

# H-Net Reviews

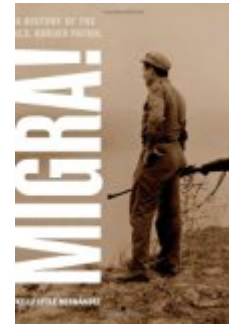
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kelly Lytle Hernández. *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. xv + 311 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-25769-6; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-26641-4.

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In *Migra!* Kelly Lytle Hernández, an assistant professor in history at the University of California-Los Angeles, explores the U.S. Border Patrol's role in curbing unauthorized immigration and enforcing laws along the Mexico-U.S. border. Hernández traces the practices and ideology of the Border Patrol from its creation in the 1920s to the late twentieth century.

She argues that for about the first decade and a half of its existence, the Border Patrol used “physical brutality” on a regular basis to achieve its goals, but she also maintains that in the 1940s, the patrol began to eschew “raw violence” (p. 109). At midcentury, she notes, some in the Border Patrol viewed themselves in part as guardians of immigrants. “In memo after memo,” she writes, “officers shared stories about abuses by farmers, who held migrants captive, paid poverty wages, and provided unsanitary living conditions” (p. 177). Hernández does not delve much into these reports, but one hopes that she or another scholar will further tap these records to shed more light on how migrant farmworkers were exploited. She states that such memos help reveal how the Border Patrol justified its aggressiveness in arresting unauthorized immigrants in the 1950s—to a certain extent, the patrol embraced an “abolitionist narrative” in which the agency was liberating migrants from a kind of twentieth-century slavery, just as the federal government had crushed plantation slavery in the 1860s (p. 179). As Hernández details, one Texas farmer who employed Mexican immigrants also envisioned himself as participating in a nineteenth-century plantation drama, but here the roles of hero and villain were reversed, with the federal government riding roughshod over civil liberties in an unjustified effort to interfere with the lives of south-

ern planters and those who labored for them.

At the same time, white south Texas farmers, dependent on workers from Mexico, deployed egalitarian and humanitarian arguments to criticize the patrol's aggressive tactics. In protesting an incident in which an American citizen (“of Latin extraction”) and his wife who were giving a ride to an unauthorized immigrant were in turn advised by an officer from the Border Patrol that their action put them at risk of being imprisoned, a white representative from the Valley Farm Bureau of Texas posed the following question: “Has it come to the point in this land of ours that one dares not let a brown-eyed man ride in his car?” Granting federal police too much authority ran the risk of fostering racial segregation, he argued. “Must we segregate ourselves from the society of these people,” wondered the Farm Bureau representative, “or shall we continue to associate with the Garcias’ and Gonzales’?” (pp. 162-163). Likewise, Texas agricultural employers characterized Border Patrol plans to house detainees and to fly them back to Mexico as violating human rights: “Farmers and ranchers condemned the proposed detention center as a ‘concentration camp’ and a ‘Korean-type wire stockade’ that was a ‘contradiction to our good neighbor policy.’ The detention center was more evidence of the Border Patrol’s ‘gestapo’ tactics, they argued. But the airlifts were even worse. It was ‘inhumane’ to deport Mexican nationals to the interior of Mexico, decried ranchers and farmers” (p. 164). At the same time, organizations representing middle-class Mexican Americans, who feared that their status in American society was made more precarious by the influx of unauthorized immigrants, endorsed the vigorous efforts to curb such migration. In portraying the complexities

of the immigration debate, *Migra!* is particularly compelling.

What is missing from Hernández's work is more of a sense of the larger factors that pushed the Border Patrol to greater efforts to block immigration. She does discuss the role of various private organizations in the debate over unauthorized immigration, and she does mention in general terms some larger societal factors that encouraged the Border Patrol to take a more energetic role in slowing this migration, such as the unemployment of the Great Depression that set the stage for mass deportations in the 1930s and the fear of Axis subversion that led to the expansion of the patrol in the World War II era. And, in the concluding chapters of the book, Hernández does effectively link the efforts to more aggressively police the border since the late 1960s with the increasing public concern over crime and with the increasing willingness of politicians to impose harsh punishments on lawbreakers. But I also think that a more thorough and detailed sampling of public opinion as expressed in newspapers might have been of tremendous value in explaining the conduct and policies of the Border Patrol since the 1930s.

Hernández offers somewhat contradictory accounts of when the Border Patrol came to focus on the task of curbing unauthorized immigration from Mexico. On page 101, she writes, "By the end of the Great Depression, Border Patrol work in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands was

almost entirely dedicated to the project of policing unsanctioned Mexican immigration." Then, two pages later, in reference to World War II, she notes, "The anxieties of a nation at war rushed through the U.S. Border Patrol, transforming its national organization, swelling the number of personnel, and introducing new concerns regarding border enforcement and immigration control.... These were the years when the U.S. Border Patrol took a sharp turn toward policing unsanctioned Mexican immigration in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands." So did the shift to a focus on stopping immigration occur in the 1930s or 1940s?

A minor quibble—Hernández's assertion on page 28 that the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act "introduced a nationality-based quota system that strictly limited the number of immigrants allowed to enter the United States each year" can leave readers with a somewhat erroneous impression. While the 1924 act did effectively end mass immigration from Europe, a 1921 immigration act was actually the first to introduce quotas—though higher ones—for European countries.

The strength of *Migra!*—and the reason why it deserves attention from those who study immigration, federal law enforcement, or the American Southwest—is its examination of the how different groups, such as Anglo growers, Mexican Americans, and the Border Patrol, viewed unauthorized immigration.

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