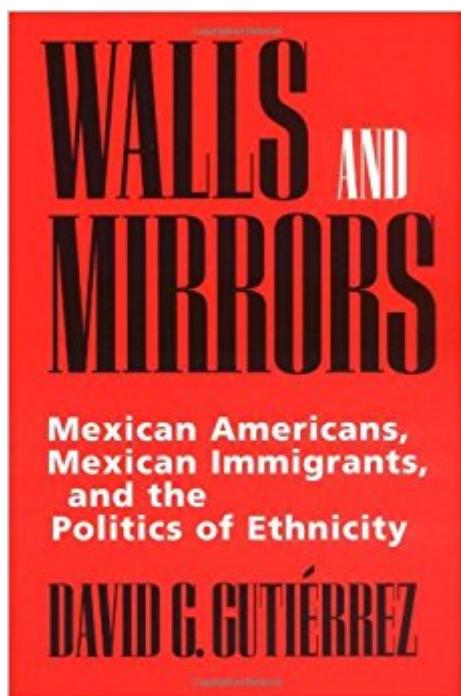


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# Walls And Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, And The Politics Of Ethnicity



## Synopsis

Covering more than one hundred years of American history, *Walls and Mirrors* examines the ways that continuous immigration from Mexico transformed and continues to shape the political, social, and cultural life of the American Southwest. Taking a fresh approach to one of the most divisive political issues of our time, David Gutiérrez explores the ways that nearly a century of steady immigration from Mexico has shaped ethnic politics in California and Texas, the two largest U.S. border states. Drawing on an extensive body of primary and secondary sources, Gutiérrez focuses on the complex ways that their pattern of immigration influenced Mexican Americans' sense of social and cultural identity and, as a consequence, their politics. He challenges the most cherished American myths about U.S. immigration policy, pointing out that, contrary to rhetoric about "alien invasions," U.S. government and regional business interests have actively recruited Mexican and other foreign workers for over a century, thus helping to establish and perpetuate the flow of immigrants into the United States. In addition, Gutiérrez offers a new interpretation of the debate over assimilation and multiculturalism in American society. Rejecting the notion of the melting pot, he explores the ways that ethnic Mexicans have resisted assimilation and fought to create a cultural space for themselves in distinctive ethnic communities throughout the southwestern United States.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A highly readable book based on sound research and full of questions about, and insights into, the

nuances of ethnicity in American politics and society."--"SAGE Race Relations Abstracts

David G. Gutiérrez is Assistant Professor of History at the University of California, San Diego.

Writing in the mid 1990s, historian David G. Gutierrez published *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* in 1995. Educated at the University of California Santa Barbara and Stanford University, Gutierrez studied under Albert Camarillo, his graduate advisor at Stanford as well as Richard White and Ramon Gutierrez (amongst others). At the same time as the book was being written a backlash in California against immigrants erupted with the reelection campaign of governor Pete Wilson and Proposition 187 which would prohibit "illegal aliens" from using health care, education and other social services provided by the state of California. The proposition passed in November of 1994 but was later found unconstitutional by a federal court. It was in this environment that Gutierrez began to look at Mexican Americans and their complicated relationship with Mexicans. As his research would show, the former had always been deeply divided over the immigration issue. As the author notes, the debate has historically fallen along polar positions, with one group viewing Mexican immigrants as a threat because they increased economic competition and helped to reinforce the negative stereotypes held by white Americans. At the other end of the spectrum there is the group which has more sympathy for Mexican immigrants based on ties of culture and kinship, believing that these ties are much more important than any differences which might lie between the two groups. It is this argument which makes *Walls and Mirrors* stand out from the previous works analyzed. First of all his focus is on the tensions which exist not only between Mexican Americans and white Americans, but those between Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants recently arrived. This tension is one which has always existed but is certainly not mentioned very often in all the debate which rages about immigration, as most people lump Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans together in the same breath, never acknowledging that there is any difference between the groups and their ideas on these issues. Keeping the above in mind, in chapter two Gutierrez sheds light on Mexican labor and why it was encouraged in the United States, for there can be no doubt that the U.S. did encourage Mexican workers to enter the country. As the author notes, American capitalists in the southwest needed a source for cheap labor, but also had to deal with an American public which had, over the years, developed negative stereotypes about Mexicans. Many Americans saw Mexicans as "an inherently backward, slow, docile, indolent and tractable people." How could you justify using these sorts of people

(assuming the stereo-types were true) in a modern economy? American capitalists argued that these people would do work required by commercial farmers, mining companies and railroads which white Americans would not do. They would work long hours for low wages and in conditions to hard to make the jobs attractive to white workers in numbers needed to satisfy the growing demands for labor in the southwest. Thus, the identity given to Mexican workers (and immigrants) was one of compliant laborers suited to do the lowest and meanest jobs in the modern American economy and, as such, they did not represent a threat to American workers. In other words, Gutierrez is presenting us with a portrait of Mexican identity from a white point of view. Continuing in this vein the authors sources argue that whites had been educated away from “physical labor, particularly common labor, and more particularly itinerant labor” however, Americans failed to realize that these tasks must be performed by someone thus the need for Mexican itinerant labor. The capitalist argument continues with the point that Mexican laborers are not foreign to the US, as there has been 100 years of close contact, and, unlike say the Chinese, Americans and Mexicans understand each other. Gutierrez notes that Mexican Americans, like other workers in the US, feared in-coming Mexicans would mean fewer jobs and less pay when jobs were available. Thus, to some extent, Mexican Americans saw themselves not as members of some greater pan Mexican nation, but as American workers whose jobs could be threatened by foreign labor. In the best cases, there was ambivalence on the part of both Mexican Americans and Mexicans towards the other. Finally, the most important piece, and this is Gutierrez’s main contribution to the literature, is the point the author makes about mixed loyalties being present in ethnic identity concerning Mexican Americans. In the end, Gutierrez work represents a tour de force which comfortably fits (and contributes to) Chicano/a history, new Western history, social history, urban history, labor history (although to some lesser extent) and social history, as well as overall United States twentieth century history. This work, as do all works in the Chicano/a historiography, can be considered a work of subaltern analysis. It is well written, well researched and the sort of work which would fit in with an undergraduate course or even a graduate course looking at issues of Mexican American identity. One criticism of the work is that it does not present the reader with much information regarding gender and leaves the reader wondering about Chicana’s and their identities. However, having said that, the author covers so much ground, and offers so much to the literature that he can be forgiven for missing one or two things in an otherwise exemplary piece of historical writing.

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This book truly marks a turning point in Chicano history by interrogating the similarities and differences between Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans in the U.S. The metaphor of Walls and Mirrors sums up the relationship between immigrants and longtime U.S. residents: they shared cultural, labor/class, and daily social ties, but political and civic goals divided them. This book, then, is a political history that examines the importance of both legal and cultural citizenship in Texas and California communities. It looks at the impact of the Cold War, agribusiness labor needs, and civil rights struggles on debates over immigration at both the local and national level.

David Gutierrez' book is one of the most informative, thorough books available on the Chicano experience in the US Southwest. This book is not just for activists or Chicano studies scholars. If you have ever wondered why immigration policy exists in its present form, or why racial tensions still persist within the southwest, read this book. It is very densely packed with valuable information and excellent sources, and it presents such information in a fairly unbiased manner. This is an impressive work of research that should be in the library of every house in America.

David Gutierrez has written a unique and fantastic book on the Chicano experience in America. Fantastic read, and as a U-M Wolverine who has heard David Gutierrez speak in person, I can say it is worthy of the praise it has received. The man knows his material!

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