

A PERSONAL COMMENT ON ASSIMILATION

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This brief essay consists of my own observations on assimilation and how this issue frequently surfaces as a significant factor in the dynamics of the Chicano community in Houston. Briefly stated, assimilation is the process by which individuals of one ethnic group lose a sense of and an appreciation for their culture by being absorbed into the culture of another. My sensitivity to this process derives from my personal involvement in what is now known as the Chicano movement. This movement began in the late 1960s and seeks not only to improve the standard of living of Chicanos, but also to retain and perpetuate Chicano culture.

The latter goal of the Chicano movement forced me to confront my personality as an assimilated individual and to reconstruct my personal history in order to understand how I had become absorbed into the dominant Anglo-American culture to the sacrifice of my own Mexican-based culture. As a consequence, I began to ask if, in the long run, it was possible for an ethnic group to retain its culture in American society, given the society's strong, assimilative mechanisms. I also became conscious of the way assimilation shaped and influenced the attitudes and viewpoints of Chicanos.

The comments which follow, therefore, are personal reflections and observations about the role of assimilation in the life of the Chicano community in relationship to three important issues: conflict between Chicanos and *mexicanos*, militancy among middle-class Chicanos, and bilingual/bicultural education.

In Houston conflicts between Chicanos and *mexicanos* have occurred most frequently in the junior high schools and among the working class. In the junior high schools, Chicano students verbally and physically taunt the Mexican students. They refer to the Mexican students as *mojos*, a derogatory derivation of the Spanish term *mojados*, which has been translated in English to mean "wet backs." Also numerous physical altercations have involved both groups during and after school.

A survey of working-class Chicanos in Houston was taken in November of 1978 to assess their perceptions of the problems facing the community. It

revealed that a large segment of the Chicano population regards immigration from Mexico as having adverse effects on the community. Chicanos view Mexican nationals as an economic threat and believe that the presence of a large number of Mexicans in their neighborhoods gives them a bad image.

Cultural assimilation into Anglo society is an important factor to consider in explaining why Chicanos feel and act as they do toward *mexicanos*. Those Chicanos involved in conflicts with Mexicans in the junior high schools are, for the most part, second and third generation Americans. They have little or no facility in the Spanish language and little or no awareness of their historical and cultural roots. Although they see themselves as different from the Anglo population, they do not perceive themselves as belonging to the same ethnic group as native Mexicans or as recent immigrants from Mexico. They resent the fact that Anglos put them in the same category as the Mexicans. In the survey, Chicanos who harbor these negative feelings are distinguished from those who do not by the language they speak. These Chicanos are primarily English speakers. The English-speaking Chicanos also feel, as do the junior high students, that Anglos fail to distinguish between Chicanos and *mexicanos* and that this failure leads to misconceptions about them by Anglos.

Assimilation, as revealed by language usage, plays a prominent role in explaining the tension between Chicanos and *mexicanos*. Assimilation leads to the erosion, bastardization, and eventual elimination of Spanish as a spoken language, and consequently it inhibits communication between Chicanos and *mexicanos*. Assimilation lessens the sense of attachment to Mexico as the motherland and orients them towards the society and history of Anglo-Americans. Through assimilation Chicanos internalize the negative attitudes held about the *mexicanos* by members of the dominant society and, consequently, they do not want to be associated with or compared to those who immigrate from Mexico. The working class's negative feelings are reinforced by the perception of Mexican immigrants as competitors for employment. Given the impact that assimilation has upon the actions and attitudes of Chicanos towards Mexicans, the process of assimilation could well be taken as a means of social control because it divides members of the same ethnic group along different cultural lines.

Yet not all assimilated Chicanos feel alienated from Mexican nationals who reside within the United States. Ironically, those Chicanos who are the most outspoken on behalf of Mexican nationals come primarily from the middle class, the most assimilated segment of the Chicano community. Nowhere is this fact more apparent than in the actions of the League of United Latin American Citizens, (LULAC), a middle-class Chicano organization which for years has been the principal voice in favor of assimilation. LULAC has been especially outspoken on the issue of immigration from Mexico. This organization has consistently supported the right of children of undocumented immigrants to an education in the United States; it has opposed the attempt of the United States government to control the flow of immigrants through a

policy of mandatory registration of workers; it has strongly supported civil rights for undocumented Mexican immigrants; and it has lodged forceful protests against the wholesale deportation of Mexican nationals.

Why have some middle-class Chicanos taken such a militant stand on these issues? Historically, leaders of militant and revolutionary movements have often come from the educated middle class and, in this respect, middle-class Chicanos are no exception. Militancy among the assimilated middle class, however, may also be a response to continued discrimination. Educated Chicanos come in contact with Anglos at a level where competition for high-paying occupations is fierce and where the lack of education is not a valid excuse for discrimination. Instead, a more sophisticated pattern of discrimination comes into play, one which is more difficult to attack and almost impossible to eliminate. The assimilated middle-class Chicano may be more militant because he realizes that, despite the fact that he speaks English as well as his Anglo counterpart and that he has obtained a similar education, he continues to bear the brunt of discriminatory practices. In other words, he is aware that assimilation does not automatically translate into parity with Anglos and this realization leads to the development of a militant attitude.

The assimilated, middle-class Chicano may also be more militant than the working-class Chicano because he has more to gain by destroying discriminatory barriers. If successful, the Chicano middle class can more easily perpetuate itself as a class, especially if it is able to transfer middle-class opportunities to its children. The educated middle class is also more aware of the channels and resources which can be used to express frustration. Precisely because these Chicanos are assimilated into Anglo-American culture, they know how to deal more effectively with Houston's power structure. One of the most interesting aspects of middle-class militancy, however, is that it does not always include risk-taking. The same survey which reveals that middle-class Chicanos are more militant in expressing themselves also shows that the middle class is more reluctant than the lower class to go to jail or to engage in confrontation tactics to support their views. This reluctance stems from their belief that society holds within itself the proper channels by which grievances can be remedied. They may also believe that they have more to lose by employing such tactics. Therefore, assimilation is to some degree responsible for fostering militant attitudes but not radical activity among middle-class Chicanos.

Assimilation is also the crux of the problem in bilingual/bicultural education. The issue is not fundamentally pedagogical, but one of assimilation versus culture retention. Some Chicanos want bilingual programs where concepts and skills are taught in both Spanish and English during the first twelve years of school so that the Spanish language can be perpetuated along with values and norms which stress the family, community, group relationships, and strong interpersonal skills. The bilingual programs currently in existence are only transitional ones which are designed to assist Spanish speakers in making the conversion from Spanish to English as quickly as possible. In other words,

the programs are meant to assimilate culturally the Spanish-speaking population into Anglo-American society. From a societal point of view, this approach is logical.

All societies have attempted in one way or another to integrate diverse populations or to assimilate different ethnic groups through the development of a common language. A national language promotes common values, attitudes, loyalty and, consequently, a degree of social order. Therefore American society has a stake in assimilating Chicanos linguistically and culturally. And to a large degree it is succeeding. In 1970, for example, the U.S. Census Bureau reported English as the primary language spoken in the homes of half the Mexican origin population. This figure is somewhat suspect in light of the Census Bureau's admission that it undercounted those with Spanish surnames, most of whom are monolingual in Spanish. But this percentage, nevertheless, indicates that English is the primary language for a large segment of the Chicano population. The fact that a majority of Chicanos in the Houston Independent School District are not enrolled in bilingual education programs further supports this interpretation. In fact, the overwhelming majority of students enrolled in bilingual educational programs are of Mexican birth. Mexicans, and not Chicanos, are the partakers of bilingual education in Houston and in other urban areas with large Mexican immigrant populations. In south Texas, and other areas close to the Mexican border where assimilation is less pronounced, Chicanos as well as Mexican nationals are enrolled in bilingual programs.

The majority of Chicanos, however, reside in urban areas, and most of them are not enrolled in bilingual programs because assimilation into Anglo-American culture has already taken root by the time they start school. Assuming, therefore, that preserving Chicano culture is a desirable goal and that most Chicanos consider the public school system as the institution responsible for obtaining and perpetuating the culture, what strategies can Chicanos devise in order to retain their culture? First of all Chicanos might insist that all Chicano children, regardless of language proficiency, enroll in bilingual programs. This strategy will ensure the perpetuation of the Spanish language and culture not only among the Mexican born students but also among the native born Chicanos. However, it is unrealistic to depend on Anglo-run school districts in Houston, or elsewhere, to pursue this kind of policy without pressure from the federal courts or the state legislature.

In addition, Chicanos can develop plans for the establishment of their own school system which would allow them to control the curriculum of their individual schools. It could possibly be accomplished in one of two ways: by advocating a decentralized school system with a number of semiautonomous smaller districts or by acquiring their own independent school district. Although the policies of the smaller districts would be coordinated with the central district, each would have the authority to develop a curriculum which could meet the needs of a particular ethnic group. A separate Chicano school district in Houston's East End, where a large number of Chicanos live, is especially appealing to some because this sector includes the Houston Ship

Channel area which would give it a firm tax base. At present, neither plan is receiving much attention from Chicanos. Of course, resistance from Anglos would make either option difficult or impossible to implement. Private schools could also serve to maintain the culture, but given the limited economic power of Chicanos, it is unlikely that they could develop private schools on the scale needed to perpetuate the culture.

It is possible for Chicanos to find support from Houston's Anglo business community for implementing a bilingual and bicultural curriculum for the entire twelve years of public school. The large and growing Chicano and Mexican populations in Houston have made this business community aware of the potential market the Spanish-speaking community represents. Currently, there are an estimated five hundred thousand Chicanos in the Harris County area. The business community is beginning to seek ways to reach this market in Spanish. In the process it is discovering that being bilingual gives merchants a way to reach a market which is estimated to have 1.3 billion dollars of potential spending power in the Houston metropolitan area. In the future the business community may support extensive bilingual programs in the public schools as a means of creating a labor force which understands both Chicano and Anglo cultures.

Chicanos also need to examine how other institutions can or ought to play a part in perpetuating culture. For example, the role that the family can have in sustaining Chicano culture has to be assessed. The evidence to date indicates that the Chicano has a difficult time passing on the culture beyond the first and possibly the second generation because the assimilative influence of the public schools and the mass media are stronger than the family's influence, especially in urban areas like Houston.

Chicanos should support the expansion of the Spanish language media, especially television. In Houston the Spanish language media are just now beginning to show signs of entering a period of rapid expansion. Spanish language programming in television has increased to approximately sixteen hours a week. Prior to 1980 it was almost nonexistent. Also, there are efforts underway to bring a Spanish language channel to the Houston area. For almost thirty years there was only one Spanish language radio station in Houston. By 1979 the number had grown to three. The Spanish language media can play an important role in perpetuating culture. The question is whether it will ever become developed enough to compete with the English language media as an assimilative mechanism. Although the potential is there, it has yet to be realized.

The Mexican culture has survived in the United States mainly because of the constant influx of new immigrants from Mexico, but in the future the cultural impact of this immigration will diminish as Mexico's birthrate continues to decline, its economic situation improves, and the need of its people to immigrate lessens. This will not happen in the immediate future, but if and when it does, the Mexican "agents of cultural transmission" will not have the same impact as they do now, and the Chicano population will continue the process of assimilation.

In discussing how assimilation affects Houston's Chicano population is easy to overstate each point. The relationship between Chicanos and Mexicans is not always one of conflict; instead, there are many areas where contact between the two groups is harmonious, cooperative, and strengthened by bonds of kinship and affection. Also, not all middle-class Chicanos are militants. Many middle-class Chicanos in Houston have little or no contact with lower-class Chicanos because they live in predominately Anglo neighborhoods. They may also believe that Chicanos do not have any special or unique problems and a great number of individuals feel that learning English is a necessary prerequisite for upward mobility. For such reasons many Chicanos do not support bilingual education nor do they see any importance in retaining the Spanish language and Mexican culture. Finally, it should not be concluded that assimilation totally eradicates a group's sense of identity. Other ethnic groups in the United States such as the Poles and the Italians retain a sense of their ethnic origins, but for the most part they are Anglicized Poles and Italians because their native cultures and languages no longer exist. Given the proximity of Texas to Mexico and the discrimination that Chicanos continue to experience, the probability is very great that most Chicanos regardless of how assimilated they become, will always retain a sense of their ethnicity. However, if Chicanos, especially those involved in the Chicano movement, want more than just a sense of ethnicity, as in the case of the Poles and Italians, they must devise ways of sustaining their culture. If they do not, believe they are destined to become white Mexicans through assimilation.