

INTO THE STACKS ARTICLE RELAUNCH: “POWER AND CONNECTION”

Into the Stacks: Article Relaunch: “Power and Connection”: “An Indispensable Tool”: Reflections on Imperial Interpretations in Recent Immigration Histories

Eladio Bobadilla 

Department of History, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

Published in 2011, Paul Kramer’s “Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World,” has become something of a classic text in the historiography of the United States. Twelve years and nearly 400 citations after its publication, historians of the United States who specialize in everything from empire proper to foreign relations to labor and capitalism have looked to this article for methodological grounding, direction, and insight. Countless historians across many subfields have found their work imprinted by Kramer’s call for a more systemic and deliberate engagement with the imperial, beyond the “superficial and invocatory” threads of previous generations, such as (though hardly exclusively) those found in the New Left and cultural studies traditions (1348).

For historians of immigration, the article holds tremendous and enduring relevance. It can be, and for me and others has been, “an indispensable tool in the kit” of our histories (1350). Directly and indirectly, explicitly cited or more implicitly referenced, “Power and Connection” has influenced major historiographical threads and trends and has led historians to craft sophisticated, novel, and important arguments about migration—arguments that have allowed us to construct fuller stories, weave more compelling narratives, and mount more sophisticated arguments. Here, I offer a brief look at how Kramer’s work has influenced notable immigration historians and histories, including my own, and offer some (admittedly fragmentary) thoughts on where the field might go from here as it continues to grapple with, respond to, and expand upon Kramer’s arguments a decade ago.

Perhaps most obvious, in my view, Kramer’s vision of an imperial-minded focus has allowed immigration historians to write histories that are simultaneously local and global, that embrace at once the massive and the minute. In this way, they have been able to draw upon the methods and promises of global and world history (the distinction, though it has been made, has always been rather fuzzy in practice) while embracing the detail and vibrancy of microhistory, without getting too stuck in the pitfalls of either.¹ Among the most notable recent examples of this are histories as distinct as Hidetaka Hirota’s groundbreaking work on the myth of once-open borders, which examines both the mechanisms of local control in the late nineteenth century and the global implications of that system after that period and Kelly Lytle Hernández’s *Bad Mexicans*, which vividly recounts the vibrant cross-border resistance movements that anarchist radicals, led by Ricardo Flores Magón and influenced by an emerging global anticapitalist discourse, instigated in the borderlands during the Mexican

¹Ian Tyrell, “Reflections on the Transnational Turn in the United States,” *Journal of Global History* 4, no. 3 (Nov. 2009): 453–74.

Revolution.² And indeed, both highlight the inner workings of American imperialism, as viewed through the prism of migration and border control.

Related to this, historians of immigration who have embraced this framework have been able to tell more multidirectional histories, considering not only the military and economic influence of the United States on the rest of the world, or the cultural and social influence of migration on the United States, but both simultaneously, paying close attention to how capital's displacement of people in the Global South has led to waves of migration, which in turn have changed the social, political, and demographic landscape of the United States. Jessica Kim's *Imperial Metropolis* is one example of the kind of work possible when adopting this frame, by showing how American institutions, operating from a distance but no less violently (and effectively), crafted racial categories and hierarchies in both Mexico and the United States, all in the service of a capitalist empire hungry for wealth accumulation.³ In doing so, she also illustrates the irrationality of the "formal" vs. "informal" empire distinction that Kramer criticizes here and elsewhere (1374).⁴ One can find similar threads in the brilliant work of Julian Lim, who, in her 2020 book *Porous Borders*, demonstrates how late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century migrations, the result of capitalist exploitation and imperial ambition, resulted in multidirectional crossings, cultural exchanges, and tensions between and among Anglo Americans, ethnic Mexicans, Chinese immigrants, and African Americans.⁵

As well, migration histories that have accepted the challenge of imperial history have been more able to consider both structure and agency without giving undue weight to one over the other. The most dynamic histories of immigration as of late have been able to capture both the terrifying reach of the American empire's surveillance and police state and the everyday actions of migrants who have challenged the power of both state and capital in often limited, but decidedly creative and meaningful, ways.

Although pioneering scholars were doing this type of work before Kramer's article was published—consider Kitty Calavita's profoundly influential *Inside the State*—recent works have been even more explicit in their attention to how empire and its subjects have interacted in practice.⁶ I think of works like Deborah Kang's *INS on the Line*, Ana Minian's *Undocumented Lives*, and Adam Goodman's *Deportation Machine*, all of which have demonstrated how the juggernaut that is the American empire has served both to oppress immigrants and to offer them ways to resist.⁷ In my own oral history interviews, I regularly hear from immigrant narrators how their fortunes often hinged on which immigration officer or interviewer they encountered during a hearing, or what kind of disposition the agent who arrested them displayed. If not for Kramer's piece, I may have missed how this is very much a function of empire: as the American empire has grown, as its bureaucracy has bloated, it has often been, ironically, low- and mid-level bureaucrats who have been granted the most discretion and latitude in how they choose to enforce immigration law. This has led to abuse, to be sure, but also has opened doors for more humane encounters, as people exploit what Kramer calls "imperial vulnerabilities (1354)."

²Hidetaka Hirota, *Expelling the Poor: Atlantic Seaboard States and the Nineteenth-Century Origins of American Immigration Policy* (New York, 2017); Kelly L. Hernández, *Bad Mexicans: Race, Empire, and Revolution in the Borderlands* (New York, 2022).

³Jessica M. Kim, *Imperial Metropolis: Los Angeles, Mexico, and the Borderlands of American Empire, 1865–1941* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2019).

⁴Paul Kramer, "How Not to Write the History of U.S. Empire," *Diplomatic History* 42, no. 5 (2018): 911–31.

⁵Julian Lim, *Porous Borders: Multiracial Migrations and the Law in the U.S.–Mexico Borderlands* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017).

⁶Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I.N.S.* (New York, 1992).

⁷Deborah Kang, *The INS on the Line: Making Immigration Law on the US–Mexico Border, 1917–1954* (Oxford, UK, 2017); Ana Minian, *Undocumented Lives: The Untold Story of Mexican Migration* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); Adam Goodman, *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants* (Princeton, NJ, 2020).

Finally, Kramer has helped historians think more productively about American exceptionalism. Reading and re-reading “Power and Connection” has led me to ponder undeniably uncomfortable, but I think necessary, thoughts on this point. First, is it always wrong to acknowledge exceptionalism? In some ways, the United States has, in fact, been unique, or dare I say, exceptional, in its immigration policies. What other country, for example, has had as fluid a legalization and citizenship process as the United States? One need only consider the millions of visas the U.S. State Department has approved in recent years, including employment-based visas, family-sponsored visas, and other, more curious oddities like the K-1 (“fiancé”) visa, which grants a path to citizenship to foreign nationals marrying Americans almost automatically (the process is so peculiar and fascinating that it has become the focus of massively popular TV shows like “90 Day Fiancé”) and the diversity visa (Carly Goodman recently has written about the topic brilliantly).⁸

I often find myself at odds with scholars who depict American immigration history as uniquely—exceptionally—restrictive, exclusionary, and cruel. To be sure, it *has* been that. But not *just* that. America’s imperial posture has often compelled it to maintain, at least relatively speaking, a more permissive (if not always welcoming) stance toward immigrants than many other developed nations. As Kramer argues, immigration is best thought of as a filter, not a wall.⁹ At countless points in time, he points out, the United States has not barred but provoked immigration (1382). Perhaps, as Kramer writes, we need not “dispense with a sense of uniqueness” entirely. None of this is to excuse the vast collection of violent and oppressive episodes that have defined U.S. immigration history. But as I, too, have argued elsewhere, to depict immigration as either open or restrictive is to miss the point.¹⁰ The United States has been both, often simultaneously. In other words, and to return to my previous point, the United States has been exceptional, but not for the reasons some suggest. What has made it exceptional is its ability to bear the weight of massive contradictions, which can best be explained through the kind of imperial lens that Kramer calls for. In other words, rather than deny its exceptional features, it is important to think and argue productively about when, how, and why the United States is and has been exceptional, and then examine the implications.

Doing so will require some recalibration and a degree of tolerance for a conceptual language that does not entirely deny exceptionalism but instead explores it productively. In decades past, countless historians have attacked the notion of American exceptionalism. In an effort to shed notions of American (white) supremacy, scholars have long tried to dispense with the theologies that fueled Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis and the generations of scholars who stubbornly clung to that dangerous myth. In recent decades, “turn” after “turn” has sought to jettison these nationalistic, jingoistic, racist, and exclusionary histories. Yet, as morally laudable as those efforts have been, they sometimes have tended toward a kind of overcorrection, which, ironically, produced a new form of exceptionalism: a negative exceptionalism that views the United States as exceptionally and uniquely violent, corrupt, racist, and inhumane, and of its immigration policy as uniquely restrictive—a view that, again, I find both incorrect and unproductive.

I have become fascinated, for example, by how sending nations have become receiving nations and how those countries and their peoples, once on the receiving end of rabid xenophobia, have more recently embraced their own nativist, reactionary forces. There are other examples, of course, but Mexico, the one most familiar to me, provides an interesting case

⁸Carly Goodman, *Dreamland: America’s Immigration Lottery in an Age of Restriction* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2023).

⁹Paul Kramer, “Imperial Openings: Civilizations, Exemption, and the Geopolitics of Mobility in the History of Chinese Exclusion, 1868–1910,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14, no. 3 (July 2015): 320.

¹⁰Eladio Bobadilla, “For Us There Are No More Back Doors: California’s Proposition 187, the Paradoxes of Immigration Control, and the Long Struggle for Immigrants’ Rights,” *California History* 100, no. 3 (2023): 2–23.

study. Mexico now subjects Central American migrants to precisely the same kind of cruelty that its citizens were subjected to for decades in the United States (and on its southern border). The irony is breathtaking: as a sending nation, Mexico learned firsthand the ins and outs of immigration control, and it now applies and enforces the very same to its own (largely Central American and Caribbean) immigrant and refugee populations. And its people, historically the victims of brutal forms of racism, nativism, and xenophobia, now often fill the role of perpetrators (few might have imagined seeing anti-immigrant protests south of the border calling for a policy of “Mexico First”).¹¹ The temptation remains, no doubt, to revert to a U.S.-centered explanation for this: countries under American influence (control?) have acted as colonies historically did: as proxies and client states. Certainly, much of this has to do with weaker states’ acquiescence to American imperial decrees, but monocausal explanations ignore that Mexico has had its own unique and, dare we say, exceptional, motives for behaving this way. And of course, there is much to be said about the history of migration control in Europe, which has been no less brutal than that of the United States.¹² In other words, the United States is exceptional, just like everyone else.

An imperial history of immigration will not solve every puzzle, explain every contradiction, or resolve every debate in our field. It will, however, encourage us to ask better questions, seek more complete answers, and, hopefully, lead us to embrace the nuances and complexities that we teach and demand of our students. That we are, a decade after its publication, discussing this piece is a testament to its explanatory utility. I, for one, will be citing it, referencing it, and drawing inspiration and guidance from it for many years to come.

¹¹Perhaps the exceptions that prove the rule are studies like the following: Jürgen Buchenau, “Small Numbers, Great Impact: Mexico and Its Immigrants, 1821–1973,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 20, no. 3 (2001): 23–49; and Pablo Yankelevich, “Mexico for the Mexicans: Immigration, National Sovereignty and the Promotion of Mestizaje,” *The Americas* 68, no. 3 (2012): 405–36. For recent expressions of nativism in Mexico, see, among others, James Fredrick, “Shouting ‘Mexico First,’ Hundreds of Tijuana March Against Migrant Caravan,” *NPR*, Nov. 19, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/19/669193788/shouting-mexico-first-hundreds-in-tijuana-march-against-migrant-caravan>.

¹²For a broad overview, see Christof Van Mol and Helga De Valk, “Migration and Immigrants in Europe: A Historical and Demographic Perspective,” in *Integration Processes and Policies in Europe*, eds. Blanca Garcés-Masareñas and Rinus Penninx (Cham, Switzerland, 2016), 31–55. For other relevant debates, see Peter Gattress, *The Unsettling of Europe: How Migration Reshaped a Continent* (New York, 2019); Andrew Geddes, *Immigration and European Integration, Towards Fortress Europe?* (Manchester, UK, 2000); Nicholas de Genova and Nathalie Peutz, eds., *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement* (Durham, NC, 2010); Jean Beaman, *Citizen Outsiders: Children of North African Immigrants in France* (Oakland, CA, 2017); and Julie R. Watts, *An Unconventional Brotherhood: Union Support for Liberalized Immigration in Europe* (La Jolla, CA, 2000).