

The Bracero Program 1942-1964

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Introduction

The word *braceros* is derived from the Spanish root “brazo” which means “arm” with the added suffix “ero” which usually signifies “he who works.” Thus, the word *cocinero*(cook) works with a *cocina*(stove), a *panadero*(baker) works with *pan* (bread), and a *jardinero* (gardener) works in a *jardín* (garden). Braceros can be understood to mean “he who works with his arms,” an apt name for the temporary guest worker program that brought millions of impoverished Mexican peasants to work as manual labor in the United States between 1942 and 1964. In retrospect, their classification as anonymous and entirely replaceable “arms” seems also appropriate; such was the consideration they received from the growers whose profits the *braceros* assured.

The Bracero Program was extended, interrupted, re-negotiated and re-initiated many times during its twenty-two years’ existence. The reasons for its demise are controversial. Some say that by the Sixties, the presence in the United States of thousands of illegal agricultural workers, together with the introduction of the mechanical cotton harvester, had destroyed the practicality of the Bracero Program (The Bracero Program& Cohen, 2011). According to the U.S. government, “the dramatic drop in demand for indentured Mexican labor corresponded to the overall decline in farm employment resulting from extensive mechanization of U.S. agriculture during the 1960s” (Vogel, 2007, p. 6). Until its end in 1964, over 4.5 million work contracts had been signed under its auspices, enabling millions of Mexican men to work legally – but temporarily - in the United States (Mize, 2006). Its positive and negative aspects are still being debated and are discussed in this paper. It should be noted that, while all conditions and events cited herewith are documented and occurred, not all were present everywhere. The implementation of the Bracero Program varied greatly from place to place.

History

Favourable conditions

In the early twentieth century, conditions were favourable for the Mexican and the United States governments to collaborate on a program that seemingly would benefit both.

South of the border, the decade-long Mexican revolution had ended in 1920. Two million people had died and the country was in chaos after ten years of “sudden and violent armed movements, coups and counter-coups, religious fanaticism and anticlerical outrages” (Tuck, para.7). After the revolution, president Cárdenas accelerated his predecessors’ policies of land reform, breaking up most *haciendas*(extensive plantations) into small individual holdings. Since individual farming on small plots is less productive than on large plantations, and due to drought, lack of credit, water, and seeds, in the years before the Second World War, crop harvest yields were falling and employment was scarce (The Bracero Program, para.2& Cohen, 2011). Unemployed Mexican peasants were increasingly hungry and desperate.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the United States entered the world conflict, triggering fears of impending labor shortages in the agricultural sector of the economy (Bickerton, 2000). With unemployment rates in 1942 at 4.7 percent, and as over one million rural workers moved to military and factory jobs in the cities, farmers alerted the U.S. government that they faced harvest-time disasters without replacement workers. The United States was acknowledged to be “a country in need of the talents of those outside our national frontiers” (Bickerton, p. 898).

Unemployment in Mexico and a lack of rural workforce in the U.S. informed bilateral talks and culminated in the signing of agreements between the two governments. Thus came into existence the Emergency Farm Labor program, otherwise known as the Bracero Program (Fernandez, 2010).

The war years 1942- 1946

As signed on August 4, 1942, the Bracero Program was a government-to-government temporary guest worker program, whereby young male Mexican peasants would work in the United States for periods between six weeks and six months at a time and return to Mexico after fulfilling their contracts. Both governments had agreed to conditions which included free transportation from recruitment centres in the interior of Mexico to the workplace in the U.S., free housing, water, and blankets. Food was to be provided by the employers at cost. Workers were to be paid the local prevailing wage for the type of manual labor, to be established at the beginning of every season. In addition, a minimum of salary was guaranteed (Fernandez, 2010). *Braceros* were not to drive tractors, operate machinery or perform any work other than manual labor (Mize, 2006). The Mexican government tried, to a certain extent, to protect its workers from exploitation, discrimination and prejudice (Fernandez, 2010). For instance, in the early years of the program, Mexico objected to Texas being included in the Bracero Program, citing its notorious racism against Mexican nationals, but was dissuaded after 1946, to aboutface and exclude Idaho, which had approved rules forcing *braceros* to stay at their assigned job or face arrest, and provide – “forced, unpaid labor while awaiting trial” (Bracero Timeline, 2002, no page). It should be noted, however, that excluding Texas in the early years was useless, as Texas continued to hire wetbacks until it could legally obtain *braceros* (Durand, 2007).

The United States government guaranteed compliance with the agreement, including that *braceros* would not be used as strike-breakers or in the military, and that their use would not displace domestic workers. The government first delegated responsibility for recruitment and contracting to the Farm Security Administration, part of the Department of Agriculture, then to the War Manpower Commission a year later (Galarza, 1964).

The Mexican government, in turn, required that applicants at the recruiting centres present a recommendation from their local municipal authorities certifying that they had agricultural experience but no land, and that their labor was not locally needed (Hernandez, 2006).

Recruitment centres were originally set up, at the request of the Mexican government, in urban areas in the Mexican interior: in Mexico City, Tlaquepaque, and Irapuato, among other cities.

As soon as word of the program leaked out in Mexico, the ‘flow of *aspirantes*[would-be *braceros*]...was immediate and multitudinous.’ Within a week, thousands of potential *braceros* descended on the Secretariat of Labor in Mexico city....Processing of applicants was quickly moved to the National Stadium...Crowds sometimes grew so large and unruly that firefighters were ordered to disperse them with hoses. Those...who made it into the stadium were registered, interviewed by representatives of the Mexican government and various Americans, given health examinations by Mexican and American officers, including X-rays (and, often, a spraying with DDT or other insecticides for lice), posed for identification photographs and placed into groups of twenty-five or thirty to have the contract read and explained to them....Each applicant had to spend from 5 to 7 hours before a battery of more than sixty examining officials (Mitchell, 1961, p. 30)

In 1942, a number of American rail carriers, citing a shortage of workers to maintain the tracks, requested workers from Mexico. Accordingly, on January 1st 1943, the U.S. War Manpower Commission informed the State Department that the railroad industry faced a severe labor shortage, which resulted in bilateral talks with Mexico to expand the Bracero Program to the railroads (Bracero timeline, 2002). By the end of 1944, more than 80,000 men had been contracted to work on the railroads, having undergone the same recruiting procedures as those *braceros* destined to work on farms. New recruitment for work on the railroads was suspended in August 1945 (Bracero timeline, 2002). However, most railroad *braceros* did not return to Mexico at the end of their contracts. They were delayed by the employers and remained in the camps, working without a contract, for months. The last of the railroad *braceros* were finally repatriated in April of 1946 (Galarza, 1964).

The Recruitment Process

Even in the early years of the bilateral, government-administered, Bracero Program, the journey from a Mexican village to an American farm or railroad was perilous and long, and it often caused the peasant to incur significant debt. An aspiring *bracero* first had to obtain a birth certificate, a proof of completion of military service, a letter certifying that he was not member of an *ejido* (communally-owned land), as well as a character reference from his own municipal authorities (Cohen, 2011).

Even though the Mexican government announced that all the forms were free, “as more men sought contracts, a growing number of officials...began to charge for documents, both legal and fake..... These practices would come to permeate all levels of the program” (Cohen, 2011, p. 90).

Corruption was widespread and not always confined to Mexicans. A late 1950s investigation revealed that almost eighty percent of the program participants had paid for a contract (Cohen, 2011). In 1956, Galarza estimated that, on average, every *bracero* had to pay off debts of \$40 before he even began work at what was usually 40 cents per hour (Rosas, 2011). Pedro Ortega, MD, offered testimony that U.S. doctors at the recruitment centre sold the x-ray films of men who had passed the physical exam to *aspirantes* who were worried about passing (Molina, 2011).

Having travelled at his own expense to the city, the *aspirante* would congregate with thousands of others outside the recruitment centre while waiting for his name to be called over a loudspeaker, perhaps “the next day or the next week. If luck runs against him, he may be around for a month before his name is called” (Galarza, 1956, p. 3).

Once his name was called, the *aspirante* entered the recruitment centre, where he could wait between 6 and 10 hours to be examined by the doctors, at which time he had to undress in front of as many as forty men (Rosas, 2006). The examinations could be humiliating. Schlosser (1993) reported that *braceros* were made to “await employment with numbers hung around their necks, then stripped naked and sprayed with a delousing agent” (p. 104). The would-be *bracero* was then interviewed by both American and Mexican officials and photographed. Then, he boarded a bus or a train for the long trip to the border. Those rejected for the Bracero Program, because they were too young or too old, too sick, or female, were directed to return home (Hernandez, 2006). Many, however, did not and made their own way to the U.S. border, crossed easily and illegally, and became Wetbacks.

Contracted *braceros* vary in their account of the trip to the U.S.A. Some lucky ones rode comfortable buses, but others were transported in cattle cars on the Mexican railways, without heat, toilets or drinking water. Depending on the location of the recruitment centre, the trip could take up to twenty hours (Cohen, 2011).

Tired, dirty, and hungry, *braceros* underwent a second inspection at a reception centre just inside the United States which duplicated the procedures they had undergone in Mexico (Molina, 2011). Naked and in groups, they were sprayed with a white powder, “to kill the Mexican fleas” (The Bracero Program, Testimony, para. 2). Finally, they were fed, usually an American-style sandwich, a food unfamiliar to tortilla-eating Mexican peasants. Nevertheless, “after several days without food, the sandwich tasted like glory....” (Campoya, J., Bracero testimony, para.1)

Afterwards, the farmers or their agents arrived to select the workers which were needed in their farms (The Bracero Program, Testimony, para. 2). Arriving *braceros* were screened, not only for physical characteristics such as calloused hands, but also for character traits that would make them ideal workers: “youth, servility, humility and docility” (Cohen, 2011, p. 99). In the documentary *Harvest of Loneliness*, Henry Anderson, who at the time was conducting research in public health, described the scene he witnessed at El Centro, the receiving centre close to the border in California, as a large hall where the representative of a grower association, seated before a desk, interviewed men standing in a long line before him. The representative was happy to explain to Anderson what his criteria were: “They had to be men who were apparently timid, docile, unlettered, and impoverished. Anybody who was well-dressed or well-spoken would be rejected” (Orozco, 2010, no page)

The post-war years

At the end of 1946, and although it had informed Mexico of its wish to terminate the Bracero Program, under pressure from the agricultural lobby, the U.S. government extended it until 1949, maintaining the broad outlines of the program, but with key changes in its administration (Palmunen, 2005). “...Control slipped into the hands of the individual growers from 1948 until 1951” (Bickerton, 2000, p 897). The government, which had been responsible for recruitment and transportation, “passed the burden, financial and otherwise, of recruiting and transporting the guest workers on to the growers” (Palmunen, 2005, p. 48). As soon as the government turned the responsibility for recruitment over to the employers, guest workers were exploited and abused (Palmunen, 2005). The result was that government-negotiated contracts were replaced by contracts negotiated directly by the growers and the *braceros*. First, since the growers would have to pay for transportation for the contracted *braceros* to the U.S., the recruitment centres were moved from the interior of Mexico to facilities closer to the border.

This meant that *aspirantes* would have to travel from their villages to border cities like Chihuahua, Aguascalientes and Ciudad Juarez on their own and at their own cost. Thousands of *aspirantes* camped outside the recruitment centres for weeks, and those rejected for *bracero* contracts found it expedient to cross the border without the authorization of the Mexican government or the sanction of the U.S. government to join the already large numbers of Wetbacks in the United States, who were bound by no contracts and enjoyed no protections at all (Palmunen, 2005). Regardless of where recruitment took place, the thousands of people waiting to be hired were a heart-breaking sight, for Mexico and its border cities were unable to provide basic services (Durand, 2007). In the film *Harvest of Loneliness*, Juan Zacate, a *bracero*, testified that outside the recruitment centre, the situation was desperate, as thousands of men were without food. He said “I have seen men eat banana peels, watermelon skin, even newspaper. They were that hungry” (Orozco, 2010).

In 1951, Public Law 78 was passed by the U.S. Congress. Under its provisions and after re-negotiations, the Bracero Accord of 1951 was signed, extending the program until 1964. Altogether, the Bracero Guest Worker Program brought in more than 2 million workers – many of them on multiple contracts - to work on American farms (Hernandez, 2006).

Illegal immigration

After 1946, while the Bracero Program continued apace, illegal immigration skyrocketed, and growers were quick to take advantage of the availability of un-attached workers to whom no safeguards nor conditions applied (Basok, 2002). Thus, could be observed in the fields of the Southwest the presence of “mixed crews” comprised of *braceros*, wetbacks, and even “locals,” the traditional American farmworker. Crossing the Mexican-American border was not difficult: it involved crossing the Rio Grande river (hence the term “wetback”) and avoiding the perennially-understaffed Border Patrol. Galarza (1964) noted that even in 1954 it was not possible to keep more than 200 patrolmen on duty at one time along a border which extends almost 2,000 miles. He implies that “it never appeared to be the intention of Congress to finance the Service adequately so that the gateway to illegal labor could be firmly closed” (p. 61).

Indeed, on at least two occasions in 1948 and in 1954, when negotiations with Mexico had temporarily broken down and *bracero* recruitment had temporarily ceased, word was put out in the Mexican border areas that recruitment of wetbacks would take place on the American side. Many wetbacks crossed into the United States under the nose of the Border Patrol and were promptly hired by growers waiting on the other side (Booth, 2012). The government of Mexico, which cooperated in the Bracero Program, was nevertheless opposed to illegal and uncontrolled migration of its citizens to the U.S., as illegal migration did not facilitate the return of its citizens after fulfilling their contracts, and it also threatened to drain manpower from areas where it was needed in Mexico, thereby jeopardizing the government’s project of industrialization (Hernandez, 2006). So, on occasions,

...when it was understood that the Mexican government intended to close the border...[Mexicans] began to wade the shallow river in sight of the Border Patrol, which received them with formality, herded them into temporary enclosures and immediately paroled them to the cotton growers, who trucked the men at once to the fields (Galarza, 1964, p. 49).

In addition, a process known as “drying out” was conceived and executed with the participation of the growers and the Border Patrol, whereby wetbacks –often by the busload and by pre-arrangement- were rounded up and taken to the nearest processing centre where they were encouraged to reach a toe across the border into Mexico, and then allowed to immediately regularize their status in the U.S. as *braceros*. The newly legal *braceros* were then returned to their employers with proper credentials (Galarza, 1964). Thus, any wetback was potentially a *bracero*, and this dehydration process enabled growers to retain the Mexicans who had demonstrated the desirable qualities of a submissive hard worker. As an indication of extent, in the fiscal year of 1950 only 19,813 new *braceros* were admitted, while 96,239 wetbacks were dried out and turned into *braceros* (Galarza, 1964).

Finally, the reverse process also existed: many legal *braceros*, unhappy at their assigned place of work, due to exploitation, lax housing standards, poor recruitment policies, withheld wages or any other reason, just threw away their papers and walked off to join the legions of wetbacks already at work in the farmlands (Palmunen, 2005). So, beginning in the post-war years and throughout the 22-year duration of the Bracero Program, illegal immigration increased alongside legal immigration. “Indeed, during the program’s existence, there were often more illegal immigrants than *braceros* employed in American agriculture (Schlosser, 1993, p. 104).

It should be noted that, although they often shared nationality and background, there existed some enmity between the *braceros* and the illegals, because *braceros* believed undocumented Mexican workers lowered wages and worsened working conditions (Hernandez, 2006).

Abuse of the Bracero at the Workplace

Although the Mexican government tried to negotiate guarantees for the *braceros* it allowed to emigrate, research has documented that these were often ignored, in particular after 1946 (Fernandez, 2010; Galarza, 1956; Mize, 2006 ; Molina, 2011; Palmunen, 2005 & Vogel, 2007). Agribusiness and its allies conspired to provide agribusiness with maximum profitability. The abuse and degrees thereof varied from worksite to worksite. Some farms abused in some ways but not in others, but all of the following have been documented:

Wages

According to the bilateral agreements, *braceros* were to receive what was called the “prevailing wage” for the type of work performed, not less than that which was offered to local hires in the same area. However, in practice, farmers and their representatives would meet once a year and determine in advance what the “prevailing wage” would be for that season. The agreed-upon amount per box or per pound would be announced publicly in the media and was the basis for the *bracero* contract. Notably absent from the local wage boards were any workers or worker organizations, so the prevailing wage was *de facto* set by the growers themselves (Fernandez, 2010).

Even though the *bracero*'s contract specified the hourly wage and piece rates for the job he was meant to perform, the choice to pay the worker by the hour or by the piece was the prerogative of the employer. Piece rates are based on how much a worker produces and he is usually paid a flat fee per item produced. As a result, the wage schedule was often changed from day to day at the whim –and to the benefit of- the employer. According to Mize (2006), often the *bracero* in the field did not know how much he would be paid that day, for...

On the most labor-intensive days, when the crops were not producing or needed cleaning to remove mold or insects, the pay was worst and on a piece rate. However, when pickings were good and the work was comparatively easy, the pay was on an hourly rate, so the amount did not depend on how much was picked (p. 93).

According to Durand (2007), this switching of pay schedules enabled the employer to pay the workers less. He asserts that when the job was paid as piecework, even if the migrant worker worked intensively for eight hours, sometimes his earnings did not reach the minimum established in the agreement. Galarza (1956), who interviewed hundreds of workers, reported several instances of simple cheating by the employer. In one case, the *bracero* said that the employer gave no receipt to the worker for his work, but recorded time in a time book, which he refused to show to the worker. If the worker disagreed with his wages, the foreman would get angry. Another *bracero*, who had been picking cotton by the pound, asked the employer to turn the scale so he could verify the weight for himself, but the employer became irate and began to shout “You think I am a robber? Your mother was a robber(p. 49).

Work conditions

The farmwork that *braceros* were contracted to do was supposed to be limited to “stoop” labor. They were not to operate machinery, drive trucks, pack produce or perform any job other than manual labor in the fields. If they performed any more skilled work, they were to be paid at a higher rate. In practice, however, “there was a conviction that once a grower was legally permitted to hire a *bracero*, the particular ways in which he was to usefully employ him was no matter for official concern” (Galarza, 1964, p 181) On one farm...

Although their permit was to pick cotton only, they would pick cotton during the day, but in the evenings and on Sundays they would repair fences or paint the farmer's house. However, they were only paid for the cotton picked from 6 am to 5 pm (The Bracero Program, Testimony, para. 3).

Farm labor is more physically demanding and less financially rewarding than almost any other kind of work (Schlosser, 1993). The work is dirty, tiring, and takes place in all types of weather. The jobs assigned to *braceros* were unremarkable in this aspect, except for the obligatory use of the “*cortito*,” or short hoe, a tool that, today, is illegal for fieldwork in most states in the U.S. because its use causes debilitating back injuries and constant pain.

At the time of the Bracero Program, a long-handled hoe was considered damaging to the plants. Indeed, to thin beet plants, for instance, the short hoe gave the worker more precision and less error, but the health consequences of using it were terrible. The field hand with a short hoe had to bend over, or stoop, constantly. At the end of a day with the short hoe, often in the blazing heat, the worker could hardly stand up (The Bracero Program).

Injury and accidents

Farm work is hazardous work. Mitchell (1961) reported data from the California Senate Fact-Finding Commission on Labor and Welfare which shows that in 1957, there were an average of 32.4 disabling injuries per thousand workers over all industries, but 50 disabling injuries per thousand in agriculture. The rate of injury in agriculture was third highest after mining and construction. In 1961, the rate of disabling injuries was still much higher in agriculture than over all industries (53.5 compared to 31.9 per thousand workers). While the risk of accidents was not unique to *braceros*, in some cases the lack of effort to avoid them can be described as abuse. For instance, to harvest lettuce, a sharp blade was used to cut the stems and peel off the spoiled leaves. When the pay was by piece and speed was desirable, its use could be dangerous. To harvest beets, *braceros* used a tool similar to a razor-sharp machete with, fixed to the end, a semi-curved three or four-inch hook. In particular when being paid by the piece, the *bracero* would try to work as fast as possible to pick up the beet with the hook and slice off the top in one swing (Valderrama & Rodriguez, 1995).

The work contract of the *braceros* specified that they were to travel, whether on long hauls or just from their barracks to the fields, in adequate transportation and during the daytime. In addition, state regulations were applicable: there should be seats, signals, safety equipment, protection against the weather, rest stops and licensed drivers. Nevertheless, overcrowded *braceros* were often transported, standing up, in tomato trucks, old buses and other inadequate vehicles (Galarza, 1956). Accidents took the lives of untold numbers of *braceros* (Orozco, 2010).

Housing

According to the Bracero agreements, sanitary housing was to be provided free to *braceros*. In some places it was, but in most it was not. *Braceros* could be found living in converted chicken coops, in markets, dilapidated bunkhouses, in tents, in barns, stables and shacks, without running water, sewers, toilets or any facilities for bathing (Galarza, 1956). According to Molina (2011), when substandard housing conditions resulted in disease, instead of blaming the conditions in which they were forced to live such as open sewers, the presence of refuse in the camps, and contaminated water, health authorities stigmatized Mexicans as carriers of disease with unhygienic living habits. In *Harvest of Loneliness*, the ex-bracero Raul Oseguera recalls that, in one camp, as there were no bathrooms, the workers had to wash and defecate “in the ditch” (Orozco, 2010). One of the narrators said that many bunkhouses were but “Quonset huts covered with a sheet of galvanized iron” in which the summer heat became intolerable (Orozco, 2010).

Food

The standard *bracero* contract was very clear in regards to the food. It stated that \$1.75 would be deducted from the worker’s pay every day for food, which was to be provided at cost. Theoretically, the worker had the right to provide his own meals and thereby keep \$1.50 per day. According to the contract, if the *bracero* opted to provide his own food, the employer was required to provide him with cooking and eating utensils, as well as a stove, fuel and water. However, in many camps, the *bracero* was not free to take the second option and was forced to eat the food provided by the grower, usually in a mess hall operated by a concessionaire. *Braceros* who questioned or opposed the growers had their contracts terminated and were repatriated to Mexico (Rosas, 2011). Although the employer had committed, in the contract, to provide free transportation to town at least once a week for the *bracero*, he often neglected this obligation, further impeding the *bracero*’s ability to prepare his own meals (Galarza, 1956 and 1964).

No single aspect of the Bracero Program was the cause of more irritation than the food services. The quality and insufficient quantity of food were the cause of incessant complaints on the part of *braceros*. Galarza (1956) says that is because the concessionaire benefited from the arrangement. The concessionaire’s profits derived from the difference between what the grower was allowed to charge the *bracero* and his expenses to provide the food. The cheaper the food provided, the more profit he was able to make. There were countless documented cases of food poisoning among the *braceros*.

In addition, the *braceros* were charged for food every day, whether or not they had worked. Galarza (1956) documented weekly pay checks of 65, 80 and 94 cents. In *Harvest of Loneliness*, ex-bracero Jose Hernandez testified that sometimes the weekly check was only a penny (Orozco, 2010)

Deductions

The pay that the *braceros* received was inconsistent and often featured unexpected and illegal deductions. The first to appear in 1951 were charges for wire “twistems.” On a section of a carrot field, the worker squatted or crawled on his knees, sorting by size and grading bunches of carrots that had been disinterred by a machine. To secure the bunches of carrots, he used a length of wire, usually covered in paper imprinted with the name of the grower. In 1951, the remuneration for this job was 28-30 cents a crate, and the worker was charged between 10 and 12 per cent of his wages for the wires (Mitchell, 1961). In 1952, the practice continued while it was challenged by the National Workers Agricultural Union. Although the U.S. Department of Labor defended the practice as customary and the growers gave other explanations and justifications, when the labor union announced its intention to bring a civil suit over the matter, the practice was stopped. No refunds were given to the workers, however (Mitchell, 1961).

Then, there was the issue of blankets, for even in cold temperatures, only one blanket was provided as per the contract. If the worker needed another one, he had to buy or rent it and the deduction would be made from his week’s pay. In California in 1952, the Bureau of Economic Security (part of the Department of Labor) found that “illegal blanket deductions were almost uniformly applied” (Mitchell, 1961, p. 257). The charges for blankets were stopped after provisions in Public Law 78 expressly forbade them in 1951 (Mitchell, 1961). Galarza (1956) documented that deductions from pay checks were inconsistently applied from ranch to ranch. Some pay checks listed illegal deductions, but other *braceros* received pay checks where money was withheld without any explanation or under the heading “Miscellaneous.”

Furthermore, by agreement with the Mexican government, for a number of years of the Bracero Program, ten per cent of the *bracero*’s wages were withheld from his pay. Under a compulsory savings scheme, the money was to be deposited in Mexico in two rural banks for the *bracero* upon his repatriation. In *Harvest of Loneliness*, numerous speakers testified that they never received this money (Orozco, 2010). Only decades later, and under pressure by the U.S. government, has some incomplete restitution been made by the government of Mexico (Orozco, 2010). Untold millions simply disappeared.

Finally, the *bracero* was forced to take out non-occupational accident insurance, and the premiums were deducted from his pay. Galarza (1956) has reported that, here too, an illegal profit was made by some in the form of kickbacks to the growers, claims processed but after the repatriation of the worker, or never processed nor paid.

Representation and collective bargaining

According to his contract, the *bracero* was free to meet with and elect representatives of his choice and enter into negotiations with employers, although he was not allowed to strike. However, in practice, the *braceros* were almost never allowed negotiate and were denied access to the staff of workers’ associations (Cohen, 2011). When they did elect representatives, they frequently found their representatives quickly transferred or repatriated (Mitchell, 2012). In *Merchants of Labor*, Galarza (1964) summarizes it as follows: “Mobility, bargaining, free associations, elections, concert action and self-determination were absent from the Bracero Program (p. 227).

Complaints

Braceros and undocumented workers had almost no recourse in cases of abuse or non-fulfilment by the employers of the provisions of the work contract. Growers had a simple remedy to avoid complaints: whenever a worker complained or filed an insurance claim, he could be branded an agitator and risked immediate deportation (Mitchell, 2012). In addition, there was always the threat of non-renewal of the work contract. After having greased palms all the way from Mexico to the U.S. and after having invested weeks or months waiting to be called, all *braceros* wanted a chance to work more. Even if they had not earned as much as the contract promised, they wanted the opportunity to do so, for the stipulated wage was far in excess of what they could earn in Mexico (Mitchell, 2012). There are numerous documented cases of the immediate transfer and disappearance of workers who had been the spokesmen for other workers (Galarza, 1956). As a result, fear kept the *braceros* from voicing complaints.

Moreover, the rural landscape and often distant *bracero* camps did not facilitate any complaining. The *braceros*, hampered by a language barrier, in unfamiliar territory, and in any case desirous of renewing their contract after its expiration, tended to tolerate injustice in its many forms. The *bracero* camps were so numerous and isolated that the chance of official investigation was negligible (Cohen, 2011). Mize (2006) has described it as “a coercive factory regime” in which the worker had very little power, as he was told to “shut up or go back” (p. 94).

The political climate in the U.S. after WWII was also hostile to any agitation on the part of workers, as the media and the public both engaged in “Red Scare” rhetoric. In Cuba, in the early 1950s, Fidel Castro had triumphed over the U.S.-backed Batista, and thereafter Americans became increasingly fearful of any activity linked to workers’ rights, unions, or communism. “Not only was grievance-filing discouraged, it was often impossible, since men generally did not know how to where to file” (Cohen, 2011, p. 142).

In spite of substantiated reports of abuses, deductions and other injustices, official action was rare and mostly ineffective. “Whenever workers or unions complained of maltreatment, an internal investigation, based in very narrow grounds, sided with the grower associations, only occasionally slapping a wrist and eliciting a promise to do better in the future” (Mitchell, 2012). Agribusiness had powerful allies in local businesses, county seats, program administrators, and in Washington (Cohen, 2011).

Negative effects of the Bracero Program

It negatively affected domestic workers

In spite of the U.S. government’s attestation that certification to import *braceros* would not produce a decline in employment conditions for U.S. citizens, it did. (19). “Some employers favored Mexicans ...for their tractability, deportability and willingness to work for lower wages” (Fernandez, 2010, p. 23). Since the *bracero* workers were captive and cheap, they came to dominate most crops, thereby displacing domestic workers (Cohen, 2011). There were several reasons for this dominance, including the fact that domestic workers required family housing, whereas the *braceros* were an all-male import and could be housed in barracks. In addition, being tied to one employer, *braceros* could be counted on to finish the harvest period, whatever the pay and conditions. Another reason domestic workers were displaced was the “prevailing wage.” As previously mentioned, these were determined in advance by local wage boards without worker or union input and announced to the public. In practice this meant that the “prevailing wage” was a very low one. Locals or domestic workers had to accept it or not work (Galarza, 1964).

Thus, wetbacks and *braceros* came to dominate certain areas of agriculture, squeezing out domestics. A double bind was established as follows: the growers would determine the prevailing wage. If not enough domestic workers accepted that wage, then the growers would receive certification to bring in *braceros*, as there was “*evidently* a labor shortage” (Mitchell, 2012, p. 90).

Furthermore, domestic workers –U.S. citizens or not—were not the hires of first choice of employers if they had access to *braceros* or to illegal immigrants. *Braceros*, regardless of conditions, were forbidden to move to a different farmer. Wetbacks, having no contract and no protections whatsoever, were highly profitable, although they “had a way of vanishing from camp overnight singly, or in groups, enticed by some runner who led them to greener pastures” (Mitchell, 2012, p. 83). Domestic workers could just move elsewhere when they were dissatisfied with the work conditions or the wages, and they often did, leaving employers without the manpower they needed to bring in the harvest.

In general, the Farm Placement Service and the media portrayed domestic workers as “unreliable, winos, incompetent, unstable or cantankerous” (Cohen, 2011, p. 58). In addition, in some cases, Mexicans together with technology displaced domestic workers who were already settled and unionized. In the Southwest, lettuce heads had traditionally been harvested from the field, then transported to packing sheds where the workers were unionized and paid at a higher rate. *Braceros* were not to be used to pack, as these jobs were supposed to be reserved for domestic workers. However, after 1946, growers quickly incorporated a huge new machine that moved along 12 rows of lettuces at a time. The field crew picked the lettuce and placed it on the machine, where conveyor belts packed the heads in boxes. Growers found that lettuce could be packed in the field, thus enabling them to pay *bracero* wages to pack their produce, avoiding payment to the domestic packers at the union-negotiated higher wage (Mitchell, 2012). Finally, *braceros* displaced domestics because of convenience. Henry Anderson, in *Harvest of Loneliness*, explains it thus: “Growers were not going to go out and recruit domestic workers as long as they knew the government would provide [workers] at their doorstep” (Gonzalez et al., 2010).

It depressed wages

Since *braceros* or illegal immigrants could be had for low pay, the wages offered for agricultural work became depressed. In particular during the war years, jobs were opening up in industrial sectors that were safer and better remunerated. One source reports that in 1944, *braceros* earned a “prevailing wage of forty cents for either a day or night shift, approximately sixty cents lower than the wages earned by unskilled native-born workers in other employment sectors” (Rosas, 2011, p. 586). So, unsurprisingly, domestic workers “were less inclined to take jobs in the agricultural sector” (Palmunen, 2005, page 47). Many studies have documented that during the Bracero years, wages remained low for farm work. For instance, a US Department of Labor study revealed that between 1953 and 1958 farm work in the U.S. in general had increased by 14%, but in over half of the areas and crops which used *braceros*, wages had decreased or stayed the same (Mitchell, 2012). The importation of *braceros* allowed agribusiness to maintain a surplus labor pool in which there were more workers than jobs (Orozco, 2010).

Finally, it is to be noted that in 1964, when the Bracero Program came to an end, “farm wages in California went up 23 percent” (Mitchell, 2012, p. 396).

It hindered unionization

It is not a coincidence that César Chávez was unable to effectively mobilize farmworkers until after the Bracero Program came to an end. After WWII, the United States saw a recurrence of union activity mostly under the provisions of the Wagner Act of 1935 that guaranteed industrial workers the right to organize. In the post-war years, farm workers also began to organize, in particular after a two-year dispute at the DiGiorgio Fruit Corporation that erupted in 1947, where *braceros* were openly used as strike-breakers and forced to the fields to replace the striking, predominantly domestic, workers. At DiGiorgio, *braceros* were openly escorted by government officials to the empty fields. It was only after the harvest was over that, after multiple union protests and legal actions, the *braceros* were removed (Cohen, 2011). According to Booth (2012), in the DiGiorgio conflict, *braceros* were “used simultaneously as strike-breakers and anti-immigrant scapegoats” (p.623).

During the twenty-two years of the Program, *braceros* were used innumerable times to cross picket lines, regardless of their feelings or convictions. Solidarity was not possible: the *bracero* work contract explicitly forbade them from striking or from honouring local strikes of other workers by refusing to cross picket lines (Cohen, 2011).

From totally opposing the Bracero Program in the beginning, little by little, unions such as the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC), with the support of the Catholic Church, began to show interest in *braceros*, but they were opposed by the powerful growers and their allies. *Braceros* were also rejected by their domestic counterparts. They were seen as competitors and foreigners, not as natural class allies. In the end, the class divisions would persist until the 1960s, impeding the unions’ progress and development until then (Cohen, 2011).

It established migratory patterns for illegal immigration

Illegal immigration increased side-by-side with the Bracero Program, even though Operation Wetback of 1954 resulted in the deportation by U.S. immigration officials of more than one million persons, most of whom were Mexican (Hernandez, 2006). It is telling to report that deportation of illegal entrants increased from 29,176 in 1944 to 101,478 in 1954 (Mitchell, 2012).

Using undocumented workers had many advantages, not least of which was that such workers were in no position to make wage or housing demands.... With undocumented workers, growers could exercise what they saw as their ‘right to hire and fire labor as we [see] fit (Mitchell, 2012, p.81).

The Mexican government was opposed to illegal immigration of its nationals to the U.S. and collaborated actively in policing its side of the border, particularly as it was under pressure from Mexican agribusiness (mainly cotton) in the northern part of the country, which lacked manpower (Hernandez, 2006). The U.S. government has been criticized for its hypocrisy: on one hand its lax and underfunded Border Patrol enabled the entry of thousands of illegal wetbacks to exploitation by American growers, while on the other hand it deported them, usually after the harvest had taken place (Schlosser, 1993).

In 1986 Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which included a special amnesty for illegal immigrants who could prove they had done farm work in the United States in the previous year.

It eventually granted more than a million illegal immigrants legal status in the United States, in what has been called “one of the greatest immigration frauds in American history” due to the widespread use of falsified papers (Schlosser, 1993, p.104).

Since sanctions for employing illegal immigrants, provided in the 1986 IRCA reform have rarely been applied, illegal immigration continued after 1986 and continues apace today, in spite of efforts to police the border with Mexico. This has resulted in an estimated illegal population in the U.S. of over 11 million, of which 56% are from Mexico (Passel & Cohn, 2011). Faced with a massive flow of unauthorized immigration from Mexico, U.S. officials have concentrated on interdicting those attempting illegal entry, but this strategy has only increasingly placed border-crossing in the hands of organized crime (Bickerton, 2000). Today, would-be illegal immigrants pay higher fees and face greater dangers, but they still come.

Since agribusiness has greatly increased in the Southwest of the United States since WWII and in spite of increased mechanization, the whole system of agriculture in the Southwest of the United States now depends on a steady supply of illegal immigrants, as the present H2A temporary farmworker visa system is inadequate (Schlosser, 1993).

Employers, including but not limited to agriculture, want a continuous supply of cheap controllable labor. This includes either undocumented immigrant workers or contract workers such as *braceros*, both of whom enter the country under conditions that restrict their autonomy (De La Garza, 1993).

Finally, many historians concur with Schlosser (1993) who has averred that the Bracero Program established the “social networks and migratory patterns responsible for subsequent waves of illegal immigrants” (p. 104).

It destroyed families

The Bracero Program must also be considered through a human lens that transcends national borders. There is no doubt that it was devastating for the families of those who departed to work in the United States. In 1940, the average Mexican family had six children (Cordero, 2000). A 1943 census of San Martin de Hidalgo, Jalisco, showed that, on average, each female relative of a *bracero* was responsible for three children and two adults (Rosas, 2006). The *braceros* were all rural Mexican men. They travelled to work in the United States for periods of up to six months, and their contracts were renewable by their employers. They left behind women and children who struggled to survive without the traditional breadwinner, even if remittances from the U.S. were regular. Seven years into the Bracero Program, an estimated 385,000 Mexican men had been separated from their families. However, the Mexican government did not recognize women as heads of household and did not provide any support to them (Rosas, 2011).

While their *bracero* husbands were away, Mexican wives were exposed to an exhausting and exploitative situation as they tried to bring in enough money to feed their children. Working up to 14 hours per day, they worked cleaning other people’s homes; mending, washing and ironing other people’s clothing, preparing and vending food items; raising crops and livestock, in addition to running small businesses (Rosas, 2011).

To help their overburdened mothers, children worked also, caring for smaller siblings, farming, or performing unskilled work for others, earning the equivalent of seventy-five cents per week (Rosas, 2011).

Some female heads of household migrated to urban centres, in particular to those places where *bracero* selection centres were located, as these offered the best chance for employment. But migration, for women, came at a heavy social price, as they bore the stigma of the sex trade that flourished around the selection centres, and upon their return to their own villages, the “prostitutes” were often rejected (Rosas, 2006).

The problem was compounded by the fact that *braceros* were rarely able to improve their families’ standard of living unless they accepted repeated and extended contracts in the U.S. which, in turn, caused deterioration in their family relationships. An estimated 172,000 Mexican men renewed their contracts for five consecutive years. Rosas (2006) avers “In the best of circumstances, Mexican men would return, finance their family’s nutritional needs, and save enough to finance bribes that would allow them to renew their contracts” (p. 188)

Finally, many *braceros* “skipped out or remained in the United States as undocumented immigrants Their failure to return...and reunite with their families alienated them from the Mexican children and women they left behind” (Rosas, 2011, p. 386)

Braceros often felt that migration had undermined their authority. “Men not only lost tight control over the actions and movements of women and children, they were also stripped of their individual reputations” (Cohen, 2011, p. 191).

On the other hand, the *bracero*'s experience in the United States was alienating as well. His day was rigidly scheduled: he was up by 4:00 or 5:00 am, worked in the fields for as long as 10-12 hours, and returned to his male-only barracks in time to perform the demeaning tasks that, in Mexico, had been the domain of women, such as laundry and cleaning. He spent days in the fields and nights doing women's work, while cut off from legitimate access to women's labor and bodies (Cohen, 2011).

Alienation was often relieved by drinking, as “it became a common way to escape the drudgery, monotony, and isolation of their physical labors and surroundings” (Cohen, 2011, p. 110). In addition, the government of Mexico estimated that 82 per cent of returning *braceros* divorced their wives (Rosas, 2006).

Positive effects of the Bracero Program

The Bracero Program did provide undeniable benefits to both Mexico and the United States, improving bilateral relations, as it recognized the existence of a bi-national labor market which was of concern to both countries (Durand, 2007). For the first time, Mexico was acknowledged as a partner, rather than a recipient of decisions made unilaterally by the United States, as it allowed Mexico to negotiate and voice its objections, as in the case of the exclusion, in the early years, of Texas due to the discrimination and racism prevailing in that state.

It alleviated unemployment

In the aftermath of the 1910-1920 Mexican revolution, there was considerable disarray in Mexico, in particular in rural areas, where employment was scarce and poorly paid. Although some people had benefited from the land reform initiatives that dismantled the large *haciendas* and had acquired plots of land, they still usually depended on rainfall which, in Mexico, is unreliable. The successive governments did not provide support to small farmers in the form of credit or seeds. These post-revolution decades coincided with a period in which the Mexican population doubled: there were many more mouths to feed from each plot of land (Cordero, 2000). The Bracero Program, at least in the beginning, appeared to offer a way for men to earn enough money in the United States to support their families, as it promised at least 60 pesos for one day of work, the equivalent of three weeks of rural agricultural work in Mexico (Rosas, 2006). The Mexican government, in the public relations campaign, touted that, since ten per cent of their salary was to be withheld, upon their return, *braceros* would be able to invest in fertilizers or buy farm machinery and so modernize agriculture in Mexico with their savings.

Over the twenty-two years of its existence, the Bracero Program did alleviate unemployment in Mexico, for it allowed over 4 million Mexicans to emigrate (Galarza, 1964).

It became an important source of income

The remittances from *braceros*, though small and intermittent on a personal level, were nevertheless large on the national level. Eventually, remittances from the U.S. amounted to Mexico's third largest industry, according to a 1963 NBC newscast, narrated by Chet Huntley that is reproduced in *Harvest of Loneliness* (Orozco, 2010).

It benefitted the poorest in Mexico

In spite of its human consequences, the Bracero Program did produce economic benefits for the poorest segment of Mexican population: the rural landless. Archives are rife with oral life stories that attest to *braceros* having opened small businesses like bakeries, barbershops, eateries and the like (The Bracero Program). For the first time, characteristics typical of a rural peasantry such as calloused hands were valued and desirable, extolled by the government of Mexico as indicators of manliness (Cohen, 2011). Although at the price of social exclusion, the Bracero Program did indirectly precipitate the economic emancipation of Mexican women, as it forced them into employment and leadership (Rosas, 2006).

With the Bracero Program, field workers who were the neediest in Mexico, “had access to greater economic resources which they would never have acquired working in Mexico” (Durand, 2007, p. 32).

Many historians maintain that the greatest benefit was to the United States, both in economic and in human terms.

Some positive effects of the Bracero Program were that:

It alleviated manpower shortages

The Bracero Program began as emergency war-time labor shortage relief, and it was successful in its original intent. As young Americans departed for WWII, the remaining workforce gravitated to emerging jobs in industry, leaving agriculture without sufficient workforce. Agriculture is different from industry in that the need for workers is seasonal and dependent on the weather (Schlosser, 1993). Galarza (1964) asserts that

It may well have been that the abundance of Mexican contract labor accounted for crop conservation. No crops were lost due to manpower shortages in the state [of California] between 1942 and 1960 (p. 240).

Throughout its 22-year existence, the Bracero Program assured manpower for farmers, even to those who did not use *braceros*. It was clear that “the supply of labor for those who did not hire aliens was undoubtedly eased” (Galarza, 1964, p. 241).

It kept prices for agricultural products low

Even today, the price of labor is an essential component of the price of any agricultural product and can make the difference between a profit and a loss for a farmer (Schlosser, 1993). Before mechanization of farming, it was even more so. The ready availability of cheap labor reduced some of the uncertainty faced by the farmers, as they could be assured of enough hands when needed. It also kept prices low for the consumer in the United States and enabled growers to produce labor-intensive crops such as asparagus and strawberries (Mitchell, 2012 & Palmunen, 2005). It is indicative of the importance of the Bracero Program that after 1965, the cultivation of white asparagus, which requires about four times more labor than tomatoes, declined precipitously. “By 1979, asparagus acreage was only 55 per cent of the postwar peak in 1959” (Mitchell, 2012, p. 411).

It changed the growing landscape

Although it cannot be said that the end of the Bracero Program alone forced the mechanization of American farming, the sudden unavailability of cheap labor was influential in encouraging the investment in and use of farm machinery. A beet harvester had been in place since the war, but the crop still required thinning and planting by hand. During the Bracero Program, as mentioned earlier, a monster lettuce harvester had made possible packing in the field. In 1959, a tomato harvester was invented, but not readily introduced, as it required capital investment and since hand pickers were available and cheap (Mitchell, 2012). The 1960s saw the introduction of a mechanical cotton harvester. However, after the Bracero Program, mechanization of agriculture increased and created a “significant transformation of the growing landscape” as the new machines required large-scale farming: a minimum of one-hundred acre fields in order to work at full capacity (Mitchell, 2012, p. 413).

Mechanization was not limited to the use of the harvesters. Eventually, farmers had to invest in direct-seeders, power tillers, chemicals for weed control, bulk bin carriers, and other items to maximize output (Mitchell, 2012). As a result, the number of small, family farms declined in favour of industrial-type agribusiness (Galarza, 1964).

It enabled the growth of US agribusiness

American agribusiness benefited the most from both the Bracero Program and of the concomitant illegal immigration during the same period, in that growers were able to increase their profits since the cost of labor was so small. The surplus pool of labor enabled them to easily rid themselves of workers who did not give satisfaction and to replace them with others. Growers were able to reject for employment those who, like domestic workers, required more than basic investment in barracks-type housing or had any bargaining power concerning their wages. Collusion with government and other officials gave the growers almost unlimited impunity for violations of the work contract’s conditions. The presence of the *braceros* enabled growers to resist strikes without risking their harvests or their crops. Because they profited, growers were able to increase their acreage, invest in machines, and afford the expenses associated with mechanization. The government’s lax enforcement of the borders has enabled illegal immigration. Quoting Philip L. Martin, a member of the Commission on Agricultural Labor, a group mandated by the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, Schlosser (1995) asserts that, not only was there collusion, but that “we have essentially privatized the immigration policy of the country, and left it in hands of California’s growers” (p. 106). According to Galarza (1964) both the Bracero Program and illegal immigration have been a tremendous subsidy for agribusiness.

Discussion

The United States' economy is based on capitalism, whereby the laws of supply and demand determine the price of commodities in a free market. This was true during the Bracero period and is true today. So we are led to wonder: do capitalism and a free market always lead to exploitation? According to De La Garza (1993), it does.

Employers, including but not limited to agriculture, want a continuous supply of cheap controllable labor. This includes either undocumented immigrant workers or contract workers such as braceros, both of whom enter the country under conditions that restrict their autonomy (p. 896).

Some believe that any guest-worker program, such as the Braceros Program, can be equated with indentured servitude. Linking the legal status of a worker to a binding contract shifts all the power to the side of the employer and will inevitably lead to abuse (Vogel, 2007). Indeed, Lee G. Williams, the U.S. Department of Labor in charge of the Bracero Program, described it as a system of "legalized slavery" (The Bracero Program).

It seems clear that the United States benefited more than Mexico from the Bracero Program and that, in human terms, it did incalculable damage to those Mexicans who participated in it. There remains the question of intent: was it a calculated ploy to exploit the *braceros*, or was the intent more justly conceived?

When the *braceros*, hoping to mitigate the poverty in their home villages, migrated to the United States in search of work, it was "ruthlessly manipulated both by Mexican politicians...and by the U.S. agriculture and its political allies" (Booth, 2012, p. 623).

According to Booth (2012), the Bracero Program was only "an early experiment in the process which would lead, eventually, to an 'integrated global capitalism'" (p. 623).

Vogel (2007), in an avowedly socialist publication, concurs with Booth that the Bracero Program was a system for exploiting workers both domestic and Mexican and that, furthermore, a similar program succeeded it.

U.S. capitalism invaded Mexico in pursuit of cheap labor the year after the termination of the Bracero Agreement. In 1965, Mexican president signed into law the Border Industrialization Program that established the maquiladora system in Mexico...later expanded under the North American Free Trade Agreement (p. 6).

In the final lines of his book *They saved the crops*, Mitchell (2011) says exploitation and profit were inextricably linked in the Bracero Program. According to him, The Bracero Program, a force for destabilization of working people, was also a force for the stabilization of the profitable landscape: it saved the crops – precisely *because* it destroyed lives (p. 422).

In conclusion, the Bracero Program, like most of history, can be interpreted from a variety of angles. From the economic point of view, it did benefit the United States much more than Mexico. From a human point of view, its consequences were disastrous for both the citizens of the U.S. and Mexico who, in the Southwest, are practically the same people, since not only were the farmlands in question once part of Mexico, but their populations hail predominantly from there.

Unfortunately, after considering the past and the increasing economic gaps present in the United States between classes, I will have to conclude that capitalism, enchanting because of the freedoms, inventions and wealth that characterize it, is not an acceptable system in moral terms, as the wealth of some implies the poverty of others, be they citizens of the same or of another country. In capitalism and the free market, some must be losers for others to gain. Schlosser (1993) said it better than I:

We have been told...to bow down before 'the market.' We have placed our faith in the laws of supply and demand. What has been forgotten, or ignored, is that the market rewards only efficiency. Every other human value gets in its way.... No deity that man has ever worshiped is more ruthless and more hollow than the free market unchecked.... Left to its own devices the free market always seeks a work force that is hungry, desperate, and cheap—a work force that is anything but free (p. 108).

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