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Representation by Other Means: Mexican American and Puerto Rican Social Movement Organizations

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Electoral participation is only one facet of a larger pattern of Latino political engagement. As the oldest Latino communities in the United States, Mexican Americans (since 1848) and Puerto Ricans (since 1898) have a long history of organizing to protect themselves against racial discrimination. Social movement organizations were often the only outlets for political representation and self-defense in a society where Latinos were outnumbered and barred from effective participation in the institutions of government. Latino organizations generated a leadership cadre and served as vehicles through which interests of class, gender, occupation, and ideology were mediated through the lens of race. Although Mexican American and Puerto Rican activists shared common experiences of racial and ethnic injustice, organizations emerged with distinct understandings of life and race relations in the United States. Today, racial and ethnic considerations continue to inform and drive the organizing impulse among Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans. Some organizations promote politically moderate agendas, while others espouse revolutionary or separatist goals. The study of these groups yields a more complete understanding of Latino politics and the complex forces driving a growing political force.

Mexican American Organizations and the Struggle for Equal Civil Rights[1]

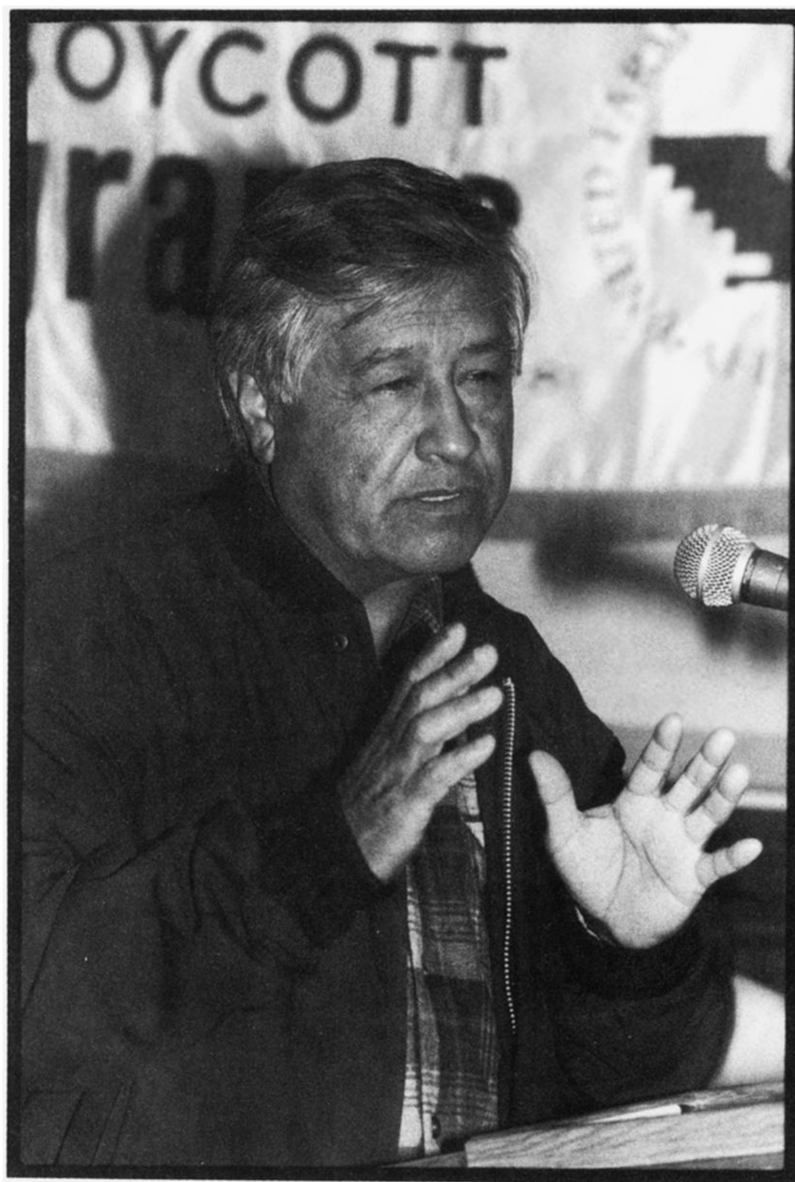
Since the end of the Mexican-American War (1846-48), Mexican Americans have organized numerous responses to racism, segregation, and violence (Acuña 2000). But until the turn of the twentieth century, Mexican Americans were too economically weak, politically marginal, geographically isolated, and poorly acquainted with the legal traditions of the United States to launch sustained political campaigns. However, as the population grew, so did the number of organizations representing the community (Tirado 1970). Over time, three distinct forms of organizations emerged to protect members of the community from outside threats: the *mutualistas* or mutual aid societies, Mexican American labor unions, and civil rights organizations.

The *mutualistas* were the earliest organizations for Mexican Americans. Common in Mexico and the American Southwest prior to that area's annexation by the United States, the *mutualistas* issued funeral insurance, acted as credit unions, created libraries, and published newspapers. After the Mexican-American War, their functions expanded to include racial advocacy and self-defense (Hernandez 1983). What distinguished the *mutualistas* from other activist groups operating at the turn of the twentieth century was their organizers' ardent Mexican nationalism, rejection of cultural assimilation, and distrust of American political institutions. Through the *mutualistas*, the webs of race, class, and culture, created a tight bond of interdependence among Mexicans living in territories they believed properly belonged to Mexico. In order to reinforce group solidarity and keep the Anglo society's cultural influences at bay, the *mutualistas* sponsored traditional dances, barbecues, and celebrations of Mexican patriotic holidays. In large cities like Los Angeles and San Antonio, the Mexican Consulate established relationships with the *mutualistas* and other organizations as it sought to

harness nationalist sentiment among the immigrant population in order to further its domestic and foreign policy goals (Gonzalez 1999; Sanchez 1993).

Labor Unions

As they immigrated to the United States in increasing numbers, Mexican workers were confronted by well-financed farm and ranching associations that wanted a large, unorganized labor pool, and by Anglo-dominated labor unions that treated the new immigrants as enemies (Gomez-Quiñones 1994; Zamora 1993). Mexican American labor activists primarily fought discrimination in the workplace, but they often took the lead in community organizing. Lacking political representation and isolated from the Anglo population, Mexican American farm workers' struggles for equal treatment often met with violence as union meetings were disrupted, members beaten, and leaders deported (Escobar 1999). Labor-led organizations shared many of the *mutualistas'* cultural values but rejected nationalism as a dangerous division that weakened all workers. Mexican nationalism, like racial discrimination, pitted workers against each other and made them all vulnerable to exploitation on the job. Opposed to racism in all forms, given the opportunity, Mexican American labor activists readily joined in multiethnic organizing (Ruiz 1987).



Under the leadership of Cesar Chavez, the United Farmworkers Union (UFW) organized a nationwide grape boycott during the 1970's to gain union recognition and collective bargaining agreements in California's rich grape industry. Photo by Alain McLaughlin/Impact Visuals.

Civil Rights Organizations

By 1930, the proportion of Mexican Americans who were born in the U.S. skyrocketed as a result of natural population increases and the deportation of 500,000 Mexican immigrants during the Great Depression. This demographic shift gave rise to a more educated and assimilated political leadership (M. Garcia 1989; Sanchez 1993), who emphasized the rights of citizenship in the United States, endorsed the American system of government, and believed that racism could be overcome through interest group politics. Their mobilizing strategies were premised on the belief that the American free enterprise system was normatively acceptable and that Anglos would eventually accept Mexican Americans as their social equals. What further distinguished these activists from those of the *mutualistas* and the labor-based groups was their celebration of industrial capitalism and its potential to reward the best qualities of their people: intelligence, hard work, and perseverance. Racial solidarity was considered necessary only to eliminate the evils of discrimination. In the long run, individual Mexican Americans would find their place in the social order (Marquez 1993). After World War II, groups like the League of United Latin American Citizens, Coordinating Council for Latin American Youth, and the Mexican American Movement would become the most visible and articulate forces in Mexican American politics (M. Garcia 1989; Pycior 1997).

The Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s

The mass deportation of Mexican citizens during the Great Depression and the growing numbers of native-born Mexican Americans depleted the ranks of those most responsive to appeals to Mexican nationalism. Although a few prominent nationalists did remain after the 1930s, their ideas would not reemerge in full force until the dawn of the Chicano Movement.

Beginning in the mid-1960s, university and community organizations across the Southwest adopted the disruptive politics of the Black Power movement and formulated a revitalized ideology of cultural and racial separatism (Gomez-Quiñones 1973; Muñoz 1989). Some activists rejected the entire racial, economic, and cultural structure of Anglo society and argued that equality could be achieved only through Chicano-controlled political parties, social service agencies, and government (I. Garcia 1989; Vigil 1999). The Alianza Federal de Pueblos Libres, formed in northern New Mexico, reignited the issue of land stolen from Mexican settlers after the Mexican-American War. Reies Lopez Tijerina, the Alianza's charismatic leader, became the leading proponent of Chicano separatism as he utilized the courts, protest, and armed confrontation to reclaim the old Spanish and Mexican land grants in order to build a Chicano homeland (Nabokov 1970).

The most widely recognized organization of the era was the United Farm Workers Union. Cesar Chavez, the union's leader, was revered by movement activists for his ability to organize migrant farm workers, lead strikes against farm employers, and draw national attention to farmworkers' plight (Hammerback and Jensen 1998). Chavez solidified his status as one of the era's great civil rights leaders by successfully coordinating a national boycott of grapes, lettuce, and table wine. The boycott brought farm owners to the negotiating table and won Californian farm workers the first multiyear agricultural contracts in the state's history, a stable union, and unprecedented gains in wages, benefits, and working conditions (Jenkins 1985; Martin, Vaupel, and Egan 1988). Most of those gains would be lost, however. The passing of the 1960s' liberal atmosphere, a protracted struggle with the rival Teamsters Union, and increased grower resistance virtually destroyed the union's ability to negotiate contracts and wield power in California agriculture (Mooney and Majka 1995).

The Contemporary Period

Mexican American political organizations today serve a population increasingly differentiated along the lines of class, gender, and occupation. Mexican American business and professional associations, like their Anglo counterparts, advance their members' economic interests through lobbying, advocacy, and networking. Several women's organizations, notably the Mothers of East Los Angeles and the Mexican American Women's National Association—the only Mexican American organization to maintain a continuous presence in Washington, DC, since the collapse of the Chicano Movement--have established reputations as important players in local and national politics (Honig 1996; Pardo 1998). The Industrial Areas Foundation maintains a vigorous network of neighborhood organizations in Mexican American communities throughout the Southwest. Their values and vision for change are drawn from an activist interpretation of the Judeo-Christian tradition of solidarity with the poor—a doctrine they believe will unite people of all races and creeds (Reitzes and Reitzes 1987; Shirley 1997). Finally, members of organizations like the Southwest Network for Economic and Environmental Justice draw their inspiration directly from their predecessors in the Chicano Movement. Their politics are informed by cultural nationalism, community control of institutions, and a distrust of Anglo-dominated society (Marquez 1998).

The political struggles of the twentieth century transformed the character of Southwestern politics and opened the way for the formation of a constellation of new organizations and strategies. The decline of old-style civil rights groups like the League of United Latin American Citizens or the GI Forum contrasts dramatically with the vibrancy of younger, more specialized groups and associations. Most active groups that pursue a broad civil rights agenda, like the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund or the National Council of La Raza, are elite-driven organizations, heavily dependent upon philanthropic and corporate support (Gallegos and O'Neill 1991). Grassroots Mexican American social movement organizations, on the other hand, rely on volunteers to break caste barriers and engage in a continuing internal debate over values, tactics, and visions of life in the United States.

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Puerto Ricans in Urban Social Movements[2]

In *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements,* Manuel Castells concluded that urban social movements are mobilizations seeking "the transformation of urban structure" (1983, 291). Attempts to make such change can take several forms that include challenges to dominant social relations involving power, gender, race, or culture. Social movements tend to mobilize masses of people in civic actions designed to call into question their assigned status in society. These actions typically threaten elites, who respond adversely to attacks on their values, legitimacy, and claims to political leadership. Puerto Rican social and political activism provides an illustration of how a group that has had relatively low participation in the electoral arena for many decades has, in other, nonvoting ways, done much to challenge dominant urban and economic interests.

Understanding Puerto Rican Social Movements

In U.S. society, social movements within communities of color have special significance due to the size and location of the groups, their social history in relation to processes involving the accumulation and distribution of wealth and power, and the contemporary material conditions of constituents of these groups. While much of political science literature and popular commentary has overlooked the role Latinos have played in key social movements during the last 50 years, a few recently published books do describe Latino involvement in social movements, including the Civil Rights Movement. Still, as Rodney E. Hero noted, "much of the mainstream research, particularly what might be called the 'empirical/behavioral' work, has either not acknowledged or has not adequately accounted" for different interpretations of urban politics. (1997, 468).

Mobilizing to transform urban structures is especially important for Puerto Ricans because members of the group tend to be among the poorest and least educated individuals in the United States. They are also among the least likely to vote. Of the 31.7 million Latinos currently living in this country, approximately three million are Puerto Rican (not including the resident population of Puerto Rico). While 63.9% of Puerto Ricans have a high school diploma or more, only 11.1% have a bachelor's degree (27.7% of whites hold at least a bachelor's degree). Also, Puerto Ricans tend to be much poorer than Mexicans, Cubans, or Latinos from Central and South America. In 1998, approximately 43.5% of all Puerto Rican children were living below the poverty level, compared to 10.6% of all white children. In that same year, 26.7% of all Puerto Rican families were poverty-stricken; only 6.1% of white families were in poverty (U.S. Bureau of Census 2000). These conditions have persisted over several decades despite Puerto Rican electoral advances at the local level in some cities.

Puerto Ricans have organized for worker rights, human rights, and expanded education opportunities. The full stories of these episodes, especially stories about the key roles labor and community activists played have yet to be written. As Victor M. Munoz concluded, "Annals of Mexican-American empowerment do not deal at length with the significance of organized labor, let alone organized labor in the Southwest as a factor in empowerment" (1991, 99). This also holds for Puerto Ricans, who were active as leaders and nonelite participants in community and labor movements in New York City, and other places, during the decades before and after the Second World War (see Colon 1961). Information about Puerto Rican political participation in social movements during this period is available in the classic work, *Memorias de Bernardo Vega* (Andreu Iglesias, 1977), an autobiographical account of a Puerto Rican labor activist in New York City.

Puerto Rican intellectuals and activists also made important contributions during the Harlem Renaissance. Elinor Des Verney Sinnette wrote of Arthur Alfonso Schomburg, for example, that he "was an inspiration to Harlem youth and was actively involved in a variety of community-sponsored campaigns to improve social and economic conditions in the community" (1989, 161). Later instances of Puerto Rican social movement politics included the short-lived Community Control movement led by Puerto Rican parents in the Lower East Side section of New York City during the early seventies; the Young Lords Movement, which unfolded in New York City, Chicago, Hartford, and Philadelphia; the Puerto Rican student movement that unfolded in several cities throughout the sixties and seventies; and the mobilization of workers led and sustained by Puerto Ricans in cities such as Hartford, Boston, and Chicago. Information about these social movements has been collected in a timely anthology by Andres Torres and Jose E. Velazquez (1998).

The Political Economy of Puerto Rican Migration

Puerto Ricans began arriving in Northeastern cities, especially New York City, very early in the twentieth century and played a prominent role in community and labor politics, if not the electoral arena. Even though the Puerto Rican House of Delegates formally rejected U.S. citizenship in 1917, the U.S. Congress imposed citizenship on Puerto Ricans that same year with the Jones Act in order to maintain a supply of cheap and mobile labor for industries in the Northeast and plantations in the South. For many decades, Puerto Rican residents, although citizens, were treated by white leaders as merely cheap laborers who had no rights that true Americans needed to respect. Dissatisfaction with this treatment was embodied in the songs and literature of Puerto Ricans living in the United States. One example of this is renowned conga player Joe Cuba's "Y oye, y ese pito? I never go back to Georgia." A hit in black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods in New York City throughout the late sixties, the song protests the exploitation of Puerto Ricans as cheap migrant labor in the South.

Even as Puerto Ricans sang of not going back to the migrant camps, they were organizing to change the power status between labor and management. Gloria Bonilla-Santiago's 1988 study of the efforts to organize Puerto Rican migrant workers in New Jersey in the sixties and seventies highlights the role and effectiveness of Puerto Rican organizers. There were similar efforts in rural parts of other Northeastern states, including New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts.

Puerto Rican Politics and Communities of Color

Understanding the ways Latinos have participated in social movements provides insight about fundamental relationships involving power and wealth, race, class, and the control and management of urban space. Studying Puerto Rican politics within the context of social movements helps to identify key political issues and questions facing this community. In particular, it

can shed light on political relations among Puerto Ricans and members of other communities of color, particularly blacks. Looking at how Latinos have been involved in social movements may give rise to insights different than those uncovered by studies of electoral and political participation. As Jennings (1994) noted, issues of conflict and consensus, and the reality of political collaboration to achieve social change--especially among black and Puerto Rican communities in New York City--have a long, complex history that cannot be told exclusively through comparative studies of the electoral characteristics of groups.

The Status of Puerto Rico

The relationship of Puerto Ricans in the United States and Puerto Rico is another issue that becomes more understandable when viewed through the lens of social movements. Some political scientists approach Puerto Rican politics as two separate spheres, the Island and the mainland, merely connected by a continual back-and-forth stream of migrants. But looking at Puerto Rican politics within the context of social movement suggests linkages between these two spheres by showing how fundamental issues such as class, race, and ideology mold the political activism of residents in both places (see Center for Puerto Rican Studies 1979; Maldonado-Denis 1969)

Recent Scholarship

Two key works that analyze Latino politics within the context of social movements are the anthologies *Latinos and the Political System* and *Pursuing Power: Latinos and the Political System* (F. Garcia 1988, 1997). Carol Hardy-Fanta's *Latina Politics, Latino Politics* (1993) describes and analyzes the broad and nonelectoral participation of Latina women in local politics in Boston. Jose E. Cruz (1998) has published a similar account also touching upon social movement issues and Puerto Rican politics in the city of Hartford, Connecticut, and Enrique T. Trueba (1999) has focused on how Latino identity politics may be emerging in the national arena. These books provide key information about how Latinos have participated in social movements.

The Impact of Puerto Rican Activism

What conclusions can be extracted from this brief review of Puerto Rican political participation and social movements? Significant accomplishments can be attributed to Puerto Rican leaders and participants in social movements. To give just one example, the Puerto Rican student movement helped to make higher education more accessible to the children and adults of a community that represented close to one million people in New York City during the sixties and seventies. It also helped to create and nurture a Puerto Rican intelligentsia based in the United States, and, at the same time, facilitated the partial transfer of an island-based intelligentsia into higher education in the United States (Serrano 1998).

Political Science and the Study Puerto Rican Social Movements

Reliance solely on traditional indicators of political participation such as who votes, or writes letters to elected officials, or wears a campaign button, will yield little understanding of the political behavior of the Puerto Ricans. As suggested by Hanes Walton Jr. (1985), the study of political participation should not be limited to the electoral arena. Jaime A. Regalado also raised this concern, asking, "Is political empowerment the exclusive province of electoral participation and influence over formal political structures?" (1997, 170).

Mexican American and Puerto Rican organizations have increased their activities to advance their members' interests. Here, workers who lost their jobs because of NAFTA march through downtown El Paso. Photo by Jack Kurtz/Impact Visuals.

Finally, studying Puerto Rican political participation within the context of social movement encourages scholars to utilize social history as a methodological tool. Indeed, analysis of Puerto Rican political characteristics and behavior would be incomplete without understanding aspects of the social history of Puerto Ricans and their community-based struggles over the

twentieth century. Thus, Stephen Thermstrom's warning of more than 30 years ago is still relevant. Thermstrom argued that reliance on hard data to the exclusion of historical analysis is problematic. He observed that "the student of modern society is not free to take his history or leave it alone. Interpretation of the present requires assumptions about the past. The actual choice is between explicit history, based on a careful examination of the sources, and implicit history, rooted in ideological preconceptions and uncritical acceptance of local mythology" (1969, 236). Investigating how Puerto Ricans participate in social movements and seek to challenge and change political and economic interests and urban structures provides a much needed opportunity to integrate the study of political science and social history. Seizing this opportunity may provide further insight into how Puerto Rican activism aimed at transforming urban structures continues to expose the limitations, and mold the possibilities, of U.S. democracy.

Notes

1. Benjamin Marquez prepared this section.
2. James Jennings prepared this section.

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