Marginalization, Americanization, and Organization of Mexican Americans from the1840s to the 1940s

Introduction

Throughout the history of Mexican-Americans, powerful and numerous elements of the dominant Anglo-American populace have attempted to incorporate Mexicans into the dominant US culture while simultaneously working to delegitimize and marginalize the Mexican identity and culture. When US leaders and citizens have attempted to incorporate Mexican-American it was largely done in a marginalizing manner. For example, making the argument that their acceptance should rest on their status as temporary foreign workers, or that their inclusion should be contingent on "Americanization" a process in which they are forced to adopt the dominant values of America as decided by Anglo-Americans. Overall, the objective has largely appeared to be that of molding Mexican-Americans into useful and productive second-class citizens as a way of making their inclusion acceptable or desirable, rather than viewing them as equal citizens from the get-go on the basis of their humanity. When Mexican-Americans have demanded to be treated as equal citizens, there has almost always been pushback from those who fear they will steal jobs from Anglo-Americans, or from those who viewed Mexican-Americans through a racially prejudiced lens. Although there have been many tactics used by Mexican-Americans in a push for equal rights and respect as US citizens, one of the most effective throughout the decades has been the formation of a common culture which allowed Mexican-Americans to embrace their identities in an empowering manner, and to support each other through tight-knit communities of mutual-aid and activism. This strategy resists attempts by the dominant culture to force confirmation on unfair terms. I will attempt to show the effective and admirable resilience of the Mexican-American community throughout this essay by highlighting historical periods in which there were attacks on the Mexican and Mexican-American cultural identity, attempts of forced assimilation by the dominant culture, and efforts within the community to organize and secure better socioeconomic and political prospects as US citizens.

Integration of the Mexican People as Citizens of the US after the Mexican American War

The genesis of a sizable Mexican-American culture within the US can be traced back to the Mexican American War, a war of conquest which then-Senator Abraham Lincoln argued against, and it's consequences. Perhaps surprisingly, the first members of the Mexican-American community did not cross the border to get into the United States. The border crossed them after the US emerged from the war victorious and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was ratified on February 2, 1848. Approximately 1/3 of the Mexican Republic's territory was conceded to the US in this agreement, including the states now known as California, New Mexico, and Texas. The treaty stated that Mexican citizens residing in these territories "shall be free to continue where they now reside, or to remove at any time to the Mexican Republic." Further, that "those who shall prefer to remain in the said territories may either retain the title and rights of Mexican

citizens or acquire those of the citizens of the United States"(Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo). If neither option were declared within one year, Mexican citizens would be naturalized as citizens of the United States by default.

Despite the clear implications of the rights and respect that the title of US citizen entailed, Mexican-Americans faced many challenges during their initial incorporation into the United States. The truth is that many, if not a majority in America at the time, did not want the people who already resided within these lands as fellow citizens, but rather wanted the land itself. A quote from a sitting US Senator during the time of annexation bluntly states:

> we do not want the people of Mexico, either as citizens or subjects. All we want is a portion of territory, which they nominally hold, generally uninhabited, or, when inhabited at all, sparsely so, and with a population, which would soon recede, or identify itself with ours (Lewis Cass).

While only the voice of one Senator, his statements provide a good portrait of the prejudiced tone that permeated US leadership and culture at the time, as well as the expectation that Mexicans either leave or assimilate. Many Americans were very excited by the economic opportunity and the potential glory associated with the settling of "new" lands. Views of the Mexican people, however, tended to be far more negative. Mexicans were often characterized as "savage, degenerate, half-civilized, and barbarous," and without basis were charged with "committing massacres and atrocities"(Arnoldo de León). Historian David Gutiérrez writes that "the bitterness and hatred towards Mexicans stimulated by [the] recent war in many ways intensified Anglo-Americans' hostility towards 'Mexicans'-including those who, at least in theory, had become members of American society"(Gutiérrez).

A rapid influx of Anglo-American and European immigrants overwhelmed the nearly 100,000 ethnic Mexicans who populated these lands and created numerous problems for the newly marginalized community (Gutiérrez). Unfortunately, negative stereotypes carried very real practical problems for the new citizens. Perhaps the most concrete and painfully visible of these problems was the violence that Mexican-Americans faced as they rapidly became a minority in the Americanized Southwest. Though only 547 recorded cases survive today, thousands of Mexicans were murdered by racially fueled mobs from 1848 to 1928 (Carrigan). Mexican Americans also faced serious socio-economic losses. Mexican Americans "experienced vast structural displacement as the local economy shifted rapidly from a pastoral one, […]to a capitalist one"(Gutiérrez). Many Mexican Americans had been employed by the Mexican elite as "blacksmiths, harness and saddle makers, leather workers, vaqueros," and other skilled labor jobs (Gutiérrez). With the end of an economy heavily built on ranching and farming, many Mexicans saw this work disappear and were forced to accept unskilled occupations which offered lower wages. In the eyes of many Anglo-Americans, this served as further "proof" of the false perceptions that Mexican Americans were a lower class of people. This establishment of the

Mexican people as a second class of citizen in the eyes of Anglo-Americans also led to economic disadvantages at the hands of employers, including a blatantly racist "dual wage" system, in which Mexican Americans were consistently paid less than their Anglo-American counterparts, based solely on their ethnicity and skin color. It is clear that although Mexicans were promised US citizenship, over time they were increasingly denied the benefits we would associate with this title.

While the economic displacement, violence, and racial prejudice against Mexican Americans caused many hardships for the community, it also began to foster a sense of ethnic awareness in the Spanish speaking communities of the now-American Southwest which had not existed before. The Mexican population had previously seen itself as divided by class or geographic origin, yet Gutiérrez writes that "by the 1870s scattered evidence indicates that Mexican Americans in various locales had begun to forge an affirmative sense of themselves as an ethnic minority of a larger society"(Gutiérrez). The formation of ethnic unity and communities of solidarity would become essential for the survival of the Mexican-American culture, and for the fight towards an improved socioeconomic reality for Mexican Americans.

Barrios provide an example of the community as a place for preservation and solidarity of the Mexican American culture. Gutiérrez reports that these isolated neighborhoods, although unfortunately highly reflective of the ethnic groups eroding socioeconomic status, "functioned as sanctuaries from the bewildering changes occurring around them." While it is unfortunate for a people to be relegated to isolated neighborhoods, barrios provided the safety and privacy which is necessary to a people in order to grow as a community.

Another example was the creation of *mutualistas*, or "mutual-aid associations". These associations "provided the working class and poor with a broad range of benefits and services they otherwise could not afford" (Gutiérrez). By working together and cooperatively pooling resources, members of these communities were able to support each other financially and were also able to assist each other in times of crisis- whether the nature of that crisis was family, health, or otherwise.

While there were other reactions within the community against the American discrimination, ranging from retaliated violence to emigration back to Mexico (although this became less frequent during the Mexican Revolution), none proved to be as effective as this formation of community. Leaving for Mexico may have been good for individuals, but did not help the budding Mexican American community struggling north of the border. Violence or retaliation against Anglo-Americans, justified or not, served to flare tensions and reinforce negative stereotypes against Mexican-Americans. In developing an ethnic awareness and sticking together in isolated areas, the Mexican-American community was able to preserve its culture and help each other through what was arguably the most volatile and marginalizing stage of Mexican American integration into US culture.

Increased Immigration of Mexicans Into the US and Efforts of Americanization

Following the beginning of the Mexican Revolution in 1910, there was a rapid increase [in] immigration to the US by Mexicans. Historian Vicki Ruiz writes that between the years "1910-1930, Mexican immigration increased by at least 300 percent," and by 1930 the population of Mexicans living in the US had risen to 1.5 million (Ruiz). With such a large influx came a wide array of responses from Anglo-Americans, resulting in three major groups. The first was the Restrictionists, comprised mainly of labor workers and nativists, who sought to restrict nearly all immigration from Mexico. Ruiz writes that this group was perhaps the most threatened as well the most vocal on the topic and that they "viewed Mexican immigrants as cheap labor who would compete with 'American' workers"(Ruiz). The second camp consisted primarily of employers, who argued for unrestricted immigration, mostly for access to cheap labor that could fill the vacuum of workers created by World War I. The third group was the "Americanists" who, as Ruiz writes, fought to guarantee the "Americanization of the migrants [in order] to ensure their cultural allegiance to the United States after arrival" (Ruiz).

The Americanists first won power in California with the election of a progressive governor, Hiram Johnson, in 1910. By 1913, a permanent commission of Immigration and Housing was established, and in 1915, the Home Teacher Act was passed. These acts initiated the investigation of the living and working conditions of immigrant workers in the state and asked schools to teach English, core American values, household duties, functions of the government, and other subjects aimed at Americanizing immigrants (Ruiz). The program took a new step in the 1920s, however, when it attempted to target the women of the households.

In the eyes of Americanists, Ruiz reports that "Mexican women were seen as the individuals primarily responsible for the transmission of values in the home" the logic being that "if the Mexican female adopted American values, the rest of her family would certainly follow suit"(Ruiz). Another perspective, however, was that this program aimed to prepare a section of the Mexican-American population to serve as second class citizens in the economy. Ruiz asserts writes that in the realm of policymaking "Mexican women were seen as prime targets for meeting the labor need for domestic servants, seamstresses, laundresses, and service workers in the Southwest"(Ruiz). Mexican women were taught to wash, sew, cook, budget, and mother happily and efficiently, and in school, girls were taught lessons that would contain propaganda, such as the idea that Mexican immigrants were inherently good at trades such as sewing or cooking (Ruiz).

These efforts in Americanization largely failed, in large part due to the Mexican-American populations' commitment to community and culture. Mexican-Americans were still deeply loyal to their nation of origin, with one study conducted in 1923 showing that "55 percent of Mexican immigrants surveyed considered it their duty to remain politically loyal to Mexico, while almost all the rest refused to answer the question"(Ruiz). In addition, due to the population sticking

together in large Barrios, teachers were overwhelmed in their attempts to "educate" all of the households in any given district, as resources would be spread thin. By remaining loyal to their common culture and identity as Mexicans, Mexican-Americans resisted Anglo-American's efforts to assimilate their community into the role of second-class citizens who would collectively serve a function similar to that of servants for the broader culture.

Mexican Americans as Scapegoats for the Great Depression and Civil Rights Activism

Americanization efforts had also ended in large part due to the economic stresses and woes of the Great Depression. Unfortunately, while efforts at Americanization ended, Herbert Hoover ran a scapegoat campaign against Mexican Americans during the economic crisis. This created a sentiment within elements of the nation that if Mexican-Americans were kicked out, there would be enough jobs for Anglo-Americans. Industries began to sweep Mexican Americans out of the workforce to be replaced by Anglo-Americans. In a letter asking the Mexican government for assistance, one Mexican-American writes:

> as far as industries, there is a wire factory and a brick factory. The wire factory has not employed a single Mexican in years[.]The brick factory was our only option, and […]it laid off all Mexicans in order to hire North Americans and Europeans instead. (Situations of Mexicans in Rockdale, Illinois to the Chicago Mexican Consulate, 30 December 1930)

In addition to discrimination in the private sector, there was also discrimination in the public. Historian Zaragosa Vargas writes that "Mexicans were barred from public work projects," and discriminatory laws were passed, such as the California Alien Labor Act which "eliminated the remaining Mexicans on state construction work gangs" and served to "crystallize the exclusion of Mexicans from 'white jobs'" (218, The Mexican American Struggle for Labor). As Mexican Americans lost their jobs and began to rely more on relief, counties became overwhelmed, and a massive deportation campaign known as repartition began. Vargas reports that "a total of 345,839 Mexicans were repatriated or deported back to Mexico from 1930 to 1935" (Vargas).

In response, Mexican Americans once again stuck together, forming labor unions and organizations such as LULAC and El Congreso. Many of these organizations found their start from *Mutualistas*, but all pushed for greater political and economic rights for Mexican-Americans. Some, such as El Congreso, fought directly for working-class Mexican-Americans. One leader and activist, Luisa Moreno argued that "[Mexican-Americans] are not aliens. They have contributed their endurance, sacrifices, youth, and labor to the Southwest." This marked a new push for citizenship on the basis that their community had worked and sacrificed for America, and deserved to finally be accepted as Americans. Another organization, LULAC, was more exclusive than others but was very effective in securing rights for Mexican-Americans. Gutiérrez writes that LULAC created an organization that focused on a "political agenda that focused on citizenship training and naturalization of "foreign-born

Mexicans”(Gutiérrez). While LULAC has elements of assimilation in it (hence being slightly more exclusive than other organizations), it was in an attempt to gain more political influence for their organization and for their people, and ultimately was controlled by the marginalized community itself, a less problematic prospect than being handed down values by the dominant culture. Both organizations were dedicated to celebrating their ethnic pride and worked to secure rights for members of their ethnic community, again highlighting the effective strategy of solidarity amongst the Mexican-American community throughout their history in securing a better status in American society.

Wartime America, Zoot-Suiters, and Final Remarks

As Mexican-Americans began to secure more rights and as economic opportunity increased due to World War II, Mexican American youth began to forge their own identity, wearing zoot-suits and going out to jazz clubs, dancing with Mexican Americans, African Americans, and even Anglo Americans. This increase in friendly contact between the youth of different ethnic groups was in large part a consequence of what historian Escobedo writes was a new “wartime vision of an America in which inhabitants claimed one common culture or view of nationhood that touted the importance of the unity of all races and creed”(Escobedo). When Mexican Americans began to leave their segregated neighborhoods, Historian Luis Alvarez reports that Anglo-Americans saw it as the first "collectively established visible and intense network of cross-racial social activity”(Alvarez). However, these developments occurred alongside a continuation of nativist and prejudiced attitudes, and many "zoot-suiters" and other activists were met with retaliation by elements of American society.

Despite efforts to stop Mexican American youth from wearing zoot-suits, ranging from violence to the banning of zoot-suits altogether in some locales altogether (Alvarez). Nonetheless, zoot-suiters persisted in their act of sociocultural activism. While this act of protest may not seem like much on the surface, in reality, it was a collective and visible stand taken by an entire community. In the face of violence, marginalization, and a demand to "Americanize," the Mexican-American youth community stood together and asserted themselves as members of American society. While many older Mexican-Americans did not participate in zoot-suit riots or accept the youthful behavior, some viewing it as radical and even disapproving of the adoption of more individualistic values by the youth, they continued to stand resilient against the persecution and discrimination against the youth in their community.

Time and time again, Mexican-Americans have proven their resilience when faced with forced attempts of assimilation or Americanization by the dominant culture. Since the beginning of marginalization, they have maintained a steadfast ethnic pride and fostered a sense of community that has allowed them to support each other through the worst and most violent phases of integration into American society. By isolating themselves (or rather, by making the most of the isolation forced upon them) in order to preserve their cultural identity and establish

networks of mutual-aid in their community, Mexican-Americans were able to continuously fight for greater social and economic inclusion in American society. Further, they were able to increasingly integrate into American society on their own terms, rather than on the terms forced upon them by the dominant culture which did not have their best interests in mind.

While Mexican-Americans were still not fully accepted by the end of the 1940s, progress in the fight to improve their socioeconomic positions and levels of political inclusion had grown immensely, culminating in their ability to assert their culture and identity outside of isolated barrios, and paving the way for an effective civil rights movement. With a strong and empowering sense of ethnic pride, communal organization, and impressive resilience in the face of violence and discrimination, the Mexican-American community fought for an improved socioeconomic reality in America without the use of violence and made gains so impactful that they are still felt today.

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