

Chicano Movement and Identity through a Social Stratification Lens

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Abstract

This thesis will illustrate the roles of identity and politicization of the Mexican American community with a political lens of social stratification. The goal is to discuss its resilience during pre and postindustrial America in hopes to enlighten what other ethnic minorities may be experiencing during the current ethnic hostility of mainstream America.

I. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to explore what sparked the Chicano Movement in the 1960's and with it, the Mexican American identity. Mexican American roots have a deep historical resilience through a sociological theory lens. An unmeltable ethnic class, who finds "the source of their plight in a history of internal colonialism during which these groups have been confined to specific areas and made to work under uniquely unfavorable conditions" (Portes & Manning). The resilience of the Chicano community can be sociologically explained as a result of the constant economic disadvantages and the hostility of their host culture, in this case Anglo America. This resilience is in direct response to social disadvantages that had already existed for centuries but did not become a source of communal resilience until post World War II, a period in time when veterans of color were returning home after feeling they had earned their right in American society but still faced the same discrimination and inequality.

The sentiment felt by veterans created a new vision and new moral views towards segregation and racism in all communities of color in the United States. Thus, creating the right social atmosphere for the social movements we know today. Social movements such as, the Black Panther Party, Brown Berets, United Farm Workers and Young Lords, to name a few, rose in response to identity awareness and resilience to injustices.

Social stratification provides us with the tools needed to examine the reason why this specific group, Chicanos, have and continue to experience inequality. I will attempt to illustrate

several stratification theories from sociologist like Alejandro Portes & Robert D. Manning, who have dedicated their research on the Immigrant Enclave and their ability to assimilate to obtain positive social mobility in the United States. Secondly, I will discuss the works of William Julius Wilson whom, through a Black analytical perspective, argues the significance of race in American institutions. My goal is to elucidate the historical aspects of the movement and to emphasize its evolution scientifically with the help of social stratification.

We live in an advanced postindustrial society where although a myriad of rhetoric exist about economic and social equality, statistics show that poverty and inequality are still deeply embedded in us. We are experiencing immigration debates and a raising search of resources that are becoming more and more limited. This is accompanied by; two major social reactions (1) Permanent displacements of people in search of a better life create dramatic transformations in their home nations. The economic systems of sending societies tend to weaken, thus creating a norm of generational out migration as the only path to achieve any sort of upward mobility. (2) Migration is a strong source of change. Large migrant groups whether educated or not, become a source of deep change culturally and politically that may be seen as a treat to the receiving culture, creating fragmentations within the migrant community and their host. There is a correlation between social hostility from receiving cultures and the militarization of immigrant enclaves (Portes, 2010). It is important to keep in mind that in this paper, Mexican Americans are labeled as immigrants, thus migrant stratification theories are applicable. To discard previous generations who had already been part of Anglo American society before the United States took ownership of Mexican territories would be to see past the roots that enlightened the movement. Thus, understanding this resilient social phenomena can provide us with a scholarly analysis of

what we can expect in other ethnic groups who have migrated after the attacks of September 11 and are experiencing a certain degree of hostility from their receiving culture.

II. Chicano Identity

Identity is the anthropological, sociological and psychological person's view of themselves in comparison to their surroundings. "This characteristics, feelings and believes distinguish people from others" (Oxford Dictionary). For Chicanos, identity is a multidimensional coexistence of Mesoamerican roots, - area that extends from central Mexico to Costa Rica where pre-Columbian societies flourished before the Spanish invasion in the 1500's- Spanish cultural influence through religion and language as their native tongue mixed with Anglo American liberalism, language and belief of the "American Dream". For example, the term Chicano comes from the Aztec civilization that called themselves "Mēxihcatls"; this later on became Mexicanos after Mexico became a state. Mexican Americans took that and broke it into Xicanos-Chicanos after embracing the derogatory term given by their native Mexican counterparts who saw them as less than Mexican. With this label, a new stronger sense of identity was created and revolutionized (Palos, A., & McGinnis, E., 2011).

If an individual lives in a society where it is constantly being taught that their culture and their parents were a hindrance to success, then, one begins to analyze their parents and community either in a negative or protective manner. Having the knowledge that this used to be their grandparents and great grandparents' land also contributed on shaping the Chicano identity. Sentiments of resilience and the spread of knowledge, inspired urban Chicanos to believe that the

greed of the United States for more land cause them to become second class citizens; “This identity was created on basis of what we felt by facing all this hostility and aggression that we were not able to analyze intellectually yet. Everything from the embarrassment of our parents not being able to speak English well, to have the word Mexican be associated with dirty and not being able to participate in a country where we have only been wanted for cheap labor”(Rosales, F. (1996). *Chicano!*).

*“I am Joaquín, lost in a world of confusion,
caught up in the whirl of a gringo society,
confused by the rules, scorned by attitudes,
suppressed by manipulation, and destroyed by modern society.
My fathers have lost the economic battle
and won the struggle of cultural survival.
And now! I must choose between the paradox of
victory of the spirit, despite physical hunger,
or to exist in the grasp of American social neurosis,
sterilization of the soul and a full stomach.
Yes, I have come a long way to nowhere,
unwillingly dragged by that monstrous, technical,
industrial giant called Progress and Anglo success....
I look at myself.
I watch my brothers.
I shed tears of sorrow. I sow seeds of hate.
I withdraw to the safety within the circle of life --
MY OWN PEOPLE” -Rodolfo Corky Gonzales*

In early 1969 Rodolfo Gonzales wrote the poem *I am Joaquin*. By March of that same year the poem had already been adapted into a film and circulating in public demonstrations and organizing campaigns of what would later be known as The Chicano Movement. In the poem, Gonzales traces the history of Mexico and the resilience of its people but also does something very interesting, he illustrates the political paradox that comes with colonialism. *“I look at myself/ and see part of me/ who rejects my father and my mother /and dissolves into the melting pot /to disappear in shame. / I sometimes /Sell my brother out /And reclaim him /For my own when society gives me /Token*

leadership /In society's own name” (Gonzales, 1969). Joaquin is a complex and contradictory character that explained the confusion, anger, pride and betrayal Mexican Americans were trying to understand in themselves as mestiza/os- individual of European and Native American ancestry- conscious of their interconnecting worlds, Anglo, Mexican and Native coexisting and prospering within themselves and their communities.

Today, Latina/os are the second largest population in California according to the United States 2010 Census. Today’s populations of Mexican American youth also are attending higher education in record numbers. However, this generation sees themselves differently than their comrades in the late 1960’s who identified as Chicano and established Chicano Studies departments in their educational systems. Self-identifying as Chicano meant that you were proud and to an extent even militant against structural racism. This new millennial generation identifies themselves differently. Speaking Spanish fluently and knowledge’s of national origin has provided advance of culture and social identity but it has also been able to highlight parallels and solidarity across Latin American cultures. In modern standards, it seems that what makes a person of Latina/o, either by birth or ancestry, identify, as “Latino/Latina” is something more (Montejano, D., 2010).

It has only been true today, due to our current awareness in a society constructed by race, that we have realized the similarities culturally and politically with other Latin Americans. This understanding, based on personal and group interactions, has taught latina/os the reality of racism in the United States and pushed for no other option but to join together. A person chooses to identify as Latina/o when they realize and experience commonality and solidarity with others who speak the same language, practice similar beliefs and undergo similar aggression and

oppression. Thus, being Latina/o has embodied more than just a racial and cultural label but a political term. Nothing, aside from Salsa music, has unified the Latin American community this day more than the fight for immigration reform. To illustrate this, I want to clarify that the United States of America has not ever undergone this long without creating a naturalization reform and the recent involvements, starting from 1970's leading to 2014's Honduran Children Refugee Crisis, politically and economically have created a wave of blood and famine in Latin America forcing people to migrate to the United States in search of a secure place to live and an opportunity for positive social mobility.

Therefore, more than being a racial or cultural designation, "Latino/Latina" is a political term. Individuals who self-identify as "Latina/Latino" tend to find us involved, in some way, in resisting and fighting white supremacy. Due to this awareness and understanding of the dynamics of prejudice and power, people who call themselves "Latinos/Latinas" tend to feel solidarity and seek unity, not only with "Latinos/Latinas" of other national origins, but with African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans and other people of color—all of whom are oppressed by institutional racism and euro centrism in the United States.

III. The Chicano Movement

Social movements have their roots repeatedly in history and only emerge after a long period of time faced with oppression and uncertainty. At one time, Mexico was a larger territory that extended from the Yucatan Peninsula all the way to Texas, California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona and Nuevo Mexico. In 1846, United States troops declared war on Mexico after many

Anglo Americans had begun settling in what was then Mexican territory, and began to occupy it and refuse to follow laws established by the Mexican government.

Two years later Mexico lost the war and one hundred thousand Mexicans lost the land that had belonged to their ancestors for centuries. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo promised these Mexicans the opportunity to live a free and prosperous life if they decided to become United States citizens. Sadly, over time Mexican Americans realized these promises not to be true.

By the 1950's Mexican Americans had already lost the remaining land their ancestors lived as tenants in despite horrible living conditions. They also faced the same segregation and racism African Americans faced even though they were seen as "white" in the eyes of US government. Some living in other parts of the US were unlucky to live in "sunset towns," known as towns and cities where people of color were warned against walking in the streets after sundown or risk being harassed or lynched. The Mexican American community felt as though there was nothing they could do about all the injustices, and accepted their social stratification.

Mexican American hearts and minds did not change until the victory of the United States after World War II where at least three thousand Mexican Americans served. "We went to fight to give people liberty and their civil rights and then we came back home and it was the same as we left it" (Sandoval & Miller, 2009). Mexican American Veterans returning home to the United States believed they had finally earned their right as citizens in the country they put their lives at risk for but were still denied of their basic rights. The outrage and desolation was felt nation wide.

The death of Private Felix Longoria and the denial from the only funeral home in his hometown to provide a proper funeral in honor of the deceased soldier was one of many examples in the Midwest that finally created a spark in the Mexican American community. Mexican Americans began to demand their rights and celebrate their origins after realizing that their “white” label in segregationist American society meant nothing.

Thus, the fight to be recognized as Mestizos- term used to describe a person of combined American Indian and European descent- began. Mexican Americans commenced to see the rise of the civil rights movement in the African American community and tried to create solidarity with these groups. Mexican Americans believed that if they gained the recognition of the Supreme Court, like the African Americans fighting for the 14th Amendment, they would be protected by the Constitution and be able to change their lives regardless of Anglo sentiment. The problem was that Mexican Americans were labeled as white, creating the argument that they were not being legally denied of their 14th Amendment like the African American community.

On August 1st 1951, a bar brawl broke in a small Texan town. Pedro Hernandez shot and killed Joe Espinoza. Hernandez lawyer, Gustavo Garcia, saw this case as an opportunity to also put in trail Mexican Americans’ civil rights. Garcia argued that his client, Pedro Hernandez, would not be judged by a jury of his peers as it is stated by law because Mexican Americans were not allowed to participate as members of a jury, thus, making his trial unfair and unconstitutional. This showed that if Mexican Americans would be treated as equal to Whites, they would be allowed to be part of a court of jurors. Texans viewed this as a threat to social order denying Garcia his claim. Garcia then decided to team up with John Herrera and Carlos Cadena to appeal his case in front of the Supreme Court.

On January 11, 1954, after months of anticipation and community collaboration to raise funds for the legal team to be present in Washington D.C. Garcia, Herrera and Cadena were ready to present their people's case to the Supreme Court. This was an extraordinary case, not only where these lawyers representing their community and themselves, they were facing the risk of losing or worse, win and be labeled as something lesser than, like their Black allies. First, they had to define Mexican American and their socio cultural difference to Anglos to the justices who did not know what that meant. "In the North they don't even know about the 3 million Mexicans living in the Southwest" (Lopez, I., 2003). Three months later, May 3rd 1954, Hernandez vs. Texas won the right to be trailed by his peers and Mexican Americans won the right to be labeled Mexican American and under protection of the 14th Amendment.

Mexican Americans were astonished. Not only did they make Anglo Saxon society listen to them, but also were finally recognized by the Supreme Court as their own racial group. The sentiment of mistreating another person was seen as un-American in Mexican American communities who felt powerful now that the United States Constitution was behind them. Mexican Americans began to run for office in their hometowns and ask for more representation in their schools. This was the small spark needed to begin what we know today as the Chicano Movement.

The years that followed, lasting from the late 1960's to mid 1970's, have been described as a "Renaissance" era. The United Farm Workers arose and Chicano youth played notice. Mexican American youth, tired of the misrepresentation in their schools, lack of mentorship and low graduation rate, began to demand for a better education and won. Here is when we truly begin to see the Chicano movement define itself as a politicized method of ethnic resilience.

During this period of time, “Mexicanidad” became illustrated in morals. It is expressed in verse and fashion, but most importantly, militarized and shaped as a form of communal strength.

By the mid 1970’s when Chicanos achieved enough political power questions of “philosophy and ego” began to rise. The main cause for this division was deciding whether to remain radical or become a reformed political party, creating fragmentation in the movement. “The “gringo” would no longer be the main target of activist, who now exchanged accusations of “selling out” and “opportunism” among each other (Montejano, 2010). By the end of the 1970’s, the inability to reconcile in order to work as an unified entity and the small gestures of progression offered by the State in order to appease the Mexican American community, removed the political strength of the Chicano Movement. For we have learned that when a host culture is less hostile and more welcoming to ethnic minorities, militarization and the need to resist assimilation lessens (Portes, 2010). Today, the Chicano movement is not what it used to be, as a matter of fact; universities who currently offer Chicano Studies programs are encountering difficulties recruiting new students (Florido, 2013). This has mainly to do with the recent immigration waves of Latin Americans arriving in the United States who have assimilated with one another and mixed.

IV. Social Stratification Theories

After briefly epitomized the beginnings of the Chicano movement and how it’s ethnic identity has been a tangible source of strength and resilience; I will proceed to further hypothesize how it all connects reasonably into place academically with two specific theoretical examples. I wish to represent full intent to step away from historical evidence and equity

philosophical rhetoric in order to truly demonstrate cognitive and rational explanation to answer scientifically racial inequality and “unmeltable” ethnic that is the Mexican American community.

In post Industrial United States, we live in constant awareness of the economic and social disparities that surround us. We are aware that some members in our society have the luxury to live in mansions, have easy access to higher education, healthcare, highly desirable job positions, drive and wear the newest items that demonstrate prestige; while others can not afford to own a home, let alone have the monetary power to receive easy access to healthcare, higher education and are too preoccupied with earning enough to survive paycheck to paycheck every month until they can no longer work and become obsolete in the eyes of society.

Social stratification recognizes this and presents theories as explanations to these occurrences continue to be a part of who we are as a society and as individuals. Social stratification is the complexity social institutions, of any kind, created to form inequalities within certain populations. These inequalities can be seen through (1) what goods and ideas society views as valuable and desirable (2) the laws society makes that create the norm of who can and cannot have access to these desirable goods and ideas and (3) the “mobility mechanisms”(Grunsky, 1994), or the forms by which an individual can move up or down social classes with ease, that determine an individual’s occupation and determine the resources or goods they have access to. Social stratification occurs at the ethnic, political, economic, gender and educational level and is reinforced by power, prestige and status that exist within a society.

John Rawls, an American political scientist and philosopher, wrote *A Theory of Justice* in 1971. After spending his childhood during the Great Depression and seeing the inhumanity of World War II, Rawls grew up questioning what a society needs in order to insure that it offers

justice to its citizens. In his book, Rawls tries to identify what may truly be unfair in our society and how we can fix it; he does this by introducing four main points. First, statistics indicate the degrees of inequality our society exists in but is hard to acknowledge this due to our nation's rhetoric of the "American Dream" that has swept into political agendas and into the heart of society. Second, the reason why our society fails to become more just is due to its citizens inability to imagine what it would be like to live under different social circumstances. To further understand this, John Rawls conducted a sociological research named *The Veil of Ignorance* where his subjects were asked to imagine themselves in a cognitive stage before birth without any knowledge of the circumstances they'll be born into. Ignorance as to what sort of parents we would have, what our neighborhoods would look like, how our schools would perform, the level of access to health care and how the police and social systems would treat us where some of the questions Rawls asked in his research.

The Veil of Ignorance stops us from comparing what others have done to achieve upward mobility and instead challenges us to envision the statistical risk of entering American society as if it were a lottery, without knowing if you would be born into an affluent family in Manhattan or an undocumented family in the outskirts of Phoenix. Thirdly, knowing what we would like to change in our society through *The Veil of Ignorance*, would have a positive impact on our schools, hospitals, fair access to law and decent housing. From a *Gemeinschaft* and or *Gesellschaft* level, we would come to understand what type of society we would want to live in, we have just have not given proper thought due to the strong influence the power elite has in politics. Fourth, Rawls recognized that his research creates different social issues into different orders of importance depending on the individual. Some may rank taking control of air pollution

in the environment higher than easier access to higher education; in any case the goal of John Rawls is to help us understand that our social goal is to create a state where no matter what circumstances our parents may have, we would all have a fair chance to live in a healthy prosperous society.

IV a. William Julius Wilson

In his article, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*, sociologist William Julius Wilson begins by explaining that race perception to gain access to class and prestige has changed. After decades of racial oppression, ranging from slavery to segregation, Blacks, just like Chicanos, were confined into exploitative labor conditions and eliminated from gaining economic competition against their white counterparts. He highlights however, that due to the political, social and economic battles won during the Civil Rights Movement, communities of color have been able to eliminate those barriers but with that a new set has emerged. Dr. Wilson compares previous barriers with new barriers and says that although old barriers were designed to “control and restrict the entire black population” based solely on race; new barriers still hold racial significance but only create hardships on an individual level, specifically the black underclass.

Dr. Wilson proposes that in American society there has been three different stages of “black-white contact” that have created different political and economic forms of racial stratification. The first consist of slavery and early post American Civil War; he labels it as *plantation economy and racial caste oppression*, a period in time that can be compared with the Spanish Conquest of Mexico and the creation of a similar caste system that lasted until the early

nineteen hundreds. The second stage begins around 1875 and ends at the New Deal era and may be characterized as the period of *industrial expansion, class conflict, and racial oppression*. The third and final race revolution takes place during post World War II America, mid 1960's and 1970's, identified as *progressive transition from racial inequalities to class inequalities*. Both the second and third revolutions speak truly to Blacks and Chicanos alike; in terms of space and time Mexican Americans had already lost their lands and been integrated into Anglo American society by 1848, the year the Treaty of Guadalupe was signed. We must keep in mind that Dr. Wilson's main point is to highlight that according to the methods of production and or political agendas of each era; different restrictions on how racial groups socialize with themselves and institutions in the United States dictate their limited access to privilege and power.

In order to further explain the economic ramifications that have created racial stratification, William Julius Wilson introduces a Marxists' explanation of race. Here, the ultimate goal of the capitalist class is to create a system that will create the most profit by limiting workers' demands and creating divisions in the labor market; these divisions are created racially. In doing so, employers ensure their control over the marginalized working class of color by encouraging racist policies and propaganda that limit their access to education, health and proper living conditions but sustain a healthy labor market for whites (Bonacich, E. ,1972).

Marxism goes further by explaining that the capitalist not only benefits from this controlled cheaper labor market but also uses it to manipulate the white labor force. If white employees begin demanding for higher salaries and or begin to strike, the capitalist class can threaten to increase the salary and or offer the jobs of white employees to employees of color. The weaker the white labor force, the easier it is to replace it with cheap black and or migrant

labor. “If the labor market is split among ethnic lines... class antagonisms are transformed into racial antagonisms” (Wilson, 1978). These racial divisions in labor are a creation of the capitalist class to increase fragmentation and limit solidarity within the working class. This theory can be put in use during the strikes of The United Farm Workers who originally gained their positions of labor due to a decrease price of white labor after the Great Depression. In this scenario, the capitalist class maintained different immigrant enclaves isolated and in constant competition with one another. It was not until the Filipino and Mexican migrants decided to unite and strike as one that they finally began to have their demands met (Pawel, M., 2014).

IV b. Portes & Manning

In collaboration, both sociologist Alejandro Portes and financial expert Robert D. Manning, use previous theories to explain the adaptation of immigrants in their new society, specifically Anglo America. The communality in their research focuses mainly on the capability of immigrant enclaves to assimilate as smoothly as possible following the adaptation process into “mainstream” America. During this adaptation process, immigrant groups must undergo cyclical periods of economic hardship and discrimination into eventually reaching a certain level of social and economic growth correlated with knowledge of American culture into their path of acceptance (Portes & Manning, 1990). Failure of immigrants and or their entire communities to assimilate in such a sequential order is associated with their declination to lessen or fully eliminate traditional beliefs and or affected by the “resistance” of the native society to accept them due to racial, religious and cultural differences. Keeping in mind that lack of knowledge of

American culture exists, this puts immigrant enclaves in legal vulnerability directly affecting the opportunities to have a well-paid job, access to education and healthcare.

Therefore, the ability to triumph fully adapt as an immigrant depends on (a) “willingness” to shed away your ethnical differences and (b) replacing traditional values with those of mainstream Americana. However, this principle perspective does not weight in the racial tensions and divisions that may already exist in the receiving culture that make the process of assimilation longer and or, in extreme circumstances, unachievable.

A second theory speaks of migrant groups that have chosen to become “unmeltable” decades after their arrival in American society. These “unmeltable ethnics”- Blacks, Chicanos and Native Americans- share a history of colonialism, slavery, oppressive labor and living conditions. This is due, as previously mentioned by Dr. William Julius Wilson, to their roles in the labor market that have benefited the elite class and white working class. Communal theories speak of this reclines not as an act of intentional defiance but as a response of constant disadvantageous labor positions and the “absence of a smooth path of assimilation”. Unmeltable ethnics have taken the path of communal self-defense rather than continue waiting to individually be welcomed by their host culture.

Historical knowledge and constant oppressive labor has contributed to their resilience and recent collective political power. This “reactive formation”, as labeled by Professors Portes and Manning, to reassert their ethnic identity and social interest has led to ethnic solidarity and mobilization, as seen with the politicization of the Chicano identity, to obtain power and upward mobility in order to compete with the “native” population.

V. Closing Remarks

Immigration and ethnic groups have transformed the image of America. We see this in the reshaping of our social system growing more and more into two polar extremes, a liberal value system and conservative value system, remaking America's view of its self as a post industrial nation (Lipset, S., & Bendix, R., 1992). However, the core of American society has remained untouched. Legal systems, higher educational systems, mastering of the English language, basic values and most importantly the way power and mobility is set to maintain class structure has remained the same. Attempts have been made by radical immigrant groups such as the Chicanos in the 1960's and the DREAMER movement¹ in the 2000's to challenge their social stratification but only have been able to gain the sympathy of the general population. "Mass immigration "pushes from below" affecting... labour-intensive industries and public schools and forcing some institutional accommodations at this level" (Portes, 2010). The power elite still remains untouched, the potential for migrant groups to create change, at any social level, is limited due to the existing power of political and economic institutions.

What sparked the Chicano Movement in the 1960's and with it, the Mexican American identity was nothing more than a direct response to constant disadvantageous labor positions and the "absence of a smooth path of assimilation".

"Unmeltable" ethnics have taken the path of communal self-defense rather than continue waiting to individually be welcomed by their host culture. Mexican American roots have a deep historical resilience through a sociological theory lens, knowledge of this and the Latin American

¹ DREAMER Movement- group of undocumented youth who from early 200's to present time have been politically active in order to achieve access to higher education and an immigration reform. The term "Dreamer" comes from the Senate bill "The Dream Act" who if passed in 2010, would have provided a path to citizenship for 6 million undocumented youth in the United States.

migrations that have followed after the mid 1970's have re shaped the Chicano identity into a broader more accepting ethnic enclave that ethnically and politically recognizes it self as Latina/o. Chicanos and Latina/os alike have and continue to demand their rights and celebrate their origins after realizing that their "white" label in American society meant nothing.

*... And now the trumpet sounds,
The music of the people stirs the
Revolution.
Like a sleeping giant it slowly
Rears its head
To the sound of
Tramping feet
Clamoring voices...
Soft brown eyes of expectation for a
Better life.
-Rodolfo Corky Gonzales*

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