

## **POWER STRUCTURES, MINORITIES AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY:**

**A theory advocating the importance of movements of self determination of cultural identity by minorities in addressing minority issues in multicultural societies favoring assimilation.**

Hear me, people: We have now to deal with another race-small and feeble when our fathers first met them, but now great and overbearing. Strangely enough, they have a mind to till the soil and love of possession is like a disease with them. These people have made many rules which the rich may break but the poor may not. They take their tithes from the poor and weak to support the rich and those who rule.

Chief Sitting Bull, Powder River Conference, 1877

### **Setting the Ground**

During the Immigration reform protests of 2006 in America, immigrant Mexicans and Mexican American workers took to the streets to show the U.S what a “day without immigrants” would be like. I remember many who expressed wonder that the protestors carried Mexican flags along with U.S flags, saying “how could they be asking to be identified with the U.S and still carry Mexican flags?”. For me, this show of separate identity was an intuitively important part of any movement protesting a kind of colonialism, where representation of one dominant group pervades both societal institutions and the culture. A cultural renaissance of Hindu values occurred during the Indian fight for independence from the British, and during the Paris riots of 2005, the youths expounded the ghetto suburb culture they grew up in. This is because mobilization of masses of minority populations is linked to how they see themselves, and how they are seen by society, and this link is what I intend to study in this paper. I will use the case of the Mexican American political experience in the Southwest United States to demonstrate the link between capacity for self determination of identity and political agency.

Sitting Bull, that ever eloquent leader of the proud Comanche Nation, offers in the quotation above a biting critique of the mainstream morality of his time, the Anglo American Way of Life. Like most defeated peoples in a time of inter-ethnic conflict and

racial hostility, his experience of American society was one of alienation and colonization. His experience was the experience of the “losers” in the Anglo vision, which the dominant culture never acknowledged in their literature and grand histories of progress and the industrialization of the New World. He was horrified by the poverty in the urban areas of the city, of a desolation unknown in the prairie, and was known to give money to the poor white homeless people he saw in the streets. And, speaking to the tribes, he knew that only one choice remained to preserve his people, and that was make the transition to the Anglo way of life, a culture which would deny his people the capacity for self sufficiency for generations. For one who had once stood against the American armies as a proud warchief, at the head of the last vanguard of Native American culture and strength, this knowledge of the inevitable loss of power that would result for each individual of his nation to live as he pleased must have seemed truly soul deadening. But, he still criticized the wrongs of the society, and urged his people only to take from this new way of life that which benefited their interests.

Forced to conform to the norms of a restricting culture, Sitting Bull preserved his individuality even after gaining acceptance as a popular figure in the new industrialized society, by retaining, in his private life , a fierce loyalty to his traditions and beliefs. Much to the horror and indignation of many enlightened individuals, he refused to give up his beliefs in polytheism, he still engaged in the ancient shamanistic practices. He spoke of the of cruelty and manipulation which went unacknowledged in the mainstream history of the time, and attracted those who were aware of this hidden history, both oppressed Native Indians of different tribes and even oppressed white workers. That he could make his voice the voice of so many, is the reason that it is still heard from beyond

his lonely grave deep in the Lakota Nation, from beyond the silent places where he was murdered.

In a country like the U.S, which is traditionally taken to be a melting pot of cultures, this small perspective offered in the quote above offers a different insight into the essence of what was viewed as Americanism and the reality of this difference demonstrates the importance of inter-ethnic discourse when it comes to establishing an American identity.

The numerous failings of the system which affected the capability of Native Americans to pursue their own interests could never be acknowledged if the Native Americans weren't represented in the institutions of society. If the American identity is a conception which is dominated and established entirely by a mainstream community, then how are minorities to view themselves except in terms of the majority? How can they view themselves as agents of change in their own communities, if their very identity is determined by factors outside their control? It seems inevitable that minorities, when confronted with an established culture which seeks only to assimilate them, without entering into some kind of intercultural dialogue, should choose to define themselves, as Sitting Bull did, in opposition to the mainstream culture.

The experience of alienation is one of voicelessness, of feeling that one is being left behind by the wheel of progress, of the system. This voicelessness is an integral part of any documentation of the experience of poverty, as it is the experience of minorities in a segregationist host culture, who frequently tend to be poor. Histories of any minorities by minority individuals are histories of colonization. While minorities find themselves as prisoners of a host culture because of actual colonial aggression,

colonialism is more subtly the subjugation of the ability of one group to pursue its own interests by another group whose interests do not represent the interests of the minority group.

The theme of poverty as lack of agency is thus dealt with in this paper, the solution to this kind of poverty being empowerment of minority individuals.

## THE THEORY

‘Politics is the art of controlling your environment’

- Hunter.S. Thompson, political commentator, journalist

The purpose of this paper is to offer a theory by which minority groups and other oppressed groups who are not represented in the power structures of a society can address social issues specific to their respective conditions, and thus protect their interests in a society which takes away their capacity for self interest. Participation in the political and economic processes is seen as increasing the agency of these groups to advance these very interests, so thus increasing this participation is seen as the objective of any minority movement. This would require a unification of the interests of the diverse individuals who have suffered the same treatment, and takes the form of realization of collective shared history. It is thus, aptly named, a study of the politics of identity.

The paper is divided into two parts. Part 1 studies how inability of minorities in societies which the dominant culture determines the groups identity takes away the minorities capacity for agency and self determinism, and results in political and economic subjugation. This part has two sections, which will study how Mexican Americans in the SouthWest had no control over their identity and thus how society responded *to* them in

the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when economic and political marginalization was *de jure*, and in the 40's to the 50's, when some *de jure* restrictions were raised but it was still *de facto*.

Part 2, as I mentioned, posits that cultivation of an independent and united minority identity, of common history, will give those minorities with upward mobility and sufficient social standing a tie of allegiance to those who social conditions still permit from rising above the self sustaining cycles of poverty which cripple generations. This sense of allegiance will allow them to act as representatives of the minority group and address the social issues which disallow proportional representation of minorities in society, and give them the freedoms to independently change their lives. A lack of this cultural solidarity with the minority as a whole, and a lack of identification with rest of the minority group, on the other hand, will encourage those minorities who achieve positions of social significance to pursue their own interests. Without political power the poorest of those among minority groups cannot exert any pressure on their “representatives”, while the dominant interest groups in society definitely can. Thus such minority organizations in power would make concessions to dominant interest groups for their own survival, and distance themselves from those minorities who do not share the same opportunities, and cease to represent them, even defining themselves in terms of the host culture. While this restricts the capacity of these representatives to make claims on the status quo, it also distances the poor among the minorities from actual representation in the realm of social and economic policy, and leads to a continuation of political and economic alienation of large percentages of these minorities. If the minority groups as a whole are not brought up to a position where they are equipped to participate on equal footing, then inequality will persist, and race will always be a factor in deciding the merit

of individuals because of the sheer lack of proportional representation in the institutions of society. It seems absurd to think that inequality will ever be seriously tackled with one section of society, meting out “equality” to the other groups, which are maintained in a state where they are unable to claim it for themselves. While minority political groups divorced from the large percentages of the poor and devoid of any connection of a separate minority identity and minority solidarity cannot address the social issues plaguing large populations of minorities, the illusion that the minority society is incapable of taking control of its own destiny is prolonged, because despite having political representation the group as a whole still exists in relative deprivation. This is detrimental to the conception of the political ability of those minorities in relatively privileged positions, as with no base of support to make their own demands and affect social change they are relegated to positions of political passivity. In the words of the good Hunter Thompson, politics is indeed the art of controlling your environment, political capacity is agency for the marginalized.

To illustrate the theme of this second part, I will use a specific example to judge how this plays out in practice: The militant student activism in the Chicano power era of the 60’s and early 70’s, which was the only movement which really sought to establish a Mexican American identity as a basis for mass mobilization, and which many scholars on the subject regard as the height of Mexican American political consciousness and activity. After this demonstration, this theory could hopefully be used to understand most minority/majority conflicts taking place in the world today, such as the situation of Muslims in Europe.

## **PART 1**

### **An Analysis of how lack of self determination of cultural identity affects the capacity for minorities to participate in an assimilationist culture which represents the interests of one dominant group**

A local example: Santa Paula, California

When documenting the ethnographic history of Mexican Americans in the Californian community of Santa Paula (a fairly representative community in regards of its treatment of Mexican Americans), the sociologist Martha Menchaca writes in the reconstruction of contemporary local community histories, experiences of prejudice and of deliberate economic marginalization are treated as unimportant or ignored, in favour of focusing on community figures, local heroes and on. This in itself is important because of the “unbalanced and univocal documentation of the contributions of the dominant culture”, which obscures the contribution of other groups (Menchaca, xiii). Failure to include information about racial minorities, Menchaca writes, results in their depiction as passive community members and thus not significant agents of production and change. (Menchaca, xiii). This robs minorities of their historical presence, and thus in the community this lack of presence can serve to justify a belief that they must not have done anything to merit attention at all. Thus, a construction of any kind of minority identity requires a construction of the history of disenfranchisement, of segregation, of unwarranted police brutality, of racism, of unfair labour practices, because these form the *context* in which minorities existed, and these directed their historical capacity to affect change.

For Menchaca, documenting the historical consciousness of Mexican Americans

in Santa Paula is important because this is the first step in inter cultural discourse in a community which is important for her, it is a recognition of the cultural interplay which truly directs the history of communities, and is validating for individuals in that it recognizes the contributions of the minority to the community. In Santa Paula, for example, the community founders and people of local legend were the local citrus growers, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Production of citrus fruit was the major economic activity of Santa Paula in this part of its history, and it was the citrus growers who originally brought wealth to the families of Santa Paula. Unsurprisingly, Menchaca writes, they have been lionized by Santa Paula's archives, and in local memory, as the founding fathers of Santa Paula, because with the proliferation of industry they brought in local development, roads were constructed, and so on. This is the reality of the community as perceived by the community even today, but it is a distorted reality. The glaring omission is that the profitability of the citrus industry was in no small part due to its heavy reliance on cheap landless Mexican American labor, who were politically and economically dependent on the growers because their capacity for individual sustenance was taken away in a series of laws passed by the U.S after the Mexican American war which did not allow non-white Mexicans to hold land, making them essentially a peon class. In fact, it was these Mexican Americans and Mestizo Indians who were the original inhabitants of Santa Paula, they built the city, they cultivated the land, and they planted the first citrus orchards.

This little example of omission is just to drive home this point, the history of a minority culture in a society which is defined by a dominant culture is precisely a history of omission. When reconstructing these identities, in areas with large degrees of



segregation and general social “apartness”, whether it is a large city such as Paris or the small and sleepy Californian community of Santa Paula, it is historic consciousness of alienation which is important to minorities, simply because it explains who they are. Memories of resistance and untold histories of opposition becomes important in this identity because it shows the racial minority that it is possible to be an agent of change, or someone who refuses to accept a subordinate role in the community and instead seeks to transform it into a kinder and gentler place.

### **Mexican identity and economic subjugation in the Late 1800’s- 1940’s**

(How De Jure marginilization gave the dominant Anglo culture and Anglo institutions control over the socio economic realities of Mexican Americans)

The history of Mexican Americans in this time is rooted in one of imposition of an external conception of racial inferiority and genetic determinism by the dominant culture, and the adequate social and economic policy, which took the form of an economic marginilization justified by the dominant view of the limited capability of Mexican Americans. It was on the basis of this racist view that they were relegated to the role of a peon class, which in turn propagated this racist stereotype.

This denial of the independent, native Mexican identity came soon after the treaties of Guadalupe Hidalgo signed to end the Mexican American War, in the form of legislation which denied Mexican Americans equal rights as citizens based on race. Article 10 of this historic peace agreement was a demand by the independent government of Mexico that the rights of native Mexican American and Mestizo individuals who owned land would be protected by honouring all land awards made to individuals by the governments of Mexico and Spain. This was struck out in the ratification of the treaty by

the senate, denying them recognition as such “individuals”, and the promise to grant all Mexicans within the occupied border citizenship within a year was also ignored.

Political disenfranchisement soon followed, as the only Mexicans who were granted political rights were those classified as “white”, as the genetic inferiority theories which were popular at the time justified this restriction in their capacities to govern themselves. In California’s first constitutional convention, the overriding view is that Mexicans are Indian and shouldn’t be allowed political rights. According to California legislators, the racial restrictions could not be challenged by Congress as a violation of the Constitution, or as a violation of Guadalupe Hidalgo. They left open the term White, which means that individual townships could decide the rights, and that political rights were granted to individuals on proving their whiteness. Laws of 1855 saw the outlawing of traditional outdoor activities: cockfights, fiestas and so on. These were clearly to reduce the visibility of the native identity of Mexican Americans.

These racial segregation laws overturned the all men are equal language of the civil rights acts of 1875 and 1876. They granted full benefits of law to all U.S citizens, excluding Indians. Social Segregation was legalized by the Supreme Court in 1896, allowing states absolute power in segregating based on color, and allowed states to decide who was white and who was non white, and that Mexicans were Indians. Since Indians could not go to school with white children, could not vote or hold land, they were often branded as Indians, and de jure segregation followed. In 1935, the California legislator officially passed educational segregation saying that Mexican students indeed are Indian, and thus should not study with White Children. School segregation enhanced the differences in opportunity between the two groups.

Since the Mexicans were transformed into a politically powerless, wage earning class they were completely dependent upon community leaders for their survival who were often their employers, which meant that they accepted the residential segregation legislation passed on them De Jure segregation laws were passed in small American farming towns, and enforced by local laws, and maintained by real estate policies.

Common to accounts of Mexican identity at the time was their portrayal as a fruit picking caste: a racist belief that Mexican Americans were genetically disposed towards labor, and this justified their discriminatory employment as low level peons. This identity was imposed on them, but affected them because they were transformed into this class because of it, and their existence as thus only served as justification for further marginalization.

## Washington and Lee University

The historian Mark Reisler has a lot to say on public perception of the Mexican during the years 1900-1930, when 10% of Mexico's population migrated to Southwest America, and how it was this identity created for this group which affected public policy towards it, as interest groups used this perception to affect federal action on the immigration issue. Both those who desired restriction on immigration and those who were opposed to imposition of such restrictions during this time, Reisler writes, used the same common perception of the Mexican immigrant, as Indian peons whose characteristics and potentialities were racially determined. Reisler says that both groups, in concurrence with the wisdom of even some social scientists of the day, viewed Mexicans as indolent, lazy and backward. The only difference is to the restrictionists this genetic disposition was antithetical to American values and harmful to society, while those

favouring immigration viewed this disposition as a valuable prerequisite of the unskilled labour they required. A common perspective:

“The Mexican is docile, patient, usually orderly in camp, fairly intelligent under competent supervision, obedient and cheap. If he were active and ambitious, he would not be tractable. His strongest point is his willingness to work for a low wage.” (Reisler, 324)

The common wisdom was thus that Mexicans were inherently unprogressive, nomadic, must be supervised, and this was based on the actual status of Mexican Americans in early 20<sup>th</sup> century society, particularly in the southwest (like California, where they were used as farm labour). But this is because a peon, one does not have the capacity for personal agency. In the wisdom of the day, this is because Mexicans were “hacienda minded”, used to work in a semifuedal setting under powerful landowners in Mexico. But this ignores the fact that there were large populations of native Mexicans in areas such as California, which were in the same situation of economic dependency as their immigrant counterparts, and regarded as the same as immigrants because non-Mexicans were not recognized as American citizens and their social identity was the same: landless unskilled labor. As Tejas congressman in 1921 observed, “the word Mexican is not used to refer to the citizen of a country, but rather to his race.” (Reisler, 324)

How is a landless laborer to have any sense of personal agency or responsibility to self if their valued characteristic is obedience to a “master” class? Economic dependency fostered the sense of dependency, but as we have elaborated above, it was government policy, in the form of land laws, which engendered this dependency, rather than the actions of the minority themselves.

But since this relationship between how the majority’s contribution to the

perception of the Mexicans and Mexican contributions to this identity is not explored, then the majority comes to regard the plight of the Mexican's as due to their actions themselves. Their survival depended on conforming to their employers paternalistic views, but this was only seen as something inherent in Mexican-ness.

In this part of the century, where these landless labourers could have looked to unions and labour protection organizations for protection of their rights, they found enmity. Many unionists were restrictionists, who professed a dislike for Mexicans because they “perpetuated” a feudalistic system at odds with the American notion of freedom and workers rights, and because they undermined the basic claims of White workers by accepting inferior and subhuman standards of living, and therefore were the cause of hygienic and social problems in society. That this was inherent to Mexicans was something taken for granted, and what is not taken into account is the relative deprivation and lack of basic functioning capabilities which forced Mexican Americans into accepting such low standards of living. Deliberate residential segregation by the employers of these workers, and through local laws and land agreements, probably had more to do with the subhuman living conditions than a racial affinity for such conditions.

What was happening on a regional scale perpetuated itself in community histories, and Menchaca's Santa Paula is certainly no different. It first existed as Mexican Spanish Ranchos, before being brought out by Homesteaders, white people who migrated West and brought up the lands that Mexican Americans could no longer possess. They became the labor supply for the citrus growers, who lobbied against big industry to maintain the status-quo. Their justification: that Mexican opportunities were racially predetermined, and this comes out in the statement of president of one of the largest

citrus growers in Santa Paula, Charles Teague, the Limoniera company

“Mexicans have always been one of the chief sources of California’s labor supply. They are naturally adapted to agricultural work..many of them have a natural skill in the handling of tools and are resourceful in matters requiring manual ability. The Mexican people are usually good natured and happy.” (Menchaca, 28)

### **Mexican American political subjugation and identity from the 1940’s- 1960’s**

By 1950, the Mexican population in South West U.S had increased considerably, doubling in California. This larger population could press for representation more vocally. As a result of wartime industrial demand, many workers migrated to the cities, where they came into contact with urban institutions and political entities. Some gains from the war time economy led to the rise of a middle class, and Mexican American veterans took advantage of the GI Bill which provided entitlements such as access to higher education. (Muñoz,47)

As a result of this change, some Mexican Americans achieved enough mobility to collectively push for eliminating the legal barriers promoting institutional racism, and minority political representation. The ethnic studies professor Armando Navarro presents an overwhelming amount of information on the development of Mexican political participation from the years following the Mexican American war in his book, the *Mexicano political Experience in Occupied Aztlan*.<sup>1</sup> His views are incredibly insightful because of his 28 years of community organizing experience and his own childhood experiences in an impoverished barrio during the age of Mexican American militant

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<sup>1</sup> Aztlan: The territories of SouthWest U.S occupied by the U.S.A after the Mexican American war. Aztlan is Arizona, Texas, Nuevo Mexico, Tejas, Nevada, Utah and parts of Colorado. A term used by Mexican Americans to refer to the places they grew up in the SouthWest.

activist politics: the Chicano Generation. The time between the 40's and the 60's is referred to by Navarro as the time of Mexican American Generation (MAG), the time of the rise of an urban Mexican American middle class and political Mexican elite which was politically aware enough to lobby for its own interests. This group was vital in removing some de jure barriers to participation, especially in terms of school segregation. The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), one of the more prominent groups among the Mexican American Generation, for example, won a number of cases in the 40's challenging de jure segregation. (Mendez vs. Westminster School district, Minerva Delgado vs. Bastrop Independent School District, Hernandez v The State of Texas). By 1960, LULAC had 150 councils and was a national organization. But because of its middle-class base and ardent espousal of integration and assimilation into the host culture, it failed to connect with many of the interests and aspirations of the working-class Mexicanos. Indicative of this was LULAC's opposition, like most MAG groups of the time, to the Bracero worker program, in which the U.S relaxed immigration from Mexico to meet its wartime demand for industrial labor. This policy led to a resurgence of racist nativism as seen in the earlier part of the century, visible in the popular "Operation Wetback". LULAC chose to culturally distance itself from the "wetback", portraying themselves as good Latino's who generally were capable of being American and adherent to the values of liberal capitalism. This was unfortunately the trend for most social action organizations and political groups of the time, in a time of stringent conservatism, and the environment of distrust of anything Un American which cast a pale over the McCarthy era, when this generation was most prominent. Navarro speaks of the prominent exception being the Community Service Organization, which originally spoke

of community development and citizenship rights for undocumented workers, but as it gradually came to be dominated by the middle class, it too joined the rhetoric of rights for Mexican American Citizens. (264). One can intuitively see how pursuing these kinds of survivalist political tactics would make these groups serve anyone but themselves. It was hard for the national Mexican Organizations to support farm workers collective movements, for example, when undocumented migrant workers promoted the farm strikes and had more cultural similarities with working class Mexican Americans. The contributions of this era were vital in that it proved that change was possible, for Mexican Americans.

Navarro gives an exhaustive analysis of this era, but overwhelmingly concludes, like most historians that though this era allowed political representation of Mexican Americans, it was still typified by political marginalization.

I subscribe to this view on the basis of the academic research referred to above, and my paper is not concerned with the analysis of the achievements of the MAG generation, which failed to generate large scale support, but of the Chicano generation that succeeded it. What is important here, is to show that there was a lack of common identity between the political Mexican American elite and the poor in the MAG generation, and to show that, in contrast, the Chicano movement was explicitly to be a movement of identity which helped it benefit social change by uniting social groups, and thus an entirely different kind of movement, regardless of the contributions the MAG generation made to the movement. And the inadequacy of this MAG generation, like much historical theory, can be demonstrated by using one of Muñoz's many illustrative examples:



Crystal city, Tejas, a Winter Garden community of some 10,000 people, 80% of them Mexican, and the self, and the self designated “Spinach Capital of the World”. The large Mexican American population, which had a correspondingly large middle class, struggled for political control of the community’s all white town council. This was a typical trend in the MAG generation, as I have discussed, caused due to migrant population increase and the political awareness of the relatively well off which allowed them to participate in the ballot. In 1963, Muñoz writes that Mexican Americans were able to gain positions on the city council, helped by Teamster union officials and PASSO (a typical MAG national social action group). This was empowering in that it helped the Mexican population show their political dominance over the white minority. However, Mexican American domination of the council was short lived, they were ousted from power in two years. Their election had not been the result of strong grass-roots organizing, and the lack of support was instrumental in their defeat” Simply put, the elected leaders could not, without any base of support, govern effectively because they stood alone when confronted with the racist structure of the institutions which was ingrained in the Texan mentality. They found political acceptability by distancing themselves from the poor, but were politically impotent because of it.

This shows, that though by the 60’s, the Mexican Americans had a far more say in their identity than in the 20’s, that basically their identity was still imposed by them by the host culture. In the early 20’s, Mexicans had to demonstrate that they were “white” and prove whiteness in order to be granted basic citizenship rights (because of the racist legislation against non-white Mexicans I mention earlier),and the success of the Mexican American elite also followed the same essential mentality, in that it depending on them

showing their allegiance to liberal capitalism, and the American way of life as represented by the status quo. This period is important in that society recognized the right to self-determination and right to achieve for every individual in principle, shown by the removal of de jure racist legislation, but the system was still de facto racist, because of the gross inequalities. The political ineptness of the Mexican American leadership lay in the fact that they defined themselves still in terms of the host culture and were thus limited by it, and thus Mexicans in this era retained the same sense of lack of identity and common purpose as the earlier one. Being Mexican or having a native culture still had no worth, because the oppressed Mexican workers' identity became the Mexican identity, and therefore for Mexican Americans, becoming American was the key, and the only new choice was the choice to "be American".

Thus the political history of this time followed the same pattern of "omission" of minority contributions to majority society. Genetic inferiority was replaced with cultural inferiority, shown in the acceptance by Mexican American groups of the existence of racism, but failure to provide an alternative non-white identity.

## PART II

### Movements of Identity and their social uses in addressing community needs

So far, this paper has dealt with a historical account of how dominant groups traditionally imposed identities on minorities, taking away their capacity for self-determination. This was important when considering poverty as a phenomenon of societal alienation. I have shown how the majority group dominated by Mexican Americans in California, which affected the reality of impoverished minority individuals beyond their

capacity to control it. They serve instead as historical models demonstrating the key phenomena of the subjugation of a minorities self interests, of the detrimental effects of being unable to determine one's own interests, and the political and economic dependency which such a lack of agency promotes.

This part of the paper will deal with the probability and means of “cross cultural dialogue”, through which the host culture can be made aware of minority contributions to society and through which minorities have more say in their futures. The solution, I propose, is a multiethnic and multicultural approach to politics, where different minority groups, each united by their own common consciousness of cultural identity, can participate in society based on their own assessments of what is better for the development of the minority group as a whole and thus themselves become representatives of their communities in the political process. If united by a common cultural identity, the minorities in positions of relative advantage will consider not only their own personal interests, but will also consider the interests of those from their minority group still unable to escape structural inequalities, allowing them to become agents of constructive social change.

Indeed, even someone blinded with diabolical optimism cannot proclaim that those representing the interests of the poorest of the minority populations in the political institutions have increased in the last few years in any of these countries, and Navarro argues that the interests of the poor Mexican Americans who still suffer because of systemic inequities are less represented now than they were in the radical activist times of the sixties because of an overall lack of common cultural identity between the minorities with access to the institutions and those without access

For Navarro, this is certainly the case with current Mexican American organizations in California and in old Aztlan (as of 2002). As the Mexican population of these areas burgeons, Navarro writes, and their representation in local government increased, their capacity for organizational political activism, their ability to mobilize the masses to call for real social changes, reached its lowest point ever. “Organizations of sorts existed that were national, statewide and regional, but they did not possess a power capability...they lacked the capacity to mobilize and create critical mass” (633). Because of the absence of grassroots advocacy organizations, and without the presence of a strong and unifying mass based organization with a capacity for strong advocacy, and without any basis to affect social change, there has been no improvement in the condition of those living in ghetto conditions, in the barrios and the colonias.

This attitude is in marked contrast to the mass based movements of intellectuals and advocates, and organizations which presented a common, unifying cultural identity of being a Chicano at the peak of Mexican American political activism in the 60's, based on the specific historic background of being Mexican American. Though many organizations formed during this time suffered from organizational problems, the more prominent groups succeeded in uniting workers, students, intellectuals and political activist under one banner.

The deterioration in the capability of Mexican Americans to organize en masse is seen by Navarro as due to the trend of Mexican Americans in political parties reverting to a more conservative, individual focused political ideology in the years 1975-1999, which he broadly refers to as “The Viva Yo” Hispanic generation, (Navarro, 401), represented by a movement towards a more individual, I-focused materialistic approach,

which basically followed the general trend of politics towards conservatism which started in the eighties. This Hispanic Generation mentality dominated Mexican American politics throughout the years 1975 and 1999, with political activism with the aim of bringing about a reordering of institutions was limited only to a few intellectuals and activists.

Politically, the HG was ostensibly status quo oriented, which adhered to a middle class bias towards individualism, materialism and pursuit of unbridled wealth. This generation of Mexican Americans increasingly accepted the label 'Hispanic' as an identifying term, as was encouraged by federal government agencies. Why this label is insidious is because of how it is again, a majority perspective of identity, which obfuscated the important cultural legacy of Mexican Americans. As Navarro writes, the term Hispanic is derived from Hispania which indicates those who trace their lineage back to the Iberian peninsula. Hispanic accentuated the direct linkage of culture and heritage the Spain, and this was used by those who sought to distance themselves from the Mexican American masses, by emphasizing white cultural roots in Europe and rejecting native Mexican roots. Arnaldo Vento writes "The term obviates the native American and or indigenous side of Mestizo culture" (Navarro, 408)

"Thus, by the turn of the century", Navarro writes, "the reality of the situation was that few Mexican scholars through their research or leadership were agents of change (Navarro, 416). While some of the research of these scholars addressed social issues, they largely lacked policy recommendations. This period is characterized, for Navarro, as an era where the efforts of scholars and intellectuals "from a social change perspective had little impact on the colonized and impoverished conditions of the barrios or colonias in

Aztlan” (Navarro, 416)

## PART II

### **The Chicano Movement**

Chicanismo simply embodies an ancient truth: that man is never closer to his true self as when he is close to his community....Chicanismo draws its faith and strength from two main sources: from the just struggle of our people and from an objective analysis of our community’s strategic needs.

- *El plan de Santa Barbara: A Chicano plan for higher education*, Oakland 1969

A new identity means a new perspective on the world, a new consciousness, a new being-in the world itself. Identity was the aim and modus operandi of the Chicano movement, but identity in the form of a fundamental change in consciousness. The eight years (1968-1975) where the institutions of the Chicano Movement dominated the Mexican American identity, especially in the South West, Navarro writes “were unparalleled in degree of activism, struggles for change, leadership, and organizational formation. Aztlan’s (South West U.S) *barrios* and *colonias* experienced a new sense of cultural nationalist consciousness fostered by an abundance of dynamic leaders and protest organizations.” (Navarro,304). For the purpose of my thesis, I will show that because it was a movement for identity it allowed the degree of leadership and political participation that it did, which favored social progress. Thus an self determined identity based movement will be shown as the most effective model for societal change, as it allows capacity to motivate masses. The Chicano era of politics is regarded as intrinsic by Navarro to the Mexican American political experience because of the sheer volume of change it brought around, and thus this model needs to be sustained to advocate the same degree of change, I will concur.

The historical causes of the movement are manifold, but will not be discussed here. For this purpose, Navarro specifically details the many preceding movements, and the nature of the relations between the movement of Mexican Americans and the large scale social revolutions of the time which led to the fruition of the radically self determined Chicano Generation (CG). Specific actions by groups of the MAG period did make the Chicano movement possible, and it is likely that the Chicano movement never would have happened except in the social turmoil of the sixties. My discussion of the MAG period, and that before it, however is merely to contrast how the minority population was effected by not having a united cultural consciousness with how it was relatively empowered when it did have a degree of such a consciousness, not to show how the MAG led to the possibility of the CG, and thus the CG could as easily be compared to the self interested conservative generation of the 80's and 90's, which Navarro accuses of having a similar lack of identity. The causal factors are not necessary, because the specificity of the identity I am dealing with is not what is important, rather the aim is to show:

1. The Chicano movement was explicitly a movement for a self identity
2. It maintained political participation by promoting this identity, and by reconciling different interest groups with its own interests.

If the movement truly was a movement for self determination, even if it owed the conditions for its inception to the New Left Student movement or Civil Rights movement, (themselves arguably movements for self determined identity and therefore equally valid subjects for this study), it would have eventually followed its own course and pushed for specifically Mexican American concerns, which, as we shall see, it did.

That the impetus behind the movement was the search for identity is definitely the theme of most Mexican American intellectual efforts in Mexican American literature and social research of the early 60's. Corky Gonzales, a former barrio youth who later sought to address the plight of urban Mexican Americans and become one of the spiritual leaders of the movement, addressed this need for Mexicans to transcend the Anglo identity in his poem *Yo soy Jaoqin*, which became very popular among Mexican American activists of the early sixties, and one of the most important pieces of literature in the movement. Part of the poem is reproduced below, for the issues discussed here must have been relevant to the Mexican American political experience because of the poems immense popularity with the social activists of the 60's:

I am Joaquin,  
Lost in a world of confusion,  
Caught up in the whirl of a gringo society,  
Confused by rules,  
Scorned by attitudes.  
Suppressed by manipulation,  
and destroyed by modern society,  
I have come a long way from nowhere,  
Unwillingly dragged by that  
Monstrous, technical,  
Industrial giant called  
Progress  
And Anglo success...  
In a country that has wiped out  
All my history,  
Stifled all my pride,  
In a country that has placed a

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Different weight of indignity upon

My

Age-

Old

Burdened back

Inferiority is the new load,

I look at myself

And see part of me

Who rejects my father and 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.**

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What is important about Joaquin, is that it does not advocate a specific cultural identity at the time of writing this poem. Gonzales's aim in writing this poem was the possibility of organizing a movement of common identity regardless of what specific identity it was, and thus he concludes:

La Raza!

Mejicano!

Español!

Latino!

Hispano!

Chicano!

Or whatever I call myself,

I look the same

I feel the same

I cry

And

sing the same

Students, and intellectuals were increasingly motivated by this theme of finding their own interests in the interests of others with similar cultural backgrounds, in order to fight social problems which addressed the unique nature of being Mexican American in America. According to Navarro and Muñoz, the Mexican American leadership of the middle sixties saw as prominent Chicano historian Luis Valdez concluded, that “there was only one identity appropriate to the oppressed Mexican American people, and it was rooted in the non-white indigenous past and in the working class history of our people.” (Muñoz, 63). Speaking on behalf of the farm workers, Valdez expressed typical resentment of the conservative Mexican American Generation, writing thus

Our campesinos, the farm working raza find it difficult to participate in this North American country. The acculturated Mexican-Americans in the cities find it easier. They have solved their Mexican contradictions with a pungent dose of Americanism, and are more concerned with status, money and bad breath than with their ultimate destiny...they will fall into the American Melting pot and be no more. But the farmworking raza will not disappear so easily..... 63

### **Achievements of the Chicano Generation**

That many intellectuals and politicians were seeing that the only way to advance their interests would be by appealing to the largest broad mass as possible, and thus the consciousness of the importance of having shared sense of cultural pride as a lowest common denominator to unite Mexican Americans, is seen in the increase of academic studies, manifestoes and journals about the nature of Mexican American identity.

(Muñoz,55-58). For Navarro, the clearest example of this in mainstream politics was the unprecedented walkout of socially respectable MAG generation Mexican American leaders from an Albuquerque Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) Meeting in March of 1966. Fifty Mexican American leaders walked out of an EEOC meeting held in Albuquerque, Nuevo Mexico, to address discriminatory employment practices in the city. Among their demand were federal anti poverty programs which addressed Mexican American needs. (Navarro, 327)

As a direct result of the EEOC walkout, an ad hoc group was created which would put pressure on the federal government. Their Demands: a meeting with Lyndon Johnson appointment of a Chicano to the EEOC, policy level positions in federal and state civil rights agencies, and in the 1968 White House Conference on Civil Rights.

In 1967, a U.S president was for the first time pressured into positively responding to demands voiced by Mexican American leaders, and he met with five leaders representing the GI forum, LULAC and PASSO. President Johnson named Vicente Ximenes to head the EEOC's Inter Agency Cabinet Committee on Mexican American Affairs in 1967. Appointment of more Mexican Americans to important policy positions on the War on Poverty Program, and within the departments of Education, Labor and Justice were results of this action. While Navarro presents a number of arguments why this show of MAG support for the poor was purely symbolic (activists and *barrio* youth could not attend the White House Conference, for example), he concedes that this event is important because even MAG generation politicians saw a political need to openly confront the system, which they had never done prior to 1966. In effect, they acknowledged that they would have to address Mexican American poverty

issues to garner legitimacy and support. 1966 is regarded as one of the 'heyday' years of the Chicano experience, and so its capability to mobilize support is seen in its capacity to change the tactics of even relatively conservative Mexican American politicians.

In California, the struggles for farm workers rights caught the attention of activists and community organizers every where. The National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) was formed under the guidance of popular leader Cesar Chavez, and used strikes, civil disobedience and unionized lobbying to achieve its goals. The Delano Grape Strike of 1965 was an important strike organized by the NFWA. It was a strike against inhumane working conditions forced upon Mexican workers by grape growers in California. The strike was a twenty five day march from Delano to Sacramento, which started with only Chavez and a handful of farmworkers. The express purpose of this strike was to gather popular support by a demonstration of Californian Farm worker identity. Along the way Mexican American *Teatros* celebrated its excursions, and Mexican American film makers collaborated with the Plan de Delano, making it the subject of documentaries. By the time the march reached its destination, its ranks had swelled to ten thousand. It was able to pressure two large companies, Schenely industries and the Di Giorgio Corporation, into negotiating contracts with the unions. It also served as a template for similar movements around the country, such as Reies Tijerna's march from Albuquerque to Santa Fe for workers in California, to press for the land grants promised to descendants of the occupied territories of former Mexico in the South West. (Navarro, 329). The large non farm worker Mexican American presence at these marches is explained by Francis Swadesh thus: "their direct action affirmed their identity as members of *La Raza*, (the people) and gave them pride and tranquil self-

confidence” (Navarro, 329). Thus these movements achieved their own, local, immediate aims, but concurrently contributed to the cause of *La Raza*, by providing an opportunity for any alienated Mexican American to identify with it.

A need for legitimacy and recognition by student activists was clearly seen in the student support for Cesar Chavez’s California based farmers movement for the improvement of Mexican American agricultural workers. The two champions of farmworkers rights, Cesar Chavez and Reies ‘The Tiger’ Tijerna, continued to enjoy large scale success in mobilizing the farm workers to unionize and protest their peon status. Chicano intellectual Valdez called Chavez the leader of the Mexicans, that had long been awaited. (Muñoz, 60). The Tiger’s roars could be heard throughout the nation, when he and members of his newly formed group “The Alliance” , occupied lands in Tejas promised to them by Guadalupe Hidalgo, but whose ownership was ignored by the government. The fever pitch of the support for this act was high enough for local media to start spreading fear stories about guerrilla warfare breaking out through the SouthWest, and even the probability of an armed secession movement. (Navarro, 330).

The initial student support was largely one of pride, in associating themselves with Mexican Americans who were actually agents of social change. (Muñoz, 59)

But, Chavez’s and Tijerina’s movement was explicitly addressed to the needs of farmworkers, and Chavez denied responsibility for any Mexican American movement beyond that. Student organizations in California spent their energies in taking food to the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee and protesting the sale of grapes. Though the fact that it was a Mexican American movement was enough for them to see value in participating in it, it did not represent the interests of the vast populations of Mexican

Americans living in cities and dealing with the specificities of urban poverty .

This reconciliation came about with Gonzales, who as a product of a *barrio* upbringing spoke of alleviating urban poverty, especially through access to education, and this paved the way for students to fight for their own interests while maintaining a commitment to that of farmers and peasants to maximize the support base. The importance of considering Gonzales's poem earlier is his appeal to all groups seen in it, and he was vital in voicing the students role in what rapidly was becoming "El Movimiento" (The Movement).

It was under Corky Gonzales's Denver based Crusade for Justice (CJ) that many of these students and activists found a forum for addressing their grievances, and for aligning their interests with the interests of La Raza by deriving legitimacy for their own causes through shows of support for Gonzales's *barrio* improvement movement. Gonzales wanted an organization that extolled the virtues of *comunidad*, by sponsoring theater productions, cultural dance and fiestas within *barrios* to promote unity, as well as promoting political discussions which advocated self-help and the community based organizing. The Crusade for Justice (CJ) arose out of this strategic need, from the ashes of an older group called The Volunteers formed by Gonzales to deal specifically with *barrio* issues in Denver, especially police brutality. The Volunteers argued that existing anti-poverty programs sought to merely placate the poor instead of promoting real social change, and Gonzales held a demonstration at the Denver Civic Center to protest the purely symbolic nature of anti-poverty measures which did nothing to ameliorate the cycle of poverty issues which plagued the Denver *barrios*. That this message resonated is seen in the attendance to this meeting: 1200 Mexican Americans participated in Gonzales

demonstration against the Civic Center. It was at this demonstration that Gonzales promised a statewide movement of community grassroots organizing in the barrios to deal with barrio issues, a “spark of a crusade for justice” which would be carried into the heart of every community in Denver. (Navarro, 364) This movement also supported other movements of La Raza, such as when a caravan of CJ members provided assistance and solidarity with Tijernas “Alianza” movement. Furthermore, it called out to different Mexican American groups to display support for the movement and change it into a national show of solidarity.(Navarro, 365)

In 1968 The CJ participated in the Poor People’s Campaign, which was another community development program providing services to the poor. CJ also purchased the Cavalry Baptist Church for \$76,000 in an impoverished neighborhood in downtown Denver. This was used as the CJ’s multipurpose headquarters, and a meeting place through which the CJ could reach out and proselytize to the Mexican American poor. From here, Gonzales promoted his *Plan Del Barrio*, which was to be reproduced in every CJ group in Colorado. A freedom school was established in the Cavalry Baptist Church, for example, whose purpose was to raise *barrio* residents’ consciousness of political issues and organize them. Social services such as food drives and alternative education services (such as La Escuela Tlateloco) were regularly provided by the CJ members, and community libraries were established as well. All activities of the CJ were financed through member contributions and fundraisers held at cultural events within the *barrios*. From a movement which began with a single *barrio*, thirty middle class families, *pintos* (ex-convicts) and *barrio* youth, it became a statewide organization which had branches in many major cities of Colorado. The CJ is also credited with being the guiding

force behind the creation of a Raza Unida Party, with Gonzales presiding over the RUP party meeting in 1967 and the important National Chicano Youth Conference, which sought to bring national organization to the domestic efforts of individual Chicano Groups.

Gonzales was also able to express the discontent of the upwardly mobile at their political inactivity, which appealed to intellectuals and students, based on his own experience with politics. (Muñoz, 57) He served as Democratic precinct captain, was the Colorado Coordinator of the *Viva Kennedy Campaign* in the 60's and later served as director of The War on Poverty Program. Since Mexican Americans had no real voice in the early 60's, Mexican Americans tended to ally themselves with the political groups most aligned with their interests, and they found it in Kennedy and in the War against Poverty, which at least addressed poverty issues. This was a movement towards liberalism necessitated by the fury of the Civil Rights movement, but Mexican Americans gradually saw that The War on Poverty and Kennedy's liberalism did not address Mexican American issues, and even the Black civil rights leadership did not have Mexican Americans as its primary concern. In disgust, Gonzales resigned from the Democrat party, stating that the aim of their inclusion in the political process was merely to consciously create a class of political "lackeys, prostitutes and boot lickers." (Muñoz,57).

Gonzales called upon the students to fight against inadequate training of Mexican American professionals, and removing barriers to institutions of higher education, and this allowed students in higher education to act in their own interests in supporting preferential acceptance of Mexican Americans and demanding cultural studies programs



to better understand the power structures of society, while still retaining commitment to the Movement. Many student groups were formed during this time.

The East Los Angeles Blowout of 1968 was a movement which completely embraced Chicanismo and regarded as one of the first large scale orchestrated protest movements of the Chicano movement which demanded national attention. Over a thousand Mexican American students, starting with those of the largely Mexican Abraham Lincoln High School simply walked out of classes. They were led by a teacher, Sal Castro.

Along with community organizers, they distributed thirty six demands that had been drawn up by members of the community and teacher strike committee. Addressing the needs of the community served by Lincoln High, it called for freedom of speech, hiring of Mexican American teachers and teaching Mexican American culture in schools.

An interregional body of Mexican American students, the Union of Mexican American Students (UMAS) assisted them, as well as the Brown Berets, a militant activist group with Marxist revolutionary principles analogous to the Black Panthers, comprising both students and street youth. Through a collaboration of student interests, teacher interests and community interests, the strike took place which gathered enough support to bring the LA school system to standstill. Castro, who is credited with instigating the strike, was also an ex member of the *Viva Kennedy* campaign. He realized the scope of his agency was limited enough to merit sacrificing his career for pursuing his vision of social change. We can see how the power of an identity movement is to in its ability to attract powerful community leaders like Castro, who would otherwise not be able to use their knowledge and organizational potential to address local community needs without an interregional base of support.

In the beginning of this section, we acknowledged the need to show that the Chicano movement was a movement of cultural identity, and in the cultural achievements of the period, the Chicano movement was unrivalled. Many groups released their own newspapers, for example, to promote their agendas, awareness, and lessons in organization.

The release of *La Raza* newspaper in 1967, which publicized that it was a barrio newspaper which would address specifically the issues affecting the community, is one of the forerunners of this tradition. The format of *La Raza* was used for the rest of the papers which would follow. “Without its reporting”, Chicano historian Acuña comments on the paper “much of the communities histories of the time would have been lost.” (Navarro, 323)

Gonzales’ Crusaders for Justice had the newspaper *El Gallo*, Cesar’s farm workers had *El Macriado*, The Raza Unida Party of Tejas had *La Verdad*, Brown Beret’s had *Regenaracion*. Scores of others appeared, even Chicano prison inmates had their own newspapers to address their concerns about treatment in prison and discrimination they faced after serving time through newspapers such as *El Chino*, *La Voz del Chicano* and *Aztlan*.

The Chicano Press Association became responsible for publishing many of these newspapers and much of the literature of the movement. In effect, what was happening on a national level was happening at all levels: all the newspapers addressed specific local issues, but they carried the same format and were all part of the larger Chicano Press Association. (Navarro, 324)

The promotion of traditional teatros dealing with Mexican American themes is also

important. The teatros performed skits and plays during many of the strikes and popular movements of the time. These plays would usually be in Spanglish, (a mixture of English and Spanish), as they dealt specifically with Mexican American themes. Mexican American filmmakers also drew on the movement for inspiration, and addressed racism in movies such as Jesus Trevino's *America Tropical*. (For a full listing of the many achievements in Mexican American dance, theater and film, see Navarro 320-325)

The successes of the Chicano movement lay in its ability to unite many political interests under the quasi-ideology of Chicanismo, which was unspecific enough to allow multiple primary and secondary leaders united only by frustration and unrealized expectations, and was able to incorporate numerous diverse organizations. Chicanismo could mean whatever it wanted to for each individual interest group. For example, students could volunteer with Gonzales's Crusade for Justice. In return, they enjoyed the support from the street youths, which gave their demands most credence. One of the great achievements of the student movements of the time was their mobilization of the semi-criminal urban youth known as the *vatos locos*. The street style of the *vatos locos* thus became a component of the movement, and students would imitate this style to closer their ties to the street youth. Each Mexican American student body, was thus, invested in the betterment of the Mexican American interests in its own community, as well as that of the Mexican American Movement in the U.S. This, at the same time, spurred other intellectuals to works of Chicano literature, allowing authors such as Jose Antonio Villareal, Rudolfo Anaya and Oscar Zeta Acosta, to deal with their individual identity crises by drawing on and exploring this identity, while their works were enriched by and at the same time enriched the cultural identity of the rest of La Raza.

This would also allow individual interest groups to participate with other interest groups as long as their interests were met. An example: the San Francisco strike of 67 by the Third World Liberation Front, which was a movement by a blacks, white leftist youth, and Mexican Americans to increase cultural studies programs in colleges and increase admissions to third world students. UMAS, which contributed to this cause, could only have benefited by an even greater feeling of agency because of this large scale allying of interests, of being contributors to a world revolution. Inherent in this movement was the ability of the individual, but also the recognition that greater agency and radical new modes of existence and consciousness could be achieved by individuals coordinating as a whole than as mere individuals in a hostile system. (The difference in political experience clearly shows this). Possibly, this could have impressed on many that the true self interest of man does lie in his connection to community, that each member of the community has greater capacity for self determination if they can together combat oppressive sociocultural forces. This is certainly Gonzales view, when he defines his project of fostering Mexicano nationalism as inherently revolutionary:

Nationalism exists...but until now, it hasn't been formed into an image...my job is to create in ideology out of the longing . Everybody in the barrios is a nationalist, it doesn't matter if he's middle-class, vendido, a sellout, or what his politics may be. He'll come back home, to La Raza, to his heart if we build centers of nationalism for him...Nationalism is the key to our people liberating themselves..I am a revolutionary...because creating life amid death is a revolutionary act. Just as building nationalism in an age of imperialism is a life-giving act....We are an awakening, an emerging nation, a new breed. (Muñoz, 76)

The Crusade for Justice, in 1969, held the National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, which represented the moment when the cultural renaissance ideals of the Chicano Movement were explicitly formulated as the aim of the movement. It had an

attendance of fifteen hundred people and a hundred groups in attendance, and brought together students, barrio youth, former gang members, *pintos* (Ex-Convicts) and intellectuals such as the poet Alberto Urista.

The conference basically formally introduced the concept of Aztlán and the need for self-determinism and reclaiming national identity. (Navarro, 337) This ultimately led to the birth of the The Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MechA) party, at a conference in Santa Barbara, where Mexican American student organizations came together to promote a concrete plan for a national direction for Mexican American interests to unite their varied local efforts.) The birth of a national La Raza Unida Party was also envisioned as a national coordination of political efforts. Several Mexican American student groups contributed to the preamble of a La Raza party in Tejas. The preamble addressed specific reforms in education, such as removing standardized tests favoring Anglos, ensuring proportional representation of minority groups in higher academic institutions, hiring of minority counselors, and valuing the oral traditions and songs of the state. It recognized that many Mexican Americans were ex-convicts, and pushed for giving ex-convicts the right to vote, and in this way promoted the rights of convicts. It pushed for the removal of legal fees when running for political office, and free legal representation, because this allowed underprivileged poor Mexican Americans political access, but at the same time benefited the poor. It called for economic development by reducing regressive taxation, equitable redistribution of wealth, and the “restoration of the element of competition in the economy, through the break up of monopolies and trusts by vigorous anti-trust measures, ... (such as ) community cooperative ventures.” (Muñoz, 106). The purpose was to increase the interests of

Mexican Americans in these communities, but one can see how in the case of the economic reforms, this leads to a greater agency for all the oppressed within a community.

La Raza finally collapsed because it was unable to maintain what gave it power, its ability to represent an umbrella of interests. There were schisms between the Farm workers and the MechA students, and this was compounded by the increasingly conservative mentality of Navarro's "Viva Yo" generation, which arose in the general atmosphere of materialism and accumulation of individual wealth in the Reagan era, a throwback to "I" focused as opposed to "We" focused politics. But the importance of this movement was its capacity to attract agents capable of political change, in its ability to unite the interests of the elite and the masses, and thus as long as this political organization is maintained, I conclude is a valuable model for any group seeking positive political change. In the words of Carlos Fuentes, responding to the high school strike of '68,

Mexican Americans are reminding us all of the very powerful roots of our personality, of the very wide extension of our cultural image and of the community action required if that identity is to become more than just a passing reference in celebrations.

(Muñoz, 67)

## **Conclusions**

I have contrasted the Chicano movement, as a movement of identity, to situations where the same minorities had no say in determining their identity. The same understandings can be used to analyse other relationships between majority societies and colonized peoples, and I have conducted a more brief, but similar study on the Muslim Immigrant Experience in France regarding the politics of identity. Hopefully I have

demonstrated how the theory I have described above plays out in the Mexican American political experience, and thus provide a framework in which minority/majority relations can be studied and the true importance of minority movements of self-determinism can be understood. Especially in today's conflict-filled world, with people united across countries with memories of common alienation, the value of understanding movements of self-determinism cannot be understated, as people tend to react in fear when minorities emphasize their differences rather than their similarities. A useful further project would be to discuss the mass mobilization employed during the Immigrant Reform Protests in terms of how immigrants and immigrant sympathizers understood their role in the movement and what needed to be done.

The immediate legacy of the Chicano movement was an increase in their political clout. Navarro writes in the presidential elections of 1968 and 1972, both Republicans and Democrats began to see Mexican Americans as an important swing vote (Navarro, 348)

Democrat presidential candidates Robert Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey both courted the Mexican American vote, with Kennedy relying heavily on United Farm Workers and Chicano students for his vote. The influence of Chicanismo here cannot be denied, as even Democrats could see that the Chicano movement controlled the hearts of the people in those years. On his win in the California primaries, Kennedy publicly thanked Cesar Chavez. (Navarro, 348).

In 1972, the Mexican vote was split between the Chicano RUP party and the Democrats. Many Mexican American organizations remained neutral, but few continued to support the Democrats. As a result of this, Nixon won, but this also demonstrates the

effectiveness of Chicanismo in mobilizing Mexican Americans to align with a party which would adequately and without compromise represent their particular interests. Having all interests represented, after all, seems to me the essence of a democratic society, and would be necessary.

Navarro sees the current conservatism of Mexican American politics as once again reducing the capacity of the Mexican American elite to address issues concerning Mexican American poverty. “Outside the *barrios* and *colonias*, the Hispanic generation (Viva Yo- The “I” generation) is still the most prevalent because of its compatibility with the white dominated political culture.” (Navarro, 686, parenthetical statement mine) The current stagnation in politics has leaked into Mexican American academia, which is also more status quo oriented. (Navarro, 694). Navarro speaks ominously of contemporary political apathy in *barrios* today as opposed to the restless idealism and hope for change which permeated the *barrio* in the 60’s. “In California by 2040, whites will make up 31% of the population, but will comprise 53% of the voters. By contrast, Latinos will compose but 26%” (Navarro, 695), Navarro says, saying that this could prolong the “South African Apartheid syndrome” which will further aggravate *barrios* and *colonias*.

Largely this is because of lack of experience in democratic and participatory traditions of contemporary youth, which does not prepare for or encourage political participation in the United States. There is a marked absence of effective grassroots organizations and political pressure organizations which work at the *barrio* level. This does not allow Mexican Americans to tackle the crisis of poverty, or to address the poverty of Mexican Americans which will always be associated with their name as long as it persists in the degree that it does.

“ Not one (contemporary Mexican American) interest group has a vision or a plan of action that



ideologically purports major change of the liberal capitalist system. Like politicians, they have no viable answers or solutions to the complex issues and problems confronting the barrios and colonias of Aztlan. This suggests that as buffers or ‘want to be whites’ at best they only offer Band Aid approaches to change” (Navarro, 699)

There are a lot of social service providers in the barrios, whether non profit, tax exempt or federally funded advocacy organizations. To truly address the causes of poverty, however, structural readjustment is required which requires mass mobility and giving the poor hope for change.

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