

# The Chicano Movement And Identity

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The psycho-social process of people of Mexican origin in the U.S. Southwest becoming aware of their cultural identity up until the beginning of the 1970s Chicano Movement took place in the framework of a conflict with the popular imagination of the “authentic, American”

identity based on Anglo-Saxon values and ethnocentrism.

The identity of the individual depends not only on primary identifications, but also on secondary ones, which occur when the social circle of identifications with models that promote the possibility of formulating and creating hierarchies of future expectations about oneself broaden out. When the usefulness of primary identifications ends, the individual’s identity begins to form,

depending, in turn, on the process whereby the community in question identifies the individual.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, we say that the formation of identity is a dialectical process in which not only similarities play a part but also the differences that separate out the “other,” those exogenous to the group. Personal affirmation also goes through the negation of the “other” and “otherness,” although this negation does not define the totality of the being.

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Americans, who claim to be the possessors of the true identity, have also needed at different times and places the “other” to construct this identity: the Amerind, the Irish, the Jew, the Mexican.

An ethnic group shares not only origins, but also values about these origins, and the positive appreciation of these values is an important part of the formation of the identity of the individual inside the group. Ethnocentric solidarity includes the dimension of consciousness and counter-distinction in the sense that many groups exist only because of the awareness that they are not other groups. Identity is not only the individual, but also a group, phenomenon; it is a process localized in the individual nucleus and in the nucleus of its common culture. Thus, the consciousness of being in the world of the collective creates its own social or ethnic identity. However, we must add that cultural identity, whether social or ethnic, is not necessarily national identity. A cultural group is not necessarily —nor is it always— a national group.

The way in which the community identifies the individual is joined to the ways in which the individual identifies with others. If the individual is recognized as someone who bothers others, the community can suggest different ways for the individual to change. In this way, through both repudiation and the assimilation of previous identifications, a new configuration emerges. That is why Erickson said that cultural and historical change is traumatic for the formation of the individual's identity.<sup>2</sup>

We think this happens in the case of Chicanos. Given the primacy of Eurocentric ethnicity and Anglo-

centric values, the internal coherence of the expectations that have been formed in the process of identifications breaks up. The early relationship of Chicanos who stayed in the Mexican territories lost in the War of 1847 and those who later migrated to the United States is one of power and domination, in which power is both concrete and amorphous. It is a domination understood as some ruling over others by virtue of the existing order.<sup>3</sup> Over time and down through history, Chicanos have sought their maturity and cultural identity from this place of defeat and marginality.

The acquisition of collective consciousness demands a self-assumed identity proposal. The struggle for improving the Chicano community's socio-economic level is carried out within a conceptual framework that assumes the need for a search for its identity. When World War II veterans returned to the same social surroundings they had left behind, disillusionment and discontent with middle-class Mexican-American assimilationist organizations increased. The difference was not initially ideological, but, rather, centered on the lack of social mobility achieved by participating in these organizations and other, national, organizations like the Democratic Party. This split resulted in the leadership of the traditionally conservative Mexican-American organizations demanding more of the U.S. federal government with regard to equal opportunities and access to jobs.

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During the social ferment of the 1960s, before Chicano student organizations emerged, several waves of protest occurred because of the inequalities Mexican-Americans were subject to. The most significant thing was the symbolic twist that these movements took through the affirmation of ethnic identity and the Mexican cultural heritage. Particularly important in this sense was a small Mexican farm workers union strike in Delano, California, led by César Chávez. This union joined in the struggle of Philippino grape pickers who had struck demanding the same pay that the braceros received. Chávez's union, in turn, went out on strike September 16, 1965. They marched toward Sacramento carrying a strike flag, the Mexican flag and the standard of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

That same summer, the black urban ghettos had exploded, starting with Watts in Los Angeles. In New Mexico, activist Reies López Tijerina struggled by constitutional means to recover communal lands that under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which finalized the war between Mexico and the United States in 1849, should have been respected, but which the U.S. government had turned into federally-owned forests.

When previously repressed left movements re-emerged in the United States, some Mexican-American students joined them. Among them were Luis Valdez, Roberto Rubalcava and

Ramón Macías. Valdez and Rubalcava, both student activists at San José State College in California, became members of the Progressive Labor Party and, in 1964, on returning from a trip to Cuba, produced a first radical manifesto against the leaders of the Mexican-American community and their assimilationist policy.

When he finished his studies, Valdez joined the anti-establishment radical theater group the San Francisco Mime Troupe and from there continued his critique of assimilation. In 1965, he participated in farm workers' efforts

There had to be acceptance or recognition by Mexicans themselves of their own inferiority, even if only unconsciously. "Mexicans...had contradictory feelings of gratitude, anger, frustration and resignation concerning their experience with Anglos. Some Mexicans accepted Anglo beliefs about Anglo superiority... yet others could never believe such things, because they hated them [Anglos] too much."<sup>5</sup> Although this idea has some merit, it is only part of the truth and implies that the refusal to accept Anglos' pejorative description was owed to the hatred felt for

blood weigh the same, but rather grafts from there on the solid trunk from here, or like little streams that become part of the majestic river that is the Indian. The notion of the mestizo Mexican is an ideological fable, a euphemism to try to hide—or at least minimize—the overwhelming predominance of the Indian in the Mexican people as a whole. Only the growing isolation and stubborn racism of some elites allows them to fail to recognize in that brown skin, that black, straight hair, those high cheekbones and those almond-shaped eyes the intense gaze, the distinctive, more generalized features of the Mexican face. Our true face, without cosmetics, dissimulation or impossible negations. That is, at the end of the day, an Indian people, no matter how hard it is for some to accept.<sup>6</sup>

Despite this distance, what remains and what differentiates the Mexican American persists: the skin color, the color of the eyes, the rhythm of speech.

in Delano, led by Chávez, and wrote the Delano Plan, which proclaimed the principle of a social movement. In that same year, he founded the Teatro Campesino, recruiting its members from among student activists in northern California. Ramón Macías, a student at the University of California at Berkeley, became one of the original playwrights of the Teatro Campesino. According to Chicano author Carlos Muñoz, many of the concepts about Chicano identity and the emergence of the Generación Chicana came out of the ideas of Luis Valdez and the cultural work of the Teatro Campesino. However, Muñoz also said that these young people were the exception and not the rule in the 1960s.<sup>4</sup>

The inferior place of Mexicans in U.S. society cannot be maintained solely with discrimination and brute force.

them and not the outright rejection of these stereotypes.

The acquisition of consciousness of Mexican-Americans' identity is complicated by several phenomena. Their traditional rejection of being called "Mexican" is not only because of the deformed reflection of negative stereotypes in the United States, but because of the discriminatory, devaluing prejudice that they have suffered in their own country. Just because this prejudice has a high degree of class content does not mean that it is not racist. As Guillermo Bonfil says:

The faces speak to us of genetic continuity and the predominance of Indian features. This people remains. There was a mixing of the races; there still is. But it is not a balanced mixture of blood in which the Indian and European

All these elements of rejection suspend the Mexican-American, from his/her origins, in a space where physical features and the symbols of original ethnicity are not necessarily attractive. But in the cultural vacuum in which he/she is submerged, the cultural symbols are indispensable to him/her despite the fact that they continue to change because of the distance—not only physical, but cultural—of his/her country of origin. Despite this distance, at the same time, what remains and what differentiates the Mexican American persists: the skin color, the color of the eyes, the rhythm of speech; it persists to clearly distinguish him/her and, as a result, he/she is marginalized and rejected. The abyss that separates him/her from acceptance also persists through the new Mexicans who are continually arriving so that those features and that speech, that skin color, are not forgotten. It persists in a way

that, even though he/she may have been there, on the other side of the border, for generations, he/she is not allowed to find meaning or be included by the symbols of the other, adopted culture, a culture that for innumerable reasons is always an adopted culture, but not totally adopted because it cannot recognize itself in it.

We have a typical case in Rodolfo “Corky” González, who had gone through all the byways of the frustrated identity in the search for assimilation. He was the product of an urban barrio. He had a long history of activism and in his personal attempt to capture that identity that so eluded him, he managed to capture the imagination of young people through his epic poem, “Yo soy Joaquín.”

“Yo soy Joaquín” filled a void for the generations that had lived without access to their historical and cultural roots, or to the history of their community in the United States. All of those who had been lost between two worlds, the Mexican and the American, who in different ways rejected their attempts to concretize who they were could identify with the character Joaquín.

“Yo soy Joaquín” by no means sets out a strategy or a political ideology to be followed, but it does capture the very essence of the frustration, the pain and the anger at rejection, marginalization and racism suffered by people of Mexican origin in the United States, as well as the rift with the two cultures. As González himself says in the prologue, the poem was a journey through history, a painful self-evaluation, but above all a quest for his people and his own identity. In that sense it was a foundation of the new identity called being “Chicano,” since many of its lines express that search and try to respond to it.



Cándido Morales

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The character does not assume a particular ethnic nature, but puts himself forward as the continuum of the synthesis of the dialectic of his history, a history that takes on the mantle of Cortés, Cuauhtémoc, Malintzin, Hidalgo, Juárez, Villa, Zapata; master and slave; hero and executioner; Juan Diego, Our Lady of Guadalupe and Tonantzin; Cortina and Murrieta; a soldier bleeding to death in Normandy, Korea and Vietnam; the son of a culture and a violated treaty; the mariachi, Rivera, Siqueiros, *corridos*, El Cid.

Luis Valdez is the one who gave ideological direction to the Chicano identity when he declared that the Chicano heritage was not rooted in the Spanish component, but in the indigenous, working class component. The Chicano position on mixed blood was that Anglo-American racism that re-

fused to integrate Mexicans after 1848 encouraged lighter-skinned Mexicans to identify themselves as Spaniards, and that others sought to differentiate themselves racially from blacks and Amerinds.

Following this ideological line, Chicano student groups met in the summer of 1969 in Denver, Colorado and proclaimed the Spiritual Plan of Aztlán, which contained their proposal for their group identity. “Most of us know we are not European simply by looking in the mirror...the shape of the eyes, the curve of the nose, the color of skin, the texture of hair; these things belong to another time, another people. Together with a million little stubborn mannerisms, beliefs, myths, superstitions, words, thoughts...they fill our Spanish life with Indian contradictions. It is not enough to say we suffer an identity crisis, be-



cause that crisis has been our way of life for the last five centuries.”<sup>7</sup>

They assume the predominantly indigenous component of which Bonfil speaks. They rectify the position vis-à-vis mixed blood that encouraged lighter-skinned Mexicans to identify themselves as Spanish and that others, in an attempt to “whiten themselves,” sought to differentiate themselves racially from blacks and Amerinds. “Before the world, before all of North America, before all our brothers in the Bronze Continent, We are a Nation. We are a Union of free pueblos, We are Aztlán. We are free and sovereign to determine those tasks which are justly called for by our house, our land, the sweat of our brows and by our hearts. Aztlán belongs to those who plant the

seeds, water the fields and gather the crops, and not to the foreign Europeans. We do not recognize capricious frontiers on the Bronze Continent.”<sup>8</sup> The last point in the plan refers to the aim of achieving an autonomous nation, culturally, socially, economically and politically free, which would make its own decisions about the use of land, taxes, using its people for war, the promotion of justice and the profit from the fruit of their labor.

By including power relations in ethnic relations and demanding autonomy and self-control over their institutions, at the same time that it shared some things with the dominant society, such as the use of English alongside Spanish, the Spiritual Plan of Aztlán’s pronouncement of what Chicanos con-

sidered to be their true identity was ahead of its time because it proposed a community structured by what today is known as the model of pluralist cultural policies. **MM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Erik Erickson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, Inc., 1968).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>3</sup> Max Weber, *Economía y Sociedad* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1984), p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> Carlos Muñoz, Jr., *Youth, Identity and Power: The Chicano Movement* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1991), p. 283.

<sup>6</sup> Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *México profundo: una civilización negada* (Mexico City: Editorial Grijalbo, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Luis Valdez quoted in Muñoz, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> Jack Forbes, *Aztecas del Norte: Chicanos of Aztlán* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Premier Books, 1973), p. 174.