

The Hubris of Anglo Racial Thought
Emilio Zamora, Professor
Department of History, University of Texas at Austin

Ultra-conservatives like the Republican members of the Texas State Legislature continue to condemn the history of race thinking, racial discrimination, and racial inequality as a regular subject of study and learning in our classrooms, and they do it *descaradamente* (with a shameless, consummate “hubris”).

Their reluctance to consider this history and its continuing relevance is understandable. Why would they turn to history if it proves that race explains major parts of our recorded experience, including slavery, Jim Crow, differences in employment, education, and political representation, health disparities, voter suppression, injuries to a sense of worth, and racialized identities among Anglos, Mexicans, and Blacks? According to a growing number of accounts by the press, ultra-conservatives instead prefer to falsely accuse teachers of advancing a theory of race that blames Anglos and their children for the evils of race. They continue to make such accusations without evidence while also advancing the notion that race is not necessary in the classroom.

Texas Republicans seem to believe that they do not have to explain anything since they are in power, meaning that they can do as they please without fearing any repercussions at the polls. They are mistaken. In a Democracy, those in power are obligated to advance the principle of shared governance that minimally requires a fair, honest, and open process of dialogue and law-making in cooperation with the opposition. The citizenry also rightfully expects comportment of the highest order and deserves the greatest and highest good that their representatives can provide. Their monumental failing at this moment of the debate on the teaching of race, however, is that they do not ground their views on history.

To demonstrate this, I offer a racialized text from Mexican American history to argue that sensible and verifiable observations of race in our state’s history offer important lessons not solely for our youth, but also for those whose job in government is to serve and represent the people of Texas well:

When first discovered, Texas consisted of mostly cosmic junk, including cactus, rattlesnakes, horned toads, tarantulas and four kinds of climate. Later, the greaser, a species of human invented by the Spaniards moved in and the rattlesnakes moved north in search of a better society. In the past seventy years, however, great improvement have been made. (Zamora, p. 49)

Adopted as a resolution offered by the delegates from El Paso to the annual meeting of the Texas State Federation of Labor held in San Antonio in 1912, the statement clearly broadcasts widespread racial animus against Mexicans, expressed in a language of comical derision intended to foster public approval.

The clearest meaning in the text is that the ostensibly superior Anglos have a demonstrated ability to develop Texas, whereas Mexicans do not, reducing them to such a lowly,

sub-human species that even rattlesnakes hold them in contempt. Aside from being deeply offensive, the resolution exaggerates the role of Anglos in Texas history that is nevertheless emblematic of their baseless, racialized resentment—other than for the shameful purpose of reinforcing unequal relations. The lesson is less about Mexicans than it is about the narcissistic and intolerant posture of Anglo supremacist culture.

An underlying theme, or subtext, in the resolution is that an evolutionary interpretation of history based on the Darwinian model of the “fittest” supports its conclusion of socially superior Anglos and socially inferior Mexicans. Implicit in this theme is the rejection of the lesser known evolutionary view of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck who underscored that micro and macro organisms had an equal capacity to adjust to life’s difficulties and to evolve. At its core, the resolution denies Mexicans their natural, “God-given” worth and potential, while heralding the appearance of a savior-like people imbued with a hubris to demonstrate their self-professed biological and cultural superiority, an unending political project.

The historical context adds meaning to the resolution and underscores the importance of using race as a tool for understanding our past. The first contextual point that is worth noting is that the delegates from El Paso proposed the resolution and that the labor meeting occurred in San Antonio. This suggests that the large concentrations of Mexicans in the two cities did not deter the assembly from openly stating their racialized views. They may have thought it necessary to adopt the resolution to psychologically prepare the Anglo and possibly Black population for the unsavory plans by local, state, and federal authorities to deport and repatriate to Mexico hundreds of thousands of Mexican Nationals and Mexican Americans in the 1920s and 1930s. Organized labor and nativist organizations (made up mostly of Anglos) were complicit in thought and deed when they supported the expulsions because of the unfounded fear that employers would replace them with Mexican workers, depress their wages, and destroy the unions.

The context of an increasingly bloated labor market and the fears of labor competition also offers evidence of a robust organizational life in Mexican communities that, according to several labor histories, included large numbers of independent workers’ organizations and mutual aid societies. In other words, Mexican workers were demonstrating a capacity to self-organize and their leadership from places like El Paso and San Antonio had begun to question the failure by Anglo organized labor to incorporate them, calling out their exclusion as a callous form of racial discrimination. The resolution by organized labor, in other words, may have been more than an expression of racial thinking that disregarded fellow Mexican unionists, derailing any possibility of inter-ethnic solidarity. The segregationist Anglo unionists were acting like a labor cartel in response to a perceived racialized threat.

An examination of a single act in history like a resolution, even if accompanied by sensible observations of text, subtext, and context, may seem to some like a limited exercise in the historical interpretation of the significance of race. The study of race in the history of the United States, however, inescapably consists of such focused observations, underscoring their undisputable thematic importance in our classrooms.

Texas historians have also developed a rich historiography on race and ethnic relations since the early 1970s that allows us to see the 1912 resolution as a representative record of racism that we must heed, especially at a moment like this when ultra-conservative Republicans seek to deny a vast, illuminating body of knowledge of our country's racial past and present.

THE WORLD OF THE MEXICAN WORKER IN TEXAS

EMILIO ZAMORA



Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993). To Purchase the book: <https://www.amazon.com/Mexican-Worker-Centennial-Association-Students/dp/0890966788>

