

Multiculturalism, Immigration, and Aztlan

by Maria Hsia Chang

One of the standard arguments invoked by those in favor of massive immigration into the United States is that our country is founded on immigrants who have always been successfully assimilated into America's mainstream culture and society. As one commentator put it, "Assimilation evokes the misty past of Ellis Island, through which millions entered, eventually seeing their descendants become as American as George Washington."¹

Nothing more vividly testifies against that romantic faith in America's ability to continuously assimilate new members than the events of October 16, 1994 in Los Angeles. On that day, 70,000 people marched beneath "a sea of Mexican flags" protesting Proposition 187, a referendum measure that would deny many state benefits to illegal immigrants and their children. Two weeks later, more protestors marched down the street, this time carrying an American flag upside down.² Both protests point to a disturbing and rising phenomenon of Chicano separatism in the United States — the product of a complex of forces, among which are multiculturalism and a generous immigration policy combined with a lax border control.

The Problem

Chicanos refer to "people of Mexican descent in the United States" or "Mexican Americans in general."³ Today, there are reasons to believe that Chicanos as a group are unlike previous immigrants in that they are more likely to remain unassimilated and unintegrated, whether by choice or circumstance — resulting in the formation of a separate quasi-nation within the United

States. More than that, there are Chicano political activists who intend to marry cultural separateness with territorial and political self-determination. The more moderate among them aspire to the cultural and political autonomy of "home rule." The radicals seek nothing less than secession from the United States whether to form their own sovereign state or to reunify with Mexico. Those who desire reunification with Mexico are irredentists who seek to reclaim Mexico's "lost" territories in the American Southwest.⁴ Whatever their goals, what animates all of them is the dream of Aztlan.

According to legend, Aztlan was the ancestral homeland of the Aztecs which they left in journeying southward to found Tenochtitlan, the center of their new civilization, which is today's Mexico City. Today, the "Nation of Aztlan" refers to the American southwestern states of California, Arizona, Texas, New Mexico, portions of Nevada, Utah, Colorado, which Chicano nationalists claim were stolen by the United States and must be reconquered (*Reconquista*) and reclaimed for Mexico.⁵ The myth of Aztlan was revived by Chicano political activists in the 1960s as a central symbol of Chicano nationalist ideology. In 1969, at the Chicano National Liberation Youth Conference in Denver, Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales put forth a political document entitled *El Plan de Aztlan*⁶ (Spiritual Plan of Aztlan). The Plan is a clarion call to Mexican-Americans to form a separate Chicano nation:

In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud historical heritage, but also of the brutal "gringo" invasion of our territories, we, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlan from whence came our forefathers ... declare that the call of our blood is ... our inevitable destiny. ... Aztlan 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

Maria Hsia Chang is professor of Political Science at the University of Nevada — Reno. This paper was prepared for delivery at the ASAP! Action Conference sponsored by Population/Environment Balance at Breckenridge, CO, August 6, 1999.

*continent. ...Brotherhood unites us, and love for our brothers makes us a people whose Time has come. ...With our heart in our hands and our hands in the soil, we declare the independence of our mestizo nation. We are a bronze people with a bronze culture. 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 Aztlan.*⁷

How Chicanos are Unlike Previous Immigrants

Brent A. Nelson writing in 1994, observed that in the 1980s America's Southwest had begun to be transformed into a *de facto* nation⁸ with its own culture, history, myth, geography, religion, education and language.⁹ Whatever evidence there is indicates that Chicanos, as a group, are unlike previous waves of immigrants into the United States.

In the first place, many Chicanos do not consider themselves immigrants at all because their people "have been here for 450 years" before the English, French, or Dutch. Before California and the Southwest were seized by the United States, they were the lands of Spain and Mexico. As late as 1780 the Spanish crown laid claim to territories from Florida to California, and on the far side of the Mississippi up to the Great Lakes and the Rockies. Mexico held title to much of Spanish possessions in the United States until the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Mexican-American war in 1848. As a consequence, Mexicans "never accepted the borders drawn up by the 1848 treaty."¹⁰

That history has created among Chicanos a feeling of resentment for being "a conquered people," made part of the United States against their will and by the force of arms.¹¹ Their resentment is amply expressed by *Voz Fronteriza*, a Chicano student publication,¹² which referred to Border Patrol officers killed in the line of duty as "pigs (*migra*)" trying to defend "the false frontier."¹³

Chicanos are also distinct from other immigrant groups because of the geographic proximity of their native country. Their physical proximity to Mexico gives Chicanos "the option of life in both Americas, in two places and in two cultures, something earlier immigrants never had." Geographic proximity and ease of transportation are augmented by the media. Radio and television keep the spoken language alive and current so

that Spanish, unlike the native languages of previous immigrants into the United States, "shows no sign of fading."¹⁴

A result of all that is the failure by Chicanos to be fully assimilated into the larger American society and culture. As Earl Shorris, author of *Latinos: A Biography of the People*, observed: "Latinos have been more resistant to the melting pot than any other group. Their entry *en masse* into the United States will test the limits of the American experiment..."¹⁵ The continuous influx of Mexican immigrants into the United States serves to continuously renew Chicano culture so that their sense of separateness will probably continue "far into the future..."¹⁶

There are other reasons for the failure of Chicano assimilation. Historically, a powerful force for assimilation was upward social mobility — immigrants into the United States became assimilated as they rose in educational achievement and income. But today's post-industrial American economy, with its narrower paths to upward mobility, is making it more difficult for certain groups to improve their socioeconomic circumstances. Unionized factory jobs, which once provided a step up for the second generation of past waves of immigrants, have been disappearing for decades.

Instead of the diamond-shaped economy of industrial America, the modern American economy is shaped like an hourglass. There is a good number of jobs for unskilled people at the bottom, a fair number of jobs for the highly educated at the top, but comparatively few jobs for those in the middle without a college education or special skills. To illustrate, a RAND Corporation study forecasts that 85 percent of California's new jobs will require post-secondary education.

For a variety of reasons, the nationwide high-school dropout rate for Hispanics (the majority of whom are Chicano) is 30 percent — three times the rate for whites and twice the rate for blacks. Paradoxically, the dropout rate for Hispanics born in the United States is even higher than for young immigrants. Among Chicanos, high-school dropout rates actually rise between the second and third generations.

Their low educational achievement accounts for why Chicanos as a group are poor despite being hardworking. In 1996, for the first time, the Hispanic poverty rate began to exceed that of American blacks. In 1995, household income rose for every ethnic group except

Hispanics, for whom it dropped 5 percent. Latinos now make up a quarter of the nation's poor people, and are more than three times as likely to be impoverished than whites. This decline in income has taken place despite high rates of labor-force participation by Latino men, and despite an emerging Latino middle class. In California, where Latinos now approach one-third of the population, their education levels are far lower than those of other immigrants, and they earn about half of what native-born Californians earn. This means that, for the first time in the history of American immigration, hard work is not leading to economic advancement because immigrants in service jobs face unrelenting labor-market pressure from more recently arrived immigrants who are eager to work for less.

The narrowing of the pathways of upward mobility has implications for the children of recent Mexican immigrants. Their ascent into the middle-class mainstream will likely be blocked and they will join children of earlier black and Puerto Rican migrants as part of an expanded multiethnic underclass. Whereas first generation immigrants compare their circumstances to the Mexico that they left — and thereby feel immeasurably better off — their children and grandchildren will compare themselves to other U.S. groups. Given their lower educational achievement and income, that comparison will only lead to feelings of relative deprivation and resentment. They are unlikely to be content as maids, gardeners, or fruit pickers. Many young Latinos in the second and third generations see themselves as locked in irremediable conflict with white society, and are quick to deride successful Chicano students as “wannabes.” For them, to study hard is to “act white” and exhibit group disloyalty.¹⁷

That attitude is part of the Chicano culture of resistance — a culture that actively resists assimilation into mainstream America. That culture is created, reinforced, and maintained by radical Chicano intellectuals, politicians, and the many Chicano Studies programs in U.S. colleges and universities.

As examples, according to its editor, Elizabeth Martinez, the purpose of *Five Hundred Years of Chicano History*, a book used in over 300 schools

throughout the West, is to “celebrate our resistance to being colonized and absorbed by racist empire builders.” The book calls the INS and the Border Patrol “the Gestapo for Mexicans.”¹⁸ For Rodolfo Acuña, author of *Occupied America: The Chicano's Struggle Toward Liberation*, probably the most widely-assigned text in U.S. Chicano Studies programs, the Anglo-American invasion of Mexico was “as vicious as that of Hitler's invasion of Poland and other Central European nations....”¹⁹ The book also includes a map showing “the Mexican republic” in 1822 reaching up into Kansas and Oklahoma, and including within it Utah, Nevada, and everything west and south of there. At a MEChA conference in 1996, Acuña referred to Anglos as Nazis: “Right now you are in the Nazi United States of America.”²⁰

The effect of books such as these is to radicalize young Chicanos. As an example, although Chicano undergraduates at Berkeley lacked any sort of strong ethnic identity before entering college, at Berkeley they became “born again” as Chicanos because of MEChA and Chicano Studies departments.²¹

The strident rhetoric of intellectuals is echoed by some Mexican-American politicians. Former California state senator Art Torres called Proposition 187 “the last gasp of white America” and spoke of “reclaiming” Southern California. The Mexican government also contributes to the Chicano sense of separateness through its recent decision that migrants will not forfeit their Mexican citizenship by becoming U.S. citizens and are allowed to vote in Mexican elections.²²

Multiculturalism and Immigration

All of this is exacerbated by the U.S. government's immigration policy and a new ethic of multiculturalism that has become almost an official dogma in the mass media and in academe. Exponents of multiculturalism maintain that all cultures are equal, and that the United States must accept its destiny as a universal nation, a world nation, in which no one culture — especially European culture — will be dominant. “The ideal of multiculturalism is a nation which has no core culture, no ethnic core, no center other than a powerful state apparatus.”²³

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The social ethic of multiculturalism is actively supported by an official government policy of “corporate pluralism” which militates against America’s earlier ideal of assimilation. According to Gunnar Myrdal, “corporate pluralism” refers to a society where racial and ethnic entities are accorded formal recognition and standing by the state as groups in the national polity, and where political power and economic reward are based on a distributive formula that postulates group rights and defines group membership as an important factor in the outcome for individuals. By replacing individual meritocracy with group rewards, corporate pluralism “strongly discourages assimilation in the conventional sense because if a significant portion of one’s rational interests are likely to be satisfied by emphasis on one’s ethnicity, then one might as well stay within ethnic boundaries and at the same time enjoy the social comforts of being among people of one’s own kind.”²⁴

Corporate pluralism is realized through such government policies as affirmative action, court-ordered busing, and bilingual education. In the case of the latter, by the late 1970s, bilingual education has become “a Hispanic institution.” A bilingual establishment has been formed which “fights for jobs and perks” and is determined to maintain Spanish as both language and culture. Being supported by government laws, that establishment cannot easily be dislodged.²⁵

Conclusion

Chicanos are not the only ethnic groups in the United States who resist assimilation and are geographically concentrated in certain areas and cities. The Cubans in Miami and Chinese in Monterey Park are other examples, but neither group is large enough to practice autonomism or separatism. Chicanos in the Southwest, however, are great in numbers and “are producing spokesmen for ... autonomism, separatism, and even irredentism.”²⁶

Since 1977, INS has apprehended over a million illegals a year, the majority Hispanics; anywhere from 2 to 5 million eluded the INS. By the early 1980s, the number of illegal aliens in the United States, mostly Hispanic, totaled 3 to 12 million. In 1980, the Census Bureau counted 14.6 million Hispanics in the United States, increasing to 15.8 million by 1982, and 17.3 million by 1985 — making America the 5th or 4th largest Spanish-speaking country in the world.²⁷ According to

the 1990 Census, Latin America accounted for 38 percent of America’s foreign-born, well over half of whom were from Mexico. The real percentage is probably higher because illegal aliens avoid the census and most illegals are from Latin America.²⁸

According to a report by the Urban Institute in 1984 entitled *The Fourth Wave: California’s Newest Immigrants*, by the year 2000, 42 percent of Southern California’s residents will be Caucasian, 41 percent Hispanic, 9 percent Asian and 8 percent black. Demographers Leon F. Bouvier and Cary B. Davis in *Immigration and the Future Racial Composition of the United States* expect that, by 2080, Hispanics (more than half Chicano) will constitute 34.1 percent of the total U.S. population, even if immigration were restricted to 2 million entrants a year from all areas of the world and birthrates of Hispanics converge with those of non-Hispanics. In 2080, Hispanics will be either a plurality or a majority of the population in California and Texas at 41.4 percent and 53.5 percent, respectively, assuming an influx of a conservative one million immigrants a year.²⁹

Former Senator Eugene McCarthy, writing in 1987, had warned of a “recolonization.” McCarthy’s warning was sounded five years earlier by a historian of race relations, George Fredrickson. Speaking at a colloquium on race relations in 1982, Fredrickson observed that:

*There are two ways that you can gain territory from another group. One is by conquest. That’s essentially the way we took California from Mexico and ... Texas as well. But what’s going on now may well end up being a kind of recolonization of the Southwest, because the other way you can regain territory is by population infiltration and demographic dominance. ... The United States will be faced with the problem that Canada has been faced with ... and which our system is not prepared to accommodate.*³⁰

Mario Barrera, a faculty member of U.C. Berkeley’s Department of Ethnic Studies, admitted that multiculturalism “would help prepare the ideological climate for an eventual campaign for ethnic regional autonomy.”³¹ In January 1995, El Plan de Aztlan Conference at UC Riverside resolved that “We shall overcome ... by the vote if possible and violence if necessary.”³² The rise of Mexican irredentism as a

serious political movement “awaits only the demographic transformation of the Southwest.”³³ As an article entitled “The Great invasion: Mexico Recovers Its Own” in a 1982 edition of *Excelsior*, Mexico’s leading daily newspaper, put it:

*The territory lost in the 19th century by ... Mexico ... seems to be restoring itself through a humble people who go on settling various zones that once were ours on the old maps. Land, under any concept of possession, ends up in the hands of those who deserve it. ... [The result of this migration is to return the land] to the jurisdiction of Mexico without the firing of a single shot.*³⁴

Multiculturalism and the United States government’s immigration policy have contributed toward the rise of Chicano ethnic separatism within the American Southwest that has all the makings of an incipient Nation of Aztlan.

NOTES

¹ Scott McConnell, “Americans No More?” *National Review*.

² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), pp.19-20.

³ Mario Barrera, *Beyond Aztlan: Ethnic Autonomy in Comparative Perspective* (NY: Praeger, 1988), p.7.

⁴ “It is not clear whether most Chicano nationalists favor independence for Aztlan itself or seek its annexation by Mexico.” Brent A. Nelson, *America Balkanized: Immigration’s Challenge to Government* (Monterey, VA: American Immigration Control Foundation, 1994), pp.31, 26.

⁵ *Reconquista! The Takeover of America* (California Coalition for Immigration Reform, 1997), p.2.

⁶ Barrera, *op. cit.*, p.3.

⁷ <http://www.aztlan.org/planaztl.html>

⁸ Nelson, *op. cit.*, p.27.

⁹ Thomas Weyr, *Hispanic U.S.A.: Breaking the Melting Pot*, (NY: Harper & Row, 1988), p.1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.1, 16, 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.2.

¹² A publication of the Chicano movement, MEChA (*Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan*), founded in 1969.

¹³ McConnell, *op. cit.*, p.35.

¹⁴ Weyr, *op. cit.*, p.6.

¹⁵ McConnell, *op. cit.*, p.33.

¹⁶ Weyr, *op. cit.*, pp.8, 5.

¹⁷ McConnell, *op. cit.*, pp.32, 33.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.35.

¹⁹ Nelson, *op. cit.*, p.31.

²⁰ McConnell, *op. cit.*, pp.33, 34.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.35.

²² *Ibid.*, pp.34, 35.

²³ Nelson, *op. cit.*, p.110.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.12.

²⁵ Weyr, *op. cit.*, p.9.

²⁶ Nelson, *op. cit.*, p.26.

²⁷ Weyr, *op. cit.*, p.3.

²⁸ McConnell, *op. cit.*, p.32.

²⁹ Nelson, *op. cit.*, pp.4, 2-3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.1, 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³² *Reconquista!*, p.1.

³³ Nelson, *op. cit.*, p.32.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.34; McConnell, *op. cit.*, p.30.