
CONCLUSIONS

I lived in Los Angeles from October 1995 to January 2001. My last two and a half years there were spent living in the Rancho Park/Palms neighborhood of the 33rd Congressional district of California. This neighborhood was largely populated by Mexican Americans, established black families, newly arrived immigrants from India, and ethnically diverse university students on a tight budget. During the presidential primaries of the year 2000, I enjoyed a unique voting experience in this culturally diverse district. The ballots came in several languages, and at the few voting precincts I visited, the lines of eager voters at 8:30 in the morning snaked out of elementary school gymnasiums and auditoriums around the block. I could not understand why a majority of the people I saw voting that day were white, even though we made up a relatively small percentage of the population in that area. Where were all my Chicano neighbors? They worked full-time jobs, paid taxes and bills, and had families, some of them with several small children. So why weren't they showing up on election day, when issues directly affecting them and their families were among the items appearing on the ballot?

As an undergraduate student supported by massive financial aid at UCLA, I mostly interacted with other students in my economic situation, and to be honest, they were not white. Nearly all of my close friends from Los Angeles were Latino, black, Asian American, or Pacific Islander. These were the kids with whom I could commiserate about late loan checks, about rent raises, about fitting in a student body reigned over by glamorous size-two sorority girls and future-NBA all-stars.¹

¹ Even the traditional white standard of beauty in the United States – which includes a petite, delicate body – is being challenged by the contemporary inundation of Latino cultures into the entertainment industry,

Over the years I became more and more comfortable asking my friends direct, candid questions about our ethnic and cultural differences. My friends Shivonne, Stacy, Mike, Esohe, and Angelica patiently walked me through the sensitive and complex subject of being black in the United States; Supinder spoke to me of the raw beauty and social injustice that shapes life in India; Esther and Yenny helped me understand the cultural nuances of Korean Americans; Jenna and Cindy gave me amazing perspective on what it means to be multiracial; Jason and Stephanie taught me about the ethnic amalgamation that characterizes The Philippines; Ellana, Cindy, Omar, Brian, Sandra, Erika, and Rochelle introduced me to the welcoming yet thorny reality of Latinismo; and Georgette and Melanie and I shared the same bitter drink (that is, we were all white and economically challenged in a city where money rules). In addition to being able to boast of many invaluable friendships, I was truly fortunate to have at my fingertips this wealth of firsthand cultural information.

Living in Los Angeles – a Mexican-American urban center – and having so many Latino acquaintances inspired me to take Spanish classes at the university. When I had fulfilled UCLA’s three-quarter foreign language requirement, I was unsatisfied with my Spanish proficiency, so I took three more quarters. I had gone through all the Spanish language courses at UCLA and was still not pleased with my abilities, so I enrolled in some literature classes taught in Spanish. Before I knew it, I had completed a Minor in Spanish Literature and was almost fluent in a second language. I was listening to *rock en español* daily in my car, and I was hanging out with friends at Spanish-language bookstores, coffee houses, and dance clubs on the weekends. I could now speak Spanish

which then trickles down into widespread acceptance of a more voluptuous corporal aesthetic. The author Negrón-Muntaner uses the actress-singer Jennifer Lopez as a prime example of this mainstream cultural shift (185).

to my friends and especially to their parents, who warmed to me when the lines of communication were opened up. The opportunity had arrived for me to ask newer, more probing questions about the various Latin cultures that inhabit Los Angeles, and when I was able to do so, the first question to which I desired the answer – due to my background in Political Sciences – was political in nature; I wanted to know why I hadn't seen very many Mexican Americans at the polls on that day in the Spring of 2000.

Consequently, when I was about to graduate from UCLA in the Summer of 2000, I began to search for opportunities to study in Mexico, thinking that I might find some insight into my query on Mexican Americans and their lack of political prowess. I was certain that I was going to the source of the “problem” by going to Mexico and delving into Mexican culture head first. In search of an explanation as to why Mexican Americans are not very politically engaged, I assumed the answers were in the motherland of Mexican culture.

When I arrived in Central Mexico, I naively expected to encounter a frustrated population eagerly in search of dynamic leadership to politically enable societal solutions. Instead, I saw a generally² meek population that was culturally formed to accept the social status quo and not participate in politics despite the occasional vote or casual town meeting. Based on my experiences, I concluded that Mexicans were not the kind of people who migrated to another country for political reasons, but rather for economic ones.

² I say “generally” because there does exist the occasional political organization that passionately promotes its political agenda through protest. Examples include – but are certainly not limited to – the Zapatistas in Southern Mexico over the past decade and those rural landowners who protested the construction of a new airport in the State of Mexico in the last couple of years. Success rates of these kinds of political activity are low, but definitely not zero. The sporadic but intense violence characterizing the traditional Mexican protest style consistently bled through into many of the political scuffles of Chicanos throughout the twentieth century, as highlighted in Fox (115, 144).

Hence, Mexican Americans – especially those from their family’s first generation born in the United States – could not be expected to turn over a new leaf on the merit of their political traditions alone; adaptation to the U.S. social and political climate was necessary to foster a desire for participatory citizenship. Furthermore, considering the large percentage of the Mexican-American population that is first or second generation – due to the constant flow of immigrants – sheds light on the issue of disappointing levels of Mexican-American political participation. At any given moment, Mexican-American citizenship in the United States exists on multiple levels: first and second generations perpetuate the Mexican tradition of passive citizenship while those of third or more advanced generations in the United States move up to the middle classes, educate themselves, and struggle to politically motivate all peoples of Mexican descent.³ As long as Mexican Americans are not on the same page – socially, politically, and economically speaking – there can be little hope for the success of their political mobilization, in Southern California or any other region of the country for that matter.

Upon examination of this daunting truth, the issue of incompatible representation in Congress almost becomes obsolete. As I noted at the end of Chapter Three, even if the ideal Member of Congress for Mexican-American communities existed, Chicano individuals are most likely unprepared to take on the responsibility that advanced citizenship entails. However, the scope of this project is small, my hypothesis was specific, and it did not encompass the political readiness of Mexican Americans. In the next section, I re-examine the hypothesis of this undertaking that seems to have been formulated so long ago and discuss my tightly focused, personal triumph in this venture.

³ In-depth coverage of the civic incorporation and levels of patriotism of the various generations of Mexican Americans living in the United States is offered by De la Garza, Falcon, and Garcia (341-346).

“Never the twain shall meet”?: Revisiting the Hypothesis

As I began this scholarly journey with a poem, I would like to wrap things up with one as well. The chorus of Rudyard Kipling’s “The Ballad of East and West” is nice, and it summarizes sweetly the still unresolved problem that has underlined this study throughout: the practical chasm that separates my two pro/antagonistic groups.

Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!⁴

Mexican Americans and their Congressional representatives may not come from different “ends of the earth,” but – as I have demonstrated with this project – they certainly pertain to distinct social camps. What was I thinking when I began this affair? How did I expect these disparate groups to achieve a meeting of the political minds? Let us return to the commencement of this project to refresh our memories as to my initial purpose.

To quote myself in the Introduction of this project, the focus was on “the relationship between Mexican Americans and the Members of Congress who represent them in Los Angeles County, California, at the present time.” My goal in this endeavor was “to determine which qualities politicians in Mexican-American communities must possess in order to earn their political posts and motivate their constituencies to vote, the most quantifiable political activity.” I theorized that Congressional leaders in Mexican-American communities were “simply out of touch with the average Mexican-American voter”; and I hypothesized that “contemporary leaders in Mexican-American communities are only marginally effective in the Southern California political arena due

⁴ The full text is online at [The Kipling Society](#).

to this lack of ideological and practical cohesion among themselves and their constituents.” As executed in Chapter Four, the ultimate end of this study was to create a profile of the ideal politician for L.A. County’s Mexican-American communities.

It is at this juncture that I must ask myself some questions in order to organize my reflections and make some solid conclusions. Have I accomplished in this project what I set out to accomplish? Is the ideal MC a distant reality or an immediate possibility? If he or she exists, is the Mexican-American community socially and politically prepared to take on the responsibility of advanced citizenship? At the risk of sounding too self-assured, I must say that I have absolutely accomplished my goals in this project, and I realized – much to my multiculturalist chagrin – that the ideal MC for the Chicano communities of Southern California is indeed a political possibility, that the gap between Mexican Americans and their Congressional representatives is not an ideological one; it is the result of Chicano political indolence, and not much more.

The Great Brown Hope: Recommendations for the Future of Chicano Politics

Speculating on the future of Mexican-American political mobilization in general, the greatest hope for the Mexican-American community may lie in the creative political methodologies yet to be imagined by the Chicano youth of today. Reaching leadership positions in government and society with *mexicano* cultural and linguistic traditions in tact should become the goal of ambitious young Mexican Americans and others wishing to promote their cause.⁵ Los Angeles, a microcosm of Mexican-American issues in the

⁵ A broadened definition of “Chicano” has been presented recently: “MEChA believes that ‘the term Chicano is grounded in a philosophy, not a nationality. Chicanismo does not exclude anyone, rather it includes those who acknowledge and work toward the betterment of La Raza’” (De Unamuno).

United States, can be a social laboratory for the policy experimentation of this generation of young leaders. The political strategy for the next wave of Chicano activism should include a combination of savvy on the part of the more conservative groups to continue to work with policy makers in Washington and the inspired determination of the more liberal groups to aggressively champion Chicano culture and validation of the Spanish language.

Some concrete recommendations for the Mexican-American community can be found in Lopez, Puddefoot, and Gándara's report – A Coordinated Approach to Raising the Socioeconomic Status of Latinos in California – published by the California State Library and Research Bureau in 2000. The publication offers some edifying suggestions for the future of individual Mexican Americans as they climb the socioeconomic ladder in the United States.

Technology and Politics: Internet access may be a powerful tool in the further political empowerment of minority communities across the United States, especially for Chicanos in Los Angeles County (Lopez, Puddefoot, and Gándara 26). The more personal computers that are acquired in the homes of minorities in general, the more potential access is granted to information that may inspire social awareness and political activity. Also, as the Internet becomes a more and more accessible household tool for electoral participation, political participation by way of the World Wide Web will become more attractive for all population groups.⁶

⁶ “Internet primaries and Internet voting in elections will change how we choose our candidates, making them appeal to a national audience at the start of their candidacies. It will make the process of nomination and election an active one – an interactive one – and will stimulate voters to new levels of involvement and participation. It will be a healthy shot in the arm for a democracy increasingly devoid of passion” (Morris 51).

Media: The most generic definition of media confirms that the purpose of the modern media structure is to inform and entertain (Lopez, Puddefoot, and Gándara 48). As the media continues to expand as the primary source of information to the Latino community, its content should be customized for its audience, providing instructions to Latinos as well as to other minority groups on how to improve their communities from within and on how to take full advantage of governmental institutions.

Grass-roots Expansion: Chicano community organizations – such as neighborhood watch and after-school programs – should continue in their progression of evolving into breeding grounds of political awareness and social cooperation as a means of attaining community goals (Lopez, Puddefoot, and Gándara 60-62). The more community attachments that an individual nurtures, the more he or she will feel comfortable, if not driven, to work toward community goals utilizing partnerships and networking. The Mexican-American “tradition of community advocacy established during the activist days of the 1960s” (Moore and Pinderhughes xxiii) must be revived utilizing these communal channels in order to achieve significant political gains in the twenty-first century.

Tax Distribution Schemes: Lopez, Puddefoot, and Gándara bring another murky problem into a specific relief:

Lower income communities, like many Latino communities, typically suffer from economic blight, deteriorating infrastructure, failing public facilities, poor housing conditions, low-end real estate values, and precarious health and safety problems. Disinvestment is high and economic vitality is low. The low tax bases of these communities do not

provide the level of revenue necessary to succeed at the task of revitalization and community building. (41)

In other words, legislative reform of tax distribution schemes may be necessary in order to more equitably parcel out public funds for neighborhood institutions like libraries and schools. This is a potentially unifying issue for the Chicano communities of Southern California, as well as a potentially ripe area of study for another project. In the next and final section, I contemplate additional unrealized subjects for scholarly investigation in the various disciplines falling within the broad reach of Cultural Studies.

Closing Reflections

The day when every Mexican-American citizen registers to vote, shows up at the polls, and tangibly expresses his or her policy preferences, projects such as this one will take on an air of frivolity and superfluity and the readers may experience a touch of nostalgia. The author of this project eagerly awaits that day. In the meantime, the Chicano refrain from political activity – with all its greater implications for the myriad branches of Cultural Studies – represents a wealth of opportunities for scholarly investigation and analysis.

Women's Studies may be further enriched by an in-depth look at the often subordinate role of women in Chicano households, community groups, and political organizations. The effects of Catholicism on Mexican-American political activity might be an interesting topic for a project in Religious Studies. The field of Foreign Policy begs the question: Does the Chicano electorate have a foreign policy agenda, and if so, how and through what channels is it implemented? Public Policy Studies may benefit from an

intense investigation into the role of Mexican-American political activism throughout the pre-passage chaos of Propositions 187 and 209 in California, or in the midst of turmoil surrounding any controversial legislation nationwide. And finally, a foray into Population Studies with the goal of projecting the percentages of university-educated Chicanos compared to those of newly arriving Mexican immigrants and determining how growing numbers of each group will affect the political mobility of Mexican Americans in the near future appears to be an exciting venture. I do not mean to suggest that these academic themes are borne out of my own imagination or are completely novel, but the multidisciplinary possibilities are indeed fascinating and endless.

To conclude with a portent for the reader, I recall that the most essential unit of the American political burden/blessing – as well as of this project – is the vote. Regardless of an individual's ethnicity and/or cultural background, the vote is a mechanism for activating political interest in the masses; without it, the term “elitist rule” in the United States would less resemble a social criticism and might truly embody a rigidly constrained political reality. Despite the kind of political leadership that currently represents minority communities, Mexican Americans, ethnic and/or cultural minorities, and Americans in general should not neglect the one universal instrument in the maintenance of a democratic society. If, as Elster suggests, people indeed need to feel that the universe has a sense of purpose, of justice, and of reason (14), then U.S. citizens should accept a belief in their own personal political responsibility as the driving force behind the American political universe. On that note, Mexican Americans should view the vote as “a gift to the community” (Elster 4) and take advantage of it in order to vote more Chicanos – or Chicano supporters – into political office. Only in this way will more

Latinos break “into the upper tier of power” (Fox 171) in the United States and be able to pack a more powerful policy punch on the issues of real concern to the Chicano communities of Southern California.