The Roots of Latino Urban Agency

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The focus of this volume has been on cities where Latinos have, throughout the twentieth century, busied themselves in establishing their cultural, social, economic, and political roots. Indeed, Latinos have, especially after WWII, engaged in politics in their respective urban spaces, struggling to shape those spaces to their needs. Continuing into the twenty-first century, this process is now occurring in innumerable smaller urban areas as the Latino diaspora spreads across the United States.

This particularly local and provincial process made these communities both invisible and diverse. Ironically, because of their different historical legacy, as opposed to European immigrants, Latinos have remained insulated and invisible to mainstream America, which continues to see Latinos as migrant workers or simply as immigrants. The diversity springs from the varied and diverse circumstances they found themselves in from East Los Angeles to the Mission District in San Francisco, to Chicago, to Miami, to the West side of San Antonio and many other urban realities. Added to these multiple circumstances, the multiple national origins that make up the Latino community creates one of the most diverse and yet identifiable communities in America. Moreover, it has been difficult to generalize about Latino politics because Latinos, as pointed out above, may arguably be the most heterogeneous, or diverse, of all other cognizable ethnic or racial groups in the United States. Today, Latinos come from about two dozen different nations, each of which has its own history, economy, and social
and political systems. Each group has had different patterns of migration and encountered different experiences in the United States. Furthermore, national origins and generations are major lines of diversity among the Latino community. As the global economy engulfs the hemisphere, this diaspora of Latinos across North America has not only continued but intensified in its diversity.

While there is considerable disagreement as to whether there is a single Latino “community” in the United States, the reality of a Latino community is constantly validated as the government, the economic sector, and the media continue to refer to and take action with regard to a group called Latino or Hispanic. Also contributing to the unity of these groups are the combined efforts and activities in politics, as well as generally increasing levels of interaction among them and a heightened awareness of each other. Stated one way, it seems that politics is shaping the contours of what one identifies as Latino.

However, this volume began with the premise that one cannot begin to understand Latino politics without going to its urban roots. The aim of this book, then, has been to explain the multiple and overlapping forms of Latino urban agency in five major cities in the United States: Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Miami, and San Antonio. Stated another way, the essays in this volume explore the struggle of Latinos to overcome barriers to full participation and political incorporation. Indeed, through this discussion of struggle, we can see how the Latino community has had to improvise in order to gain inclusion. While not all of the case studies have a happy ending, they tell a story of process, a process that ultimately goes beyond this volume.

Our goal in this anthology is to begin the first steps towards a more systematic approach to understanding what we consider the roots of Latino community in the current state of the global economy. Utilizing the various manifestations of urban agency, the volume focuses on the political activities that have occurred in the local communities where the most significant numbers of Latinos reside; this is where much of the action has taken place and will continue to do so. Certainly this can be seen in the large metropolitan areas, which have large populations of Latinos. As Latinos increasingly disperse throughout the United States in significant numbers, more political activity will occur at the local level as Latinos press for increased representation and responsiveness to their policy needs. Latinos will be even more involved as influential players in the debates over these policies, and their inclusion will mean that the
policies that do emerge will be more representative of the population of this country.

It would be difficult for Latinos to change the American political system (the basis of most xenophobic fears), including its entire apparatus—its philosophies, its institutions, its operating principles, its organizations, and its processes—and there is little evidence that this is desired by Latinos. Indeed, there is also little evidence that radical changes of any sort will occur in US politics simply due to the increase in participation by Latinos, women, or any other group. Moreover, the incorporation of people who are often distinctive in their appearance (and perhaps also in various aspects of their behavior) could lay the basis for an open system, making it more accessible to a wider spectrum of citizens of the United States. Regardless of outcome, we are witnessing a more culturally inclusive process where different cultural groups, as well as a greater range of other demographic characteristics, such as gender, economic class, and occupation are having an impact on the system. As this process becomes more evident, the public agenda will reflect additional policy issues related to Latino culture and to immigration from Latin America. The most significant question that this volume does not, could not, address but is of profound significance is that of class. If class, as Rodolfo Rosales points in his study of San Antonio, is the door to political inclusion, will it limit the potential of Latino urban agency as defined in this volume? ³

What we have suggested is that Latino influence can best be measured at the local level through what we call Latino urban agency; that is, the power of community to develop and achieve creative goals, including social and political change, within their social environment. We begin our examination with Ralph Armbruster-Sandoval’s study of Latinos in Los Angeles. Armbruster-Sandoval examines the past history of the multi-racial coalitions of the Left, a tradition that continues in the 1990s and beyond. He suggests that Latino agency can manifest itself in four different forms: community leadership; a grassroots movement manifesting itself in cultural production; the intersection of labor organizing with Latino politics; and building coalitions with members of other racial and ethnic groups.

Richard DeLeon’s “The Rebirth of Latino Urban Agency in San Francisco,” Chapter Three, examined the Latinos of Mission District in San Francisco. In the Mission District the Latino community finds itself not as an isolated community but as a community immersed in reality with other communities who find themselves facing the same destruction of community by “progress.” As DeLeon has pointed out in his book, Left Coast City;³ San
Francisco in general, including the Mission District has been a story of communities that have successfully put development under siege. The story of the Mission District is a more detailed analysis of this conflict between development and community. While not ignoring or omitting the Latino community from his analysis, DeLeon has placed the Latino community’s politics in the broader context of geography and urban history. His story is of the most successful process of political incorporation of the Latino community into the larger urban picture.

Melissa R. Michelson’s “The Fight for School Equity in Chicago’s Latino Neighborhoods,” Chapter Four, examines Latino urban agency through leadership and in the electoral context, specifically redistricting. She finds that Latino urban agency in Chicago hinges on the ability of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans to answer the ethnic cue mentioned in Manzano and Vega’s chapter by looking to certain leaders for guidance and mobilizing for inclusion through redistricting and supporting specific candidates. Because of Chicago’s industrial base it has been a major “port of entry” for Mexican immigrants throughout the twentieth century. Hence, it seems culture is carried directly from the small towns in Mexico to Chicago’s neighborhoods while in San Antonio; there is more of an integration of cultures, Tejano and Mexicano. Thus, culture drives the politics in a much more profound manner in Chicago than in San Antonio, resulting in increased importance of ethnic cues in Chicago.

Montforti, Flores, and Moreno’s chapter on “Manny Diaz and the Rise and Fall of the Miami Renaissance,” discusses Mayor Diaz’s leadership and his ability to craft a political machine made up of minority developers to change the face of Miami’s urban landscape. Similar to DeLeon’s chapter, we see how Latino people construct their “political agency” in the process of engaging a city in the midst of change.

In “I Don’t See Color, I Just Vote for the Best Candidate,” Manzano and Vega examine the way in which Latinos and whites negotiated political power in the electoral arena. The authors argue that ethnic group identity is salient in the electoral process. Manzano and Vega’s particular argument is that electoral contexts, specifically campaign mobilization, are the trigger for calling forth ethnic group identity. They conclude that Latino candidates, despite living in an urban city where minority presence does not directly translate into political empowerment of the group, face barriers with ethnic groups who display dissimilar backgrounds from them. An ethnic electoral cue is a necessary but not sufficient condition for an application of an ethnic group identity to a political choice. An underlying
dynamic in their study is that ethnic bloc voting seems to work against the Latino community in San Antonio because of their dominance in numbers and concomitant lack of political and economic resources.

In this anthology we have suggested that Latino political influence can best be measured in urban cities (i.e. in cities where Latinos have mobilized to gain political incorporation in different ways). As each of the case studies suggest, regardless of the urban regime, Latino urban agency manifests itself in many forms; that is, through leadership, grassroots (collective) organizing, through coalition building, legal challenges, networks, lobbying, appointments, and in mobilizing the electorate. Further, with the demographic changes that are occurring in dramatic fashion and a presidential election where Latinos are playing an important role, a national presence is inevitable. The question then is in what form national political presence will manifest itself. It is a major premise in this anthology that the roots of the emerging presence are to be found in the urban areas.

The objective, then, in this volume has been to show how Latinos have mobilized to gain political incorporation in their respective communities. One of the major outcomes has been that the diversity of political and cultural experiences found in the contributions to this volume would seem to undermine any clear path to a national political agenda (i.e., a Latino Agenda). While there are some similarities to the experiences of the European immigrant groups in the nineteenth century, the major differences are the pervasive role of race and the profound proximity of Mexico and the rest of Latin America. Perhaps, Samuel Huntington in a perverse sense is correct about the “Mexican Problem.” While assimilation and acculturation certainly has occurred and is occurring, today, it is a two way street.

First, there is the common language tie of most Latino communities that is indeed impacting schools and their curriculums and as Michelson shows, is impacting politics. Second, there is the collective behavior born out of the indigenous cultures that however much subjugated have provided a cultural base in the experience of most Latinas and Latinos. Certainly this is borne out in the various studies presented here. While, the historical status of Latinos, in particular Mexicans in the Southwest, as incorporated citizens of a territory taken in the war with Mexico, has complicated the definition of Latinos in general, in the twenty-first century, this historical factor is lost on most. Indeed, even the concept of immigrant is blurred as Latino communities continue to grow in the urban areas and as they continue to gain political incorporation.
In conclusion, what we have found in the various essays in this volume is that the national political status of the Latino community, which seems inevitable today, will certainly be defined in ways that are different from most other groups that have gained a national presence, including the African American community and the various ethnic groups in this nation’s political history. These essays provide a window to the incredible change occurring on the ground. What does this say about Latino politics? What can we project about Latinos in American politics? At worst, it forebodes a hopelessly fragmented political base, unmanageable in political terms. At best, it represents the best of the American ideal of diversity and democracy. This view would follow the Alexis de Tocqueville view that democracy works best through associational activity at the local level. What we do know is the diversity found on the ground combined with some lasting common characteristics, historical, cultural, and linguistic, complicates any effort to predict the future of Latino politics.

What we set out to do, however, and feel we have successfully done, is analyze the roots of the Latino political presence (agency) in the United States. To that objective we invited and received five diverse, but excellent pictures of that agency in five major US cities. This by no means captures the very complex and tumultuous entry of Latinos into US politics, but the different contributions do present excellent analyses of how the various Latino communities have mobilized and impacted their political environment. How will this translate into a national politics for the Latino community? Some questions that we can raise are what kinds of issues will serve as mobilizing issues for the Latino community? Will it be immigration? Will it be education? Or will this translate via the social issues confronting the various Latino communities into a broader agenda reflecting other groups in society with a common concern for a social agenda, (e.g., the African American community, the various white, working-class communities, the very diverse Asian communities, etc). Certainly social issues will be paramount in mobilizing the various communities.

Finally, given the election of the first African American President of the United States, the economic conditions that the United States is currently facing, and the social conditions that it will most certainly leave in its wake, the social agenda that will most certainly emerge from this process may be the historical juncture where a broader politics brings together the various ethnic, racial, and working class communities in changing the old political equation in electoral politics of white, then black, and sometimes “other.” But while there is an emerging successful Latino Middle Class intensely
Conclusion

involved in its own individualistic success, a social agenda will most certainly emerge as the various Latino urban communities continue to struggle for incorporation which is based on social issues. What we can project is that because of the profound roots of Latino politics in community, and to the dismay of many xenophobes, Latino politics is changing and will change the political expectations that we have of government from the local to the state to the national. There is an old joke that if you put ten Latinos in a room you will come out with ten organizations. The hidden truth in that joke is that the collective approach by Latinos that is implied by political incorporation is that Latinos will certainly play a major role in the twenty-first century global environment in addressing the disastrous impact that global forces have had on all communities.

Endnotes

1. Indeed, the invisibility goes back to the 1960s when Octavio Romano V, among other pioneering Chicano intellectuals, challenged the Social Science treatment of Chicanos in the following manner: “Suppose that you are a traveler from outer space. You land on Earth. Everything has been devastated by a final war. You wander about…(and) you find a trap door leading into the ground…(where) you find an underground library. Curious, you pull a book down from the shelf. The book you select is about Mexican-Americans, written by a social scientist. You begin to read. Interesting. Strange. Intrigued, you read more about Mexican-Americans, more books by social scientists. By the time you finish reading these books you have come to two conclusions: Earthlings used social science to ‘explain’ history, and Mexican-Americans had virtually no history to speak of, trapped as they were in their isolated Traditional Culture, an ahistorical process to begin with.” The original quote comes from Romano’s article “The Anthropology and Sociology of the Mexican-Americans: The Distortion of Mexican-American History.” Written in 1968 in El Grito: A Journal of Mexican American Thought, and quoted by Salomon R. Baldenegro in “Scholar Gave Chicano Movement Intellectual Footing,” Tucson Citizen, March 18, 2005. Romano goes on to challenge the narrow definition of who a Chicana/Chicano is by arguing that Chicanos were more than migrant workers.

