

The Mexican and Latino Question

What Is to Be Done?

RALPH ARMBRUSTER-SANDOVAL

Enrique M. Buelna, *Chicano Communists and the Struggle for Social Justice* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018), 277 pages, \$35.95, paperback.

Armando Ibarra, Alfredo Carlos, and Rodolfo D. Torres, *The Latino Question: Politics, Labouring Classes, and the Next Left* (London: Pluto Books, 2018), 219 pages, \$24.95, paperback.

In their foundational article, “The Mexican Question in the Southwest,” published in *The Communist* in 1939, Emma Tenayuca and Homer Brooks argued that the oppression experienced by Mexican people on a daily basis stemmed from the U.S.-Mexico War. After that war ended in 1848, the “Mexican people” (either “foreign or native born”) became a “conquered people.” As Tenayuca and Brooks note, “from the very beginning, they were robbed of their land, a process that has continued even up to the present time.”¹ They further contend that “the status of the Mexican people as an oppressed national group may be compared in a number of respects with that of the Negro today. The policy of a wage differential, based upon the super-exploitation of the Negroes, has been carried over from the South and applied to the Mexican population in the Southwest. The treatment accorded the Mexicans is also a carryover to the United States’ imperialistic exploitation of Latin America.”² Tenayuca was just one of many Mexican Americans who embraced Marxist and communist views in the 1930s.

In his excellent book *Chicano Communists and the Struggle for Social Justice*, Enrique M. Buelna examines the life of Ralph Cuarón, a Mexican-American or Chicano seaman, furniture maker, father, husband, and lifelong activist who joined the Communist Party at age 19 during the Second World War. Cuarón was born in Los Angeles in 1923 and his family lived in the multiracial, multiethnic, working-class Boyle Heights neighborhood. Los Angeles’ Mexican population took off during this time period, reaching nearly one hundred thousand in 1930. The ensuing Great Depression sparked intense racism and xenophobia, culminating in the repatriation

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or deportation of nearly two million Mexicans, most of whom were U.S. citizens. Cuarón's family faced severe economic challenges during this period, prompting Ralph to work with the Civilian Conservation Corps and later the Merchant Marines after the Second World War began. In this latter capacity, he joined the Congress of Industrial Organizations-affiliated National Maritime Union and became acquainted with members who were in the Communist Party and introduced him to Marxist literature such as *The Nature of Dialectical Materialism*. And yet, as crucial as these texts were, Cuarón's lived experiences were perhaps even more critical. As he stated, "it was easy for me to understand the persecution of the Mexican through an understanding of class struggle. It was very easy for me to understand that my own suffering that I had endured as a child—the impoverishment and persecution as a young Mexican youth. My life was my education into Communism."³

After the Second World War ended, the Cold War heated up, with progressive and leftist unions such as the National Maritime Union purging its more radical members who belonged to the Communist Party. Kicked out, Cuarón searched for a year before landing a job in the United Furniture Workers of America Local 576 in Los Angeles. Local 576 had several critical Mexican-American members who were also deeply involved with the Communist Party. Those experiences were extremely formative as Cuarón later became involved with the electoral campaign of Edward Roybal for the Los Angeles city council and the Community Service Organization in the late 1940s. During that era, he also joined the multiracial Civil Rights Congress, which focused on the attacks on civil liberties and constitutional rights that commenced right after the Second World War ended. His involvement with the Civil Rights Congress was short-lived, however, as local Communist Party members were not pleased with his fierce advocacy of organizing and targeting Mexican workers. The Communist Party, despite Tenayuca and Brooks's "Mexican Question," had largely ignored this segment of the working class, seeing them as a "national minority group" rather than an oppressed nation, similar to the way the Party classified African Americans in the South from the late 1920s onward. While Cuarón could have left the Communist Party based on these key theoretical and political differences, he stayed and tried to push the Party to take a much more militant and proactive stance toward organizing Mexican workers.

Over time, Cuarón would pay a price for his principled stance on the "Mexican Question." However, for several more years, Cuarón remained in the Party, working tirelessly to elect Henry Wallace, who ran for president under the Independent Progressive Party banner in 1948. Operating

under the banner “Amigos de Wallace,” Wallace and his comrades mobilized working-class Mexican Americans in Los Angeles. Despite holding a huge rally in east Los Angeles and inspiring people all over the nation, Wallace received just 2.4 percent of the popular vote. Shortly thereafter, Cuarón became involved with the Mexican American National Association, which maintained very close ties to the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers. The International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers did not purge its radical members as part of the McCarthyite Red Scare in the late 1940s; indeed, the union collaborated with Hollywood 10 figures such as Herbert Biberman and Paul Jarrico to make the iconic film *Salt of the Earth*. Cuarón appeared in the blacklisted film as an extra. Finally, in the early 1950s, Cuarón participated in the Los Angeles Committee for the Protection for the Foreign Born that emerged after the antiradical, anti-immigrant McCarran-Walter Act was passed. Cuarón also continued to press the Communist Party to take a more assertive approach on the Mexican question, but after Nikita Khrushchev’s shocking revelations regarding Joseph Stalin’s abuses in 1956 and continued conflicts with Party officials in the late 1950s, Cuarón effectively drifted away from the Party.⁴

In the 1960s, Cuarón turned toward housing and education issues in east Los Angeles. Inspired by radical architectural ideas and communal housing, Cuarón demolished his home and built an apartment complex in which his family and other families could live. The residence on Princeton Street served as an incubator for social change, as key Chicana student activists such as Henry Gamboa, Moctesuma Esparza, Steve Valencia, and Mita Cuarón, Ralph’s daughter, lived in the multifamily complex. These youth were later crucially involved in the historic east Los Angeles “blow outs,” which involved nearly twenty thousand high school students walking out in March 1968 to protest educational injustices. Sal Castro, a highly motivational high school teacher who inspired many students to stand up for justice, attended some meetings at the Princeton Street complex during the student movement. In the 1970s and ’80s, the Cuaróns lived in Hemet (located in the Inland Empire, eighty miles from east Los Angeles) and Ralph gained employment as a custodian at the University of California, Riverside. He quickly became elected president of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees Local 3246. While on campus, he formed ties with other unions such as the American Federation of Teachers, which included lecturers and faculty members like sociology professor Edna Bonacich, who credited Cuarón as one of her most influential mentors.⁵ After a serious heart attack, Cuarón retired from the union in 1984 and died in 2002.

In the early twenty-first century, the Mexican question remained, although it became known as the “Latino question” after considerable immigration from Central America in the 1980s and ’90s. In their co-authored book, appropriately titled *The Latino Question: Politics, Labouring Classes, and the Next Left*, Armando Ibarra, Alfredo Carlos, and Rodolfo D. Torres deconstruct the word *Latino*, arguing that it “obscures more than it clarifies” based on how it homogenizes an extremely diverse population. Indeed, within the “Latino” category, Mexicans make up more than 60 percent of the overall population, followed by Puerto Ricans, Salvadorans, and Cubans. Alongside these ethnic differences, the “Latino” population is differentiated by class, gender, race, sexuality, citizenship, region, age, occupation, and many other factors that make it nearly impossible to speak of a unified group, as is the case with other ethnic groups.

Currently, there are nearly sixty million Latinxs in the United States, or just over 17 percent of the entire population. By 2050, there will be 132 million Latinxs, or 30 percent of the U.S. population. What accounts for these increasing numbers? In their initial chapter, Ibarra, Carlos, and Torres develop what they call the “empire theory of migration.” As popularly expressed in Juan González’s book *Harvest of Empire*, the empire theory of migration contends that immigration is the end result or harvest of U.S. imperialist policies in Mexico and Latin America for well over a century.⁶ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, U.S. economic domination in Mexico facilitated unrest, sparking revolutionary movements that lasted ten years (1910–20). During that period, one million Mexicans moved to the United States, becoming incorporated into the economy in working-class, low-paid, non-unionized occupations. Despite their numerous contributions, Mexicans were blamed for the Great Depression and nearly two million were deported. During the Second World War, the Bracero Program was instituted due to labor shortages, bringing millions of Mexicans to the United States as temporary agricultural workers. After the war ended, the program continued even after a mass deportation campaign, known as Operation Wetback, was carried out in the early 1950s. Then, in the 1980s and ’90s, because of Mexico’s embrace of neoliberal economic policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, millions of Mexicans, fleeing poverty, food insecurity, and unemployment, migrated to the United States.

Ibarra, Carlos, and Torres, however, do not focus on the huge increase of Central Americans into the United States in the 1980s and ’90s. U.S.-backed military regimes in El Salvador and Guatemala were responsible for mass human rights abuses, including genocide in the latter, mostly Mayan Indigenous, country. More than one hundred thousand Salvador-

ans and two hundred thousand Guatemalans were killed during the civil wars in both countries. Despite the assassination of Archbishop Óscar Romero in El Salvador in March 1980, the United States continued to send military assistance to the country's generals, many of whom were trained at the infamous School of the Americas. In Guatemala, a U.S.-backed coup led by the CIA in 1954 toppled a democratically elected government, installing a ruthless military dictatorship that launched a "dirty war" against working-class, Indigenous *campesinos*. Fearing for their lives, hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans and Guatemalans fled to the United States, underscoring the empire theory of migration thesis.

Operating alongside the Mexican question is now the "Central American Question" in Chicana and Latinx Studies. Recently, the University of California, Los Angeles, César E. Chávez Chicana/o Studies Department changed its name to the Chicana/o and Central American Studies Department.⁷ While no other departments have followed suit yet, some departments of Chicana/o Studies have facilitated the emergence of Central American Studies departments and minors. The relationship between Mexicans and Central Americans has been marked by conflict and cooperation, particularly in the greater Los Angeles region. In their concluding chapter on "Cultural Political Economy and Alternative Futures," Ibarra, Carlos, and Torres rightfully emphasize the role played by "immigrant rights organizers formed in the Los Angeles Marxist-Leninist circles of the 1970s," who were crucial in the historic immigrant rights marches of May 1, 2006.⁸ However, these "old school" Chicana organizers collaborated with Central Americans who were active in social movements in their own countries, as well as in Los Angeles in the 1980s and '90s.

Aside from this omission, *The Latino Question* raises vital issues, just as Tenayuca and Brooks did some eighty years earlier. What is strikingly similar in both texts is how the authors situate the oppressive conditions of Mexicans, Central Americans, and Latin Americans in general within the framework of global capitalism and Marxist political economy. While Ibarra, Carlos, and Torres could have relied on the work of Walter Dignolo, Anibal Quijano, and the "coloniality of power" paradigm, they relied on Marxist urban studies scholars who have written extensively about neoliberalism and capitalist restructuring in major metropolitan areas.⁹ They also quite strategically and pragmatically focused on the largest Latinx population—Mexicans and Mexican Americans—in the United States. In a very revealing chapter on "Mexican Families and Migrant Work in California," the authors demonstrate that "the agricultural workforce is comprised of over 90% Mexican foreign-born laborers."¹⁰ These workers sustain the broader capitalist economy; they are forcibly

uprooted from their homes and, once they arrive, perform back-breaking, environmentally hazardous labor that feeds the nation. And yet, they are poorly paid and often singled out for creating numerous social problems. Given their structural location in the political economy, what will they do? That is the “Latino” or “Mexican Question” – will they rise up and demand far-reaching change or will they turn inward and embrace what Greg Prieto has called the “shell,” a protective device that many immigrants adopt based on their precarious existence and the ever-present threat of deportation?¹¹

Because an open “war of maneuver” is currently impractical, a more nuanced “war of position” (in Gramscian terms) is warranted, Ibarra, Carlos, and Torres argue. Thus, while the May Day 2006 immigrant rights protests were inspiring, in today’s climate, given the criminal, xenophobic Donald Trump regime, such overt actions are highly improbable. What is to be done, then? In the book’s fourth chapter, “Racism, Capitalist Inequality, and the Cooperative Mode of Production,” the authors skillfully examine the perils and opportunities that worker cooperatives might engender regarding radical social change. Cooperatives open up space for economic democracy and alternatives to capitalism.

Currently, the “Latino question” is an open one. Latinx workers literally undergird the capitalist system, feeding us, working long hours for little pay in the fields and restaurants. As “essential workers,” they cannot practice “social distancing” during the COVID-19 pandemic. These are profoundly frightening times. These two books illustrate that, for well over a century, Mexican Americans, Mexicans, Chicanxs, and Latinxs have raised profound existential questions about their place in the world. Let us hope that these questions might finally be resolved, not only for them, but for all people.

Notes

1. Emma Tenayuca and Homer Brooks, “The Mexican Question in the Southwest,” *The Communist*, March 1939, 259.
2. Tenayuca and Brooks, 262.
3. Enrique M. Buelna, *Chicano Communists and the Struggle for Social Justice* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018), 13.
4. Buelna, *Chicano Communists and the Struggle for Social Justice*, 160.
5. Buelna, *Chicano Communists and the Struggle for Social Justice*, 206. Dr. Bonachich was my dissertation adviser at University of California, Riverside, in the 1990s.
6. Juan González, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (New York: Penguin, 2001).
7. Marilyn Chavez-Martinez, “Chicana/o Studies Department Votes on Adding Central American Studies to Name,” *Daily Bruin*, November 25, 2019.
8. Armando Ibarra, Alfredo Carlos, and Rodolfo D. Torres, *The Latino Question: Politics, Labouring Classes, and the Next Left* (London: Pluto, 2018), 167.
9. Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui, eds., *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
10. Ibarra, Carlos, and Torres, *The Latino Question*, 63.
11. Greg Prieto, *Immigrants Under Threat: Risk and Resistance in Deportation Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 82–106.

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how to save liberal democracy [presenting it as a caste problem]. Du Bois, Oliver Cromwell Cox and a cadre of Black social scientists had concluded the race problem remained the problem of the 20th century and could not be disguised by using other language. Furthermore, they concluded that racism and capitalism were so intimately connected that racial oppression could not be resolved without eliminating capitalism; socialism as a system, they reasoned, was necessary to resolve the crisis of what had crystallized into a white supremacist social system.

It is precisely to get rid of theories of racial capitalism, which are the result of more than a century of social-scientific investigations into the race problem in the United States and globally, going back to figures such as Du Bois (also an MR author) and Cox – whose works are now having a widespread impact at a movement level – that Wilkerson’s book has now become so key to shoring up the ruling ideology. (See the special issue of *Monthly Review* on racial capitalism, July–August 2020.)

Corrections

On page 64, paragraph 3, lines 2–3 of the “Notes from the Editors” in the October 2020 issue, “World Association of Marxian Political Economy” should have been “World Association of Political Economy.”

On page 4, penultimate paragraph, line 9 of “China 2020” in the October 2020 issue, “peoples’ revolutionary war” should have been “people’s revolutionary war.”

In endnote 6 of “China 2020” in the October 2020 issue, “March 31, 2019” should have been “March 31, 2020.”

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ledge in his important book *Friedrich Engels and Modern Social Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019 – see Paul Blackledge, “Engels vs. Marx?,” *Monthly Review* 72, no. 1 [May 2020]).

However, the sudden revival of interest in Engels that we are witnessing today has its source not so much in refutations of the divergence thesis as in the importance that Engels’s work has once again acquired in our time, in the attempt to address the ecological problem. His analysis of the dialectics of nature was to play a formative role in the development of modern ecological and evolutionary views and is now being rediscovered in that context. It is this more substantive issue that is taken up by John Bellamy Foster and Kaan Kangal in their articles in this issue, building on their recent analyses in Foster’s *The Return of Nature: Socialism and Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020) and Kangal’s *Friedrich Engels and the Dialectics of Nature* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).



With the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, the growing influence of theories of racial capitalism, and the massive protests in the United States in May and June 2020, it has been necessary for the U.S. ruling class to seek an alternative ideological perspective with which to divide a still-growing insurgency. The threat to the powers that be was starkly evident in the decision of non-Black, mostly working-class populations to cross the color line and stand beside the Black population in protesting police lynchings of Black people, on a level unprecedented in U.S. history since the Civil War. The fear instilled at the top by the appearance of such a massive race-class alliance helps explain the extraordinary media promotion directed at Isabel Wilkerson’s *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent* (New York: Random House, 2020), which has been praised to the skies in recent months by such establishment outlets as the *New York Times*, *New Yorker*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Los Angeles Times*.

A Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Wilkerson laces her book with useful (if fairly well-known) references to the horrors of U.S. slavery and the influence of the U.S. Jim Crow system on Nazi ideology. However, the main purpose of her book is to resurrect the long-defunct concept of caste in the U.S. context, returning to the ideas of Gunnar Myrdal and a host of others, and polemicizing against the major criticism of such a perspective in Oliver Cromwell Cox’s *Caste, Class, and Race* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1959; see also Cox’s “Race and Caste: A Distinction,” *American Journal of Sociology* [March 1945]). The objective of Wilkerson’s argument is to erase race and class from liberal discussions, replacing them with caste (presented as the structural reality behind U.S. race relations). In doing so, she draws on the very different historical and cultural experience of India. U.S. society, we are told, is primarily a caste system, like India, with whites on top and Black people at the bottom. (She treats Latinx and Asian immigrants as constituting a “blurred” category of “middle castes,” while Native Americans are seen as “exiled in their own country.” Isabel Wilkerson, “America’s Enduring Caste System,” *New York Times*, July 1, 2020.)

As Anthony Monteiro, a noted scholar of W. E. B. Du Bois, explains in the *Black Agenda Report* (September 23, 2020), Wilkerson’s caste

arguments go back to the middle 1940s and the white establishments’ efforts to whitewash race from social discourse. The reason was to prevent the idea being used for purposes akin to the ways Nazism did. Gunnar Myrdal and Ashley Montague, well-meaning liberals, led the charge. Myrdal’s massive study of race *An American Dilemma* wrestled unsuccessfully with the crises of racial oppression and

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to everyday life in England. Once, when a brawl was about to break out in a pub between German exiles and native Englishmen in a dispute over the Crimean War, Engels managed to restore calm and a certain levity by speaking loudly in a Lancashire accent (Rosemary Ashton, *Little Germany* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986], 63). He lived long enough to see the rise of a socialist movement in England in the late 1880s and '90s, and to play a significant part on the margins of the English movement, always as Frederick Engels.

In his time, Engels's publications in English, of which there were many (he wrote about sixty articles for the *Pall Mall Gazette* alone) – including his contributions to William Morris's *Commonweal*; his classic work *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, when it was finally translated into English (a U.S. edition appeared in 1887, followed by an English one in 1892); the 1888 English-language edition of *The Communist Manifesto*; and the 1892 edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* – all carried the byline Frederick Engels. He was also listed in this way on the title page of the 1887 English translation of Karl Marx's *Capital*, volume 1. It was thus in conformity with Engels's own personal preferences that, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels's *Collected Works*, as well as in most treatments of him in English-language publications, he was chiefly referred to as Frederick Engels, reflecting also his active role in English life.

Nowadays, however, Engels is more frequently referred to as Friedrich than as Frederick in English-language publications, imposing a certain global standardization – to the point that the bylines of works of his, including translations that he approved in his lifetime, have frequently been altered in this respect. This is mostly the product of the last few decades. Thus, in the introduction to the thirtieth anniversary edition of his book, *The Life and Thought of Friedrich Engels* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), Terrell Carver writes that when his book first came out, it was “somewhat rebellious, with a self-consciously Germanizing ‘Friedrich’ in the title, rather than the more anglicizing ‘Frederick.’ He [Engels] appeared that way in most English-language editions of his works” (4–5). What Carver fails to mention, however, is that the reason for this was that Engels himself chose to have his name appear that way in English-language editions of his works.



All of this is of course a very minor issue in comparison to the much bigger question, associated with the alleged divergence of Engels's analysis from Marx. Engels is often accused today (short of any real evidence) of being a crude, positivistic thinker, and is frequently blamed for the emergence of deterministic versions of Marxism in the Second and Third Internationals. Such critical views toward Engels have been actively promoted in various ways by numerous eminent scholars within the Western Marxist philosophical tradition, including such leading academic figures as Carver, David McClellan, and Gareth Stedman Jones. Nevertheless, the attempts radically to separate Marx and Engels, often going so far as to attribute Marxism as an ideology to Engels rather than to Marx, have been strongly refuted in recent years – most recently and notably by Paul Black-

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