bracero Program, which had an all-male workforce, workers were used as pawns in negotiations between the U.S. and Mexico. Consequently, workers were often made to
choose between seeking acceptable living and working conditions and securing a living wage.

Despite the adverse living and working conditions that workers experienced, interviewees expressed positive feelings toward the programs and the opportunities they provided. Mexico’s substantial lack of employment opportunities contributed to these workers’ sentiments that they had no other viable options. As a result, workers were forced to look past their needs for acceptable living conditions, working conditions, wages, and human rights, in exchange for wages.

In addition, the current state of illegal Mexican migration to the U.S. has roots in both of these programs. Also, both programs encouraged economic integration between the U.S. and Mexico. In short, the Bracero Program and the BIP encouraged illegal Mexican immigration, U.S.-Mexican economic integration, and the exploitation of Mexican laborers in the twentieth century.

**Racism Versus Sexism**

In both programs, Mexican laborers frequently experienced discrimination. While *braceros* often underwent racial prejudice, female *maquiladora* workers experienced gender-based discrimination. Regrettably, discrimination against immigrants is a common occurrence in U.S. history. In her book *Mexican Workers and American Dreams*, Camille Guerin-Gonzales explained racial discrimination’s role in denying non-white immigrant farm laborers access to the “American Dream” on
 According to Guerin-Gonzales, in the U.S. at that time, “whiteness” was the main criteria for successfully climbing the agricultural labor ladder to land ownership. In the early twentieth century, Asian immigrants from China and Japan were the main sources of cheap agricultural labor. After Asian immigrants began securing their own land, California passed the Alien Land Law in 1913, which prohibited the ownership of land by those ineligible for citizenship. Incidentally, non-whites could not become naturalized citizens in the U.S. until 1952. Thus, the “American Dream” remained unattainable for non-white immigrants.

U.S. farmers’ exploitation of Mexican immigrants was particularly common at the time. When Mexicans began immigrating to the U.S., they were considered “birds of passage,” rather than permanent American residents and citizens. Unlike immigrants from Europe and Asia, Mexicans’ home country was close by, and thus white Americans assumed that Mexicans would never live permanently in the U.S. As “birds of passage,” they provided a convenient labor supply—they could work when needed, and be asked to leave (or forced to leave, as illegal immigrants) when not needed. Even better for farmers, Mexicans tended to underestimate their wages because they based them on what they could buy in Mexico rather than the U.S. As devalued “birds of passage,” Mexicans were deemed by U.S. farmers to be a cheap, temporary, and convenient source of labor.

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309 Ibid, 16.

310 Ibid.
Accordingly, Mexican immigrants eventually filled the majority of low-paying labor positions. As a result of their devalued reputation, Mexicans were the most susceptible to exploitation by U.S. farmers.

In particular, Texan farmers were infamous for exploiting Mexican farm laborers. Consequently, Mexico blacklisted Texas from participating in the Bracero Program from 1942 to 1949. In 1947, *El Continental*, a Spanish newspaper in El Paso, reported that Mexico’s Secretary of Interior, Hector Pérez Martínez wrote a letter to the Texas government, describing seven discriminatory acts against Mexicans that were most commonly practiced in Texas. First, Mexicans were often barred from entering some public places and were frequently denied the right to rent or own property. Also, the police treated them badly, especially in rural areas. Moreover, Mexicans in Texas were often paid unfair wages. For example, prior to the Bracero Program’s inception in 1942, Mexican farm laborers in Texas earned an average of $.25 to $.30 an hour, while workers in California earned $.60 per hour. In addition, employers discriminated against Mexicans by often refusing to promote them to higher-paid positions. Also, Texan farmers placed the workers in the middle of a “fraudulent game,” in which they hired illegal Mexicans and paid them very low wages, which forced legal residents to

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313 Ibid.

travel north in search of employment. Farmers in Texas were notorious for hiring illegal Mexican immigrants even while Texas was blacklisted from participating in the Bracero Program. Finally, Texans frequently segregated Mexicans from whites in public schools. In short, Mexican laborers experienced a variety of discriminatory practices at the hands of Texan farmers, which in turn caused Mexico to bar Texas from participating in the Bracero Program between 1942 and 1949.

Government officials from the U.S. and Mexico also exploited the *braceros*. Cipriano Torres, a former *bracero*, described his discriminatory experiences with Mexican government officials during his journey from Chihuahua, Chihuahua to El Paso, Texas. Regarding his experience, he said, “When they contracted us in Chihuahua and took us to Ciudad Juárez…the mayor of Ciudad Juárez came in his own railroad car, but we traveled all day in freight cars on the train. They didn’t bring us in a train, [or] in a bus as passengers, no. They…brought us in freight cars, with coal [and] soot.” In the program, employers were responsible for funding *braceros*’ transportation to and from the U.S. Thus, American farming associations, undoubtedly wanting to minimize costs, paid for the *braceros* to travel in freight cars rather than passenger trains. Torres stated that when they arrived in Ciudad Juárez, the government officials sprayed insecticide on

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316 Ibid.


them. When Torres protested, saying, “We’re not animals,” they just laughed.319 Once they arrived in Ciudad Juárez, they crossed the border to Río Vista, which was a *bracero* processing center located in the outskirts of El Paso. Like many other former *braceros*, Torres referred to Río Vista as a “concentration camp,” which suggests that he looked upon his experiences at Río Vista in an unfavorable light. In his own words, Torres stated:

> We left from [Ciudad Juárez] in buses. They took us in buses not for passengers, but for animals, and they took us to Río Vista, the concentration camp. In the concentration camp…they put us in a big barrack, to undress us…because they were going to give us a medical exam…[When they checked] our genitals, I don’t think they did it properly, like a doctor does, using his fingers gently…No, they did it like this. (He made a forceful cupping motion with his hands.) And some people fell down.320

The medical examinations, which included x-rays, blood samples, and testicular examinations, were intended to check *braceros’* physical health in order to determine whether they were fit enough to work on farms and railroad tracks. However, according to Torres’ account, the U.S. government used the medical examinations as an opportunity to take blood donations for the war effort. They performed the “donations” without the *braceros’* consent. As Torres explained, “Everyday, they brought in 1,200 *braceros*. They told us, ‘Lift up the sleeve on your shirt… we are in a state of war. We are going to take a blood sample to help those who are fighting in the war.’ [But] it was not a sample...It was a tube, almost a quart of blood, for each person. Many people didn’t have

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319 Ibid.
320 Ibid.
to do anymore than look at the blood, and they fainted.”\textsuperscript{321} Just in his short journey from Mexico to the U.S., Torres encountered a number of discriminatory acts. He noted, “There was so much discrimination [and it was used] to degrade us, to lower us, and they were always laughing.”\textsuperscript{322}

Carlos Marentes, who has heard thousands of braceros tell their stories, gave similar accounts of racial prejudice. He described a division of race and class in the Bracero Program:

They were exploited; they were discriminated [against]… One bracero was telling me one day, “Oh, no Carlos, my boss was very good. You know what? The boss, he invited me to his home every Sunday, and his wife would bring me this great iced tea, and then some chicken…and of course, I would paint the fence, I would arrange the garden, while I was there.” There was a distinction [between them].\textsuperscript{323} This distinction between class and race allowed farmers to exploit and demean the workers. At the same time, as braceros were degraded, they became more susceptible to threats of deportation. When employers import labor from abroad, the power rests solely in their hands, for the mere fact that they can threaten an employee with deportation if they do not surrender to the employer’s demands. According to former bracero workers, they were told to “shut up or go back” if they voiced complaints.\textsuperscript{324} Together with

\textsuperscript{321} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{322} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{323} Carlos Marentes, interviewed by author, El Paso, Texas, July 22, 2008.

government officials from the U.S. and Mexico, American farmers used race and class
divisions to exploit and discriminate against the *braceros*.

In the *maquiladora* industry, female employees frequently experience gender-
based discrimination. Traditionally, employers intentionally hired a majority of women
(and still do) because they perceived them as dexterous, patient, and submissive by
nature. Since a large majority of females worked in the industry for the first 30 years of
its operations, it encountered female-specific issues such as pregnancy discrimination.
During the hiring process, many companies screened for pregnancies. Employers
utilized pregnancy testing and inquired about applicants’ menstruation patterns and
sexual activity. Companies often had their own nurses and doctors who administered
general health exams before the applicants were hired. When the medical professionals
took the urine sample, the applicant was usually unaware that it would be used as a
pregnancy test. Some companies were known to force applicants to produce used
sanitary napkins and show them to nurses who worked for the companies in order to
prove that they were not pregnant. If an applicant was found to be pregnant, she was
not hired. One *maquiladora* worker in Matamoros stated, “Everyone knows not to even

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325 Reka S. Koerner, “Pregnancy Discrimination in Mexico: Has Mexico Complied With the North
238.

326 Ibid.

327 Hilary Abell, “Endangering Women’s Health for Profit: Health and Safety in Mexico’s Maquiladoras.”
bother going [to the maquiladoras to look for work] if you are pregnant.”

Even after an applicant was hired, if she became pregnant while employed at a maquiladora, the employee was commonly mistreated or forced to “resign.” Pregnant employees were frequently harassed by their superiors and shifted to harder tasks to encourage them to quit. In one case in 1989, a woman suffered a miscarriage when her supervisor refused to allow her to leave her seat during her work shift. Supervisors used intimidation regularly to humiliate female employees, which included requiring women to present used sanitary napkins each month and punching them in the abdomen to terminate possible pregnancies. Since Mexican law required companies to provide their employees with paid maternity leave, pregnancy discrimination cut costs. However, in comparison to maternity leave expenses in other countries, the cost in Mexico was reasonable. According to the El Paso Herald Post, for each pregnant woman in 1997, the total cost of maternity leave was a mere $385, plus approximately $500 in medical expenses. In total, then, each pregnancy would have cost a company $885. Even so, multibillion-dollar companies, such as General Motors and IT&T, commonly practiced

328 Koerner, “Pregnancy Discrimination in Mexico,” 238.

329 Abell, “Endangering Women’s Health for Profit,” 596.

330 El Paso Times, August 18, 1996.

331 Ibid.

332 Abell, “Endangering Women’s Health for Profit,” 596.

pregnancy discrimination in their Mexican *maquiladoras*.\textsuperscript{334} Even though pregnancy discrimination was against labor law in Mexico, the Mexican government did little to stop it.\textsuperscript{335} Instead, the Mexican government turned a blind eye to the problem and allowed it to carry on, despite its palpable threat to human rights.

In addition to practicing pregnancy discrimination, companies commonly used sexual harassment as a way to intimidate employees and coerce them to obey, and this practice still continues in the present day. According to author Hilary Abell, “Supervisors commonly taunt workers, sometimes propositioning them and, in the worst cases, raping them. Some…offer lighter workloads in exchange for dates and sexual favors.”\textsuperscript{336} Monica Najera Benitez, a *maquiladora* worker in Ciudad Juárez, stated that she experienced discrimination regularly when she refused sexual advances from her supervisors. She said, “I don’t like it when [male supervisors] touch me, or hug me and so many times they are very abusive…[and] when I tell them that I don’t like it when they touch me, they give me problems.”\textsuperscript{337} According to Miguel Angel Camacho, an activist in Ciudad Juárez for *maquiladora* workers’ rights, male supervisors use unwanted physical touch to “control” the workers. If the workers refuse to be touched, they will be given more difficult jobs or sometimes be fired. In his own words, Camacho stated, “In

\textsuperscript{334} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{335} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{336} Abell, “Endangering Women’s Health for Profit,” 596.

\textsuperscript{337} Monica Najera Benitez, interviewed by author, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, June 31, 2008.
our *machista* culture, if you do not accept the abuse, then I am not going to have control over you, and if I can’t control you then you are of no use to me and you are not the type of submissive person that I want to employ. So, I will fire you or send you to a different place.”

Sexual harassment is not the only type of discrimination that employers utilize against women. Employers also discriminate against women in the hiring process. According to Alma Moran Villamil, a woman who has worked in the *maquiladora* industry for 20 years, “There is discrimination in selecting employees for positions. If there is a man and a woman [applying for the same high-paid job], they will always give it to the man, even if he is less intelligent and knows less.”

Pregnancy discrimination, sexual harassment, and discrimination in the hiring process threaten female employees and bully them into submission.

In the case of the *maquiladoras*, the PRI failed to protect their workers from sexual discrimination and sexual harassment, while U.S. corporations favored profits over the social wellbeing of their employees. Both parties failed to value the lives of workers, in order to ensure the *maquiladora* industry’s profitability. Similarly, in the Bracero Program, U.S. farmers frequently used intimidation tactics and racial discrimination to manipulate *braceros* and oppress them into submission. At the same time, while the PRI certainly made honest attempts to protect its workers by barring Texas from participating in the Bracero Program, it eventually removed Texas from its blacklist in 1949 in

338 Miguel Angel Camacho, interviewed by author, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, June 31, 2008.
exchange for the U.S. governments’ agreement to move *bracero* recruitment centers further away from the border.\(^{340}\) Therefore, any attempts that it made to protect its citizens from racial discrimination were ultimately undermined by the U.S.

Wages and Working Conditions

In addition to suffering discrimination, *braceros* and *maquiladora* workers experienced low wages and adverse working conditions. In the case of the *braceros*, even though the U.S. and Mexico agreed on regulations for the program, American employers did not always comply with those regulations. For example, American farmers were responsible for supplying food and shelter, but many former *braceros* complained of being cold and hungry. According to Cipriano Torres (who worked in the program 1952-1959), when he traveled between El Paso and Michigan by bus, which is obviously a long journey, the farmers provided each *bracero* with money to buy one lunch. In addition, when they were working on the farms, the farmers gave each *bracero* $5 per day to buy food. When asked if he felt if the amount was sufficient, Torres replied, “For me, it was very little what they paid us, but it was what the contract specified, right? So we didn’t fight it.”\(^{341}\) Like many other *braceros*, Torres accepted what he was given without question because he assumed it was what the contract specified. As Chapter 2 describes, most of the *braceros* had very low levels of education,


\(^{341}\) Cipriano Torres, interviewed by author, El Paso, Texas, July 18, 2008.
and therefore could not read the contracts (which were in Spanish and English) for themselves, which made them more susceptible to exploitation.

Like the braceros, maquiladora workers also experienced substandard working conditions. Employees frequently worked in close proximity to toxic chemicals, which increased risks to their health. Beginning in the 1970s, the industry received criticism for workers’ exposure to harmful chemicals. In 1978, The El Paso Times reported an increase in asbestos-related work in the maquiladora industry. At the time, U.S. safety laws became more restrictive and as a result, many U.S. companies moved their asbestos firms to Mexico, where the safety standards were less restrictive. This caused greater risks to Mexican laborers’ health. In 1978, a U.S. study showed that one in five asbestos workers died of lung cancer, one in 12 died of asbesteosis or mesothelioma, and many others died of other cancers. The Mexican government began sending inspectors to examine the presence of asbestos in Mexican maquiladoras. However, after inspecting the maquiladoras, Guillermo Quijas, an engineer for Mexico’s Agency for Improvement of the Environment, stated that there was “no problem” with workers wearing clothes which were dusty and on which there were white strands and particles of asbestos. In contrast, Dr. Raul Caudelas, who was a doctor with Social Security’s Work Medical Division, said that there was significantly harmful contamination in Ciudad Juárez

343 Ibid.
asbestos plants. Even though workers’ daily exposure to asbestos posed a threat to their health, the Mexican government and maquiladoras did little to prevent asbestos exposure.

In addition to asbestos, workers were also exposed to other toxic chemicals that caused a series of major health problems affecting workers’ reproductive systems. High exposure to toxic chemicals in the factories caused many women to become sterile. Others had menstrual irregularities, miscarriages, and produced children with birth defects. During a three-month period in 1996, one factory in Tijuana reported more than 20 miscarriages and four anencephalic births (babies born without brains) in a factory of only 200 workers. Other studies have shown that women in jobs of high stress and high exposure to solvents (such as women who work in maquiladoras) have a high risk of eclampsia, a toxic condition characterized by convulsions and sometimes a coma during or immediately after giving birth. In 2001, eclampsia was reported as the leading cause of maternal death in Mexico. Conclusively, the evidence suggests that maquiladora workers’ daily exposure to chemicals posed palpable risks to their health.

In addition to experiencing increased risks to their health, maquiladora workers received low wages for the type of work that they performed. In interviews, when asked

345 Ibid.

346 Abell, “Endangering Women’s Health for Profit,” 598.


348 Ibid, 44.
if they felt that their wages were fair for the type of work that they did, *maquiladora* workers, like the *braceros*, overwhelmingly responded “no.” When asked this question, Alma Moran Villamil responded, “They are a business, right? So they want to make the most money that they can, but the wages are not fair. They take advantage [of us.] They are taking advantage of the situation in which we live, but we have to work, we have to eat, and so we have to tolerate [the conditions]. And it’s the same way with all of the *maquiladoras* here.” Monica Nejera Benitez shared Alma’s feelings that she was not properly compensated for her work. Nejera Benitez stated, “The pay is very little because it is very hard work…For example…my back is sore a lot. I work with big machinery and I have to open really heavy doors. It’s really hot and sometimes I don’t get enough water. Yes, it’s very hard, and [I earn] very little money.” In summary, according to both *braceros* and *maquiladora* workers, they experienced serious health risks and unbearable working conditions to receive insufficient pay.

**Docile and Cheap Labor**

The U.S. employers’ ability to exploit workers has been stimulated by their perception of Mexican workers as being a cheap and docile source of labor. This belief has roots within the historical framework of the diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Mexico, in which the U.S. traditionally looked upon Mexicans as an inferior race.

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350 Monica Najera Benitez, interviewed by author, Ciudad Juárez, June 31, 2008.
The U.S. and Mexico began interacting as early as the nineteenth century, when Americans began traveling west to expand their territory. However, U.S. government officials expressed interest in attaining Mexican territory even earlier. Almost from the beginning of their relations, the U.S. and Mexico shared an asymmetrical relationship. According to Jaime E. Rodríguez and Kathryn Vincent, in the early nineteenth century, “Whereas the leaders of newly independent Mexico looked to their northern neighbor with expectations of friendship and collaboration, most citizens of the United States perceived the southern republic one as peopled by degenerate, inferior Catholic mongrels, who, like the Indians, did not deserve to retain their land.” Likewise, Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1840 that Mexicans were “an imbecile, pusillanimous race of men, and unfit to control the destinies of that beautiful country.” Americans commonly perceived Mexicans as an inferior race, and they felt that such sentiments justified the U.S. government’s eventual seizure of Mexican territories in the mid-nineteenth century. This is not to say that Mexico did not participate in its own submission to the U.S. On the contrary, the Mexican government limited itself by consistently relying on U.S. capital to survive, as was the case during the Porfiriato, the Bracero Program, and the BIP. The Mexican government’s reliance on U.S. capital thus mitigated its participation

351 Shortly after the U.S. gained independence, leaders like Thomas Jefferson were already discussing ways in which the U.S. could take over Spain’s American territories. Jaime E. Rodriguez and Kathryn Vincent, eds. Myths, Misdeeds, and Misunderstandings: The Roots of Conflict in U.S.-Mexican Relations (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1997), 11.

352 Ibid, 10.

353 Ibid.
in its own economic development—it limited its control of its economy and consequently, of its political power in its dealings with the U.S. The relations between U.S. employers and Mexican employees in the Bracero Program and the maquiladora industry paralleled the unbalanced diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Mexico. While the Mexican government attempted to protect its citizens from discrimination in some instances (for example, blacklisting Texas from the Bracero Program), ultimately their attempts were commonly undermined by the U.S. Understanding the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico is imperative in understanding the imbalance of power between U.S. employers and Mexican workers in the Bracero Program and the BIP.

As mentioned earlier, U.S. travelers expressed desires to expand their territory into the west in the early nineteenth century. The U.S. government coveted Mexico’s land and many felt that its inhabitants did not develop the land to its full potential. According to one missionary who was serving in Sonora at the time, “Sonora could have a superabundance of…produce if the inhabitants would diligently engage in agriculture. But they are much too lazy for such labor.”354 The missionary’s hegemonic description of Mexicans as “lazy” made them appear to be inferior beings. Eventually, such sentiments contributed to the U.S. government’s acquisition of nearly one-half of Mexico’s territory. After the U.S. purchased its western territory from Mexico through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, many Mexicans migrated north to work in the

U.S. mines. Since Americans believed Mexicans to be an inferior race of people, they were paid lower wages than white Americans. According to one overseer at the mines, “The lower class of Mexicans, with the Opata and Yaqui Indians, are docile. They have always been ‘peons’ (servants) for generations. They will always remain so, as it is their natural condition.” As a result of this prejudice, Mexicans were paid $12 to $15 per month compared to the $30 to $70 per month that white Americans received.

American hegemony was palpable early on in U.S.-Mexican relations. The U.S. employers’ early beliefs that Mexicans were a docile, submissive labor source continued into the twentieth century, and they contributed to braceros’ and maquiladora workers’ low wages and adverse working conditions.

U.S. capitalists’ perception of Mexican laborers as docile, cheap labor was vital to their exploitation—this was the case in both the Bracero Program and the BIP. If employees did not exhibit an acceptable amount of passivity, then their employers would cultivate submissiveness through their operations. According to Leslie Salzinger, a scholar who has conducted extensive studies of maquiladoras, “Anyone who has spent time observing capitalist production knows the impossibility of simply hiring shop-floor acquiescence—feminine or otherwise. Docility, no matter who exhibits it, is produced on the shop floor, not acquired ready-made.”

355 Ibid, 43.
356 Ibid.
employers to manipulate their workers. In the maquiladora industry, multinational firms in twin plants chose to relocate to Mexican plants because of the “passivity” of the Mexican labor force. In the maquiladoras, if workers demonstrated any disobedience or rebellion, they were often fired. According to former maquiladora worker and current human rights activist Miguel Angel Camacho,

The managers detect the people who know their rights, and they run [them] out immediately… How can you stay silent when you know your rights? It’s better for them if you are ignorant, but when you wake up and you know your rights, then it’s very difficult to stay silent. So it is very common in the maquiladoras, if the managers find out that a worker knows her work rights, they will fire her and run her out.

In the same way that maquiladora management cultivated a passive workforce, American farmers favored Mexican workers over farm laborers of other nationalities because of their apparent submissive nature. According to Camille Guerin-Gonzales, American farmers’ perceptions of Mexican laborers as the most “docile and…orderly law-abiding” workers often influenced them to hire Mexicans instead of workers of other nationalities. When compared to Greek, Italian, Hungarian, and African American workers, American farmers viewed Mexican workers favorably, due to their “peaceable and industrious…character.” Racial stereotyping was common among American employers during the twentieth century, and it often worked in their favor.

359 Miguel Angel Camacho, interviewed by author, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, June 31, 2008.
360 Guerin-Gonzales, Mexican Workers and American Dreams, 52.
361 Ibid.
As a result of racial stereotyping and segregation on American farms, conflicts arose between the individual racial groups working in the fields. For example, in one specific case referenced by Guerin-Gonzalez, a Mexican farm laborer expressed dislike for Filipinos because a group of Filipinos had once underbid him for thinning lettuce. The worker stated, “The Filipinos are bad people. They take contracts for less than we do.”362 In this case, the American farmers set the two immigrant groups against each other in a bidding war. As a result, the white American farmer received the cheapest labor available. Instead of working together to maximize the value of their labor, the immigrants worked against each other. Consequently, their labor was devalued and farmers exploited them. The farmers utilized racial segregation to their advantage by promoting a profitable bidding war between the immigrant groups.363

The Mexican government also contributed to braceros’ reputation for docility. According to Carlos Marentes, the Mexican government ran campaigns to ensure that braceros were on their “best behavior” while working in the U.S. Marentes stated,

There was no protection from the Mexican government. The Mexican Consuls at that time were basically more worried [about whether] the braceros [would] honor the contract, because the program was very important for the government. I remember seeing…a letter from the Mexican Consul of a certain area, telling the workers, “Look…you represent México [here], you’re not supposed to get drunk…you’re not supposed to engage in strikes, you’re supposed to work, and

362 Ibid, 56.

363 Karl Marx referenced the capitalists’ advantage in creating competition by stating, “Competition separates individuals from one another, not only the bourgeois but still more the workers.” Justin Akers Chacón and Mike Davis, No One is Illegal: Fighting Racism and State Violence on the U.S.-Mexico Border (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006), 175.
obey your boss.”…One recommendation was, “Don’t complain. You do everything that the boss tells you to do. Don’t yell back.”

This statement demonstrates how the Mexican government encouraged braceros to be submissive, in order to keep peace with the U.S. The Mexican government, as well as American employers fostered docility among Mexican laborers in order to maximize production in the Bracero Program and the maquiladora industry. In addition, it helped to encourage the master-servant dichotomy that had already been developed in early U.S.-Mexican relations. In the same way that maquiladora management purposely employed Mexican women because of their “natural docility,” American farmers chose to hire Mexican laborers because of their “submissive” reputation. Thus, while employers perceived maquiladora workers as submissive based on their sex, they distinguished braceros as the most docile immigrant group based on their race.

Program Negotiations

In both the Bracero Program and the maquiladora industry, workers often became trapped in the middle of negotiations between the U.S. government, the Mexican government, and American employers. For example, in the Bracero Program, American farmers and INS officials controlled the labor supply. If farmers needed more braceros than the U.S. Labor Department had allotted them, INS officials frequently “legalized” illegal immigrants once they crossed the border. This was an especially common practice during harvest seasons. INS officials also influenced the U.S. and Mexican government’s

formal negotiations of wages and working conditions. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the riots in 1948 and 1954 exemplify the way in which American farmers and INS officials were able to use the *braceros* as pawns in order to undermine Mexico’s efforts to negotiate better terms for its citizens. In both cases, the *braceros’* desperation for work destabilized Mexico’s power in its negotiations with the U.S.

Similarly, *maquiladora* workers also became caught in the middle of negotiations concerning wages and working conditions. As cited in Chapter 3, the violent attacks on Ciudad Juárez *maquiladora* workers in 1980 demonstrate the way in which workers became caught in the middle of labor union conflicts. In the incident at the American Hospital Supply Corporation, the plant management’s warning of workers not to switch labor unions suggests that it had an obligation of some kind to the Confederation of Mexican Workers (Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos, CTM). In this way, the management could have been involved in the violence that ensued, but this is not overtly stated in the *El Paso Herald Post*. At any rate, the CTM’s use of violence is just one example of how *maquiladora* workers often found themselves caught in employers’ web of manipulation and intimidation. Likewise, the incident at Convertors de México demonstrates workers’ attempts to escape labor union conflict by resorting to violence themselves. Both cases came as a result of labor unions’ disagreements on workers’ wages and working conditions. Both *braceros* and *maquiladora* workers were trapped in between parties in negotiations, which eventually resulted in an advantage to the employers. Since employers held the power in negotiating the labor terms, workers were
left to accept wages and working conditions, regardless of whether they were beneficial to them.

Mexican Immigration to the Border

Due to the close proximity of both bracero recruitment centers and maquiladoras to the border, both programs encouraged Mexican illegal immigration to the U.S. With regard to the Bracero Program, the INS officials’ “legalization” of illegal immigrants gave Mexican laborers a strong incentive to cross the border with or without the appropriate legal documents. As a result, the U.S. received a large number of “wetbacks” throughout the duration of the program. However, while INS officials may have encouraged the northern migration of “wetbacks” at first, once they became a “problem” for the U.S., the U.S. government began a national campaign to eradicate all illegal Mexican immigrants from American soil in Operation Wetback of 1953-1955.\textsuperscript{365} Thus, even though the “wetback problem” had been created by the U.S. government officials themselves, the illegal immigrants bore the brunt of the punishment. While American farmers who hired illegal immigrants did receive warnings, their punishment was oftentimes minimal.

The maquiladora industry also encouraged illegal Mexican migration to the U.S. This was due not only to the factories’ immediacy to the border, but also because of the industry’s cyclical nature. Since the maquiladoras were highly influenced by the U.S.

economy, it underwent various phases. When the U.S. economy experienced recessions, the maquiladoras, which were funded by mostly U.S. capital, cut thousands of jobs in a matter of months. This left mass amounts of workers without jobs, and as a result, they crossed the border to find work. In addition, the Mexican government enacted a series of peso devaluations, which caused drastic rates of inflation. Due to inflation, prices for commodities expanded at a much higher rate than maquiladora wages. Consequently, workers were left with little choice but to cross the border in search of higher wages. Due to the draw of U.S. capital and the way in which both programs were structured, Mexican laborers had large incentives to immigrate to the U.S.

Economic Integration

Not only did the Bracero Program and the maquiladora industry encourage illegal Mexican migration to the U.S., but both programs furthered economic integration between the U.S. and Mexico. In the Bracero Program, workers regularly sent money home to their families in Mexico. This was such a common practice that by 1953, remissions that braceros sent back home to their families had become Mexico’s second greatest source of American capital, after American tourism. As previously stated in Chapter 3, the maquiladora industry highly increased economic interdependence between the U.S. and Mexico. In the case of El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, the twin cities became economically interdependent, and a large part of both cities’

economies relied on the *maquiladora* industry for survival. Both the Bracero Program and the BIP demonstrate how Mexico relied on U.S. capital in the twentieth century to create programs that they believed would economically benefit their citizens. As a result, Mexico became highly economically dependent on the U.S. As stated by Miguel Angel Camacho, a Mexican citizen,

> Mexico is a country that has depended 100% on the United States. Our government officials [did] not resist the U.S. [and] we have gotten used to depending on the U.S. The United States has more control over me than Mexico. [It] controls who I am, what I consume, and what I have…And people accept it. But the United States does not serve the [best] interests of our people.\(^{367}\)

Camacho used the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as an example of the U.S. government’s domination over Mexico. With regard to NAFTA, he stated, “The objective of NAFTA was, how can [the U.S.] dominate Mexico? And we thought we could become part of the First World. And now, yes, we’re servants to the First World.”\(^{368}\) Many other interviewees expressed sentiments similar to Camacho’s that Mexico’s consistent dependence on U.S. capital has limited Mexico’s control over its own economic fate.

The Bracero Program and the *maquiladora* industry encouraged U.S.-Mexican economic integration as well as illegal Mexican migration to the U.S. In addition, in these two programs, the U.S. government, American employers, and the PRI adapted the programs through gendered lines in order to maximize production and minimize costs.

\(^{367}\) Miguel Angel Camacho, interviewed by author, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, June 31, 2008.

\(^{368}\) Ibid.
Regarding U.S. capitalism in Mexico, Juana María Rocino de Orozco, a former female executive in a *maquiladora*, stated, “In this capitalist world, the human being, man or woman, becomes a tool to make money…So, companies look for the best tool possible.” Under U.S. capitalism in the twentieth century, Mexican laborers, male and female alike, suffered a variety of injustices. Despite their adverse labor conditions, both *maquiladora* workers and *braceros* expressed positive feelings toward the programs and the opportunities they provided. To the workers, the programs’ benefits outweighed their drawbacks. Consequently, their desperation for employment overshadowed the importance of their own social wellbeing. Consistently throughout both programs, the U.S. government, Mexican government, and U.S. employers failed to protect workers’ human rights in favor of a larger profit.

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CONCLUSION

The Bracero Program and the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) demonstrate how the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) relied on U.S. capital in the twentieth century in order to provide employment for its citizens and achieve economic development. In the process, it worked with the U.S. government and U.S. employers to create gender-specific programs that exploited Mexican labor and created economic interdependence between the U.S. and Mexico. The PRI customized each program to U.S. employers’ preferences according to gender. While American farmers favored young, single males for agricultural work under the Bracero Program, U.S. corporations preferred young, single females for industrial work under the BIP. In both cases, the employers’ preferences contradicted their past behavior. U.S. farmers had employed women to harvest crops alongside their husbands during the 1920s, but did not hire them to work in the Bracero Program.370 Later, the PRI and Mexican entrepreneurs claimed to create the BIP in order to provide jobs for the hundreds of thousands of male braceros who returned home after the Bracero Program’s termination.371 However, the maquiladoras hired a majority of women, and the braceros henceforth returned to the U.S., or to their hometowns, in search of employment.372 U.S. employers also targeted


laborers who they perceived as the most “docile,” and as a result, Mexican laborers experienced discrimination, low wages, substandard living conditions, and adverse working conditions under both programs.

The U.S.’ appropriation of almost half of Mexico’s territory in the nineteenth century set the tone for the next century of U.S.-Mexican relations, in which the U.S. held a hegemonic view of Mexico and its citizens. U.S. employers’ exploitation of braceros and maquiladora workers, and their view of them as “docile and cheap,” demonstrated the power of U.S. authority in the twentieth century. In addition, Mexico’s reliance on foreign investment dates back to the Porfiriato. Porfirio Díaz created a “free-trade zone” in the nineteenth century in the same way that the PRI encouraged free trade through the BIP and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the twentieth century. Also, Mexico’s lack of employment consistently encouraged Mexicans to migrate north to the U.S.—programs like the Bracero Program and the BIP amplified Mexican migration to the U.S. In addition, the Porfiriato (1876-1911), the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), Prohibition (1919-1933), the Bracero Program (1942-1964), the founding of maquiladoras (1965), the passing of the Immigration Reform and Control Act, or IRCA (1986), and the introduction of NAFTA (1994), demonstrate that economic opportunities were Mexicans’ main incentive for migrating to the U.S.-Mexico border region.

During the Bracero Program, the PRI, the U.S. government, and American farmers exploited male laborers to capitalize production on U.S. farms. During the program, braceros experienced human rights violations at the hands of the U.S. government, INS, American farmers, and the Mexican government alike. Farmers’
violations of the program’s regulations eventually led to the program’s demise in 1964. The Mexican government’s attempts to protect its workers were often undermined by the braceros’ desperation for employment, as demonstrated by the El Paso Riot of 1948 and the Mexicali Riot of 1954. Other historical events, such as the El Paso Valley Cotton Association Boycott in 1953 and Operation Wetback of 1953-55 exhibit the American farmers’ insistence on undervaluing the braceros and even resorting to hiring “wetbacks” if necessary in order to minimize costs. The case of the lost ahorros exhibits the way in which the PRI took advantage of the braceros. Even though they experienced a variety of human rights violations, most of the braceros uphold a positive view of the program. In their interviews, most expressed desires to resume the Bracero Program.373 Their desperation for work overshadowed their sense of their rights for acceptable wages, living conditions, and working conditions.

The maquiladora industry was (and still is) closely tied to the U.S. economy. The industry’s cyclical ups and downs have often correlated with fluctuations in the U.S. economy. Evidence suggests that the maquiladora industry, although open to foreign investors from all over the world, is highly dependent on U.S. capital investments. As a result, it promotes free trade and economic interdependence between the U.S. and Mexico. The close economic integration of Ciudad Juárez and El Paso exemplifies this point. In economic terms, the BIP, followed by NAFTA, virtually erased the border between the two nations. In order to attract foreign investment and maintain positive

373 Bracero Project Interviews, El Centro de los Trabajadores Agrícolas, El Paso, Texas.
diplomatic relations with the U.S., the PRI catered to U.S. corporations by allowing them to hire a majority of females and turning a blind eye to their violations of Mexican labor law through practices like pregnancy discrimination, sexual harassment, and failure to minimize safety hazards. In addition, the PRI issued a series of peso devaluations in order to pay off its national debts, which devalued *maquiladora* wages. Under the BIP, the PRI modified its economic policies to maximize profits in lieu of protecting its citizens from human rights violations.

During the Bracero Program and the BIP, the PRI adapted both programs according to gender-specific market demands in order to maintain its economic relationship with the U.S. In both programs, U.S. employers profited from their exploitation of Mexican laborers by exclusively contracting males under the Bracero Program and hiring a majority of females under the BIP. Employers’ perception of Mexican laborers as submissive facilitated their exploitation of the workers. Therefore, under U.S. capitalism in the twentieth century, male *braceros* and female *maquiladora* workers had similar experiences with discrimination, low wages, and other human rights violations. Despite their negative experiences, both *maquiladora* workers and *braceros* conveyed feelings of gratitude toward the economic opportunities provided by the programs, due to their profound need for employment.

*Braceros* and *maquiladora* workers share a common historical narrative— theirs is a story about a struggle to balance survival with human rights. Although they worked under different programs during distinct eras, their experiences under U.S. capitalism were quite similar. While *braceros* experienced discrimination based on race,
maquiladora workers experienced sexism. In both cases, U.S. employers targeted them for their gendered, “docile,” and inexpensive labor. Furthermore, U.S. employers, as well as the PRI, took measures to maintain laborers’ submissiveness and complacency with their substandard social conditions. Both groups of laborers worked under extremely taxing conditions, and, according to their testimonies, were given insufficient wages in return. They also expressed feelings of betrayal toward their own government. In this light, one former maquiladora worker and human rights activist, Miguel Angel Camacho, stated, “The Mexican government [is our biggest opponent]. It oppresses us…Here, our mentality is to defend the powerful. The bureaucracy here in Mexico…is used to control [us] and not to serve [us].”

Even so, braceros and maquiladora workers conveyed feelings of gratitude for the opportunities that the Bracero Program and the Border Industrialization Program (BIP) provided to them. Mexico’s failure to provide sufficient employment to its citizens influenced these workers’ feelings that they had no other viable options. In addition, Mexico’s consistent economic dependence on the U.S. added to its citizens’ regrettable compliance with their employers’ wishes. In that same vein, a famous quote sums up Mexico’s economic relationship with the U.S. accordingly: “Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States.”

374 Miguel Angel Camacho, interviewed by author, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, June 31, 2008.

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