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**“The Ambivalence of Race: The Dillingham Commission and Mexican Immigrants”**  
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If the Dillingham Commission were appointed today, I think we can guess that the focus of its research questions and field analysis would be squarely on Mexicans and other Latin Americans, with an ancillary research agenda on terrorism and immigration, perhaps like the Commission’s Volume 18, on *Immigrants and Crime*. (That volume, reflecting its time, was particularly interested in Italians, the immigrant group with the highest raw numbers in U.S. jails for murder and attempted murder.)<sup>1</sup> For the 1907 Dillingham Commission, however, Mexicans were at best a sidelight: the term “Mexican” appears in 35 of the volumes (the singular is how it would appear in tables), but the word “Mexicans,” which would be used in textual analyses, appears in only 15 of them (compare to 42 and 39 for Italian/s). The Commission’s focus, as we all know, was squarely on southern and eastern Europeans, although it also dedicated a considerable amount of work to understanding the Japanese of the west coast, reflecting the recent Gentleman’s Agreement and conflicts over schools and citizenship for Asian immigrants on the West Coast, especially San Francisco. This explains the rather curious titles of the three volumes on immigrants in the American West, all called “*Japanese and other Immigrant Races....*” [Around a quarter-million Japanese immigrated to the US between 1899-1924; compare this to around a million Scandinavians, just to name one other random example.]

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What follows offers a few thoughts on Mexicans' role in the Commission. This early foray into a new book project on the Dillingham Commission and Progressive America links this new work with my previous research. My first book, which comes out—here's my plug—in Spring 2009, uses a mining and ranching region of southern Arizona populated by immigrants from forty countries to explore why eastern and southern Europeans ended up on the “white” side of the color line, while Mexicans—who were also legally white—did not.<sup>2</sup> So, building on that, what I hope to do in this paper is to consider the role that Mexicans had in the proceedings of the Dillingham Commission. It was quite a small one, in fact, and here I outline what I think are four reasons why.

**1. First of all, there were not that many Mexicans in the United States in the early twentieth century.** Thomas Archdeacon found 447,065 Mexicans came to the U.S. between 1899-1924 (an estimate and undercount, surely, since they were by definition undocumented—documents were not even technically required until the latter part of the period). Contrast this figure with 3.8 million Italians for the same time period.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Southern Italians ranked first in the Commission's accounting of number of entries from 1898-1910, “Hebrews” were second, and Mexicans just 28<sup>th</sup> out of 39.<sup>4</sup> Those Mexicans who were here (as well as Mexican Americans who were here before the US was) were clustered almost entirely in the Southwest. In 1920 88.1 percent of all Mexicans in the United States lived in California, Texas, and Arizona.<sup>5</sup> Even in the Colorado mining industry, the Commission's sample of 1252 foreign-born workers included only 36 Mexicans.<sup>6</sup>

Part of the immigration “crisis” today is that issues that the Southwest has dealt with for a very long time—large numbers of undocumented migrants; depressed wages as a consequence of

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segmented labor markets—are now national phenomena. Undocumented Mexican migration has been a fact of life in the Southwest and in pockets like Chicago for more than a hundred years, but to become a *national* political issue, it needed to jump these tracks and become a relevant issue at Wal-Mart warehouses in Arkansas, construction sites on Long Island, slaughterhouses in Iowa, and at chicken processors in North Carolina. That had not happened in 1907. In effect, it was possible to hermetically seal the “problem” of Mexican immigration in the Southwest. Furthermore, prior to the Mexican Revolution it should be noted that Mexican immigration was not really considered a “problem” at all.

These patterns of distribution are evident in the absence of Mexicans in the Dillingham Commission’s data. In Vol. 23, for example, the Commission compiled statistics on 17,141 households of miners or wage-earners in manufacturing between the Rocky Mountains and the Atlantic Seaboard. But of this large number (the data the Commission collected is truly staggering, even by today’s computer-aided standpoint) only 42 – or just 0.2 percent of the households – were Mexican. These were industries where one might have expected to find Mexican workers. What this tells us is how few of them there were outside the Southwest. This explains why it was politically viable for southwestern employers to lobby successfully for the immigration laws created in response to the reports to exempt Mexicans (the 1917 Immigration Act exempted them from the literacy test and head tax until 1921). The 1920s quota laws did not include people from the western hemisphere, of whom Mexicans were the largest potential migrant group.

**2. Related to Mexicans’ small numbers and regional concentration, the Dillingham Commission was not interested in the issues facing the Southwest—a very marginal region**

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**economically with the exception of copper-mining and some agriculture.** The Commission had only one western member—William Wheeler—a businessman from San Francisco, *not* a place with a large Mexican community nor industries in which they predominated. The Commission members saw Ellis Island—not Angel Island, and not the borders—as *the* immigrant experience. The numbers support them, and in fairness the Commission did report on number of migrant crossings at the borders and other related statistics. Yet the vast majority of their investigative energy was focused on populations that were not prevalent in the West. And in the West, the focus on the Japanese was motivated by current political concerns, not by which group represented the largest amount of workers.

Actually, since this panel is trafficking a bit in what-ifs, I think that if the Dillingham Commission had been convened just ten years later, it might have paid much more attention to Mexicans. Mexicans' census numbers (which were notoriously low-ball) tripled between 1910 and 1920 from about 225,000 to over 650,000. And, as Mae Ngai and others have shown, Mexicans began to assume a greater symbolic importance in immigration debates once the effects of quotas on eastern and southern Europeans began to be apparent.<sup>7</sup> Mexicans' relative proportion of all immigrants went up as the quotas choked off previous feeder groups.

Mexicans were not totally ignored by the federal government in the period of the Dillingham Commission, however. While the Dillingham Commission was doing its work, an equally energetic investigator for the Department of Labor was conducting precisely the sort of study that the Dillingham Commission lacked. In 1908, Victor Clark published his report on Mexican labor in the U.S. Bureau of Labor *Bulletin*.<sup>8</sup> Like the Dillingham Commission reports for historians of European immigration, Clark's report remains indispensable and infuriating for historians of Mexicans in the United States. Like its Dillingham cousin, Clark's investigation

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mixes interesting empirical data with cringe-inducing cultural stereotypes. So, Clark could make arguments like that Mexican workers needed only “an adobe hut...even a shelter of branches against the wind” and a “serape...to lie on at night,” because “the wants of the Mexican peon are hardly more complex than those of the Indian from whom he is descended,” and therefore low wages did not harm him.<sup>9</sup> Clark, like the Dillingham Commission, intermixed bone-headed commentary with in-depth statistical evidence and interviews. Perhaps the Commission did not want to duplicate Clark’s effort, which was briefly cited—without crediting Clark—in the brief chapter on mining and smelting in Arizona, discussed below.<sup>10</sup>

**3. But in addition, the Commission ran out of funding.** In its report on agriculture on the Pacific Coast and in the rocky Mountain states—a study which had, considering the subject, tiny numbers of Mexican research subjects—the Commission noted that it had intended to do a study of “farmers of different races in California, Oregon, Washington, Colorado, and Utah, and of Mexicans in Arizona and New Mexico....The suspension of the general field work in the spring of 1909, however, made it impossible to carry out the plans which had been matured.”<sup>11</sup> It is worth speculating whether more complete coverage of Mexicans in the field work would have set Mexicans on a different course in the restriction years and tied their trajectory more closely to that of European immigrants.

My speculation might make more sense attached to a specific example. Of all the segments of the economy studied by the Commission, the western railroad, mining, and smelting industries employed by far the most Mexicans. In fact, it could almost be said in the early twentieth century that these were the *only* industries in the United States in which Mexicans yet played a truly central role. The Southwest was a region very isolated and unique in 1907-1911;

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in its generalities it shared much with colonial societies but in its particulars, at least for the continental United States, it was somewhat *sui generis*. This could lead one to argue either that it was imperative to give it a closer look; or, conversely, that its status as an outlier made it expendable given limited funds. As it turned out, as the report notes, "...The data for mining and smelting in Arizona...are very limited owing to the fact that the investigation had only been begun when the work of the field agents of the Commission was suspended."<sup>12</sup>

Even with that caveat, however, the Commission was able to secure statistical data on 2,307 workers in two of the largest copper mining districts in the United States, Bisbee and Clifton-Morenci-Metcalf. These were two particularly interesting examples for the Dillingham Commission, because the first (Bisbee) was known as a "white man's camp" and the second (Clifton) as a "Mexican camp." These labels referred to who was allowed to work in the best jobs underground. In an industry that depended on immigrant workers from all over the world, these labels were especially provocative, because they begged the questions "who is white?" and "who is Mexican?" Both mining districts, for instance, had increasing numbers of Northern Italians working in them.<sup>13</sup> Northern Italians generally faced far less discrimination than southern, but in the Arizona copper-mining districts, they were not much about the station of Mexicans. In fact, in Bisbee, the white man's camp, when Italians began arriving in 1903, the newspaper reported that "a question of great moment...[was] agitating the miners"—that question was whether to allow Italians in the white man's camp. Some residents complained that the new Italians "could live as no white man can."<sup>14</sup> Given the very different racial dynamics of the two camps—in Bisbee, Mexicans could work only as "top men," doing work above-ground, while in Clifton, they could work as skilled miners underground—it is unfortunate that the Dillingham Commission's report lumped together the employment data from the two camps. As

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a result, it is not possible to discern from the quantitative material any differences in how the ethnoracial hierarchies of the two camps operated. In addition, because of the funding cuts, “the special agent was unable to make a personal investigation of the mines...[, and] for this reason the sections on race changes, relations of the races employed, and employers’ opinions of the races employed, are omitted”<sup>15</sup>—all of which would be nice to know in places known by racial labels.

Even with these omissions, however, the data make certain tendencies clear. The most interesting is that northern Italians and Mexicans—in both the “white man’s camp” and the “Mexican camp”—found themselves in very similar situations. “Only 2 of 159 North Italians and 2 of 598 Mexicans were foremen, and these men were employed...largely because of their value as interpreters.”<sup>16</sup> The report noted, “The Mexicans and Italians are usually employed at the simplest unskilled labor, or if employed at other work, are *employed for lower wages* than those paid their American and north European competitors.”<sup>17</sup> This practice was known as the dual-wage system. While it is usually associated with Mexicans, the fact that it applied similarly to Italians is important to note. “Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and Italians” earned the lowest wage, \$1.25-\$1.50 per day.

The most interesting thing about the report—the aspect that makes it most frustrating that it did not include field work—was that the Commission, which was hardly shy about blaming culture or work ethic or physiology for wage disparities, explicitly named racial prejudice as the culprit for the race-based wage system in the mines. In both the white man’s camp and the Mexican camp, the report noted, “discrimination was exercised against the Mexicans and the North Italians in the payment of wages.” In the white man’s camp, “nearly all of the native-born and North European miners and general laborers received \$3.50 per day,” but “nearly all” the

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Mexicans “were paid only \$1.50...” While the report conceded that top men of all races were usually the lowest paid, it was clear that “*only racial discrimination* can explain the great differences that existed in the district between the wages of these Mexican surface laborers and those of native-born and north European employees engaged in other kinds of common labor.” In addition, Spaniards, South Italians, North Italians, and Mexicans received “wages [that] were lower than those paid native-born and North Europeans *engaged in the same or similar occupations.*” “The low earnings of the Mexicans and the North Italians” exaggerated the large difference between native-born and foreign-born wages, obscuring the role of race as opposed to nativity. “No other group [except for rare exceptions of Italians and Spanish] earned less than \$2.50.”<sup>18</sup>

The issue, clearly, was not nativity, but race. 87.8 percent of natives of England earned between \$3.50 and \$4 (in the regular miner wage range), whereas only 11.9 percent of northern Italians did. Only 0.6% of the Italians earned more than \$4; the largest proportion made \$2 to \$2.50. “All told, 93.3 percent of the representatives of this race [northern Italians] earned less than \$2.50 per day” at a time when “white” miners earned \$3.50. This example shows the conclusions that more research about Mexicans might have reached—for the mines of Arizona suggest the very real possibility that Mexicans and Italians occupied almost the exact same position in the racial hierarchy of that industry.

Unlike the studies of the Southwest, full funding was possible for *Immigrants in Industries* Vol. 16, Part 17: Copper Mining and Smelting, which surveyed workers in Upper Peninsula and in copper-mining region of SE Tennessee. Michigan’s Upper Peninsula was second to Arizona in copper production (Montana was third), so it did represent a large proportion of that industry. But it is a shame, from a historical perspective, that southeastern

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Tennessee by quirk of funding received more attention than the Arizona copper fields, thus resulting in less analysis of Mexican workers, who would become the predominant labor force of the smelter industry. (The Commission’s study of the smelter industry in Arizona, which also had its field work canceled, found that out of 1566 employees at the Clifton and Douglas, Arizona, smelters, 60 percent were Mexican; even in 1909 they constituted the highest percentage of any nationality in western smelting, and this would only increase over time.).<sup>19</sup> From the standpoint of the historical researcher (that is, *me*) this is especially disappointing since one of the main topics the copper-industry study addressed was “Racial Displacements,” or the progression of one “racial” group to another in a particular industry.<sup>20</sup>

This brings me, finally, to my last point.

#### **4. For the Commission, Mexicans were an anomaly wrapped in an enigma.**

Not unlike the Caribbeans and West Indians in Melanie Shell-Weiss’s research, Mexicans did not fit nicely into the paradigms of “off-white” or “in-between race” immigrant groups that structured the Dillingham Commission’s investigations. Mexicans’ migration experience was different; their racial status was ambiguous; their status as low-paid, but welcomed, immigrants was unusual.

Some of the confusion about Mexicans is evident in the Commission’s *Dictionary of Races and Peoples*. The definition of “Mexican” seemed rather inconsistent about what it was defining—was it a racial category or a national one? The definition began, “Mexican: Any native of Mexico who is neither of Negro nor of Indian descent. Defined thus for immigration purposes, because Negroes and American Indians (see) are listed separately regardless of nativity (cf. *Cuban* and *Spanish American*.)” The Mexican population, unlike that of Cuba, is mainly of

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Indian or mixed origin and *is therefore largely excluded from this definition.*” So, weirdly, “the Mexican population” was excluded from the definition of “Mexican.” The definition continues, “While 70 per cent of the inhabitants of Cuba are white, less than 20 per cent of the people of Mexico are of pure white blood. About 40 per cent (5,000,000) are of pure Indian blood, to whom must be added 43 per cent of mixed blood....Mexico is Spanish as to official language, [and] as to the greater part of its white population, and as to type of civilization....”<sup>21</sup>

From this definition, it would appear that the only people who were “Mexicans” were actually “Spanish.” The debate over Mexican-as-national-label-or-as-racial-label had some affinity with another debate the Commission engaged in: whether “Hebrew” was a “race” or a “religion.” In any case, this definition of Mexicans obscured as much as it revealed. It did, however, suggest some hardening resistance to “mongrel” or “mixed” races, of which Mexicans were the paradigmatic example. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, with which the United States had acquired much of the Southwest, had promised the right to American citizenship for the erstwhile Mexican citizens residing in the ceded area. Because the treaty of 1848 predated the fourteenth amendment, which abolished racial classifications for citizenship, this meant that, technically, Mexicans were white in the eyes of the American law, because a 1790 law allowed only white immigrants to naturalize.<sup>22</sup> Of course *de jure* and *de facto* varied significantly—though in some places much more than others. Over time, racial prejudice and classification of Mexicans increased, as this definition suggested, and “Juan Crow” laws had become widespread. These racial hardenings and shudderings over racial mixture are evident in the *Dictionary*’s definition.

## Concluding Thoughts

For the Commission, then, Mexicans were basically outliers. This would be very different today, of course, when they would be of central concern to a similar body and when the racial assumptions about southern and eastern Europeans would seem outlandish and embarrassing and certainly naïve. But many of the stereotypes about Mexicans evident in the report and its era continue to have versions today. Perhaps one legacy of the Commission's relative neglect of Mexican immigrants is the many unanswered questions and passionate disagreements about border policy in the United States.

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Notes to the Dillingham Commission reports are abbreviated here to title and volume number. All the reports can be accessed at <http://library.stanford.edu/depts/dlp/ebrary/dillingham/body.shtml> (last accessed 30 May 2008).

<sup>1</sup> *Immigration and Crime*, Vol. 18, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Katherine Benton-Cohen, *Borderline Americans: Making Racial Divisions on the Arizona Borderlands* (Cambridge, Mass., forthcoming 2009). I am aware of Hasia R. Diner's recent critique of whiteness studies in this body's journal. She makes many valid critiques of the "lapses of analysis" in these works, and how whiteness's explanatory power has been exaggerated; however, the article does not address the reality that Mexicans were also legally white yet—unlike Europeans—ended up "non-white." See "The World of Whiteness," *Historically Speaking* (September/October 2007), 20-22.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas J. Archdeacon, *Becoming American: An Ethnic History* (New York, 1983), 118-119.

<sup>4</sup> *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, Vol. 5, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Archdeacon, 141.

<sup>6</sup> *Japanese and Other Immigrant Races in Pacific Coast and Rocky Mountain States, vol. 3-Diversified industries*, Vol. 25, p. 166.

<sup>7</sup> Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Victor S. Clark, "Mexican Labor in the United States." *Bureau of Labor Bulletin* 78 (1908): 466-522.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Clark, quoted in Dru McGinnis, "The Influence of Organized Labor on the Making of the Arizona Constitution" (M.A. Thesis, University of Arizona, 1930), 18.

<sup>10</sup> See Vol. 25, p.130.

<sup>11</sup> *Immigrants in industries: Japanese and Other Immigrant Races in the Pacific Coast and Rocky Mountain States*, Vol. 25, 287.

<sup>12</sup> Vol. 25, p. 95.

<sup>13</sup> Phylis Martinelli of St. Mary's College in California has done fascinating and thorough quantitative and qualitative research on Italians in Bisbee that relies on this and other data. She is the definitive source on these matters, but what follows is my own reading of the Dillingham Commission's data.

<sup>14</sup> "No Foreign Labor Wanted," *Bisbee Daily Review*, 27 May 1903, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Vol. 25, p. 125

<sup>16</sup> Vol. 25, p. 129-130.

<sup>17</sup> Vol, 25, p. 130.

<sup>18</sup> Vol. 25, p. 131.

<sup>19</sup> Vol. 25, p. 187, 208. This was true even though Montana and Utah had no Mexican smelter workers and Colorado only had six, p. 209.

<sup>20</sup> For example, see the discussion in Vol. 16's Anthracite Coal Mining section pp 592-593 (though it does not address Mexicans).

<sup>21</sup> *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, Vol. 5, p. 96.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, 1998), 7.