Shelby Lydon

SPAN 380

Andrade

May 3 2013

Chicano movement

In the early 1960’s into the late 1970’s, movements were being created in the United Stated by the so called minorities of the time, acting on behalf of their civil rights which had been mostly ignored or denied at the time. With the spark of the African American civil liberties progression, the latino people took a similar approach in order to bring to light the injustices that had been done to them during the same time. Latino people, or Chicanos as they came to call themselves, had previously fought for their rights in a more submissive, underacknowledged manner, but with the rise of civil rights movements, the younger generations initiated a new approach which involved a great deal of physical action, organization, and unyielding fervor.

Leading up to the time at which Mexican Americans began referring to themselves predominantly as Chicano, the United States was undergoing a transformation of civil liberties and political action in the forms of strikes, rallies, and often times aggressive social movements by all involving parties. In 1960, the population of people who identified themselves as Mexican was little under 4 million, most of which resided in the Southwest, mainly Texas and California. At the time, the number of illegal immigrants from Mexico was around 4 times greater than that of people who came to the U.S. legally. Recently, the number of Latinos working in the labor fields actually declined from around 42 percent to 30, which indicates that instead of attributing themselves to hard-labor jobs, they were moving into higher-educated positions. In fact, the number of Spanish speaking peoples who gained a high school education in the fifties increased significantly by nearly 75%. However, with that being said, education, along with occupation and income proved to be a continuing problem for Mexicanos during the time; they as a people were at the bottom of all three categories in comparison to the majority of Anglos. While education progressed slightly, the majority of Mexican Americans still found themselves working in secondary labor fields, working as unskilled workers in low-wage jobs; the unemployment for Mexicans was twice as high as for Anglos during the time. Many Spanish speaking populations, specifically in Texas, were found to be poor or below the poverty level of America; much of the scrutiny was due in part to discrimination based on class, religion and race. Due in part to the language barrier between Spanish speakers and non-Spanish speakers, many Mexicanos found themselves at the bottom of the workforce, earning the lowest wages out of all workers.

The Chicano people who were becoming the targets for oppression and felt the heaviest burden of discrimination were the children of migrant workers; often these children were born to illegal immigrants who solidified the citizenship for their children to provide a better life. While many Chicanos had been living in the countryside, more and more people moved to bigger cities where jobs were easier to find. However, traditional families began to break down with this move as children were introduced to a life that was very different from their parents; this clash often separated families internally. As a result, pachuco gangs were formed out of the young Chicano youth in the 40’s and 50’s, and they were caught between the traditional values of their parents and the denial of basic rights by Anglo society. Through the eyes of the society that judged and denied them, Chicano people, farmworkers particularly, were seen as stupid, ignorant and dirty and many Chicano people were unable to recognize any greatness in themselves because of this outward discrimination. To be Mexican was a burden .At the same time, these pachuco youths sparked a great defiance through an extreme exaggeration of their identity, dressing in unusual clothes for the time, developed their own form of slang, and the occasional acquirement of tattoos. These kids were almost liberating to the youths who watched the pachuco grow, and while the influence may have been negative, it did stimulate a sense of pride in oneself and in people similarly.

With the onslaught of the of the Cold War in which Mexican Americans fought and often died for their new home, the United States, discrimination began to fade and overt racism fell significantly. The black civil rights movement had a huge impact on society in America and on others who were facing similar discrimination issues and sparked significant mobility within other minorities at home in the states. The Chicano movement began with a number of organized people who were rooted in barrios, schools, and prisons, ranging in radicalism. Initially, movements had started with farmworkers and industrial workers in the early 1930s, however those efforts were halted by an inability to organize properly the farmworkers of the area and also because of the Bracero Program, which called for the importation of temporary contract laborers from Mexico to the United States. The constant influx of people provided a unique situation in which immigration numbers skyrocketed; people living on the border of Mexico and the United States gained external dependence. Also due to the number of immigrants, the standard of living in those border areas rose and new opportunities were being provided in job markets nearby. Upper- and middle-class Mexican frontiersmen gained substantial benefits from the rise in cross-border interaction.

Even though the social conditions in the United States were blatantly unhealthy and unfair, Mexican people were still recognizing the opportunities America could provide to them and so they stayed, instead of returning to Mexico like many had originally planned . After World War II, the Mexican middle class bubbled with new intensity, establishing a steady interest as well as ability to take political action to a new level. Action groups were being created in Mexican neighborhoods like the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA), and the Viva Kennedy movement which was largely responsible to Kennedy’s election in 1960. These groups, unlike other organized parties before them, now had the power and the ability to call for political action. Following in the footsteps of the civil rights movements of Martin Luther King Jr., Chicano people rose themselves and worked to unite in a way that had previously been impossible to coordinate. Education was becoming an even larger issue now among the youth, and was at the forefront of the fight for civil rights. For Latino kids, high drop out rates, segregation, poorly cared for schools, and a lack of Mexican American teachers in the field of education are issues that they fought for and are continuing to fight for today. The middle class and lower class Chicano youths were becoming the leaders of the Chicano movement, taking action in schools and in their neighborhoods to bring to light everything that they were being denied. Teenagers worked to legitimize their work within education reform by involving politicians like Robert Kennedy in order to gain support and increase members for the cause.

Today, Mexican Americans, or Chicanos, are living lives that seem to have improved over the last fifty years in some ways. I believe it is a matter of perspective and location; some Mexican people living in Texas or New Mexico may be facing greater or lesser problems than those living in California. From what I have seen, many Latino people living in my area congregate themselves in one area, their own communities; if this is their own decision or something that they had little choice in deciding. I still see laborers in agriculture fields who are dominantly dark skinned, starting at the wee hours of the morning. Schools that I have volunteered for have a higher number of African American and Mexican children than Anglo; Anglo kids are outnumbered around 5 to 1. What I’ve seen from these school, from the kids, from their educators, from their teachers, and in their neighborhoods is both good and bad. I feel that these kids are being given a number of choices now that they may never have been presented with forty years ago; simultaneously, I can see that many of these kids are not held to a higher standard like their caucasian peers. In my own academic setting, I see a great deal of Latino youth my age attending higher education facilities, and to me I see that as a major improvement. Politically, there is still a lacking of Latino involvement, and I know that there are still changes that need to be made. However, I feel that if the progress that the youths of the lower to middle classes made in the sixties is any indication of what is possible, there can only be more progress now.

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