New Citizens, New Rights

Undocumented Immigrants and Latino Cultural Citizenship

by
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Traditional theories of citizenship often link membership and rights, with one defining the other. Thus, becoming a citizen entitles the new member of society to a certain set of rights—civic, political, and social—that are generally unavailable to noncitizens (Turner, 1993). As has that of other democratic societies, U.S. history has been marked by the efforts of excluded groups to obtain full membership in society. While the incorporation of new citizens into the polity may temporarily stabilize the social system, it can also produce frustration if these rights are curtailed, denied, or unevenly distributed: "As citizenship institutionalizes social expectations which cannot be satisfied by the state under all circumstances, citizenship entitlements fuel political dissent" (Turner, 1991: 217). Rights, however, are neither arbitrary nor finite. New citizen groups bring new needs to the polity and begin to enunciate and claim new rights.

In the United States, the link between membership and rights is a critical but vexing one, particularly for groups that have been excluded from full membership in society. Karst (1991) contends that minorities achieve membership in U.S. society through the struggle to claim rights as citizens. Similarly, Patricia Williams (1991: 164) argues that, for African-Americans, obtaining the rights enjoyed by white Americans is the "marker of citizenship." In this sense, citizenship rights are not bestowed by the simple act of birth but must be fought for and achieved. Citizenship is an active process of claiming rights rather than the passive acquisition of an arbitrary and limited set of rights.

Denying minorities full citizenship militates against their citizenship and hinders their active participation in the political system, but by struggling to

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open the doors, excluded groups have emerged as "new citizens" (Hall and Held, 1990). In the United States, the "new citizens" of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s were not new as members of society but new political subjects, actors who challenged existing power and social relationships and claimed new sets of rights.

For many groups, such as racial minorities, women, gays, the disabled, and others, the struggle for full citizenship and full membership in U.S. society has involved demands that extend beyond those of traditional white males. Each group has had its own particular needs and struggled for specific sets of rights that have expanded the rights of the entire society. Thus, African-Americans have fought racial discrimination in the workplace and the poll taxes and dual ballots that effectively negated their right to vote. Women continue to demand educational and workplace environments that are free of sexual harassment and gender discrimination. Similarly, the demand for bilingual ballots to ensure that voters fully understand ballot measures and the election process has emerged as a central theme in the struggle for Latino[1] empowerment (Flores, 1992). These new rights not only extend participation but reframe the context of that participation in terms of the needs of the new citizen groups.

This essay explores the concept of citizenship from the perspective of citizens as social actors struggling not only to gain full membership in society but also to reshape it. Drawing on my fieldwork on the Chicano community of San Jose, California, I present three cases illustrating how Latinos forge community, claim space, and claim rights—all of which are essential elements of cultural citizenship. The cases also demonstrate how Chicano efforts to support immigrants have, in certain instances, created space for the political participation of undocumented and legal-resident immigrants and their emergence as new citizens.

CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP: CLAIMING SPACE AND RIGHTS

Developing a sense of belonging to society is a key attribute of active citizenship. Those who feel excluded are less likely to participate in politics. Several studies of U.S society discuss the notion of "belonging in America." Bellah (1986) and Perin (1988), for example, portray a social world rooted in the experiences of middle-class whites. This world contrasts sharply with daily life in most Chicano neighborhoods. Indeed, a study of the Latino social world in San Jose (Rosaldo and Flores, 1993) revealed a distinctly Latino perspective on U.S. society, one replete with stories of racial discrimination—

albeit phrased in such terms as *falta de respeto* (lack of respect), *humillación* (humiliation), and the importance of *dignidad* (dignity). The people we interviewed described an America that was far less egalitarian or inclusive than that described by Bellah or Perin, and they expressed a deep desire for a more inclusive and egalitarian society that accorded with "the American dream."

The concept of "cultural citizenship" has been developed to refer to the various processes by which groups define themselves, form a community, and claim space and social rights (Rosaldo, 1987; Rosaldo and Flores, 1993; Flores and Benmayor, 1997). Cultural citizenship encompasses a broad range of everyday activities as well as the more visible political and social movements. A key aspect of the concept is the struggle for a distinct social space in which members of the marginalized group are free to express themselves and feel at home. It is in such a space that groups can "imagine" themselves and develop independent social and political organizations (Anderson, 1983). Obtaining space, keeping it, and being free to use it as they see fit often require these groups to organize themselves and make demands on society.

Castells (1983: xviii) argues that city dwellers "need, more than ever, to reconstruct a social universe, a local turf, a space of freedom, a community." This is especially true for Latinos, who often organize on a neighborhood or citywide basis to secure space for cultural identity constructions, group survival, and community organization.[2] As Gottdiener (1985: 123) argues, however, "Space is a physical location, a piece of real estate, and simultaneously an existential freedom and a mental expression. Space is both the geographic site of action and the social possibility of engaging in action."

Latinos, like other "new citizens," yearn for a space of their own in which to think, to create, and to act in a way that reflects their sense of themselves. Without the ability to express themselves, excluded groups have no ability to "belong" except on someone else's terms, that is, from the perspective of the dominant culture. The daily life practices, taken together, carve out a space that is distinctly Latino and an evolving Latino consciousness (Padilla, 1985). The process of claiming space and rights is what we term cultural citizenship. It is not inherently oppositional, but it can be, particularly when the dominant society, by opposing or restricting cultural practices, necessitates struggles to protect perceived "cultural rights" (Silvestrini, 1997).

CLAIMING COMMUNITY, CLAIMING RIGHTS

I turn now to three cases based on participant observation and extensive interviews that were part of the research for my dissertation (Flores, 1987)

and subsequent interviews and participant observation as part of a larger study of the San Jose Chicano community. In the early 1970s, I worked in a cannery in the downtown area and was active in the local community. Later, I was an administrator of a community health center that served the predominantly Mexican community of that area. I also helped to organize several coalitions and organizations involved in the struggle for immigrant rights. The three cases demonstrate cultural citizenship as Chicanos and Mexicans joined together to defend community interests, define community membership, establish key symbols, and claim rights in the process establishing a social space that enabled undocumented Mexicans to participate with Chicanos in struggling for their own rights.

The cases take place in a predominantly Mexican immigrant *barrio* (neighborhood) in west-central San Jose that is 80 percent Mexican. Most of the barrio's residents are Spanish-speaking, and many are undocumented immigrants. In 1990, 21 percent of barrio residents lived at or below the official government poverty level; median family income was only $20,807 and per capita income just $6,779 (Rosaldo and Flores, 1993). Mexican immigrants in the area often share cars and apartments and help each other to locate jobs and avoid detection by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Until the early 1970s, the canneries provided Mexican immigrants with a regular source of employment, at least during the canning season, but shortly thereafter the high-tech defense industry displaced agriculture and the canneries. Since then, Mexican immigrants throughout Santa Clara County have become concentrated in the low-paying service sector as maids, dishwashers, janitors, and day laborers.

The barrios and the adjacent downtown area were frequent targets of INS raids in the early 1970s. As in other cities, there have been conflicts and tensions between Chicanos and Mexican immigrants in San Jose.[3] Even so, there have also been many examples of mutual support. During the depression era of the 1930s, for instance, Chicanos and Mexicans in San Jose jointly protested the so-called repatriations of Mexicans throughout the country that resulted in the deportation of roughly 500,000 Mexican immigrants and their U.S.-born children (Hoffman, 1979). In 1973, Chicanos and Mexican immigrant activists joined forces to oppose policies that would have required the community clinics funded by Santa Clara County to collect data on legal and illegal immigrants, because viewing the collection of such information was the first step toward the identification and deportation of undocumented residents (Flores, 1987). That same year, the Centro de Accíon Autónoma (Autonomous Action Center—CASA), of which I was a member, built a community coalition to protest INS factory sweeps in the local canneries. The demonstrations were joined by several community groups, including the

Cannery Workers' Caucus (CWC), a predominantly Chicano-Mexican caucus of the Teamsters' Union Local, and the Confederación de La Raza Unida, a confederation of several Chicano organizations.

The county's proposal to review documents and count the undocumented reminded many of the 1930s repatriation of Mexicans, including U.S.-born citizens, and the roundups and deportation raids of "Operation Wetback" in the 1950s. CWC's founder, Lucio Bernabé, said, "It made me sick. I got so angry. I thought 'Not again. Not again!' " He recalled:

> They [whites] forget we [Mexicans] built this city. . . . in the 1930s, there were thousands of us that marched for jobs and unemployment benefits. They deported a lot of people who were labor leaders just for being Mexican. They didn't care. We were just all seen as the same, as Mexicans. In the union, we had a saying, "Un daño contra uno es un daño contra todos" [An injury to one is an injury to all]. We can't let them divide us. We must defend each other. Just because someone doesn't have papers doesn't mean they don't have rights.

Bernabé described the past deportation as a lesson for the present. Such stories are part of the collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992) of the Chicano community and contribute to group formation and cohesion. Our interpretations of the present are often framed by past experiences and collective memory (Lipsitz, 1990). Interpreting the past acts upon our understanding of the present and affects our vision of the future (Flores, 1992). The stories forge collectivity by explaining common history, experiences, and trajectory. By recalling the past repatriations and stressing the need for unity, Bernabé also encouraged present-day Chicanos and Mexicans to join together, understanding that an injury to one is an injury to all.

By defending the undocumented, the Chicano activists asserted their right to determine who was and who was not part of their community. Their definition of community was not limited to U.S. citizens but included immigrants, documented and undocumented alike. The stories of past deportations told by Bernabé and others melded with the experiences of Chicanos. Many had witnessed abuses by immigration officials as their neighbors, friends, family members, or perhaps even they themselves were detained and questioned. The stories shaped a collective memory that engaged the present and fueled the struggle for rights and social change. Stories of the past, popular culture, narrative, life histories, and cultural practices contested master narratives and created counternarratives. The other emerged as subject in part through such contestation.[4] Thus, key elements of the Chicano social movement—its rhetoric and collective identity—emerged from an interpretation of the past that served the present.

A second example illustrates this point by examining the performative aspects of cultural citizenship. Chicano and Latino community activists working in the nearby community health center (known as La Clínica) in 1979 learned that school-aged Mexican children could not register for school without proof of immunization and that undocumented parents feared that in the process the county nurses might report their status, causing deportation of the entire family or of the parents alone. It was common to hear stories of children left behind (*dejados*) when their parents were picked up at work or at the bus station by the INS. To address this issue, the Chicano activists organized special immunization days at La Clínica and formed the Comité Pro Derechos de Los Niños Indocumentados (the Committee for the Rights of Undocumented Children). The committee organized networks of support to alert families if INS officers were seen in the area and to provide temporary foster homes for children whose parents had been arrested or deported. As an activist working in La Clínica, I assisted the group and helped to organize workshops on immigrant rights.

As in the earlier example, here Chicano community activists rallied to support undocumented Mexican families. Undocumented parents were informed of the rights of their children, who were usually native-born U.S. citizens, and their rights as parents to complain about the treatment of their children by school officials. In addition, special workshops were held with an immigration lawyer to discuss their legal status. La Clínica and the adjacent Catholic church provided an important "free space" (Evans and Boyte, 1986) where parents, children, extended family, neighbors, and activists could meet and plan joint action free from fear of arrest or deportation. These experiences provided strength for more public collective action.

Community activists wrote a play (or *acto*) to present the issues to the community and recruited undocumented Mexican parents and children to join with them as actors. The committee staged performances in church following mass, in parks, and at a local school. The skit educated parents about their children's right to attend school and their rights as parents and as immigrants. Near the end of the play, there was a mock confrontation as audience members joined actors to challenge "La Migra" (the INS). After the skit, two community members sang a *corrido* they had written about immigrant rights.

These cultural forms allowed children and parents to discover new strengths. Performance, according to Victor Turner (1986), serves to "re-member." It reenacts and reconstitutes community (R. Flores, 1997). Thus, the undocumented, used to concealing their identities and their status, found sufficient strength to take center stage in a skit about their conditions. The *acto* revealed the complexities of the broader social drama it exemplified—the fear of deportation, fear of separation from loved ones, anger at the power

of the INS, and the message that from collective action comes the strength to confront it. It provided a space for social inversion similar to Bakhtin's carnival, which "uncrowns power" by its mocking laughter (Lipsitz, 1990: 16).

Unlike a carnival, the skit is designed to activate—to stimulate what Freire (1973) terms conscientización, the process of acquiring critical consciousness and becoming political subjects. Freire explains that only as the oppressed "grasp the themes [of their oppression] can they intervene in reality instead of remaining mere onlookers" (1973: 4). Through discussions of the issues to be presented in the play, parents and children grasped the "themes" of their oppression, becoming subjects to oppose it. The creation of political subjects is itself a process of social practice. "Conscientizatión" is, according to Cornel West, a "new self-perception, in which persons no longer view themselves as objects of history, but rather as subjects of history, willing to put forward their own selves and bodies to reconstruct a new nation" (1993: 134).

In performing the skit, the Chicano activists and Mexican immigrants defined community. They drew the audience into the action, calling on them to join in the singing and collectively chanting about their rights. By hissing and laughing at "La Migra," the audience practiced and prepared for real-life confrontations. Their ridicule "uncrowned" the INS and, by association, the state apparatus of which it was a part. The actors gained strength and confidence by challenging their enemies—"La Migra," the courts and police, and the U.S. government that had adopted the policies. Similarly, by witnessing and cheering victories on stage, the audience, Mexican immigrants and Chicanos alike, shared experiences. The skit allowed them to practice collective resistance symbolically and prepare for victories in real life. It broke down boundaries between documented and undocumented, script and spoken words, performer and performed, subject and object, as the undocumented themselves became subjects, agents of change in their conditions and those of their children. On several occasions, audience members, many of whom were undocumented, later joined community rallies against deportations. Thus, the *acto* prepared them for public action. Self-defined representation, then, became a vehicle for oppositional action[5] as the immigrants entered the public arena.

Through the skit, the community related its own story, inverting and subverting power relations. The children and their parents became collective "heroes," examples to be emulated. By contrast, "La Migra" and the school officials and police who cooperated with it were booed as villains who ripped children from their parents' arms. The skit served as a broad retelling of the story of the undocumented, a counternarrative to evoke collective action.

The third example was a collective response to an open attack on immigrants. In May 1982, President Ronald Reagan instituted his infamous "Operation Jobs," which arrested undocumented immigrants holding supposedly well-paying jobs to free those jobs for U.S. citizens. Latinos, the vast majority of them Mexican, represented more than 80 percent of those apprehended. Within a few weeks of the raids, most of the U.S. workers had left the jobs they had made available, refusing to do this back-breaking, dangerous, and undesirable work.

Raza Sí, formed by Chicano activists (including La Clínica staff members, myself among them) in 1980, built broad community support against the raids. The performative nature of the name "Raza Sí" betokened an unspoken response. Both affirmation and negation, the name of the organization was drawn from Chicano resistive culture—from a call-and-response chant popular at immigration rights rallies: "Raza Sí! Migra No!" (Our Race Yes! The INS No!). The concept of "La Migra," although unspoken, lay beneath the surface, effaced by the more powerful affirmation of "Raza Sí." The name, literally meaning "Race Yes," derives from, among others, "La Raza Cósmica," a concept introduced by the Mexican revolutionary intellectual José Vasconcelos that transformed *mestizaje*, the mixture of races and cultures resulting from colonialism, into a source of pride. The concept of the "Cosmic Race" envisions a world in which barriers between nations and races have become meaningless. Thus, the group's name evokes pride, empowerment, and self-determination. It appeals to a mythical past while indicating a possible future.

At a meeting organized by La Clínica's board and staff, community members voted unanimously to refuse admittance to INS agents. Again, La Clínica became a sanctuary and "free space" for social and political organization. Raza Sí held a community meeting at the church school adjacent to La Clínica to inform residents of their rights. A loose community-alert network was formed to gather and disseminate information on the whereabouts of INS officers—setting up a form, if you will, of "border patrol" that reversed power relationships, the hunter becoming the hunted.

Raza Sí formed a citywide coalition with such groups as the Asian Law Alliance, MEChA (a Chicano student organization), and the Santa Clara County Central Labor Council to demand that city employees be prohibited from cooperating with INS officials. One city council member, Blanca Alvarado, at the time the only Latino on the council, participated in the press conference wearing a button that read "Illegal Alien"—mocking the INS and identifying with its victims. In the next few days, church leaders and leaders of community agencies began wearing similar buttons. Raza Sí printed up its own "green cards" with the words "Raza Sí Member" and distributed

hundreds of them throughout the city. These "green cards" were proudly worn as badges of activism. Councilwoman Alvarado told me in a 1990 interview, "I was really upset by what Reagan was doing, blaming the undocumented. Wearing the button was our way of fighting back, saying 'Just try to take us!' "

The coalition won an important victory. Both officials and the local school board in fact instructed their employees to cease cooperating with the INS. On the heels of the victory, Raza Sí and the citywide coalition joined with statewide and national groups to condemn the raids and to counter Reagan's assertion that the undocumented "steal" jobs. Through these coalitions, Raza Sí joined in national debates around the immigration legislation that was eventually adopted in 1986 as the Immigration Reform and Control Act.[6]

The language of protest produced a powerful counterdiscourse. The Chicano activists appropriated the symbols of the INS, subverting their meaning and inverting their power. The INS, long feared as a source of terror, became instead an object of derision, and the community-alert network reversed roles. The objects of searches, Mexicans and Chicanos, became the subjects conducting their own searches. No longer passive onlookers forced to hide, the undocumented became political subjects acting upon and changing power relationships. Similarly, the community "border patrol" claimed space. The barrio, protected through collective action, became a sanctuary and an arena for political organization. Rejecting false divisions between those born on one side of an arbitrary line and those born on the other, Chicanos in San Jose demarcated an "imagined community" forged through mutual interest and action.

The Raza Sí "green cards" became sources of power and identity within the community, markers of membership in a community formed by collective action. Chicanos, Mexican legal residents, and the undocumented all wore them pinned to their shirts, blouses, and jackets. Through mass distribution of its cards, Raza Sí undermined and symbolically invalidated the green cards of the INS. Similarly, buttons declaring "Illegal Alien" deposed the concept, stripping it of its pejorative power. By wearing the button, the councilwoman and others tacitly declared, "To take them you must take me first." The act shouted defiance of the INS—no small thing coming from an elected official and from church and community leaders.

The counterdiscourse of the protest movement moved Chicanos and Mexicans from the margin to a newly visualized and revisualized center. It was part of a developing counterhegemonic ideology that sustained and fueled the Chicano and Latino social movements while simultaneously contesting the dominant ideology and the unequal treatment of Latinos. In their desire to fight attacks against the undocumented, Chicano activists proclaimed that the

undocumented were part of their community and had rights that had to be protected.

These cases illustrate cultural citizenship through the claiming of space and the development of a distinct Chicano perspective on community that includes undocumented Mexicans. They also point to the development of a counterrhetoric and ideology that reframes and contests the dominant ideology. Perhaps most significant, they record the emergence of Mexican undocumented and legal-resident immigrants as "new citizens" demanding "new rights." By creating a space for discussion and cultural practices, Chicano activists have also created a social space for the participation of undocumented Mexicans in civil society—in theatrical performances, protests, social debates over legislation, and, in some cases, even electoral victories (Flores, 1992). Mexican immigrants are emerging as political actors—as citizens, in the broadest sense—demanding their rights.

CULTURAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Cases such as those just presented are not uncommon (Flores and Benmayor, 1997); similar struggles have taken place throughout the country. They do, however, illustrate the importance of linking cultural practices to broader struggles for social change. By advocating for and claiming rights, Latinos are also defining their own communities and interests. These claims are potentially counterhegemonic even when what they contest is not the state or class rule but dominance in social institutions that are themselves part of cultural hegemony. Although such struggles begin in civil society, they often involve the state. They may unfold in schools, in the city government, or in trade unions. At the core of the contestation is the notion of civil society, with all of the diverse institutions that, taken together, constitute the cultural domain in which hegemony is enforced. Mechanisms of social and cultural reproduction are never complete; they produce and are met by oppositional elements (Williams, 1977). What is key is that the cultural practices that compose cultural citizenship can become oppositional social movements.

While cultural citizenship does not supplant or obviate the need for broader movements that can challenge class or hegemonic rule, the creation of social space and the claiming of rights can lead to powerful social movements. The examples I have presented illustrate cultural citizenship as a process by which subjugated groups define themselves, claim space, and claim rights. Latinos are creating social spaces (both physical and expressive) that knit together self-defined communities. They are rejecting the artificial

boundaries established by the state to distinguish between citizens and noncitizens, and by including the undocumented and legal residents in their social movements they are creating social spaces in which immigrants can emerge as subjects fighting for common interest. Counterdiscourses are being developed that offer alternative visions of U.S. society. Finally, new citizens and new social actors are emerging, redefining rights, entitlement, and what it means to be a member of this society.

As an amalgam of culture and citizenship, the concept of cultural citizenship reflects the tensions of each. While citizenship is contested and incomplete, culture is constantly shifting and evolving (Rosaldo, 1989). The various examples reveal the power of cultural claims in creating new citizens and sustaining social movements that demand new rights. While immigrants are castigated by the dominant society, they are embraced by Latinos who see commonalities of history and interests. Undocumented immigrants live out their lives in the shadows. Their masks of anonymity conceal their hopes and aspirations to be members of society. Their role as political actors for the most part remains subterranean—like their lives, hidden from public view—but they are emerging from the shadows as new subjects with their own claims for rights. They too are "imagining community" (Anderson, 1983; Chavez, 1994). Their claims are given space by Latino social movements and by counterideology that stresses Latino unity. The notion of cultural citizenship helps us to comprehend the relationship between the new citizenship movements and demands for cultural rights.

Simply put, Latinos are not only entering society as "new citizens" but struggling for new rights. Their social movements can potentially help to reshape this country, remolding it in their own image. What the "new citizens" seek is neither replication of the old country nor assimilation into the host society but a renegotiation of what it means to be a citizen and, more important, a distinct Latino infusion into the defining fabric of the United States. Ironically, the work that Latinos envision may be more like the ideal America than the America that exists. It is a world committed to values of democracy and social justice. As Latinos set out to construct their vision of society, as they create space to live it and claim rights and entitlement based on it, they are not only "imagining" America but re-creating it. While Latinos may not fully belong to America, their hopes and frustrations do. Their dreams help us to conceive of a different America, one that is perhaps more just and egalitarian. The Latino vision of America may be an alternative one, but like all such visions, it has the potential for reordering, restructuring, and renewing.

NOTES

1. I use the term “Latino” to refer generically to the various groups that the government has termed “Hispanic”—U.S.-born descendants of immigrants or immigrants from Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean islands. The term “Chicano” refers to a distinct group of Latinos, Mexican-Americans, usually U.S.-born descendants of Mexican immigrants or Mexican immigrants who came to the United States at an early age and were raised in U.S. society.

2. Castells emphasizes that local struggles for space cannot be isolated from broader struggles for social transformation and political power. Otherwise, various minority groups and poor communities can be pitted against each other, with one group gaining at the expense of others, while class relations remain uncontested. This simply is “the institutionalized reproduction of a society dominated by capitalist corporations with the ideology of endless competition” (1983: 171).

3. Tensions often exist between Chicanos and Mexicans and between legal residents and *indocumentados* (undocumented persons). Many working-class Chicanos resent Mexican and Central American immigrants, arguing that they depress wages and increase competition for jobs. Indeed, a 1992 national political survey of Latinos found that 65 percent of all Latinos believed that there were too many immigrants coming to the United States. The study also found that a majority of Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and whites believed that U.S. citizens should be hired in preference to noncitizens (de la Garza et al., 1992: 102).

4. As Saldivar (1991: 16) explains, “the subject exists as a mirror reflection of an *other* subject and becomes a subject itself in the recognition and reflection of and in the other.”

5. As Giroux (1991: 26–27) argues, “Representation . . . gives way to opposition and the struggles over questions of identity, place, and values. Difference in this context brings out the possibility of not only bringing the voices and politics of the ‘Other’ to the centers of power, but also understanding how the center is implicated in the margins.”

6. As opposed to “amnesty,” which implied forgiveness for past crimes, Raza Sí advocated redress of injustice. The organization’s leadership, of which I was a part, argued that undocumented immigrants contribute to society and should receive immediate unconditional residency.

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