

**Post War Activism in the *Barrio* :  
Alienation and Political Organization**

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The Chicanos<sup>1</sup> as a group have experienced cultural aggression and subjugation by the dominant Anglo society which has been unwilling to accept them as equals, or allowed them to share the opportunities that they themselves enjoy. Instead, the Anglos have through naivety, ethnocentrism, or just malicious prejudice instituted a system of domination which has "socially, politically and economically deprived"<sup>2</sup> Chicano citizens. The *barrio* gives evidence of this deprivation, for within its boundaries one can observe the effects of a community which has been historically denied equal protection, equal education, equal access to public facilities and equal political representation. The Anglo leaders have been content with this situation. They viewed the problems of the Chicano's as inherent to the race, rather than as a result of years of discrimination and cultural estrangement. However, after the end of World War Two several new Chicano groups appeared to challenge the Anglos by unifying the *barrio*, and fighting for equal treatment. Their fight to reduce discrimination and in-

crease political consciousness was important in helping reduce the Chicano's sense of alienation and improve his self-esteem.

One of the basic rights of an American citizen is equal protection under the law but the Chicano has been denied this. The "Zoot-suit Riots"<sup>3</sup> of 1943 that took place in East Los Angeles, give ample evidence that Anglos felt little need to extend fair and equal treatment to the Chicano. These riots, which lasted from June 4 through June 11, were led by Navy and Marine personnel who were encouraged by headlines like "Zoot Suiters Learn Lesson in Fight with Servicemen" in the *Los Angeles Times*, and the editorial in *Los Angeles Daily News* declared that "the time has come to serve notice that the city of Los Angeles will no longer be terrorized by a relatively small handful of morons parading as zoot-suit hoodlums."<sup>4</sup> The message was clear, zoot-suiters were hoodlums, and it was the duty of the servicemen to teach them a lesson. They proceeded to do so by beating and disrobing every person that they found wearing one, even if they had to enter private homes and theaters to find these aggressive "foreign" threats to the public peace. Meanwhile, the police did nothing to interfere with the lesson, but chose to help by arresting as many as 600 bloodied victims or "students" of the mob to "prevent" further violence.<sup>5</sup>

The main crime of the zoot-suiters', or *pachucos* as they were often called, seems to have been that they did not conform to the Anglo's idea of dress and grooming, and instead chose to wear clothes that were distinctive, and which allowed the Anglos to easily identify them as a group apart. Granted, there had been several incidents between servicemen and Chicano youth, but those seem to have involved the Anglos' treatment of Chicanas. Acuna theorizes that perhaps the service personnel had developed a bad image of Mexicanas by patronizing the prostitutes of Tijuana and may have projected this prejudice onto the Chicana thereby precipitating altercations.<sup>6</sup>

Even if these original altercations had been started by Zoot-suited young *pachucos*, there was no rational reason to attack all people wearing the fashion. Certainly, there was no reason for the reported attacks on Chicanos in general which included attacks on cripples and mothers with babies in arms.<sup>7</sup> The underlining cause of the attacks must have been the pejorative Anglo perception of the Chicanos as an inferior group, unworthy of equal protection. Even Eleanor Roosevelt declared that the disturbances were "in the nature of race riots."<sup>8</sup>

Although the Los Angeles media vehemently denied the charge, the denial is hard to accept. Just the year before there had been the "Sleepy Lagoon"<sup>9</sup> incident, which brought forth an official Los Angeles police report from its Foreign Relation Bureau that stated that the Mexican was different from Anglos, because his Indian ancestry made him "desire to use a knife or some lethal weapon. In other words his desire was to kill, or at least draw blood."<sup>10</sup> This opinion's lack of scientific research and over generalization seems to be consistent with Allport's definition of prejudice which states that "there must be an attitude of favor or disfavor; and it must be related to

an over generalization (and therefore erroneous) belief."<sup>11</sup> If this pejorative opinion was as widespread as the report would indicate, one can discern the real nature of the conflict.

This incident also gives one a look at the estrangement of the Chicano youths. The zoot-suiters or *pachucos* and *pachucas*, were, generally speaking, the American-born children of immigrants from Mexico, children of Chicanos who had newly migrated from rural areas, or children of Chicanos who never could find their way out of the *barrio*. Most of their families had experienced the repatriations and deportation of the depression years, and the children had witnessed the forced separation of Mexican fathers or mothers from their American family members. In some cases "even the naturalized citizens were urged to repatriate, and the rights of the American-born children to citizenship in their native lands were explicitly denied or not taken into account."<sup>12</sup> This experience must have impressed on the children that they were viewed as somehow less American, something that could be discarded or sent away when no longer needed. Adding to this sense of estrangement was their exclusion from beaches, theaters, parks and many of the best paying jobs. Yet, they seemed to realize that they were not Mexican like their fathers or grandfathers, but had somehow become separated even from them. This state of conflict was described by Octavia Paz :

Their attitude reveals an obstinate, almost fanatical will-to-be, but this will affirms nothing specific except their determination.....not to be like those around them. The Pachuco does not want to become a Mexican again; at the same time he does not want to blend into the life of North America.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps it was this desire to be different that led the *pachucos* to try to create their own identity through the wearing of the zoot-suits and the use of Chuco (a blend of old Spanish, Spanish English and the slang of the border Mexicans).<sup>14</sup> Although not all Chicano youths of the time opted for the zoot-suit style or used Chuco, I think that they can be seen as symbolic of a genuine desire or search for identity or sense of belonging that was generally felt among the second and third generation Chicanos. Consequently, the attack on them can be seen as a reaction to their rejection of traditional Anglo society or their perceived foreignness.

Another aspect of the *barrio* that was revealed indirectly by the "Zoot-Suit Riots" was the paucity of effective community self-help organizations. Evidently, the violence of the riots had awakened certain sectors of the dominant society to the need to uncover the reasons for the altercations and to try to find ways to prevent their repetition. The first thing these groups discovered was the almost complete lack of well organized community groups that could assist them on the *barrio's* behalf. This situation so embarrassed the Chicano leaders that they quickly went into action to build new groups that could give their communities stronger political unity and organization.<sup>15</sup>

Coinciding with this movement toward organization was the return of the Chicano servicemen. Many of those returning to the Los Angeles area were incensed that their friends, family and community had been so savagely attacked while they were risking their lives to protect their country. Certainly, the dichotomy of American society was not something they would continue to tolerate, for they had fought bravely in the war, winning more medals of honor than any other ethnic group, while suffering a disproportionate number of casualties.<sup>16</sup> Their war experience imbued them with the desire and courage to strengthen their community in order that Chicanos could enjoy the same rights as Anglos.

As the result of these two factors, the *barrio* saw the appearance of many new community service groups. The first of these were the Unity Leagues which were different from the older *mutualistas*<sup>17</sup> or benefit societies because their membership was mostly from the lower economic class of Chicanos with many veterans taking an active role. These leagues were involved in voter registration drives, and the Chino group was successful in getting Andrew Morales elected to the city council. Veterans also played an important role in organizing the "Community Service Organization" in 1947. This group became involved in educational reform, and cases of police mistreatment of Chicanos as well as voter registration. Their efforts succeeded in getting over 12,000 Chicanos registered, a good start in regaining at least some control over their political lives. The election of 1949 was even more rewarding, as it witnessed the victory of Edward Roybal, the first Chicano since 1881 to be elected to the City Council of Los Angeles.<sup>18</sup>

Chicanos in other parts of the country were equally active. Groups like the GI Forum and League of United Latin American Citizens (LULACS) became active in lobbying for the rights of the Chicanos. The former began by trying to eliminate discrimination in the veterans services, i.e., discriminatory practices at the Corpus Christi Veterans Hospital. It then expanded its range of activities to include discrimination in housing, education and employment.

Although politically neutral, the Forum recognizes the need for Chicanos to become assimilated into the major parties, and it encourages its members to be active in the party of their choice and to run for office. Through its benefit programs they offer scholarships and housing loans. Also, by creating women auxiliaries and junior forums for youths, the Forum was able to reach out to a large cross section of the Chicano population, and help to build communication between the different age groups and other elements of the community, thus reducing alienation within the *barrio*.

In addition, its use of patriotic symbols and the veteran status of its members helped to reduce the sense of alienation that many Anglos felt toward Chicano groups. This factor seems to have insulated it from the red-baiting that affected other Chicano activist groups during the 1950's. Its popularity can be seen in that it

has had branches in 23 states.<sup>19</sup>

Other returning servicemen joined the older more established groups like LULACS. Formed in the late 1920's, it was started by middle class people and limited its membership only to citizens of the United States. It is an assimilationist group whose stated purpose was to develop the Chicano into the "purest and most perfect type of a true and loyal citizen of the United States of America."<sup>20</sup> This statement itself seems to indicate that its leadership perceived the Chicano as something less than American, something "alien", at least as far as the Anglos perception of them was concerned. It was the LULACS purpose to have the Chicanos improve themselves, i.e., become more Anglo in manners or customs, in order to change the Anglos' perception of them. In order not to appear radical, LULACS avoided political involvement, but it did involve itself with educational and youth programs. However, its elitist image and strict rules of membership seem to have hindered its development as a mass movement. None the less, it has been effective in getting the schools integrated through financial support of court cases. It, too, has branches now in many states.

Two of the more politically active groups were *La Asociacion Nacional Mexico-Americana* (ANMA) and the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA). The former was organized in 1949 as a response to a clash between predominately Chicano miners and the police in Fierro New Mexico. Although it was active in public discrimination cases, the ANMA remained strongly committed to problems concerning trade unions and discrimination in them. It was so radical that it was placed on the U.S. attorney general's list of subversive groups, and the resultant harassment eroded its support and it faded away.<sup>21</sup>

MAPA was formed in 1958 in response to a growing dissatisfaction with intra-party politics, i.e., discrimination against Chicanos in both major parties. Bi-partisan in structure, it concerned itself mainly with electing Chicanos to public office and supported candidates of either party who were dedicated to promoting the interests of the Chicano. Recognizing a gap between its middle class members and the poorer *barrio* residents, it has tried to promote their participation by using more ethnic symbols and by collaborating with ethnic-conscious groups. Also, its decentralized structure gives it local offices sufficient latitude to develop their own programs and endorse local candidates.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

Although groups like the CSO, GI Forum, LULACS and others tried to improve conditions for the Chicanos, they found it hard to keep them committed to any one specific problem for a long time. This inability must have resulted from the diverse interests of each community. Although long perceived as a homogeneous entity, the Chicano community is quite heterogeneous with each community having its individual problems due to factors related to differing manifestations of discrimination, geogra-

phy, demography and the economy of its region. Also, one must remember that each *barrio* has its own substructure with many needs to be met. As a result, all of these community service groups seemed to turn to some of the methods of the older *mutualistas*, concerning themselves with many urgent, specific problems of their own community, e.g., zoning, housing, acts of police brutality, loans. It was these problems that the community service groups had to address to build and retain the confidence of the communities. By retaining this confidence, though, they were able to mobilize the community for some universal political actions and continued to exert pressure on the authorities.

In this way, one can see the post-war movements as having been successful in reducing the Chicanos' sense of alienation in four ways : 1. By establishing a network of groups that the Chicanos could rely on for relief from individual acts of Anglo discrimination, they reduced their sense of isolation and helplessness ; 2. By strengthening communication between the different economic classes in the *barrio* through dialogue, assistance or direct participation in their groups, they lessen alienation between them and started to create a sense of Chicano unity ; 3. By involving young people in the groups and supporting their efforts in education, the groups lessen the youths' sense of alienation from their parents and the community in general ; 4. By increasing political awareness through their political involvement and, more importantly, their election successes, they reduced the Chicanos' sense of helplessness and alienation from their government. Granted, the *barrio* was still a world apart economically and socially, and Chicanos still suffered discrimination at work and in the society at large, however, the chicanos' increased sense of unity and commitment to their community, certainly marked a beginning of a new chapter in Chicano and Anglo relations.

## NOTES

1. Though this term is not accepted by all Mexican-Americans it does seem to be popular among most of the politically active and I will use it to refer to long term residents or native born Mexican-Americans. Likewise, I will use Mexican to refer to those newly arrived or those designated as such by the material. Mexican-American will be used only for those who refer to themselves as such.
2. Julius Rivera, "Justice, Deprivation and the Chicano," *Aztlan*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring 1973) : 123.
3. For detailed information on the "Zoot-Suit Riots" see Carey McWilliams', *North From Mexico* (New York : Greenwood Press, 1968) ; Rodolfo Acuna's, *Occupied America* (New York : Harper & Row, 1988).
4. Rodolfo Acuna, *Occupied America : History of Chicanos* (New York : Harper & Row, 1988), 258.
5. *Ibid.*, 257.
6. *Ibid.*, p 256.

7. Carey McWilliams, *North From Mexico : The Spanish-Speaking People of The United States*. (New York : Greenwood Press 1968), 249.
8. *Ibid.*, 256.
9. For more information on this incident see Carey McWilliams, *North From Mexico*, (New York : Greenwood Press 1968), chapter XII ; for a detailed report see Guy Endore, *The Sleep Lagoon Mystery* (Los Angeles : The Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, 1944). For further information and documentation on the incident see the Carey McWilliams collection in the Rare Books section of the UCLA Research Library under the title: Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee-Collection 107.
10. McWilliams, 234.
11. Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading, Ma. : Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1989),13.
12. Acuna, 204.
13. Arturo Madrid-Barela, "In Search of the Authentic Pachuco : An Interpretive Essay," *Aztlan*, 4, no. 1 (Spring 1973) : 36.
14. Acuna, 254.
15. Miguel David Tirado, "Mexican American Community Political Organization," *Aztlan*, 1, no. 1 (Spring 1970) : 61.
16. Acuna, 253-254.
17. The early *mutualistas* were not extremely political, but seemed to cater more to the social or cultural needs of the middle class Chicano. Some groups like the *Orden Hijos de American* (Order Sons of America) were active in voter registration, but were local entities and soon dissolved because splits developed in their leadership, a common fate of many of the early groups. For further reading read Rodolfo Acuna, *Occupied America : A History of Chicanos* ; Carey McWilliams, *North From Mexico* ; Miguel David Tirado, "Mexican American Community Political Organization."
18. Tirado, p 61-63.
19. *Ibid.*, 64-66.
20. *Ibid.*, 57.
21. Acuna, 293-294.
22. Tirado, 67-68.

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