

Gente de bien

Lately, there are a lot of different definitions of what a Mexican and a Mexican-American is. Many of them are negative, calling the former illegal aliens, invaders, lazy, among other things. Mexican-Americans are seen as an extension of the problem, criminals, uneducated individuals and others soubriquets. Nevertheless, those of us who are either Mexican or Mexican-Americans know that such views of us are for the most part inaccurate. Throughout the history of both, Mexico and the United States, we have seen how these people have fought hard to get a better life for themselves and their families as well. When the Southwest was still part of Mexico, many of them had already created a way of life without much help from the Mexican government and authorities. In the aftermath of the infamous Mexican-American war, they continued searching for ways to keep their lands and even after they were dispossessed of them; they cling to whichever low-paying job they could find in order to survive and to be accepted as part of this society. They are brave and hard-working people who continue to be maltreated in many parts of this country and despite of that they still love and respect it.

Mexican-American history now dates back to over a hundred years. The war left many Mexicans residing on the other side of Rio Bravo (as it is known in Mexico), and they later began to assimilate their new lives in their new homeland. However, before that there had already been cases of Mexican and Americans marrying and having children. Such families were created out of convenience, so that the son-in-law, in most cases the American individual, could obtain access to the vast lands own by his “adoptive” family. Those were somehow the origins of Mexican-Americans, although this does not change the fact that many more do not precisely descend from those Mexicans that decided to stay after the war.

Mexico has always been a nation plague with a lot of social, economic and political issues. It never became the stable nation that many wanted it to be. It was due to these factors, among others, that many Mexicans decided to migrate toward the northern neighbor. After the Great Migration, many Hispanics began to arrive in large numbers to the U.S. Mexicans immigrants were and continue to be one of the most numerous groups entering the country. They soon became the second largest minority and in time they outnumbered African-Americans as the largest minority in this nation. In spite of the laws enacted to reduce the influx coming from Mexico, more and more individuals entered the country either legally or without the proper documentation.

Several factors motivated Mexicans as well as other Latinos to go across the border leaving behind their families and lifestyle. Life in the U.S was and continues to be appealing

for many foreigners. It represented a better prospect, a way of reaching the so-called American Dream. The large majority of Mexicans live in extreme poverty, they lack basic services like water, electricity, among others, and they do not even have access to education since in their neighborhoods those cannot be found or they are located too far away. Many people coming to the U.S consider better to survive day to day with the meager they make working in the fields that going back to Mexico and find ever harsher conditions. The signing of the NAFTA or TLCAN (as it is known in Spanish) in 1993, was supposed to ameliorate such conditions and create new employment opportunities for millions of impoverished Mexicans.

The aforementioned agreement, however, did not work as expected, and it proved its detractors right in several ways. It did not create jobs, except in the northern part of Mexico, in the cities bordering with the United States in which maquiladoras were established. The NAFTA benefited the U.S businessmen and their companies since they were able to move to the other side of the border in which regulations are much more lax than in the U.S. They were also able to hire laborers for much less money and with fewer benefits. Even though maquiladoras made some jobs available for Mexicans, such opportunities represented only about 3% of the jobs created in Mexico.

It also greatly affected Mexican agriculture, before the NAFTA Mexican produce exports increased 202% and imports were around 28%. After its signing, exports increased only about 50% and imports 176% which clearly shows the disparity ten years before and ten after the agreement was accepted. Competition amongst the three countries in this area is always going to favor Canada and the U.S since they possess better and more advanced equipment as well as subsidies. Talk of yet another union among the three countries has been in the air for quite a while now; the three governments talk about a unification of currencies a la EURO, the new monetary unit would be known as AMERO which would replace the U.S and Canadian dollars and the Mexican peso. It is already facing fierce opposition from people who think that would not benefit anyone, mainly the U.S since its currency is worth more than the other two.

This and the collapse of the Mexican currency negatively impacted people in several regions of Mexico who decided to come to the United States hoping to improve their situations. Unfortunately, more immigrants meant also more competition for unskilled jobs and other positions that traditionally were held by either other Mexicans/Mexican-Americans or African-Americans. Competition was not the only obstacle new comers and those already here were to overcome. For Mexican-Americans, the situation has never been easy. They are somehow discriminated against by whites, blacks and even their own people.

Generations after generations Mexican-Americans have struggled to get respect and recognition for their contributions to American society, which has been very elusive. Many people see them as inferior beings, especially those with conservative ties. They are often associated with gangs and hence considered problematic and criminals in general, draining resources by staying behind bars when such money could be used to meet other ends. They are also seen as misfits since they cannot easily assimilate the new culture and language unlike other immigrants, especially compared to those of European ancestry.

These assumptions are based mostly on hate rather than reality. Most Mexican-American people are actually bilingual as opposed to a majority of Americans who can speak only English and who believe erroneously that speaking one language is better than speaking several like people in Europe do. Mexican-Americans also deal with the religious dilemma, which is also based more on race, rather than religion and beliefs. Some justify attacks against the Mexican community on the grounds of religion and the incompatibility of ideals between Americans and their Mexican counterparts, interestingly enough the ones that attack us are also, in this regard, the ones that have most in common with us, the conservatives.

Regardless of the attacks or obstacles they have faced, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans are beginning to gain a more significant role in American society. Little by little, more young Mexican-Americans are attending colleges and universities with the intention of obtaining a degree and a better future outside of the fields and other jobs that do not offer opportunities to advance. The number of intellectuals and scholars in our community will increase steadily in the near future and perhaps by then division among Hispanics will decrease, while solidarity with other minorities will strengthen. Laws born from hatred like those in Arizona cannot stop this giant anymore; our influence will be felt more and more eventually, then the bronzing of this country will not be just their imagination and paranoia but rather a reality. As for the "Reconquista" the past is past, and I do not dwell in it.

The situation in Mexico seems to worsen gradually, especially with the old dinosaur in control of the nation's destiny once again. Violence in some cities like Cd. Juárez and others in Nuevo León and Tamaulipas is escalating and the corruption is almost tangible. The cartels along with the federal government scheme everything so that they continue getting richer while the rest of the Mexicans die in poverty. Nevertheless, I would like to believe there is a remedy and that someday my homeland will be to the eyes of everyone what I still think it is, a beautiful nation with beautiful people living in it. Despite of the difficulties we face, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans can endure and overcome them with pride and love for what we are, "gente de bien."