

“SAP-HEADED MEXICANS”: THE *POST*’S FRAMING OF MEXICO
IN THE TRIBAL TWENTIES



Tad Tuleja

ABSTRACT

In the 1920s, the Saturday Evening Post championed an ideology of progress that applauded hard work, “clean living,” and American economic interests. Editor George Horace Lorimer believed this ideology was being threatened by the government and people of postrevolutionary Mexico. This article shows how Lorimer used text and photography to construct a stereotypically backward Mexico that by contrast proved the superiority of US business culture. It argues that the Post’s framing of Mexico, ostensibly based on eye-witness observation, actually filtered out evidence of progress and naturalized a premodern “Mexicanity” that drew on centuries-old clichés about sloth and disorder.

KEYWORDS: Saturday Evening Post, Mexico, George Horace Lorimer, stereotypes, modernism

Mexican immigration is not in itself a problem. It is an acute symptom of disorder, and what it represents is thoughtless, reckless living.

—Garet Garrett, “Government by Tumult”

Photographs are a way that we structure the world around us.

They are not a picture of it.

—Sol Worth, *Studying Visual Communication*

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For the first third of the twentieth century, the *Saturday Evening Post* was “America’s magazine.” A failing weekly in 1897, it was bought that year by publisher Cyrus Curtis, who wanted it to become a man’s version of his successful *Ladies Home Journal*. With his hiring of a young businessman, George Horace Lorimer, as editor two years later, Curtis’s aspiration was quick to mature. Beginning with fewer than 100,000 subscribers in 1899, Lorimer managed the *Post*’s affairs so well that his ten-year anniversary saw circulation pass 1 million. At his retirement in 1937, it approached 3 million.¹

This success reflected Lorimer’s genius in packaging middle-class optimism as an ideology of progress. That ideology, deftly skewered by Sinclair Lewis in his 1922 novel *Babbitt*, became a secular gospel privileging commerce, Americanism, and clean living. Lorimer invoked it in a declaration of ideals written just after he became editor:

There is nothing worthy or permanent in life that is not clean, and in its plans and purposes the new Saturday Evening Post preaches and practices the gospel of cleanliness. It appeals to the great mass of intelligent people who make homes and love them, who choose good lives and live them, who seek friends and cherish them, who select the best recreations and enjoy them.²

Lorimer’s gospel evinced a belief in the virtue of industry, its promise being that of a thousand self-help tracts: Play fair, work hard, and success will follow. In embracing this version of the Protestant ethic, Lorimer succeeded in “codifying the ground rules that explained and defined Americanism,” with the classless, industrious businessman as its principal exemplar.³ The promotion of that ideology made the *Post* the nation’s primary “vehicle of typical American success themes.”⁴ It also positioned the magazine staunchly against perceived threats to US economic interests and what nativists routinely applauded as the American way of life.

In the 1920s, one perceived source of those threats was the nation’s southern neighbor, just then recovering from ten years of bloody revolution. Throughout the period that historian John Higham called the “tribal twenties,”⁵ the *Post* depicted Mexico as a foe of modernity and a source of disorder, becoming the country’s “chief vehicle for anti-Mexican propaganda.”⁶ That propaganda, feeding on stereotypes of Montesquieu’s listless South and the New World’s indolent “greaser,”⁷ made the *Post* a respectable platform for racist xenophobia. Lorimer’s white supremacist

leanings may have been most obvious in his overt ridicule of black people,⁸ but his magazine's treatment of Mexicans displayed an equally demeaning rhetoric. It was deployed chiefly against two perceived threats to Lorimer's America: one coming from the Mexican government and the other from the "witless peons" who were crossing the Rio Grande in search of work.

To counter that dual threat, Lorimer employed respected anti-immigration writers such as Kenneth Roberts. But it was not only their journalistic skills that painted the picture. Articles describing Mexican disorder were amply illustrated with photographs "proving" the case. In this essay I focus on the ways in which these "transparent" pieces of evidence reveal not the mimetic recording of facts but the production or (to use the currently fashionable term) the "construction" of a conventional "Mexicanity" that reflected old racist tropes about Latin America.

VISUAL PROOF: FILTER AND FRAME

This is not to say that Lorimer's illustrators lied. The situation is more complicated than conscious deception. The case is rather that any traveler's eye-witness representation of culturally identified "others" is driven relatively little by what is "out there," and hardly more by the representer's "choice" of scenes, but more by visual and conceptual frames already in place—historically inbred, as it were—long before the traveler has set out on a journey. In his classic study *Public Opinion*, Lorimer's contemporary Walter Lippmann phrased it with customary precision: "For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture."⁹ Or, as anthropologist Edmund Carpenter put it, "We say, 'If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it,' but the phrase really should be, 'If I hadn't believed it with all my heart, I wouldn't have seen it.'"¹⁰ With those comments as touchstones, we can easily imagine that as members of distinct social and racial fractions, Lorimer's photographers were predisposed to point their cameras toward certain objects and situations while avoiding or simply not seeing others. The result was photographic evidence that illustrated what was already "known" and that therefore naturalized a slanted, if not expressly manipulated, image of Mexican reality.

Despite its early celebrity as a truth-telling machine—the “pencil of nature” in Henry Fox Talbot’s famous phrase—the camera is only as “objective” as the inclinations of its operator. For Anglo magazine staffers “capturing” post-revolutionary Mexico, those inclinations were conditioned by a long-standing “Southernizing” perspective that, much like Edward Said’s famous Orientalizing perspective, “othered” the steamy South as lascivious and lazy—the made-to-order cultural foil to the industrious North. Whatever the personal inclinations of the *Post*’s photographers, that foil was an embedded given they could not unsee. And one that Lorimer, who approved all illustrations personally,¹¹ was happy to endorse.

The foregrounding of that foil depended on the interplay of two compositional operations. To reveal Mexico as irretrievably backward, the camera had first to ignore or turn away from all evidence of modernity; this was a *filtering* practice that excluded everything that violated conventional expectations. Then the camera had to zero in on those familiar “south of the border” metonyms that satisfied the Anglo understanding of “Mexicanity”; this was a *framing* practice that reduced Lippman’s “blooming, buzzing confusion” to established clichés. Those clichés, whether they indexed indolence (siestas) or celebration (fiestas), confirmed Mexico as an affront to capitalist labor. To the extent that this was an agreeable Anglo fiction, we may say that the *Post*’s framing of Mexico was not just compositional but *forensic*. In the court of public opinion, Mexico was indicted for not progressing.

Art critic Alan Sekula once wrote that “every photographic image is a sign, above all, of someone’s investment in the sending of a message.”¹² In the 1920s, the message that America was sending about itself—one of the bustling nation’s master narratives—was that bourgeois industry is the key to a life well lived. Lorimer’s *Post* invoked Mexico not just as a negative proof of that ideal but also as a warning: Life below the border was backward *and* its backwardness threatened American progress.

To some degree the threat was a cultural challenge, in that Mexico had long been seen as a Land of Cockayne, a place that could lure the good bourgeois into intemperance and sloth. Some of the *Post*’s illustrations, indeed, played on the “pleasant peasant” stereotype, positioning Mexico as the home of acedia, and its people, in their “typical” native dress, as visually alluring. I will expand on this point later in the essay. After 1917, the perceived threat became economic as well, as the Mexican government, in the wake of revolution, tried to nationalize US oil interests. That move rattled American boardrooms and inspired a series of *Post* articles condemning “Article 27.”

ARTICLE 27 AND THE SPECTER OF NATIONALIZATION

Article 27 of postrevolutionary Mexico's new Constitution, approved in 1917, opened with a ringing declaration: "Ownership of all lands and waters comprised within the boundaries of the national territory is vested originally in the Nation. The Nation has had, and has, the right to convey title thereof to private persons, so establishing private property." The article went on to state that, although expropriations would be carried out "only for reasons of public utility and with indemnification," the Nation's authority in this respect allowed both for the redistribution of land by "the break up of large landed estates" and for the "direct ownership" of all subsoil deposits, including "solid mineral fuels, petroleum, and all hydrocarbons whether solid, liquid or gaseous."¹³ When Article 27 appeared in the American press, it sent shock waves throughout the investment community, creating an uncertainty about Mexico's intentions that was not resolved until 1938, when the regime of Lázaro Cárdenas nationalized oil. Throughout the 1920s, the question of how far the left-leaning Mexicans would go—or should be permitted to go—in controlling their country's valuable subsoil was a principal point of tension between the two nations.

The general American stance was anxious outrage. Although some business leaders took a conciliatory posture, hoping to preserve stability, most were flatly opposed to expropriation, with or without indemnification, and the leaders of the giant oil companies, most severely threatened by Article 27, trembled especially at the thought of retroactivity. With unsurprising opportunism, they backed the US State Department's claim that all rights "legally acquired" before 1917 should be exempted from nationalization. Mexican hardliners dismissed this argument, while moderates, recalling the American proclivity to resolve issues by invasion, argued for a compromise based on "positive acts." If a company had been working its land—performing positive acts of extraction—before 1917, it could be exempted from the law.¹⁴

The threat to corporate interests was compounded by the Article's suggestion that large land holdings might also be affected, and for several years after the ratification of the Constitution, this double threat cast a cloud over US-Mexican relations. President Harding's Secretary of the Interior, Albert Fall, announced portentously, "So long as I have anything to do with the Mexican question, no government of Mexico will be recognized, with my consent, which does not first enter into a written agreement promising to protect American citizens and their property rights in Mexico." Harding,

sharing these views, withheld diplomatic recognition of the government led by Álvaro Obregón (Mexican president 1920–1924) until 1923.

In that year, in an apartment on Mexico City's Bucareli Street, protection for lands which had been subject to "positive acts" was finally put into Fall's "written agreement," in return for which the United States recognized Mexico.¹⁵ But the Bucareli agreement only masked the tension, and in Mexico it contributed to an anti-Obregón sentiment that led in 1923 to an uprising led by Adolfo de la Huerta. In America, suspicions that "crafty" Mexicans would renege on their promise were heightened by the election in 1924 of an even more leftist leader, Plutarco Calles (president 1924–1928) and the passage, in December of 1925, of enabling legislation for the hated article.

Amity between the nations was not enhanced by the appointment as Mexican ambassador of James R. Sheffield, a corporate lawyer with no Spanish who, in Robert Freeman Smith's bitterly humorous phrasing, "regarded Mexicans as barbarians who needed to be taken over and civilized by sons of 'Mother Yale'."¹⁶ Smith's characterization seems apt when you consider that, one month after his arrival in Mexico City, Sheffield wrote to the president of Columbia University, giving his opinion of President Calles and his cabinet: "There is very little white blood in the cabinet—that is it is very thin. Calles is Armenian and Indian; Leon almost wholly Indian and an amateur bullfighter; Saenz the Foreign Minister is Jew and Indian; Morones more white blood but not the better for it; Amaro, Secretary of War, a pure blooded Indian and very cruel."¹⁷

Aside from their racial debilities, according to Sheffield, the Mexicans were also suspect because of their "Bolshevism." Like many in his circle, the ambassador was convinced that Central American radicalism, particularly the civil war in Nicaragua (1926–27), was being given comfort, if not outright aid, by Calles's red sympathies. His embassy counselor, in a 1926 memorandum, called Nicaragua "merely the symptom of a trouble the seat of which is in Mexico, at which point it should be attacked." The possibility of such attack was nobody's secret. It concerned Calles enough that he devised a contingency option of setting the oil fields afire, "making a light which they will be able to see in New Orleans."¹⁸

At the *Saturday Evening Post* no less than at the American embassy, Article 27 was a virtual obsession. When Lorimer sent his star foreign correspondent, Isaac Marcossou, to Mexico in 1926, it was to discover Calles's thinking about land and about oil. Not that there were not other stories to be told. The government's land redistribution program, for example, involved

irrigation projects, agricultural schools, and development loans. Rural education, begun under Calles's predecessor Obregón, was booming, with two thousand new schools built by 1928. The Mexican labor movement had attracted over a million members. A new sanitation code was being put into effect, and in 1926 alone, over five million Mexicans were vaccinated against smallpox.¹⁹ None of these signs of modernity were of interest to the *Post*. They were filtered out as incompatible with the master narrative.

Throughout the seven stories that Marcossón wrote in the spring of 1927, the prevailing theme was the question of American property rights. The question was never "What does this mean to Mexico?" It was always "Will they play fair with us?" Predictably, the photographs that were selected to illustrate the Marcossón articles were both deictic and didactic. That is, they pointed to certain "self-evident" truths and they provided instruction about the need to prevent unruly Mexico from cheating the United States of the freedoms American businesses enjoyed in their country.

ISAAC MARCOSSÓN AND THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF INSTRUCTION

Marcossón had started at the *Post* as a financial writer,²⁰ and from the opening pages of his first Mexican report, it was clear that the threat to American capital was his paramount concern. As an interviewer he clearly deserved his professional reputation, for the article "Calles" is filled with vignettes of the Mexican leader that reveal a fine eye for detail and even a certain warmth. Plutarco Calles is "a piece of human granite," an Oriental-looking charmer whom his friends call "el turco," a socialist who denies the presence of Mexican Bolshevism; "all in all, Calles looks the fighter that he is." But despite his charisma and although what he says "sounds well," the Mexican president's omissions are far more eloquent: "In the riot of regulatory laws national rights become alien wrongs, Capital is jeopardized, initiative stifled and land tenure made the prey of cupidity and corruption." Thus "the Calles fetish of Mexico for the Mexicans imperils a hegemony essential to Pan American unity and economic solidarity."²¹

In his second article, "The Mexican Complex," Marcossón reiterated his anxiety about Mexican foul play, tying it to the "highly sensitized Latin-American temperament" which was expressed in an irrational "fear complex." Logic and reason would dictate the steady development of national resources, but in Mexico banditry, illiteracy, and factionalism militate against it. Playing on the trope of "ignorant masses versus the corrupt

elite," Marcossón expresses a special contempt for Mexico's ruling cadre, finding them less amenable to argument than their "Turkish" chief: "When a Mexican runs out of facts in support of a cause, he falls back on his pride. He is almost an absolute stranger to logic or reason."²²

The illustrations in these opening articles are mainly scene setters. Of the eleven photographs that the *Post* ran to accompany "Calles" and "The Mexican Complex," seven were what videographers would call *establishing shots* (with the volcano Popocatepétl and the capital's cathedral making obligatory appearances), while four were personal views of the president and his entourage. Of these four, one shows Calles alone, another with the American ambassador, and a third with Marcossón himself; the fourth shows the president's private secretary with Marcossón's translator. Their combined effect is to establish the reporter as eye-witness while demonstrating his intimacy with the president's circle. Since he was there, as the pictures show, he must be believed.

With "The American Stake in Mexico," the visual rhetoric becomes more subtle, and here we see for the first time the "naturalization of the cultural" which can occur when the photographic image assumes a denotative primacy over the text, making the latter "a kind of secondary vibration."²³ The verbal message of this third article is that the American investment that began under Porfirio Díaz (Mexican dictator 1876–1910) saved the country from its own worst impulses; thanks to the United States, they have railroads, banks, and telegraph.²⁴ But the photographs illustrating this text do not show that. Instead they suggest that post-revolutionary Mexico is still suffering from what Richard Henry Dana in 1840 called "California fever," the congenital disease of "an idle thriftless people."²⁵ There is an establishing shot of Tampico, the capital of oil country, which shows no more evidence of oil than the shot of Panuco, "a typical oil town," which follows it. There is a curious little tableau captioned "Election Day in Tampico," which tells us that democracy in Calles's Mexico means shirt-clad men loitering on street corners. The final view is of derricks in the Tehuantepec oil fields. The impact of the pictures is not so much to underscore American investment successes as to advertise the indolence of a country that is fecklessly undoing them. The photographs thus provide a parallel instruction, a case in point of what can happen if the "American stake" is lost.

Similarly in the fourth article of the series, a detailed condemnation of Article 27, the baleful effects of Calles's nationalist "fetish" are illustrated by a portfolio of regressions under "Mexico for the Mexicans."²⁶ That is the



FIG. 1 The opening illustration for Isaac Marcossou's "Mexico for the Mexicans" article showing an oil well in Vera Cruz on fire, with large clouds of black smoke dominating the background.

title of the article, in large display type, and the visual evidence of what that might portend is a tableau of views that connote "No progress." Of the six illustrations in this article, three—views of a "typical native" hut, a *charro* on horseback, and a "primitive" well—frame Mexico as a country stuck in the past. The other three announce a compromised modernity. "Laying telephone cable" shows the rubble of construction. A "Mazatlan traffic policeman" is depicted without cars. Most interestingly, the opening shot, laid out directly beneath the title, is of an oil well in Vera Cruz, not pumping but *on fire*. The message is clear. When Mexicans manage the wells, you will be able to see them burning from New Orleans.

Marcossou's target in the fifth article, "The Mexican Land Problem," is the government's attempt to restore the *ejido*, or Indian common land system, which had been eroding since the middle of the nineteenth century. *Ejidors* were the principal recipients of the eight million acres that Calles redistributed between 1924 and 1928.²⁷ In Marcossou's view this "obsession" had killed Mexican agriculture; the peons who received the land would not work it, because like the land itself, they were "mentally inert clay."²⁸ As photographic evidence of this thesis, we see everything *but* agrarian reform. There are two portraits, one of the minister of agriculture and one of Calles himself "talking to a peon," and then a handful of scenes in the "docile peasant" mode: "An Indian girl," "peon children," "types of Indian women," and an unmanned well over the caption "The Mexican Water Supply Is Primitive." We are also shown a hacienda appropriated from its American owner and a rural scene, entitled "A Road Scene in Mexico," which was recycled the next year in Robert McLean's *That Mexican!*, where its title was "The Quiet Stream of Mexico's Country Life."²⁹ Nowhere in this survey of the land question do we see a farmer or a field: the ostensible subject of the piece has been filtered out.

Laborers *are* present in the next article, but they are not working. Worse, they are out on strike, protesting labor conditions, as part of an “almost continuous succession of flagrant abuses of organized union power.”³⁰ The villain here, again, is opposition to capital power—a Moscow-inspired opposition which, in Marcossion’s view, portended “ultimate economic and political disaster.”³¹ What is most striking here, however, is not the attack on Mexican radicalism—predictable, given Lorimer’s conservatism—but the subtle way in which the photographs reinforce the message, even when they are seeming to point to something else.

There are seven photos that provide the visual text for this piece. Two are head shots of the relevant Mexican ministers: the heads of finance and of industry, commerce, and labor. Two others are the strike pictures I have just mentioned. The remaining three, however, are the most interesting. They function in what I would call a *typifying* or *authenticating* mode, placing on display for American readers the features of Mexican life that have already been calcified into stereotype. Thus, we see an outdoor market, a burro pack train, and a public scribe, or *evangelista*, who makes a living by writing letters for illiterates.

None of these views would be surprising in a piece celebrating tourism. Here, appearing anomalously in a piece on labor, they function didactically to *quaintify* Mexico. They are selective evidence that in spite of the Revolution and progressive politics (or, in the *Post*’s view, because of them), the Mexican people remain mired in the past. The burning oil well indicates that they can’t handle progress, and these three views naturalize that debility. Where we have sanitary supermarkets, they have flies on the food. Where we have trucks and refrigerator cars, they have beasts of burden. Where we have telegraphs and dictionaries, they must employ *evangelistas*. In a piece on labor, this trio of representations exquisitely *produces* Mexican labor as a polar opposite to steady industry, which Lorimer considered the essence of Americanism.

The Marcossion series began at the end of February. It ended in the middle of April, with “The Mexico of the Future.”³² In some ways this final article, in spite of its title, is as rich an example of the quaintifying style as anything in the series. The printed text is unambiguous. What Marcossion and the *Post* want to know is first, “What is the formula for permanent peace and cooperation?” and second, “Will the rights of American citizens be protected?” We are back to the issue posed by Article 27, which in Lorimer’s and Marcossion’s minds is the only thing that matters. Yet the illustrations here, again, are out of synch.

Two of the six photos are portraits of dignitaries, in this case the ministers of war and foreign affairs. A third shows the American Club in Mexico City—for the *Post*, presumably, a bastion of right-thinking expatriates. The remaining two are the most remarkable in the seven-part series. One depicts “cock fighting, the favorite Mexican sport” and a far cry from Lorimer’s “best recreations.” A second shows Calles, in an avuncular mood, holding a prize-winning chicken at an agricultural show. Together, they imagine the “new” Mexico as a bumpkin with spurs, an updated fusion of the oldest of all “Southernizing” dualities, counterposing the “cruelties of the Spaniards” to barnyard lethargy, the mindless machismo of the cock to the capitulation of the chicken. Whatever Marcossou said about Mexico’s future, the tendentious message of this diptych was that she had none.

She did, however, have a past, and that past is the largest, most unforgettable message in the article. It is a quarter-page view of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl, at the recently excavated site of San Juan Teotihuacan. As the burning oil well invalidates “Mexico for the Mexicans,” here an image of an ancient, pre-“civilized” power overwhelms the very idea of a Mexican future. The Mexican experiment in modernity is congenitally doomed. Whatever romantic designs Calles and his fellow Bolsheviks may have on the future, without the ameliorating influence of American investment, that future will be sacrificed, inevitably, to the ghosts of the Aztecs. Mexico being a country of the past, it could not be otherwise.

The Marcossou series served to validate, with variations, some very old stereotypes, but in the political arena, this may not have mattered, for the change of mood that Lorimer wished to bring about was realized in the end by an unexpected Mexican accommodation. By 1927, saddled with debt and as ever fearful of the arrival of the Marines, the Calles cadre became gradually more conciliatory, even allowing the unauthorized drilling of new American wells. The replacement of Sheffield by the more gracious Dwight

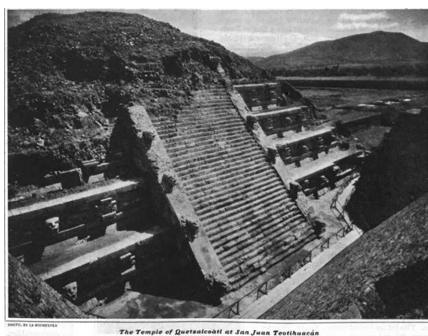


FIG. 2 The opening illustration to Isaac Marcossou, “The Mexico of the Future,” showing the recently excavated Temple of Quetzalcoatl at a re-Columbian site in central Mexico. The image shows how this site was discovered underneath the ground and included a five-story temple.

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Morrow further improved relations, and in 1928 the Mexican government provided that “confirmatory concessions, unlimited in time, would be given for all holdings on which positive acts had been performed prior to 1 May 1917”; even owners of “untagged lands” would receive preferential treatment.³³ Thus “banker diplomacy” ushered in a period of relative harmony which was to last until 1934, with the accession of Lazaro Cardenas (Mexican president 1934–1940). By 1930 even the *Post* acknowledged a change, as it credited Morrow in particular for smoothing relations and applauded the business community’s ancient nemesis, Mexico’s corrupt elites, with showing a “considerably higher sense of responsibility than ever before.”³⁴

For Lorimer’s *Post*, however, Mexico itself was only half the problem. As the fires of nationalist contention began to die down, another ember burst into flame, as *Post* readers in the early spring of 1928 encountered a second series, this one focusing on Mexican immigration.

KENNETH ROBERTS AND THE RHETORIC OF DISORDER

The *Post*’s resistance to Mexican immigration was not an isolated phenomenon, for in the xenophobic hysteria that followed the First World War, the magazine had long been a major player. Lorimer had championed a literacy test as early as 1916, and on Washington’s Birthday in 1919, a *Post* article warned that, just as the nation could not endure half slave and half free, neither could it continue to exist half foreign and half American.³⁵ By 1920, the magazine’s immigration restriction policy was well established, and during the subsequent decade, dozens of articles and editorials argued for skimming the “scum” out of the melting pot.³⁶ Ten of the articles were written by Kenneth Roberts, well known as a restrictionist mouthpiece. In his opening salvo, castigating the new immigrants, he stressed the difficulty of assimilating them into the fold:

They have been hot beds of dissent, unrest, sedition and anarchy. If the United States is the melting pot, something is wrong with the heating system, for an inconveniently large portion of the new immigration floats around in unsightly indigestible lumps. Of recent years, the contents of the melting pot have stood badly in need of straining in order that the refuse might be removed and deposited in the customary receptacle for such things.³⁷

In subsequent pieces, he rang changes on this general tune, condemning the newcomers as threats to the racial purity of the nation. "If America doesn't keep out the queer alien mongrelized people of Southern and Eastern Europe," he wrote, "her crop of citizens will eventually be dwarfed and mongrelized in turn."³⁸ Throughout the decade, such nativist sentiments gained traction through the writings of "scientific racists" like Lothrop Stoddard, whose 1921 bestseller *The Rising Tide of Color against White World Supremacy* became a racialist bible in the interwar years. In 1924 the *Post* ran two of Stoddard's pieces.³⁹ When the restrictionist Johnson Act was passed later that year, the commissioner-general of immigration gave much of the credit to the Roberts series,⁴⁰ while a *Post* editorial, praising it as "the most important and far-reaching legislation adopted in our time," also dubbed it "our second Declaration of Independence."⁴¹

But the restrictions established by the Johnson Act applied only to Europe. In the interests of pan-American harmony and as a way of appeasing employers who wanted cheap Mexican labor, the act had exempted the Western hemisphere from the quota requirements. Would-be immigrants from Mexico and Canada had to pass a literacy test and medical exam, prove they were not paupers, and pay a small fee. But the numerical flow from those countries was not restricted. As a result, nativist attention turned to the Rio Grande, as those heartened by the 1924 legal victory sought to stem the flow of the country's migrating "peons."

By this time Kenneth Roberts had already contributed to the *Post* not just the series on European immigration which had been credited with the passage of the Johnson Act but also a colorful snap at the "suckers" of Tijuana entitled "Souse-West."⁴² A decade later he would achieve fame as the author of *Northwest Passage* (first serialized in the *Post*). Now, as a fervent restrictionist, he contributed articles that made a powerful case for a Mexican quota while savaging its opponents as deluded opportunists.

Because the *Post's* position on the Mexican floodtide was so uncomplicated—prevent "half breed" undesirables from destroying America—the illustration of the thesis was also direct. In "Wets and Other Mexicans,"⁴³ for example, a text praising the difficult work of the Border Patrol was enhanced by a posed portrait of border guards, a couple of shots of impoverished Texas neighborhoods, and three views of the patrolmen doing their jobs. We are shown Mexican "smugglers" intercepted at gunpoint, a Mexican family "picked up by the Border Patrol," and a carload of "wets" being escorted back across the border.

The photography both summarizes the problem and demonstrates its solution. By framing the capture of illegals as the nut of the issue, it filters out such troubling complications as the presence of second- and third-generation Mexican-Americans, the presence of legal immigrants among those crossing the border, and the role of Anglo labor recruiters in subverting the Patrol.

Photographic evidence is more complexly deployed in "Mexicans or Ruin."⁴⁴ Here the villain is not what Roberts called the "ignorant, docile, and sap-headed Mexicans" themselves, but the growers who insist on a continuous stream of such laborers in order, at the nation's expense, to keep wages down. Roberts dismisses the cry of "Mexicans or ruin" by pointing out to the growers that there are two solutions to the shortage of unskilled labor that a quota might create. One is to adopt Lorimer's "play fair" policy by offering wages high enough to attract white workers. The other is to introduce labor-saving machinery.

Both solutions are presented with photographic "proof." Of the five illustrations in this piece, one reminds *Post* readers of the real problem by depicting, once again, the Border Patrol. Two others show the Anglo exploitation of the "sapheads"—laborers in a Texas field and a Mexican settlement, nestled uncomfortably in the shadow of a New Mexican smelter. The final two illustrations provide the solutions. They are a family portrait of white cotton pickers, proving that "we" *can* do it, if you pay us enough, and a cotton-picking machine, as the hope of the future. As in the previous piece, there is no thought given to out-of-frame complications (such as the potential displacement of both Anglo *and* Mexican laborers), only the marshaling of photographic proof for an established position. The stock of visual evidence from which one might draw here has already been selected in advance by the framing of the question.

Roberts's concluding piece, "The Docile Mexican,"⁴⁵ reviewed the domestic problems that had been created by the unholy alliance of greed and ignorance, that is, the greed of Americans who were willing to exploit the Mexican laborer and the laborer's ignorance, which permitted the exploitation. Those problems, which included crime, disease, and an undue strain on the American taxpayer, were visually condensed in pictures of immigrant hovels, grouped in arrangements that Roberts, without irony, calls *corrals*. His description of these corrals displays, with stylistic flourish, a rhetoric of diminution:

There is block after block of houses built out of scraps of wood and flattened tin cans; houses looking like half a horse car; little houses looking like a piano box; little houses looking like dog houses.

Sandwiched in between them are little drug stores, little meat stores, little barber shops, little soft-drink emporiums—stores so tiny and so meager in their furnishings that one visualizes each proprietor as being thrown into a cataleptic fit of amazement if a customer should appear—little vegetable stores, little brothels, little fruit stores, little hardware stores; and on all of them are Spanish signs and Spanish names, and around all of them clings a faint flavor of garlic and chili.⁴⁶

The “littles” in this passage do more than call attention to Mexican poverty. They reduce the people themselves to a lilliputian level, infantilizing them as so insufficiently enculturated, so inattentive to the requirements of middle-class living, that their homes are a whimsical bricolage of tin cans and packing crates, while their businesses—all those open shops whose customers Roberts is unable to imagine—amount to a border version of “playing store.” The docile Mexican, in short, is a large child who is impervious to correction by his older and wiser brother. When one does encounter a “new, clean, trim, well-designed” building among these shacks, it proves always to be a schoolhouse for Mexican children, paid for (unfairly) by Anglo tax money and utterly useless: the voices of the children in the schoolyards are always incorrigibly Spanish.

The article is illustrated by pictures of a corral (or “piano box”) house and one of the presumably useless American-funded schools. The implication is that Mexicans, despite American help, cannot be uplifted into bourgeois respectability. They will never join “the great mass of intelligent people who make good homes and love them.” The point is secured by editorial layout, as facing the ramshackle house is a full-page, four-color advertisement for Cadillac automobiles, the epitome, the ad copy tells us, of “everything that is fine and substantial.” The effect of the photographs, when the magazine is opened flat, is to confirm the Mexicans in their backwardness by revealing what they’re missing: the comforts to which they do not even aspire. Ads in the back pages of the article perform the same service. Mexicans may live in piano boxes, but with Old English Liquid Wax, you can achieve a velvety polish for *your* piano. Mexicans may be cramped and illiterate, but with Kiel tables you can “strike that charming modern note” in a room that is furnished with light, and space, and books.

I am not hinting at a conspiratorial ingenuity, only a selection process that is so unconsciously self-congratulatory that the visual rhetoric, in a sense, reproduces itself. One does not need to believe in a “saturated consciousness”



FIG. 3 A “piano box” house image used to illustrate Kenneth Roberts’s “The Docile Mexican” article. With its sloping roof and plain exterior, it resembles less a US home than a shipping box or storage shed. The very small wooden house has an angled roof, higher in front and lower in the back, and looks to be the size of a small bedroom in a US home.



FIG. 4 This full-color ad for Cadillac luxury automobiles ran on the page across from the “piano box” photograph and shows a new Cadillac with “aristocratic lines” and “regal appointments” in the driveway of a grand home, with a large arched portico and a terrace in the back. A maid, a butler, and a valet are in the scene, along with the wealthy homeowners. The opulent scene is a stark contrast to the image of the “piano box” home.

to see in such “accidental” messages a hegemonic serendipity, to acknowledge that in what British cultural theorist Raymond Williams called “a whole way of life,” there is likely to emerge a representational “givenness,” which makes the deployment of such contrasts almost predictable. Working from an established stock of generic Mexican images, Lorimer’s staff chose what they knew was already there, and when they framed their choices within the magazine’s product-dense matrix, connotative clashes could not be avoided. Lorimer himself “approved” these clashes, but they derived from an institutional and cultural habituation. Whatever latitude an individual editor may have had in make-up, filter and frame were already in place before he started. If the resulting assemblages prove a point, the point, in Pierre Bourdieu’s famous phrasing, went without saying because it came without saying.

“CLOSING THE BACK DOOR”

As the quota debate heated up toward the end of the decade, the *Post* remained committed to its restrictionist policy in a “strident campaign to keep America pure and unadulterated.”⁴⁷ In addition to the Roberts series, Lorimer also produced editorials condemning the “Mexican conquest”⁴⁸ and “nonassimilable” labor,⁴⁹ and he paid additional authors to add their voices to the chorus. One of them, financial writer (and future *Post* editor-in-chief) Gareth Garrett, was articulate about the stakes involved. Like Kenneth Roberts, he condemned the farming interests who were unwilling to acknowledge that “thoughtless, reckless living”—he was referring both to peons and to their employers—was a graver threat to American life than any alleged labor shortage. In a piece that scored US temporizing as “government by tumult,” he lamented that the sugar beet industry had become captive to an “undesirable caste,” while playing up, as had so many before him, the racial implications.⁵⁰ The five photographs accompanying his article were pure typification. They showed: two groups of fieldworkers, one of which labelled the Mexican peon as “a mixture of Spanish, Indian, and Negro blood”; a Mexican cowboy; “hay-ing near Mexico City with oxen and a wooden-wheeled cart”; and a group of migrants following a horse-drawn cart, billed as “the single largest racial stream now pouring into the United States.”

In 1930, the *Post* ran a pair of articles by Vanderbilt University economist Roy Garis. Given his reputation as a prominent restrictionist, his observations were hardly novel. The results of Mexican immigration included “falling real-estate values, extra tax burdens, school problems, increased

charities, a need for more penal institutions, lower wages, the rapid elimination of the white laborer, and the deterioration of the American standard of living."⁵¹ A Mexican quota was essential, for only by "closing the back door can we secure the full benefits of our present restrictive program that can and will mean so much to our national welfare."⁵² What is interesting about this paired polemic is the way in which its illustrations demonstrate contrary didactic modes which, however, point to the same conclusion.

The first article is illustrated by two photographs, one of a bridge spanning the Rio Grande at Laredo, the other of a group of Mexicans who evidently have just crossed it. The deictic argument is explicit: *This* is the problem. In the second article, however, the argument is more subtle. Here we are shown no direct evidence of the threat to modernity, no shacks and no "single largest racial stream," but only a pair of endearingly typical Mexican tableaux. One shows a Guadalajara potter, posed with a large family, and one is of Tehuantepec women, balancing pots on their heads. What are these photographs doing in a piece on immigration?

The answer is that, like the photographs in Marcossou's piece on Mexico for the Mexicans, they present the Mexican's "natural" state as exotic, as quaint, and (nodding to the scientific racists' *bête noire*) as fearfully fertile. These barefoot and docile folk are agreeably picturesque, but we don't want them here, because their docility and their ability to outbreed "us" constitutes an "invasion," an attack on "our way of life." This contrastive function of the photographs is further underscored by their layout, like Roberts's piano-box house, across from automobile ads. The Tehuantepec women are positioned across from a new model Chrysler, so that the reader is confronted, inescapably, with the cultural comparison.

For readers of the *Post*, whose fortunes paralleled those of the automobile,⁵³ the choice being posed here was no contest. Lorimer himself, for example, was "one of the nation's first sincere motorists," and he used the automobile as a means of escape from modernity.⁵⁴ His greatest passion was a road tour through the "wild" West, where he could browse the visual wonders of the Rockies and the Grand Canyon. But that passion for escape was a part of modernity. Like the conservationist impulse he shared with Teddy Roosevelt, like Henry Ford's obsession with the nineteenth-century village, Lorimer's zest for the rustic was an encapsulated passion, one that remained intoxicating precisely because it was staged at an exotic distance. Distanced and staged as well was the right place for "backward" peoples. One might use the automobile to visit the Tehuantepecans, but one would not want them to return the favor.

This dual positioning of Mexicans as colorfully backward there, troublesome here, was a predictable stance for the *Post* to adopt. Given Lorimer's sunny business ideology, it is hard to imagine the magazine taking any other. In the tribal twenties, "Mexico" had to be configured as an exotic consumable, while the porous US borders had to be protected from "them" consuming "us." In this contradictory attitude toward the Mexican people, one sees both the brittle insecurities of race and class, and a tradition of exotifying the steamy South that stretched back for centuries. If the actual Mexico of the 1920s was grasping fitfully at modernity, the "Mexico" of the middle-class imaginary was lost in the mists of prerevolutionary lassitude. It was that mist that Lorimer packaged for readers of the *Post*.

The success of that packaging reflected the epistemological principle that we only see what we have been conditioned to see. In the 1920s, Lorimer knew intimately what his readers believed—and wanted to believe—about Mexico and its people. The articles he commissioned, illustrated with photographic evidence, produced for his readers what was already a given in their mind's eye. That inner picture positioned Mexico not as a nation unto itself but as a monitory contrast to the United States, an anti-paragon showing "those who choose good lives and live them" the inevitable and baleful consequences of "reckless living." The *Post's* "Mexico," then, served not only as a model of disorder but as an essential foil for promoting the gospel of cleanliness. He may have been loath to acknowledge it, but for his celebration of progress to work, Lorimer needed Mexico.

So in different ways did other observers. The category "Mexico" in the 1920s became adaptable, depending not on the objective reality of the land or the people themselves, but on what service the idea could perform for ambivalent Americans. For tourist-oriented magazines like *Travel*, "Mexico" became a site of romantic, although dangerous, leisure—simultaneously the "land of bandits" and the "land of desire."⁵⁵ For writers at the liberal center, such as Stuart Chase⁵⁶ and Carleton Beals,⁵⁷ it meant the chance to escape the rattle and hum of the Machine Age. For the *Saturday Evening Post*, self-appointed guardian of Nordic America's straining gates, it became a realm of piano-box hovels and midnight border crossings. In all these disparate manifestations, Mexico was the *not us* that was there *for us*.

In his incisive short poem "Waiting for the Barbarians," the Greek poet C. P. Cavafy imagines the distress of a city's inhabitants when the barbarians who have long threatened their border suddenly disappear. One can imagine George Horace Lorimer similarly distressed by news of progress in Mexican schooling or irrigation. What might he have made of a Mexico

that had emerged from barbarism, a Mexico that was not an affront to bourgeois industry? I imagine him lamenting, in the words of Cavafy's poem, "What shall we do now that there are no barbarians? Those people were a kind of solution."

TAD TULEJA is a folklorist with interests in American popular culture, ethnic stereotypes, and mythologies of violence. With a PhD in anthropology from the University of Texas, he has taught writing at Harvard, Princeton, and Oklahoma; edited three anthologies on vernacular traditions and military culture; and published essays on yellow ribbons, the border slur gringo, and World War I trench songs. His essay "Spit and Spin: Rival Memory Narratives of Vietnam" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize by *Consequence* journal, and his song cycle "Skein of Arms" received an artistic development grant from the Puffin Foundation.

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