

Amezcuca, M. (2023). *Making Mexican Chicago: From Postwar Settlement to the Age of Gentrification*. The University of Chicago Press.

Review by **David Robles**

Making Mexican Chicago by Mike Amezcuca narrates the ethnic Mexican experience in the Windy City as it “became a Mexican metropolis in the second half of the twentieth century.” Comprised of six chapters, Amezcuca focuses on the neighborhoods of Near West Side, Pilsen, Back of the Yards, and *La Villita* (Little Village). He is interested in the spatial and racial politics that stemmed from “white flight” by ethnic Europeans who grappled with the notion of either leaving or staying in their neighborhoods as ethnic Mexican immigration contributed to not only the rising population, but also the creation of Mexican spaces in white neighborhoods. He is also interested in “the complex structures of feeling” that all of those involved experienced as ethnic Mexicans, citizens and undocumented, as they transformed these spaces into their own. These structures of feeling “encompassed individual and collective ambition, equity seeking, and dreams of opportunity” (p. 7)—all which were limited by U.S. capitalism.

In Chapter One, “Crafting Capital,” Amezcuca argues that urban whites’ dissent against the Democratic Party was not solely because of the “redistributive policies” directed towards minorities, but was also rooted in urban whites’ attempts to prevent ethnic Mexicans from settling in these white spaces and stalling the inevitable. For urban whites, seeing their neighborhood become more Mexican due to immigration led to feelings of “loss and a sense of being under siege from hostile external forces” (p. 7). The chapter illustrates that such fears stemmed from their belief that their neighborhoods would “degrade,” leading to the decline of property values, and according to Amezcuca, creating resentments fueled by housing policies and speculative markets tied to race. New Deal-era federal housing policies and mortgage lending programs, along with federal bureaucrats and insurers, led to *redlining* and segregating neighborhoods that were diverse. This in turn would allow for the denial of either grants or mortgages. By the mid-twentieth century, Chicago experienced deindustrialization, leaving behind empty factories and ethnic Mexican community members without jobs. Amezcuca notes that there were many consequences: ethnic Mexicans living in these areas had little to no political backing and representation; city administrators labeled these spaces as “blighted” and open to urban renewal efforts; renewal efforts led to gentrification; and finally, there were forced removals, the result of new immigration policies.

In Chapter Two, “Deportation and Demolition,” the author illustrates how immigration policy and urban renewal were “enjoined forms of material dispossession and urban erasure” (p. 59) in the post war years. Hence, this chapter narrates the efforts ethnic Mexican communities in the Windy City made to avoid not only deportation, but also the dispossession of their homes and the community they had created. Such efforts, especially from the Mexican Near West Side

neighborhood, saw community members' attempts to empower themselves as both residents and merchants in the neighborhood. However, Amezcua explains that city officials considered ethnic Mexican residents "expendable" as well as removable due to immigration policies deeming them deportable. This chapter makes it clear that policies such as Operation Wetback and the deportation of many ethnic Mexicans had adverse effects on the community as they weakened it and made it vulnerable to the city's plans for urban renewal. Forced out of the Near West Side neighborhood by the city administration and into the Lower West Side neighborhood known for its stockyards, ethnic Whites attempted to contain ethnic Mexicans at all costs.

Chapter Three, "From the Jungle to las Yardas," concentrates on the struggle for space between the ethnic White working class and the growing ethnic Mexican population after their forced removal from the Near West Side due to immigration sweeps and the city's plans for urban renewal. Yet, to contain and restrict ethnic Mexican peoples from either leaving or moving into the stockyards, Amezcua explains that the city passed and used numerous zoning policies that not only facilitated the containment of ethnic Mexicans in the less desirable areas of the neighborhood but prevented them from renovating their dwellings. By denying ethnic Mexican residents the opportunity to repair their homes, the city contributed to the hastened pace of dilapidation and then dispossession of these properties. In simplest terms, living in the *Las Yardas* neighborhood meant "navigating an inequitable system of urban development and residential apartheid" (p. 99). Yet, ethnic Mexicans used this inequity to create political and economic power, mobilizing to become part of the Democrat machine in the city.

Chapter Four, "Making a Brown Bungalow Belt," illustrates how ethnic Mexicans and their newfound political and economic power became crucial to reviving inner-city neighborhoods after ethnic Whites evacuated the area in the 1960s. Detailing the importance of ethnic Mexicans, especially Mexican Americans, and their economic power, Amezcua explains that the city of Chicago under mayor Richard J. Daley softened previous spatial restrictions in order to bring new life to these abandoned neighborhoods. This opportunity stemmed from not only their loyalty to the Daley Democrat machine, but also "built on the accumulated social capital that had been carefully cultivated for years" as this group of ethnic Mexicans labeled themselves as "representatives of a deserving, industrious, hardworking immigrant/ethnic group" (p. 145). Through their struggle from the post war years, Daley supporters did not identify with liberal or New Left politics or ideologies. Amezcua insinuates that the political power they exerted in the 1960s was more accommodationist as they were not in favor of the welfare state, but did support business, and law and order—illustrating how Mexican Americans who were probusiness and middle class shifted to the Republican party.

Chapter Five, "Renaissance and Revolt," examines how the pursuit for political power within the ethnic Mexican community in Chicago divided Mexican Americans during the 1960s and early 1970s. Amezcua demonstrates that Mexican Americans who were attracted to the economic development of their neighborhoods associated themselves with the Republican party while Chicanos, who wanted to empower all people of ethnic Mexican decent, aligned themselves with the Democratic party. Representing the identity politics of the time, this chapter informs the reader that Chicano activists viewed Mayor Daley's development initiatives not as a "renaissance," but merely another attempt at "cultural erasure and people removal" (p. 173) since it favored middle- to upper-income individuals. Overall, this chapter illustrates the political, economic, and social

struggle between both groups and their visions of what ethnic Mexican neighborhoods should and should not be. As explained by Amezcua, “Latino” Republicans envisioned the proposed renaissance to be guided by “Latino business power,” while Chicanos promoted a more community-oriented development. Still, the uncertainty of community control still presented the threat of displacement, and it would come in the form of young white affluent suburbanites and speculators.

Finally, in Chapter Six, “Flipping Colonias,” Amezcua’s focus is on the gentrification of the barrios, most notably, the Pilsen neighborhood from the 1970s-1990s. This chapter details the process by which neighborhoods comprised of ethnic Mexicans became gentrified via capital, connections, and coercion. According to Amezcua, John Podmajersky created a “neoboheemian fortress” comprised of new settlers that he referred to as an “artist’s colony.” However, other private real estate developers looked towards these neighborhoods for financial gain. Taking advantage of tax benefits, public subsidies, and zoning changes, as well through other illicit means, these developers were able to obtain various buildings to “rehabilitate” the neighborhoods. Well into the 1980s, community members continued their efforts to stop speculators but were no match for the capital and connections they brought. The gentrification of the barrios in the late twentieth century by speculators and “rehabbers” allowed them to reap the rewards of the “sweat equity” ethnic Mexicans, both immigrants and Mexican Americans, built and established in the decades prior.

Overall, when one thinks about the ethnic Mexican experience in the United States in relation to immigration and immigration policies, displacement, social justice, political representation, redlining, and labor, the southwest immediately comes to mind. However, the ethnic Mexican experience of these issues is not only reserved to the southwestern states where the population of this ethnic group is higher. It also encompasses communities throughout the Plains and mid-western states, and other communities with an ethnic Mexican population. *Making Mexican Chicago* illustrates this and contributes greatly to the historiography of the ethnic Mexican experience in the United States.

Reviewer Bio:

David Robles, an Assistant Professor of History at Lamar University, is a Borderlands historian whose research focuses on Chicana/o activism and movements in South Texas. He is currently working on a book project tentatively titled *Far from Heaven: The Pharr Police Riot and Chicano and Community Organizing in a Small South Texas Bordertown*. His publications include the book chapter, “It Was Us against Us’: The Pharr Police Riot of 1971 and the People’s Uprising against El Jefe Político,” in the anthology *Civil Rights in Black and Brown: Histories of Resistance and Struggle in Texas* (University of Texas Press, 2021).