
CHAPTER ONE:

“Mexican Americans: A Study in Globalism and Diversity”

At the outset of any mission focused on a specific ethnic or cultural group, one must consider the broader scholarly ramifications of the enterprise. This chapter is an orienting one, allowing the reader to see the global scheme of things and understand how the topic chosen here fits into said scheme. It begins with the presentation of the specific discipline at hand – minority/cultural studies – and its position within the essential matrix of the general discipline considered here – American Studies. The following section addresses the language to be utilized throughout this project, including its social, political, and cultural implications. Finally, a statistical portrait is painted of the subject of this study, the Mexican-American population in Southern California; this portrait highlights their socioeconomic diversity as well as introduces them as vital players in the L.A. County political landscape, the setting of this commission.

The Role of Globalization in the Formulation of Minority Studies

This work is situated within the evolving discipline of American Studies because it deals with an aspect of U.S. society that is increasingly the focus of modern cultural studies: historically oppressed segments of the American public. According to the author Berkhofer, American Studies programs are now demonstrating “an overwhelming interest in class, ethnicity, race, and gender.” The language managed by these programs has turned away from the use of “such once popular terms as *paradox*, *ambiguity*, and *irony*” and has replaced them with “*domination*, *hegemony*, and *empowerment*.” Berkhofer

asserts that even the definition of culture itself has shifted from a definition “stressing eclecticism but unity to one emphasizing division and opposition.” He contends that “the exemplary works have moved from stressing the basic homogeneity of the American mind and uniformity of the American character to noting the diversity of the American population and divisiveness of the American experience” (280). This thesis, therefore, fits specifically within the modern rubric of American Studies as it deals with Mexican Americans, who can be referred to as a significant minority group managing the *domination of hegemonic* U.S. political institutions that have not fully validated their struggle to achieve political *empowerment*.

Another consideration before continuing. No treatment of any minority group in the United States is complete without considering the influential forces of globalization in the modern era. For my purposes here, globalization is referred to as a series of world-altering processes that were born in the realm of economics and international trade and have evolved into the spheres of political, social, and cultural identity-making practices. Globalization has added an extra dimension to the Mexican-American political struggle in positioning Chicanos in a broader world context; it no longer suffices to consider minority politics only on the domestic scene.¹ However, due to this new global political backdrop, further analysis and reconstruction of group identity become essential.

The homogenization of global mass culture occasioned by globalization is often referenced as a catalyst for movements whose aim is to more concretely define an individual or communal identity. In Marchand and Runyan, “the articulation of global

¹ Mexican-American consciousness of their ties to other oppressed minorities in the United States and with formerly colonized peoples around the world played a vital role in the 1960s Chicano movement and served as a precursor to the globalism described in this section; this point is aptly made in Diego Vigil (191).

restructuring processes leads to new forms of inclusion and exclusion, while often exacerbating existing inequalities” (2). That is, Mexican Americans must not only approach traditional forms of political institutional exclusion, but also new developments resulting from globalization. The traditional Chicano identity thus becomes obsolete and new methods of identity construction become critical.²

The author Castells addresses this situation expressly by making a distinction between various types of identity-building, and by emphasizing the one that is most useful for minority groups venturing out into contemporary politics. He begins with the pre-globalization identity-building method that he calls a “legitimizing identity,” one which “generates a civil society [...] which reproduce[s] [...] the identity that rationalizes the sources of structural domination” (8). That is, legitimizing identity relies on the institutionalization of a strong civil society to reinforce that identity’s political and social domination of the masses.

Castells continues by presenting an alternative for groups that do not assimilate to the dominant, legitimizing identity: a “resistance identity.” This type of identity is “generated by those actors that are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society” (8).

When resistance identity moves out into the cultural mainstream and directly challenges dominating institutions, such as in the case of Mexican Americans, a “project identity” is the result. This is the term used by Castells to describe “when social actors,

² Globalization not only affects minority group identity within the domestic political arena; more tangible, international effects can be witnessed as well. Madrid elucidates: “Globalization of the economy displaced additional persons – professionals, entrepreneurs, artisans, functionaries, and peasants – from [Mexican] societies and other hemispheric nations and brought them as economic refugees to the United States” (108).

on the basis of whichever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of overall social structure” (8). In the face of globalization, Castell’s concept of project identity becomes a critical tool for social and political empowerment for those groups marginalized by its forces. With this in mind, let us proceed.

Naming the Beast: Cultural Labeling and Social Location

In order to orient my intellectual reflections on Mexican Americans as a Latino subgroup throughout this project, I turn to the scholarship of others to provide explanations for the categories and nomenclature that consistently bolster my arguments. Definitions of “ethnic minority,” “Latino,” “Mexican American,” “*mexicano*,” and “Chicano,” as well as exposition of their roles in U.S. society are already long overdue.

The authors Castles and Miller impart a thorough and functional definition of “ethnic minority”:

[...] a group having some of the following characteristics: subordinate groups in complex societies; special physical or cultural characteristics which are held in low esteem by dominant groups in the society; self-conscious groups, bound together on the one hand by language, culture and feelings of shared history, tradition and destiny, on the other hand by a common position within the society concerned [...]. (26-27)

In the case of the United States and its enormity of population and diversity, an ethnic minority must consider all the possible strategies of gaining access to political empowerment. Until the present, the most common strategy chosen by ethnic minorities has been to shed the limitations of specificity and embrace a broader, more abstract

political identity (Oboler xv). In the case of Mexican Americans, this generalization of identity has led to reliance on the “Hispanic” or “Latino” labels to gain acknowledgment in the national political arena, which is recognized by academe as a significant agent in the shaping of minority political association.³

Given that the U.S. political sphere is generally distinguished by interest group politics, Mexican Americans have adapted to this model. “The pressure of responding in a coherent way to the politics of national identity defined in terms of interest group politics [...] has led to the creation of an umbrella group that subsumes individual national cultures” (Torres 160). In other words, the U.S. interest group paradigm encourages the appropriation of a less defined cultural label, such as “Hispanic” or “Latino.” Which label is most widely embraced by Mexican Americans?

As recently as 1995, the term “Hispanic” was still upheld as the chief designator of the supergroup to which Mexican Americans belong. Referring to “individuals who reside in the United States who were born in, or trace their ancestry back to, one of twenty-three Spanish-speaking nations” (Moore and Pinderhughes xi), or to “people of Latin American and Spanish descent living in the United States today” (Oboler xiii), “Hispanic” was a label created by U.S. bureaucracies to simplify the task of keeping tabs on the various ethnic groups that would eventually fall under that category.⁴ Its use was

³ Castles and Miller view ethnicity as a significant, yet fleeting, agent in the shaping of minority political association: “[O]rganisation according to ‘affective criteria’ (such as religion, ethnic identification or communal consciousness) was in the long run likely to be superseded by organisation according to economic interests (class) or bureaucratic rationality” (28). As Mexican Americans assimilate into mainstream U.S. society, cultural ties to the Chicano community shall be replaced by social ties to people in the same socioeconomic class. Therefore, as this line of argument goes, cultural groupings in the political arena are temporal anomalies, soon to become extinct if not already meeting that distinction.

⁴ The author Hero backs me up here: “Despite precedents for its use, several scholars have criticized ‘Hispanic’ as a label largely imposed by governmental agencies, particularly the U.S. Census Bureau, for the sake of convenience and simplicity” (2-3).

often justified by the fact that “‘Hispanic’ identity has both a linguistic and a historical pedigree” (Torres 161).

However, “Hispanic” rapidly fell out of currency due to its controversial nature as a labeling tool; it was a constant reminder of conquest by the Spanish Empire and failed to include the subsequent cultural revolutions that occurred in the Western Hemisphere. The author Torres asserts that the “Hispanic” label “is problematic because it requires those of us who were colonized by Iberian imperialists to [...] conceive of ourselves as having an identity that overlooks or supersedes the various national cultures that give vitality to a specific ethnic identity” (155).⁵

The more modern label “Latino” is currently defended by scholars and Latinos alike as an apt replacement for the term “Hispanic.” The newer classification:

[...] embrace[s] all Latin American nationalities, including those which neither have ties to Spain nor are necessarily Spanish-dominant groups – for example Brazilians; second- and third-generation English-dominant U.S. citizens, particularly within the Chicano and Puerto Rican populations, as well as among the second and later generations of Latin American descent; English-speaking Panamanians; and various non-Spanish-speaking indigenous groups from diverse Latin American regions.

(Oboler 4)

This “pan-ethnic” Latino political awakening during the “social and political fervor of the 1960s” (Madrid 106, 107) seemed to be an imitation of black civil rights strategies (Chavez 4). In the 1970s, Latinos needed to compete with blacks for “college

⁵ Further discussion on the inadequacy of the term “Hispanic” is offered in Madrid (109-111).

admissions, jobs, and other rewards of affirmative action”; this made it “advantageous for Hispanics to join forces in order to demand a larger share of the pie” (Chavez 62).⁶

Despite the acceptance of a broader political identity in certain areas of public life, Mexican Americans continued to adhere to a more specific character in others. Prior to World War II, U.S. residents of Mexican descent referred to themselves as “*mexicanos*” or “Mexicans,” as they did not yet feel connected to American society. Following the war, veterans of Mexican descent began to identify with the United States as their *patria* and incorporated the term “Mexican American” into their vocabularies.

During the 1960s and 70s – in the midst of Chicano political activism – the Chicano label was appropriated by young, often “militant” activists in order “to express disdain for their ‘hyphenated’ status as Mexican Americans and to retain identity with their Mexican heritage” (Diego Vigil 202).⁷ The label was rejected by many members of the Mexican-American community for its common association with the “vulgarity of street life,” but “its use spread until even establishment figures – white middle-class leaders included – had adopted it” (Diego Vigil 202). In more recent times, “Chicano” has been equated to recognition of the indigenous aspects of Mexican culture.⁸ Mexican-American authors look back upon the appropriation of the Chicano label with nostalgia,

⁶ However, the argument exists that Latinos eventually leapt far ahead of blacks in achievement, making the common comparison between blacks and Latinos invalid in modern society: “Within one or two generations living in the United States, the great majority of Hispanics are integrated into the social and economic mainstream” (Chavez 6). Chavez discounts the constant arrival of Mexican immigrants as a potential cause of low levels of Latino political activity in general. In fact, most of her book Out of the Barrio is dedicated to affirming the efficiency and requisite status of Latino assimilation into white-American social, cultural, and political practices. I, however, am not buying it.

⁷ The etymological roots of “Chicano” reflect the cultural amalgamation that characterized its people: “Those of us of Mexican heritage took the word ‘Chicano’ from Mexicano, dropping the first syllable and keeping the Xicano. We are proud of that heritage even though we are not Mexican citizens, and although we are citizens of the United States we are not Anglo-Americans” (Anaya 96).

⁸ The author Anaya goes into detail on the dichotomy of Mexican culture: “The Spanish character is the aggressive, conquest-oriented part of our identity; the Native American nature is the more harmonious, earth-oriented side” (95).

proclaiming that its incorporation into the Mexican-American experience was their “declaration of independence, the first step toward our true identity and the institution of a process by which we rediscovered our history” (Anaya 96).

I use the labels “*mexicano*” and “Mexican” throughout to describe people born in Mexico, residing in Mexico or in the United States, or people of Mexican descent living in the United States whose cultural ties are still very close to Mexico as a result of alienation by white-American social and political constructs. I use the label “Mexican American” to describe those individuals of Mexican heritage born and living in the United States, or Mexican-born people who have lived long enough in the United States to socially adapt to its general culture. “Chicano” is used in this project to describe people of Mexican descent born in the United States, or born in Mexico but raised in the United States (Hero 61), who “are committed to the preservation of” their Spanish/Mexican and indigenous roots (Rocco 76). As I consider this description to be applicable to most Mexican Americans in the present tense, I use the two labels almost interchangeably throughout.⁹ A note regarding chronology: “Mexican” and “*mexicano*” are labels most appropriate in describing their namesakes prior to World War II; post-war descriptions are nearly exclusively limited to “Mexican American” and “Chicano.”

Now that the issue of labels has been satisfactorily addressed, some qualifying information on the Mexican-American communities of Southern California is in order. Not only does the Mexican-American population in this part of the United States form a cultural society, but it forms a geographical one as well. This can be attributed to the tendency of its members to inhabit the same urban spaces.¹⁰ The establishment of

⁹ The author Hero (33) corroborates my claim of reason in using the two terms interchangeably.

¹⁰ A less innocent posturing of the construction of ethnic communities is found in Avila: “The acceleration of suburbanization, coupled with the dramatic expression of the city’s nonwhite population (African

Mexican-American businesses and community organizations fosters a sense of unity that serves as a magnet for cultural reinforcement via the constant arrival of new immigrants from the *patria*.¹¹ This explains the significant concentration of Mexican Americans in so many of the Congressional districts in Southern California; a long tradition of Mexican economic and social presence in the area fosters community formation, and proximity to the U.S.-Mexico border facilitates the influx of Mexican immigrants.

The Mexican-American social location – one might recall that this refers to their “intersection of class, race, gender, and culture” (Zavella 75) – is a problematic one, as it is characterized by various societal hardships. The Chicano community is characterized by urban issues, a relatively young population, high levels of fertility (read: relatively large families), educational problems, overwhelming reliance on low-skill jobs for economic survival, and a contemporary surge in poverty (a problem for all Latino subgroups except Cubans) (Moore and Pinderhughes xx).¹² Despite generations of experience dealing with U.S. political institutions, the perpetual refreshing of the Mexican-American population with immigrants from the motherland is an invariable impediment to the achievement of maturity as a politically and/or socially unified ethnic

Americans and Chicanos in particular), created a regional geography splintered into isolated pockets of race and class. [...] This was not an accident of poor planning. It was, in fact, the outcome intended by homeowners, realtors, developers, and government officials who sought to preserve Southern California’s legacy of building separate and unequal communities” (568). The concentration of ethnic and cultural groups is no longer necessarily a negative political event, as modern redrawing of the boundaries of Congressional districts has allowed for “maximum opportunities for minority populations to elect a candidate of their own, by creating [...] ‘majority minority districts’” (Fox 166).

¹¹ “Ethnic cultures play a central role in community formation: when ethnic groups cluster in a specific area, they establish their own spaces, marked by distinctive use of housing and public areas” (Castles and Miller 33).

¹² “High levels of immigration and high fertility mean that the Mexican-origin population is quite young – on the average, 9.5 years younger than the non-Latino population – and the typical household is large, with 3.8 persons, as compared with 2.6 in non-Latino households. Heavy immigration, problems in schooling, and industrial changes in the Southwest combine to constrain advancement [...] As a group, Latinos have low education, low family incomes, and are more clustered in low-paid, less-skilled occupations. Most Latinos live in cities, and poverty has become an increasing problem” (Moore and Pinderhughes xvii, xx).

minority.¹³ Many Mexican Americans, however, have acquired the means by which to positively change their economic circumstances, and the following section offers some notable figures illustrating the upward socioeconomic mobility of a large segment of the Chicano population.



Latino cultural identification is a complicated, multi-faceted, and socially sensitive topic, as this cartoon by Lalo Alcaraz demonstrates.

¹³ This may not constitute as great an obstacle as commonly believed, as data from the year 2001 demonstrates: “Less than 10 percent of the Latino population of the United States consists of undocumented immigrants” (Madrid 112).

Chicano Diversity: Economic Statistics from Southern California

The numbers of Mexican Americans living in California are impressive,¹⁴ as are Chicano homeowner statistics, which serve as a telling indication of Chicano economic status.¹⁵ Mexican Americans are not a small, barely visible minority group in California, and poverty does not characterize the socioeconomic status of all Chicanos; a more inclusive perspective is necessary to complete the picture. In this section, some intriguing data – excerpted from David E. Lorey’s The U.S.-Mexican Border in the Twentieth Century: A History of Economic and Social Transformation – is offered in support of these assertions.

In order to accurately conceive of the rapid growth of the Mexican-origin population in California, Lorey offers a notable statistic: between 1900 and 1990, he states, this group increased more than 750 times (134). Another number attesting to the “Mexicanness” of California, Lorey contends that in the early 1980s, 27.5% of Los Angeles residents identified themselves as Latino, and by 1990, 20% of Californians reported that they spoke Spanish at home (135). In reference to the socioeconomic status of the Mexican-origin population, Lorey makes an unexpected revelation:

Although the popular prevailing conception was of poor and downtrodden immigrant families, several studies in the 1990s revealed a large and stable Mexican-American middle class in such border cities as Los Angeles. In the mid-1990s, middle-class Latino families purchased more than one-half

¹⁴ According to the 2000 Census online data, the general population in California numbered 33,871,648 individuals, of which those of “Hispanic or Latino origin” comprised a whopping 32.4%, far outnumbering any other minority group and only ten or so percentage points behind whites.

¹⁵ This economic status now also refers to their growing clout as a large segment of the Hollywood market; more and more movies, television programs, and music videos are being tailored to appeal to Latinos in the United States (Negrón-Muntaner 183). Even the label “Latino” is arguably a tool used to broaden product appeal in the entertainment industry, as it garners more buyers than country-specific monikers such as “Chicano” or “Cuban-American” (Negrón-Muntaner 184).

of the houses in Los Angeles county and owned one-quarter of all businesses in the Los Angeles-Long Beach metro area (up from 10 percent in the 1980s). (136-137)

Therefore, the economic diversity of the Mexican-American population in California makes it unwise to discount the social diversity of this population when considering their electoral behavior and levels of political participation.¹⁶ Newly arrived Mexican families may behave differently than families that boast of at least one or more generations born in the United States. This project, however, relies on the deficiency of self-benefiting levels of political participation suffered by Mexican Americans from *all* socioeconomic backgrounds. This enables my management of Mexican Americans – a heterogeneous population on the micro-level – in general terms so that I may draw conclusions about them on the macro-level.¹⁷ I also rely on several other concepts throughout this project that are critical to the success of my hypothesis. Read on.

Independent Variables: Chicano Political Inactivity and Congressional Inaccessibility

So that I may remain within the confines of my hypothesis, I provide two independent variables at this juncture.¹⁸ The first variable is the assumption that Mexican Americans generally do not participate in the political arena; that is, they do not register to vote and vote as often as they could or should. The second variable is the assumption that Members of Congress are not easily accessible, even to constituents in their own Congressional districts. Unless an opportunity arises for some positive publicity, MCs do

¹⁶ The author Rocco is of the same mind with his rejection of viewing the Chicano population in California through the lens of homogeneity (77).

¹⁷ A warning I've heeded against the academic sin of reductionism is in order here. See Elster (7-8).

¹⁸ Hero offers a practical and concise definition of an independent variable as "a variable that explains some other phenomenon, such as voting" (4). Unlike the dependent variable, the independent variable is a "given," a factor that does not transform during the course of a study.

not directly respond to inquiries, suggestions, or complaints from individuals in the private sector.

Addressing the former variable, clarification is outstanding. One should exhibit caution in the description of political activity – that is, low voter registration and turnout – of Mexican-American communities of Los Angeles County. The reader will notice that I have chosen not to use the term “apathy,” as I believe that it is impossible for a traditionally oppressed people to not care about their political and social status within the larger U.S. community, even if their lethargy on the subject is not expressed in any publicly visible way.¹⁹ I use the term “inactivity” instead, although “low levels of activity” might be the most accurate.

Throughout this project I provide numerous examples to support this variable.²⁰ In Chapters Two and Three, historical context, electoral politics in Mexico,²¹ and contemporary socioeconomic status²² are all presented as compelling evidence for Chicano political behavior in Los Angeles area in the present moment.

The latter variable – the inaccessibility of Members of Congress to their constituents – is supported in this project by personal experience and anecdotal evidence. As will be discussed in Chapter Four, I only received responses from two of the 19 Members of Congress I approached for assistance with this project, and not once was I asked by office staff if I lived in their employer’s district. Even if I had been a registered

¹⁹ A convincing argument for this line of thought may be located in Montoya (32-33). She concludes: “The extant research on Latino participation casts doubt upon one of the most commonly held beliefs about Hispanic participation: namely, that Latinos do not vote because they are apathetic. The research instead shows that Latinos participate in politics at a level commensurate with their age and socioeconomic status. Given their relative youth and their lower income and education levels, they participate less” (33).

²⁰ But for now, a little academic support should suffice: see Hero (60).

²¹ Not all authors are convinced that Mexican electoral politics in the twentieth century and the oppressive past of Chicanos in California have any negative bearing whatsoever on contemporary voting behavior of Mexican Americans. See Montoya for more in this vein.

²² Elster posits a useful description of the effects of poverty on electoral behavior on page 17 of his Introduction.

voter, they would have never known. Also, the questionnaires answered by Mexican Americans that I present in Chapter Three provide additional evidence for the immense chasm between MCs and their constituents, be it real or imagined. For the purposes of this project, this distance is real if it manifests itself in the political activities of registered voters, as it does and as I demonstrate further on.²³

²³ The concept of imagined phenomena causing real effects is not limited to my own discourse. The author Fox lends me a hand here with his treatment of the functionality of imagined (read: cultural) identity in the formulation of political strategies (7).