

Book Review: Backroads Pragmatists: Mexico's Melting Pot and Civil Rights in the United States by Ruben Flores

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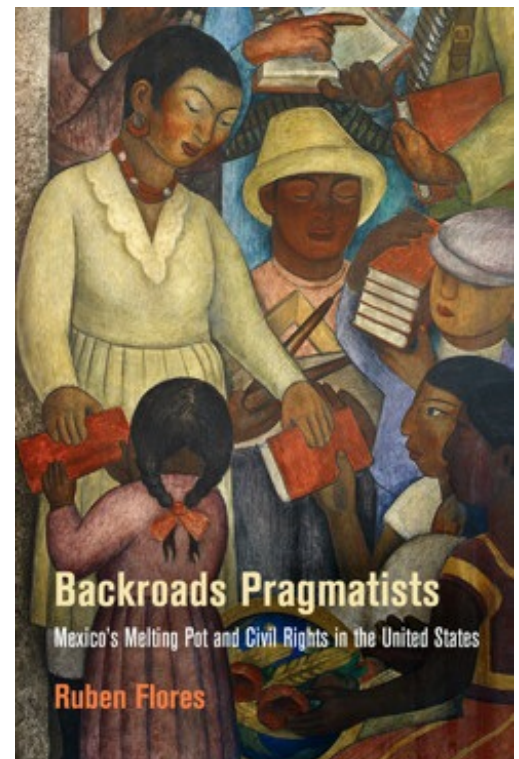
Through deep archival research and ambitious synthesis, *Backroads Pragmatists* aims to illuminate how nation-building in post-revolutionary Mexico unmistakably influenced the civil rights movement and democratic politics in the United States. Zalfa Feghali is impressed by Flores' contribution, which convincingly traces the legacy of Mexican state policies as resonating beyond Mexico's northern border and compelling shows a narrative of friendships and intellectual relationships between social scientists in both the US and Mexico.

Backroads Pragmatists: Mexico's Melting Pot and Civil Rights in the United States. Ruben Flores. University of Pennsylvania Press. 2014.

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The latest offering in the University of Pennsylvania Press' [Politics and Culture in Modern America](#) series, [Ruben Flores' Backroads Pragmatists: Mexico's Melting Pot and Civil Rights in the United States](#) is a really excellent example of how taking a broader view of intellectual history in North America can be incredibly fruitful.

Flores' book focuses on the cross-border conversations that happened when US social scientists of the 1930s looked south for inspiration on how to resolve "the social conflict in the idea of the melting pot", reframing narratives of multiculturalism and social tensions away from US-centric accounts, and acknowledging the role of post-revolutionary Mexico state policies of *integración*, *fusión*, and *incorporación* in the US civil rights movement. For these social scientists inspired and taught by John Dewey, including George I. Sanchez and Loyd L. Tireman, Mexico was "the leading experiment in the relationship between diversity and the nation in the industrial era, a progressive middle way between extremist politics represented by the United States on the one hand and the Soviet Union on the other."



According to Flores, three aspects of the Mexican state fascinated these social scientists: first, state efforts at "creating a new unified citizenry"; second, the attention paid to public education that was seen as crucial to social progress; and third, the institutions of scientific research that US social reformers saw as crucial as "they struggled to understand the immigrant's place in American society."

Flores uses these three characteristics to structure his study, moving deftly between chapters and making broader intellectual arguments that remind us of the importance of comparative history as well as uncovering relationships between key intellectual figures such as John Dewey and Franz Boas on the one hand, and Jose Vasconcelos on the other. Flores is especially convincing at the end of chapter one, where while he is perhaps a touch too defensive about his method of comparative history, even going so far as to offer a scenario where he could be criticized as "wrongheaded," his analysis sheds light on areas of US and Mexican intellectual history that have too often been considered in isolation.

In part three, "Mexico and the Attack on *Plessy*", Flores considers the relationship between educational policy in

Mexico and efforts by reformers and activists in the United States to desegregate education. According to Flores, “using Dewey, they had reconceptualised the school as an instrument of social transformation rather than an instrument of social hierarchy.” Describing a moment when schools and educational systems were polarizing issues in the US, Flores’ argument that Mexico, through its educational system and its “post-revolutionary melting pot shaped the American civil rights movement” serves as a reminder of the complex relationships between state ideology, the school, and protest movements.

According to Flores, the civil rights movements in the US are a powerful example of cross-border intellectual networking, for “as the United States transitioned into the postwar civil rights era, the Americans who had first gone to Mexico in the 1930s continued to invoke Mexico’s administrative systems, theories of democracy, and scientific institutions as models for desegregation as they became the leading social science actors in the legal campaigns that dismantled the system of desegregated public schools in the American West.” And Flores identifies that though separated by a political (and contested) border, differing state ideologies, and often divided by language, the language of philosophy offered these reformers a unifying strand: “For the pragmatist civil righters, Mexico and the United States shared a common language of pragmatist philosophy” as well as “a commitment to an enlarged federal government as an instrument of social balance in a world that had been undone by industrial capital.” This complicates the more ‘traditional’ view that casts Mexico and the US as “always already” existing on opposite poles of activism and reform.

One aspect of this book that stands out is Flores’ ability to balance accounts of the intellectual lives of these social scientists and reformers with the broader context in which they operated. Ultimately, Flores foregrounds the importance of these relationships, and the epilogue sums up the true significance of these figures’ adherence to pragmatism, emphasizing how “it justified the importance of real-world, local experience to the nation in the context of the multiethnic society, with all the complicated and muddled diversity such experience implied.”

Flores’ contribution is not simply the comparative approach he takes which convincingly traces the legacy of Mexican state policies as resonating beyond Mexico’s northern border, nor is it the compelling narrative of friendships and intellectual relationships between social scientists in both the US and Mexico. In reminding us that intellectual networks can anticipate and be brokers for national change, Flores warns us against isolationist views of intellectual history.

Zalfa Feghali is a Senior Lecturer in American Literature at Canterbury Christ Church University. Her past research has focused on the relationship between contemporary American and Canadian poetry, citizenship, and civic acts of reading. Her current work is on citizenship, indigeneity, and borders in North America. She is an avid ukulele player and can be followed on twitter [@justzalfa](#). [Read more reviews by Zalfa](#).

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