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NEW MEXICANS AND ACCULTURATION

George I. Sánchez

The citizens of Spanish descent in New Mexico, hereinafter referred to as New Mexicans, for the sake of brevity, represent one of the most puzzling cultural problems in the nation. Americans legally for almost a hundred years and identified with this region for more than three centuries, it seems absurd that they should be thought of as other than average Americans. Nevertheless, the circumstances of history have molded the culture of these people into forms and patterns which set them apart from their fellow citizens. Today, New Mexicans constitute a cultural group which is in the anomalous situation of being native American of native American descent and which, withal, is not typically American.

It is not to be implied that the New Mexican may be considered a foreigner culturally, however. Nor that his deviation from what is typically American is a failing or an undesirable characteristic. Next to that of the Indian, his culture is the most native, or American, of all those represented in the United States—not only from the standpoint of chronological precedence but also as regards the degree of his adaptation to the environment. In addition, many of the qualities which set him apart from other Americans are active or potential assets to the nation and to the American way of life.

Elsewhere, the author has presented a review of the major social and economic problems facing the New Mexicans.¹ In that review it is pointed out that, in addition to economic insufficiency and political ineptitude, educational backwardness is a potent factor in handicapping the New Mexican's cultural growth and development. This factor represents an issue that is of great import in acculturation.

The educational backwardness of a people is not an inherent or biological characteristic. Even in the case of the world's most primitive peoples (the Australian aborigines and the Bushmen of the Kalahari,

¹ Forgotten People (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1940).

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for example), serious doubt can be cast upon conclusions which would classify those peoples as inherently incapable of cultural change and progress. There is no need to document this viewpoint. The facts of biology, anthropology, and psychology make it virtually self-evident. However, it is well that, at this point, due emphasis be placed upon the fact that the educational backwardness of a society is not a product of that society's mental or physical constitution but that, instead, it is a result of the circumstances of the society's history and environment.

In the case of the New Mexican, educational backwardness is the result of two major environmental factors. One of these factors is rooted in the colonial history of the region and in the educational practices of that time. The other factor is closely associated with the administrative policy followed since the area came under the control of the United States. Both of these factors have joined to produce the same result—ineptitude and indifference in the development of education for New Mexicans.

It is easy to understand why the education of the mass of New Mexicans should not have attained a high level prior to the nineteenth century. Without drawing for an explanation upon the geographic isolation of New Mexicans from the major streams of tendency in western civilization at large, a brief insight into the history of education in Europe offers sufficient enlightenment on this point. Modern education—education for the common people—had not gained much headway in Europe prior to the nineteenth century. Even Prussia, at that time the most active state in such matters, was only tentatively feeling its way in the development of schools for the masses. England, France, and Spain were not to go far in offering education to the common man until well after the turn of the century. Education in the western world, with several notable (though as yet unimportant) exceptions, was limited to sectarian efforts which reached a select few of the population through formal schools and affected the mass of the people only casually through the general educational influence exerted by church practices. This latter type of educational endeavor existed in New Mexico, and the former type was in the process of incubation. By and large, New Mexicans were not sorely underprivileged with respect to education when compared with their contemporaries among

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the common people in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

It was the nineteenth century, with its economic and political revolutions, that saw the development of popular, or public, schools in the western world. On this point, Eby and Arrowood state:

The nineteenth century witnessed the establishment in western Europe and America of free, publicly supported schools, operated for the benefit of all the people. This development was something new in the history of civilization. It is true that there had been, even in ancient times, free public schools for the upper classes; that Protestant leaders of the sixteenth century wished all children to be taught to read the Bible and instructed in the church catechism; and that Comenius and a few other far-seeing reformers had advocated education for every child. But most educational theorists before the middle of the eighteenth century held that education as enlightenment should be the privilege of the well-to-do.3

In New Mexico, too, the few privileged, well-to-do people of the colony were educated—by tutors at home and in the schools, colleges, and universities of New Spain. These institutions, particularly those in and around Mexico City, were much like their European counterparts. Leaders, recently arrived in New Mexico from other parts of New Spain and from Spain, had been exposed to the educational advantages of the times and their level of education was not unlike that attained by their class in Europe.

While it is obvious that geographic isolation resulted in the retardation of the intellectual life of New Mexico, it must be borne in mind that, with reference to the establishment of educational institutions, the retardation suffered before the nineteenth century was of no great consequence. This is especially true if due consideration is given to the intellectual level of the common people and the absence of popular schools elsewhere in the world at the time. Furthermore, in evaluating the effects of that retardation upon New Mexican life of today, it has relatively little significance alongside the more potent effects of the area’s recent educational history. That is to say, that the important roots of the New Mexican’s current educational dilemma are to be found in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The last hundred years have set the stage for the scenes enacted today. By commission or

omission during those hundred years, the agencies of public welfare and education have brought about the educational situation confronting the state at present.

It is useless to conjecture upon the course that educational development might have taken in New Mexico had not the Mexican War intervened to give a new direction to the destinies of the area. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that the influences that motivated cultural growth and development in Europe during the early part of the nineteenth century were not without their effects upon New Mexico. The political and economic unrest of that period had its repercussion even in this outpost of Spanish colonization. Leaders of the colony were aware of, and concerned over, these movements—particularly those which related to the welfare of the masses and to new trends of thought in the fields of government and economics. The immediate educational products of this interest and concern are illustrated in the work of men like Father Antonio José Martínez and in the public utterances of the political leaders of the period. A most graphic and symbolic illustration of the educational promise given by these new pressures is observed in the legislation proposed, first under Mexican government and later under United States administration, before 1850. Some of these proposals had to do with such topics as land use and management, control of water resources, the state-church issue, education and rehabilitation of the Indian, and the establishment of institutions of higher education.

It is not beyond belief that the real and active interest manifested in issues such as these would have led to tangible accomplishments somewhat of the nature of those effected through the expression of the same sort of interest in the same type of issues elsewhere in both the New World and the Old. Certainly, these manifestations reflect a level and direction of leadership that boded well for the cultural growth of the New Mexican. It cannot be assumed that Father Martínez' school at Taos was a purely accidental and culturally unrelated accomplishment. Likewise, it is reasonable to suppose that the enlightened viewpoint expressed by local political leaders reflected movements and trends that were affecting, or were about to affect, the masses of the people.

Whatever promise may be observed in these developments, and whatever may be the interpretation placed upon New Mexican culture prior to 1846, there is no doubt that the course of events after that time gives no evidence of fulfilling either that promise or the more understandable prospects which one would unhesitatingly associate with a
progressive republican-democratic form of government. It is astonishing to have to come to the conclusion that the administration of affairs in New Mexico during the nineteenth century by the United States was lacking in all the salient benefits of good, sympathetic, democratic government which, almost without major exception, have characterized this nation's dealings with minority peoples elsewhere.

The record is easy to read. During the period of phenomenal educational expansion elsewhere in the nation and in the world, New Mexico was abandoned to the doubtful ministrations of church and private endeavor. Public education, the keystone of democratic nationality, was not recognized as of serious import to the policy followed by the United States with respect to New Mexicans. And this cannot be attributed to lack of interest on the part of native leaders. From the time of Governor Donaciano Vigil's memorable address 4 to the legislative assembly, in 1847, to that of Superintendent J. Francisco Chaves' report,5 in 1902, there is ample evidence to show that leading New Mexicans were greatly perturbed over the absence of educational opportunity. In spite of their urgings, however, public education was virtually nonexistent until well after the turn of the twentieth century.

It is unnecessary here to seek to portray the educational neglect that characterized public affairs in New Mexico between 1846 and 1910. Educational statistics are eloquent in setting forth the limited prospects of this nature which faced the people of the region. Those statistics are eloquent, also, in symbolizing the cultural deterioration which was the inevitable result of this condition. It is not to be denied that the territorial government fostered the establishment of institutions of higher learning late in the nineteenth century. As pointed out forty years ago by Superintendent Chaves, however, this contribution not only did not meet the requirements of the situation but, furthermore, tended to accentuate the unavailability of education to the common people of the territory—to the New Mexicans. An analysis of the expenditures and enrollments of the higher institutions of that period is not needed to appreciate the full force of the argument advanced by that far-seeing educator. An examination of the enrollment figures of our higher institutions of learning today suffices to show that Superintendent Chaves was prophetic when he said:

unless the schools of the lower grade are given careful fostering care these higher institutions of learning will ere very long have quite grown away from and beyond the reach of their usefulness as a part of our common school system, and as time elapses we shall more than ever witness the humiliating spectacle of that which is now partially apparent—the taxpayers of New Mexico supplying funds devoted largely to the higher training of youth from Texas, Mexico, and Arizona, even from California and Missouri, while their own children are yet poorly served in the lower grade schools and wholly unable to qualify for admission to the higher institutions.\(^6\)

How well, indeed, did he envision the situation facing New Mexicans in 1941!

The mere creation of higher educational institutions does not insure that those institutions will serve the function of cultural rehabilitation in a society. When such institutions are established among a people whose elementary and secondary education has been sadly neglected, their usefulness in that connection is questionable. This is especially true when, as in the case of New Mexico, the higher institutions do not make the special adaptations or adjustments suited to the demands of the circumstances from which both the institutions and the students they purport to serve arise. In the light of the facts at hand—the history of higher education in New Mexico and its relation to the New Mexicans—the founding of institutions of higher learning by the territory cannot be regarded as a significant event in the acculturation of the New Mexican.

It must be admitted, in addition, that the federal government casually included the territory, and later the state, of New Mexico in its land-grant and related program of assistance. The complete inadequacy of that program is made patent by an examination of the real and productive value (at that time) of the lands granted and by the ineffectualness of the other aid in the face of the wide expanse of territory, the sparsity of population, and the peculiar nature of the problems involved and with which that aid was supposed to cope. The defects of the nation's program of aid to education, as it affected New Mexico, were accentuated by the palpable unreadiness of the people of the area to exercise the functions of self-government efficiently. The national government's failure to recognize that unreadiness, and its attendant dangers to the "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" of New Mexi-\(^6\) *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.
cans, constitute the most grievous setback suffered by these people in their cultural development.

Towards the end of the territorial period, considerable progress was being made in overcoming some phases of the inadequacy noted above. The area's induction into statehood proved extremely disappointing in so far as the development of education is concerned. Furthermore, the state's program of public education, as it has affected the New Mexican, has continued to prove strikingly disappointing. If anyone would wish to question this observation, an examination of enrollments, of the school achievement of pupils, of teacher education, of the distribution of school funds, and of state and local school administration would prove enlightening. Such an examination will reveal that, in education, the New Mexican has been consistently the underprivileged child—nay, the stepchild—of the state.

In summary, it is fitting to repeat that the many educational errors committed by government during the last century have joined together to produce the educational backwardness that is now evident among the New Mexicans. In addition, the careful student will not find it difficult to recognize that certain recent and current educational policies and procedures have had the effect of accentuating, rather than of ameliorating, that condition of backwardness which was inherited from the past.

It is not to be assumed that the neglect observed in the field of education was the only failing in the past and recent history of New Mexico. That neglect was but a phase of the general unresponsiveness exhibited by government to the peculiar cultural position in which the New Mexican found himself. Just as the causes and motives of educational backwardness have been reviewed above, so could the economic and political deterioration be examined. The lack of cultural adaptations on the part of government, as noted or implied for education, is just as evident in such matters as land use and management, taxation, health, and in the institution of machinery and practices of local and state government.

All these conditions—products of much the same cause—have produced the situation which today we descriptively summarize in the phrase "the educational backwardness of the New Mexican." That educational backwardness has at its roots such backgrounds as the dispossession of the New Mexican from his land and water rights, his exploitation in competitive business, his educational abandonment, and his political manipulation by unscrupulous individuals and organiza-
tions. All these, in turn, have resulted primarily from the fact that, in the incorporation of the New Mexican into the American fold, no intelligent attention has been given to the fact that he represented a culture and a way of life that differed fundamentally from that into which he was suddenly thrust about a hundred years ago.

Adverse criticism has no value if it serves only the purpose of arousing accusations and recriminations. There is no point to reviewing the mistakes of the past unless such a procedure helps to clarify questions which are pertinent to the solution of today's problems. It is the thesis of this paper that a thorough examination of the circumstances noted above offers a highly fruitful means to the attainment of a fuller understanding and a more sympathetic appreciation of the New Mexican's backwardness than appears to exist among educational and governmental leaders today. This paper is offered with the thought that, once such understanding and appreciation is attained, a truly intelligent attack upon that condition can be made by those who today are charged with the responsibility for remedial action.

As the premises upon which the problem is founded are fully recognized and understood, the educational backwardness of the New Mexican becomes increasingly solvable by remedial action which is adjusted to the realities of that problem and its origins. As suggested herein, current remedial action should take into account the circumstances which, during the past century, have played such an important part in creating the problem. At the same time, due stress needs to be placed upon the fact that to the national government belongs a large share of the responsibility for the failure of New Mexicans to become normal Americans. This implies that the United States, as a whole, should have a correspondingly large share in the responsibility for remedying the situation. If a review of New Mexico's political and educational history served no other purpose, it would still be worth making as it offers a key to the puzzle as to what social instrumentalities share in the causes of, and should share in the remedies for, the cultural dilemma of the New Mexicans. Possibly, with the perspective afforded by history, suitable steps can be taken to enlist the appropriate governmental bodies, as indicated by that perspective, in the task of the cultural incorporation of these "forgotten people."