

Aztlán

A Primordial Imagined Community

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The purpose of this article is to consider identity as a process that takes place in a historically determined time and space. The first question guiding the research was the way in which national identities are constructed in a foreign territory, concretely that of Chicanos in the United States.

I chose as a representation scenario the political ritual of Cinco de Mayo, a fiesta on May 5 which commemorates a battle against French intervention in the last century. I was intrigued to know why this date is so rooted among Mexicans living in the United States. It is an activist, political and non-commercial celebration, and a scenario of representation of identities

that, to my surprise, involved an indigenous identity, based on which values and deep-seated emotions can be inferred that, like in all rituals, are displayed.

This all takes place at East Los Angeles College, the university with the largest number of Mexican American students in Los Angeles. The program, presented in English and Spanish, an important achievement of the Chicano movement, namely bilingual and bicultural education, includes activities beginning on May 4, sponsored by the Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán (M.E.C.H.A.).¹ The program begins by mentioning the two heroes of the battle of Cinco de Mayo. The first is Benito Juárez, whose famous saying, “Among men as well as among nations, respect for others’ rights is peace,” has enormous meaning for Chicanos as a

whole, one of whose main demands is self-determination.

The second is Ignacio Zaragoza, who some say was born “on this side” of the border when Texas was part of Mexico, in Espiritu Santo Bay, March 24, 1829. Zaragoza is considered the main hero of the battle.

The Cinco de Mayo victory is presented as Mexico’s great triumph against the invader. According to this story, Mexico conquered its sovereignty and independence there. This way of narrating the events inverts the historical time frame and idealizes the facts. But that is really not important if we consider that what is interesting is its pedagogical intention, amid the colonialism, the racism and the discrimination that Mexicans suffer daily along with the rest of U.S. “minorities.”

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Mural art has been an instrument for Chicano protest.

Photos by Mariángela Rodríguez

In the popular Chicano collective imagination, different historical threads are brought together in a symbolic unity that bestows a meaning to the commemoration.

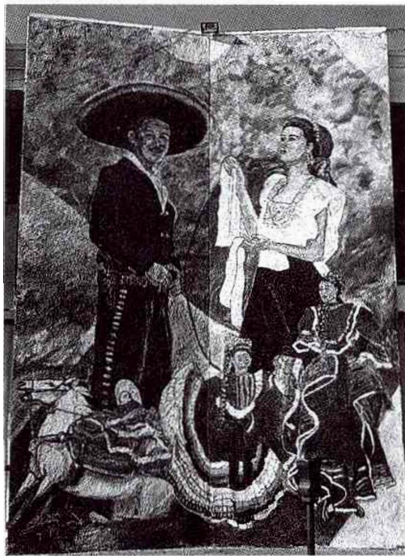
In response to the question, “Why this holiday?” the organizers emphasize the pedagogical effect, the importance for Chicanos to know “the truth about their history, this history that they have been denied by the U.S. educational system. We can only struggle for our freedom if we first know who we are.”² From the organizers’ perspective, the goal of the civic-political celebration is to teach participants about the paradigmatic events in the history of Mexicans and Chicanos. For this reason, the Battle of Puebla has become a watershed based on which seasonal holidays are established to constantly maintain their principles fresh and timely. (“Wherever there are five Chicanos there is a Cinco de Mayo celebration,” they say with pride.) These are spaces for mounting the imagined communities, in which the past and the future are seen as simultaneous with the present.³ As the school dean and master of ceremonies explains, “Cinco de Mayo is important for Chicanos because the hero of the battle, Ignacio Zaragoza, was a Texan, a Chicano.”

The Mexican ambiance is brought out in the decoration of the hall, which sports balloons with the colors of the Mexican flag, plus the mariachi music, Aztec and regional dances, and the Mexican food served in its (industrialized) American version. The students wear dress styles and fashions that evoke the Indians of northern Mexico and the southwestern United States, with their hair down to their shoulders or braided. The clothes speak of an indigenous culture, and their T-shirts are adorned with the Aztec calendar or the image of indigenous gods. Others carry

signs declaring, “Our true history must be told,” and the flag of Aztlán hangs in the hall, reflecting a clear demand for a space for their historical time.

This type of ethnic identity is projected, spread over the length and breadth of the ritual space. It is clearly expressed in the program, which points out that the indigenous dances are authentic, and that the dancers belong to the group known in Mexico as *concheros*, who practice forms of indigenous religiosity, in many cases creolized.⁴ They are presented as the “Aztec Dancers Xochi Pilli.”

These dances alternate with the band that plays Chicano rap, music whose rhythm recalls the urban way of life, the subway, the planes, the noise of traffic, factories, etc. It is music that transmits the tyranny of the clock that is characteristic of the big city. The group’s name, Aztec Underground, evokes the marginal music of a group that appeals to the pre-Hispanic past to define its nationality. When evoking this imagined community, they establish a mythical time in a contemporary context. They also speak of re-appropriating the U.S. Southwest,



a territory that Mexico lost in the war of 1848.

Between one musical number and another, American music is played over the sound system. Immediately after this, The Chicanos Pride Rappers group is introduced, whose songs express the immigrants’ situation, what it means to be a “wetback” and getting paid by piecework; they also speak of the need for trade union organization. The group’s vocalist asks the crowd, “Is La Raza in the house?” “Si!!!” everyone responds. “Are there Hispanics in the house?” “Noooo!!!” There are no white Americans in the audience. It is a festivity of one “minority” for the other “minorities.”

However, this concept of minorities does not seem to be based in reality. Of the U.S. population of 249,632,692 inhabitants, 22.35 million are Hispanics, according to the 1990 census. One out of every 11 Americans is Hispanic, and 36 percent of the minority population.⁵ These minorities are encompassed in a common category: race. It can be argued that there is a mixing together of subordinate cultural characteristics that today come together around Mexican-ness.

The commemoration of a battle that occurred in 1862 is resignified, acquiring current content that speaks to the reality of the social panorama, especially of a racist social order. The ideological content of this ritual openly questions the social order and asymmetrical social relations. Music is one of the most important emotional poles.

All of a sudden, absolute silence. The air is full of incense and the atmosphere is like a temple, with music from pre-Hispanic musical instruments such as the *teponaztle*, *chirimía* and the *caracol*. It is very clear that political and religious phenomena are two sides of the same coin. It is a

moment of deep withdrawal among them, the sign that a sacred space has been produced among the participants. The dancer explains their ritual links with central Mexico, but at the same time informs the audience that the members of the group are Californians initiated in *conchero* religiosity. The *conchero* dances have a great importance among Chicanos, in the first place, because they enormously condense dominant political and religious symbols. "The most diverse and resonant symbols coexist within them [the dances]: the Guadalupana and the country's three-colored flag, Quetzalcóatl and St. James the Apostol, the Catholic cross and the *ollin* cross. As dance captain Ernesto Ortiz said, "For *concheros*, syncretism has become a cry of victory: syncretization is not a defeat, but a victory of Mexican culture that persists under other symbols, which are given the religious character taught by our forefathers."⁶

This syncretism is linked to what I have termed "cultural creolization," which characterizes Chicano culture. If the *concheros* consider themselves warriors and what is commemorated on Cinco de Mayo is

a battle, the *conchero* conception of body is tied to this concept. For the *concheros*, the body is an instrument of battle with which order is restored amid chaos. The dancers are warriors and their musical instruments are their weapons, they fight while dancing and through prayer, religious harmony is established.

Ortiz explains the origin of the costumes; much of the embroidery had been a gift from Native American groups. It should be mentioned that there is a profound link between Chicanos and American Indians that is expressed in different ways, through marriages, for example, or through sharing what they consider to be their spirituality. It is an example of cultural reterritorialization, a symbolic reappropriation of a space that belongs to them, an indispensable condition for the formation of primordial imagined communities such as the example under consideration.

The activities continue with the presentation of the theater group "Por la Gente" (By People). The play is spoken in Spanglish, accentuated to create more comical situations. The plot involves a

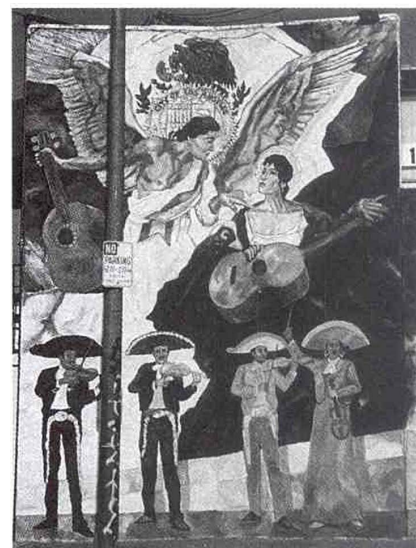
condensed recounting of the founding dates of Chicano history, the changes Mexican Americans have experienced as an "ethnic group," and the historical resignification of Chicano-ness, as well as its specific way of perceiving the world.

The play begins with the arrival of Columbus to the Americas, with the Mexico-Tenochtitlan and Cuzco empires, and Latin America in general all remembered. Mention is made of the 500 years of indigenous "resistance." The missionaries and conquerors appear whipping the Indians who they force to work.

Then Maximilian and Carlotta appear in the court, speaking in French about Benito Juárez. This is an important moment precisely because it deals with a celebration of Cinco de Mayo. The performance continues with the Mexican revolution; the actors explain that Zapata is very important for Chicanos because he fought for land and liberty, a Chicano demand. Flores Magón appears as a great ideologue of the Mexican Revolution, forced to seek exile in the United States due to his opposition to the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship. As can be seen, it is the poor



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The other moment alluded to is the Great Depression of the 1930s when Mexicans were massively deported. Another significant time is the 1940s, when the Pachucos were at their height in Los Angeles. This moment especially moves the public due to its extraordinary symbolic effectiveness. The famous repression of 1943 is portrayed on stage and the actors shout slogans such as “Viva la Raza!” “Orale carnal, órale carnal!” “We’ve been here for a long time, La Raza united will never be defeated!”

The use of imagery —incorporating many elements from television which can be appreciated in the gestures and expressions used— in this political ritual continues to have an important pedagogical effect. The local, regional, ethnic, national and transnational come together around a symbolic unity of a polysemical character, in which comedy and double entendre occupy a central place as a way to narrate political events. The performance ends with ballads of the Mexican revolution.

Immediately afterwards, Mexican objects, authentic Chicano symbols, are raffled. The first prize is a serape; the second, an Aztec calendar; the third, a representation of an Aztec deity; the fourth, a photograph of Emiliano Zapata.

Then Aztec Underground returns to the stage, beginning its set with an emotional number whose lyrics repeat “Aztlán, Aztlán” to a rap rhythm. This time, the music is a mix of indigenous flute melodies and synthesizer. This is a true ode to Chicano identity that goes from aggrega-

tion to disaggregation. There are moments of differentiation of the flute with incense spreading through the room during the prayer to Aztlán —pre-Hispanic indigenous elements; rap, the Black rhythmic style that Chicanos have appropriated; and the electronic synthesizer, the true “cultural apparatus” of contemporary societies.

Here hi-tech music comes together with sounds made with the most rudimentary objects. Music is used to tell stories of poverty and unemployment; colonial oppression is emphasized; yet the contradictions within the Chicano community do not appear. An idealized unity is invoked: they say “Chicano is indigenism,” “I’m not Hispanic, I’m a Mechicano Indian.”

They protest against the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” because they consider them European-based; the same holds true for the label “mestizo,” in which they see a colonial connotation. These affirmations are conveyed in music:

*I am Chicano,
I am Indian,
I’m not Hispanic,
I’m of pure Mechicana blood,
I have my brown skin.*

The event closes with music from the group María Fatal Band, *rock en español de Los Angeles*. Through this ritual, the Chicanos show their capacity to creatively reconfigure the past with an eye to the future, as a testimony in which they leave their mark on a country whose dominant culture seeks to erase them. ■■■

NOTES

¹ The myth of Aztlán contends that the Aztecs were the last of the seven tribes of Aztlán, the place from which it derives its name. According to prophecy, the Aztecs

were to travel south to establish their communities and their culture in central Mexico, accompanied in this pilgrimage by Huitzilopochtli, the god of war. The sign identifying the place where Mexico-Tenochtitlan was to be founded was to be an eagle perched on a cactus, devouring a serpent (Mexico’s current national emblem).

² Mona Ozuf, “La fiesta bajo la Revolución Francesa,” *Hacer la historia* 3 (Barcelona: Laia, 1980), p. 265.

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).

⁴ When I speak of “creolization,” I am referring to cultural processes of appropriation, re-appropriation and resignification that take place in the cultural order, crossed not only by asymmetries of class, but also of race, the product of a colonial situation.

⁵ See National Council of La Raza, *State of Hispanic America 1991: An Overview*. According to the data provided by this document, the composition of the Hispanic population in the United States is as follows: Mexican-Americans, 63 percent; Puerto Ricans, 11 percent; Cubans, 5 percent; Central and South Americans, 14 percent; and other Hispanics, 8 percent.

⁶ See Anáhuac González, “Los concheros: la (re)conquista de México,” mimeograph, p.1.

FURTHER READING

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