

*La frontera que vino del norte*

Carlos González Herrera, 2008, México, Taurus, 295 pp.

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*El Colegio de la Frontera Norte*

Persons who feel somewhat frustrated and powerless when entering the U.S. from Mexico by way of the various border-crossing points from Tijuana to Matamoros, and viceversa –especially in the period after 9/11– will find Carlos González-Herrera’s new book, *La frontera que vino del norte*, a fruitful and illuminating aid for understanding certain aspects of the problematics of the U.S.-Mexico border from an historical perspective. The author’s book focuses on the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez border area, which he views as a kind of microcosm of the U.S.-Mexico border region as a whole.

The volume traces the development of this particular border region from the beginning of the Porfirian period (1877) to the late 1920s and the onset of the Great Depression. The author’s treatment of this period is not, howev-

er, in the form of a chronological narrative, but instead employs a sociological and cultural thematic approach as the basis for his analysis.

The book’s initial chapter deals with the development of the “border” as a cultural notion in the U.S. and Mexico. González-Herrera indicates that historians such as Frederick Jackson Turner and others who attempted to define the significance of the “frontier” in the history of the U.S., considered that the western territories in general, including the large chunk of land acquired from Mexico as a result of the war of 1846-1848, served as a source of inspiration, optimism, and opportunity, as well as an important ingredient in defining America’s national development and democratic character. Mexico’s rulers, on the other hand, viewed their nation’s northern areas as a far-off

and undefined space, much of it desert. Although constituting a portion of the nation's patrimony, they were, as the author puts it, "peripheral to the country's geographic and spiritual heart".

In the second and third chapters, González-Herrera describes the ways in which immigration restrictions were applied to certain groups—the Chinese, Japanese, and immigrants from the Middle East—and the relationship of these policies to American nativist and racist attitudes. Although Mexicans were not legally barred from entering the U.S. during this period, border crossing for them was not an easy procedure. In chapters four to seven, González-Herrera explains how a type of *cordon sanitaire* was put into effect at border entry points along the U.S. southern land border. Mexicans entering the U.S., because they were suspected of carrying typhus, trachoma, and other infectious diseases, could be subjected to medical inspections on a selective basis, should the examiners on duty consider it necessary. The health inspections came to constitute one of the bulwarks in the argument for ever more stringent surveillance of the border areas to filter out undesirable "aliens". Although these practices

were an outgrowth of the development of public health science in the late nineteenth century, they were also, as the author points out, rooted in racist attitudes toward certain ethnic and racial groups.

In chapter eight, in which González-Herrera analyzes the question of Mexican immigration during the Mexican revolutionary period, the author relates two particularly telling and dramatic incidents provoked by such practices. One of these occurred on March 6, 1916, when 50 prisoners of the El Paso jail, on orders from prison authorities, were deloused with a mixture of kerosene and vinegar. An explosion—whether due to carelessness or deliberate intent—resulted in the death of 18 of the prisoners, the majority of whom were Mexican. A highly interesting speculation put forth by the author concerns the possible connection between this incident and the raid by *villista* rebels at Columbus, New Mexico, a few days later (March 9). Historians of the Mexican Revolution have long debated the motives for the rebel attack and that suggested by González-Herrera—vengeance for the death of Mexicans on U.S. soil—is intriguing and bears further scrutiny. No less a person than Brigadier General S. L. A.

Marshall, whose personal archive now forms a part of the University of El Paso Special Collections Department, believed that such a connection did indeed exist. Although, as Marshall points out, there is no reference in either published works or documents to such a connection, the Mexican-American community was shocked by the prison accident, and it was reported that the *Paseños* believed that there was a cause-effect relation between the incident and the Columbus raid.

The second episode described by the author concerns Carmela Torres, who, like other female residents of Ciudad Juárez, crossed the border daily during this same period to work as a maid in El Paso. On January 28, 1917, however, Carmela, angry at being ordered off the international streetcar by U.S. immigration officials and selected to take the required disinfectant bath, refused to subject herself to such despicable treatment. The El Paso dailies took up the news of her protest with vigor and vehemence, describing her as a “red-haired Amazon” leading a revolt against established U.S. laws. The citizens of Ciudad Juárez, on the other hand, cheered her defiant stance. Many expressed their soli-

darity with Carmela by throwing stones across the river in the direction of El Paso, attacking automobiles and taxis carrying tourists to Ciudad Juárez, in addition to other forms of protest.

One weakness of the book is that, although it sheds light on many of the aspects and operations of the U.S. southern “Ellis Island” ports of entry, it fails to situate these properly within the general context of the development of the U.S. as a nation and the experience of other ethnic migrant groups. Mexicans were not the only immigrants to the U.S. that tended to enter and leave the country periodically; the Chinese and Italians –to cite only two examples– also did so. The Chinese were not the only ethnic group that lent their brawn to the building of the transcontinental railway in the 1860s; the eastern portion of the line was built largely by Irish immigrant laborers. For most of the nineteenth century, until they came to exercise political power through virtue of their numbers as well as, in some cases, the accumulation of wealth, the Irish were also treated as a kind of subclass; they were “welcomed” as a source of cheap labor, but, since they were Catholic and in their majority poor, they were despised

by the dominant ruling groups in American society. Nor was discrimination in U.S. society simply a matter of race or ethnic origins; the Jews and the Mormons also suffered from it. In fact, the latter were actively persecuted—together with acts of violence and destruction—during the initial decades of their history as a minority religious group.

There is also a certain ambiguity with regard to definitions. The author uses, for example, the term “Anglo” or “Anglo-Saxon” at times to refer to the portion of the U.S. population that is non-Mexican in origin; at other times, however, these terms are used to refer to the “White” or Caucasian portion of the population and exclusive of the more visible minority groups such as the Mexicans, *negros*, indigenous peoples, the Chinese, etc. Such terms of reference require more precise and strict definition, as well as an indication concerning whether the term indeed possesses racial connotations or perhaps refers to political, economic, or cultural dominance by one particular group or certain groups. As another example, while information on Greek immigrants in the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez area is of considerable interest, they should not be categorized as

“Middle Eastern” in origin along with Syrians or Turks. Additional care should also be exercised in this respect, because many immigrants to Mexico and the U.S. from the so-called “Middle East”, for much of the period in question, belonged to distinct ethnic groups living within the Turkish Empire. This fact was also reflected in immigration records with respect to their nationality or country of origin.

Although the book focusses on the development of the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez border region from the perspective of U.S. policies, the author suggests that a second volume may be required to trace the evolution of the attitudes of the Mexican government toward the zone in question. Unlike the U.S., González-Herrera contends that the Mexican government has, throughout much of its history, devoted little attention or interest to the development of its northern border areas.

Any future work by the author on this subject will be assuredly welcomed by students and researchers of the U.S.-Mexico border region and the development of borders in general with the same *gusto* as the present volume has been received by this reviewer.