MEXICAN-AMERICANS IN THE SOUTHWEST

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himself; and, simultaneously, by the upgrading of skills in the new areas opened by an increasingly sophisticated economy.

Technology has also upset many of the old standbys of employment. Mechanization in canneries and other food processing plants has eliminated thousands of jobs. This was a significant turn, for cannery work had been for forty years the next leg up and out of farm labor. In the cities, mechanization has shown a tendency to catch up with and outrun those who have turned there for a livelihood. Laundering and car washing are examples.

This condition is now familiar to Mexican-Americans in every part of the economy. Commercial agriculture has at last perfected the mechanical tomato picker, with about as drastic an effect on jobs as the cotton-picking machine produced fifteen years before.

In the low-wage occupations transiency has been a characteristic handicap of the Mexican-Americans as a group. The footholds of residence and well-paid work have been only for the few among the immigrants of the last four decades.

Small Business

It is from these lucratively employed few that a small merchant sector has emerged—small both in numbers and in economic importance. Typically the *barrio* entrepreneur is a restaurant keeper, a grocer, the publisher of a newspaper with limited circulation, a building contractor, self-employed mechanic or craftsman. Bakeries and *tortillerias* provide opportunities for investment on a small scale and are characteristic of the business side of the ethnic neighborhood. Supplying materials and equipment for these consumer services are a few larger processors and manufacturers located in the principal cities of the region.

The small businessman who has made the *colonia* his base has never monopolized its limited market. On the one hand, Mexican entrepreneurs who discovered during the turbulent years of the revolution that their capital could find uses north of the border restricted their business to the large and growing Mexican population there. On the other hand, non-Mexican merchants have always found it profitable to operate in the *barrio* their "five-and-tens," their army surplus outlets, and their supermarkets for the Spanish-speaking clientele.

The Mexican-American entrepreneurs have become numerous enough to create their own chambers of commerce and luncheon clubs among the younger business set. As a class they have not yet proved to be effective accumulators of capital. Behind them there have been no powerful sources of credit to float them into the "big time" of commerce or manufacturing. Some have made sizable fortunes in real estate speculation, medicine, and publishing. But they have yet to prove themselves the aggressive and successful builders of chain stores, entertainment syndicates, drug networks, or insurance companies. In all of these areas of risk and profit there are individuals who are testing their nerve and putting up their cash, adumbrating perhaps the rise of a brown bourgeoisie. It will take another generation at least to show that the Mexican-American is capable of being thoroughly acculturated in this respect also.

For the present this component of a modest middle class keeps close to the protective coloration, the sentimental attachments, the cultural identifications, the mix of language, and other ambivalences which make a spectrum rather than a bloc of the Mexican-American ethnic minority. This role the small businessmen share with the professionals.

Housing

The kinds of houses Mexican-Americans live in are the most visible index of their place in the present society of the Southwest. There is a certain range of dilapidation. There are within the most rundown *barrios* brightly painted cottages with fenced-in flower gardens that set themselves off by a defiant trimness. But such possessions are not the norm. Home ownership can run as low as 15 percent in some communities, as high as 50 percent in others. In either event, landlords have not had the will or tenants the resources to attack a housing blight which is among the worst in America.

Originally, these settlements were the railroad and farm labor pools of the early century. Ground space was ample. One may still see the wide, unpaved streets laid out in the once open landscape that was unattractive to all but squatters and sagebrush brokers. As remarkable was the free space above, for those were the days before the residential tower. Even in their weatherbeaten and grim obsolescence Mexican-American neighborhoods that have not yet been visited by the bulldozer offer lessons in living. The men and women who put shacks together from secondhand and discarded materials did not build in the spirit of a vendetta against plant life. The economic scale in these reservations of poverty was small indeed, and perhaps for that reason, inevitably it was a human scale.

These were the sunshine slums pioneered by the Mexican and later adapted by the Negro. They still house hundreds of thousands of Mexican-American poor. Today 35 percent of the occupied dwellings in East Los Angeles are classified as unsound, dilapidated, and in varying stages of disrepair. These are mostly rented dwellings. In a hard core poverty tract of Houston 90 percent of the residential structures were built in 1939 or earlier. When the residents of Guadalupe, Arizona recently took stock, they found that out of 677 dwellings 500 were substandard homes with outside toilets. In Phoenix the new skyscrapers look down on decaying dwellings surrounded by affluence.

There has always been some residential dispersion from poverty tracts, and this may become more common as additional central city *barrios* are demolished. Normal dispersion has taken place when family income increased and living standards rose. Contemporary displacement by sudden sweeps of rebuilding is of a different order. It is involuntary. Its possible long-term advantages for the integration and acculturation of the few must be weighed against the short-term anxieties of the many who must move.

Educational Opportunity

The course of immigration, demographic distribution, transiency, occupational mobility, neighborhood status, and income have all in some way affected the chances of the Mexican-American child to keep up with the national norms of educational attainment. In some communities immediately north of the border, between 70 and 90 percent of the residents are Spanish-speaking. Persistent failure to consider bilingualism a cultural asset has made it an additional problem rather than a promising opportunity. What might have been a cultural bonus still remains, in many parts of the Southwest, a handicap for the young whose home language is Spanish.

The self-segregation of poverty left its mark on the schools. It has not been overcome by residential mixing. A recent survey of the public schools of San Jose, California showed a marked dominance of Mexican-American stu-

dents in some districts. Of six schools serving mixed neighborhoods but located in or close to *barrios* the school with the best ethnic balance had a 53 percent majority of Mexican children and the school with the greatest imbalance had a majority of 87 percent.

One need not lodge a special grievance against the public schools that have served the Spanish-surname communities to assess the high dropout rates and other causes of educational retardation. The gap between the Mexican-American minority and the rest of the population is ample evidence of failure to provide equal educational opportunity.

The median number of school years attained by Mexican-Americans fourteen years old and over is as follows: Arizona 8.3; California 9.2; Colorado 8.7; New Mexico 8.8; and Texas 6.7. These are averages. They conceal drastic imbalances in areas of near-total social deterioration. In a Houston tract it was found that the average was 5.4 years, against which an average of 5.7 in some border counties seemed a hopeful improvement. In Denver it is quite probable that Mexican-Americans, with an average of 8.6 years of instruction in some localities, are four full years behind the general population. Riverside, California is some fifty miles from Los Angeles, which has been called the Ultimate City. If the cultural opportunities which such a title presupposes have reached Riverside, the census data do not show it. The Spanish-surnamed living there report an average of 6.7 years of schooling.

Such figures, to be sure, conceal the weight of all the factors noted earlier. It is extremely unlikely, for example, that the half million emigrants who have been absorbed by the Southwest since 1950 were among Mexico's best educated citizens. Their lack of opportunity was the fault of their native, not their adopted country. Nevertheless, the

effects must be set down out of statistical necessity in the United States census reports. With all due allowances, it is necessary to say that society and the schools are still capable of producing situations such as this one: The town of Guadalupe in Arizona has over 5,000 inhabitants, all Mexican-American. It is a stable, slowly evolving community, not given to sudden growth. Between 1910 and 1965 only 38 of its youth were graduated from high school. None had completed college.

An educational attainment of eight years or less is automatically bracketed with the occupational capability and income level of a manual worker. As automation invades clerical and related occupations, educational preparation for those who are to hold the new jobs must advance at least through high school and, sooner or later, beyond. As an ethnic group, therefore, the Mexican-Americans have a present handicap of from four to seven years vis-a-vis the rest of the population. The rapid general increase in high school and college enrollment of the recent past serves but to emphasize the gap. The observation that the Mexican-American must run hard just to keep from falling back even more, is hardly an exaggeration.

Public Assistance

The race is not only to qualify for jobs but also to avoid dependence on public assistance. The welfare load of Spanish-surnamed recipients far outruns their percentage of the population. The figures are familiar enough. The regional averages do not vary greatly from those recently given for Denver: 46 percent of those receiving aid to dependent children and 67 percent of those receiving general assistance have Spanish surnames. In Texas, 40 percent of the recipi-

ents of aid to dependent children are families with Spanish surnames, while in California 22.8 percent of those receiving similar benefits are Mexican-Americans.

A more impressive way to view the situation is to visit the waiting rooms of the public welfare agencies in any southwestern city, or to do the rounds with social workers on caseload tours. The house calls are in the tracts where unemployment runs from 8 to 20 percent, where the deterioration of residences is 40 percent or worse, where median years of schooling do not go above the elementary grades, and where the reported income per family ranges from $2,500 to $3,000. The call-up of the needy over the loudspeakers as they wait their turn in anterooms sounds like the rollcall of a *barrio*. In these public places it is the women and the children who put the best face possible on poverty. In five out of ten cases it is probably a brown face.

But the southwest society of Mexican-Americans must be regarded from still other points of view. In a sense the terms Mexican-Americans, Spanish-speaking, Spanish-surnamed are convenient sociological handles and statistical catch terms. The use of these terms and of others—Mexicans and Spanish-Americans—suggests at once the history of the region, its population movements, and its mixtures of culture. The future might well force this ethnic minority to close ranks against hostility or pressure in the name of racial identity; it might also loosen internal ties by more intense acculturation and assimilation.

Trade Unionism

The relationship of the Mexican-American to the trade unions has been ambivalent. On the fringes of the labor market, where the Spanish-speaking jobseeker makes his

first connection, he has been hard to reach and even harder to organize. From this substantial reservoir come the moonlighters, the recruits for the open shop, the victims of unethical employment agencies, and the illegals. Adult workers who have been in the United States only a short time are total strangers to the requirements and the ideology of American trade unionism. When faced with the closed shop, the payment of dues for the union card is often regarded as the purchase price of a job.

In many industries of the Southwest, organizing campaigns and plant elections must now reckon with a Spanish-speaking constituency. Considering that this reservoir of labor power is one from which widely divergent industries draw, the unionizing problems created are common to all unions. They have, however, chosen to concern themselves only at the critical times of a campaign or an election, and purely from the point of view of the particular union affected. Trade-unionism as a national or regional organization has never, in the Southwest, approached Mexican-Americans as a cultural and social entity within which the ideas and attitudes of economic democracy could be planted.

Eventually there has developed within many unions a significant Spanish-speaking membership which by dint of experience has learned the way of collective economic action and accepts its discipline. From these ranks have emerged Mexican-American trade-union leaders, mainly in the shop steward, plant representative, and business agent categories. The higher they have risen, however, the closer they have come to the frustrations and temptations of power controls and politics within the unions. Informal blocs along ethnic lines have tended to emerge, rarely for the purpose of sharpening some ideological issue or moving the understanding and militancy of the rank and file to the

next higher level. With hundreds of thousands of Spanish-speaking men and women in the ranks of organized labor there has never been an effort to mobilize them in an auxiliary but distinctive affiliation, as has happened among Negro trade-unionists.

In short, some fundamental questions are still to be raised in this important area of the life of a great many working Mexican-Americans in the Southwest. They are now too numerous in and out of trade-unionism to be thought of casually. In some industrial plants in Texas and California one half or more of the membership is Spanish-speaking. One of the largest locals of a construction union, with 15,000 members, has a registered membership that is 60 percent Mexican. A garment workers' union with 8,000 members is 75 percent Spanish-speaking. Since these are industries on which unemployment presses severely, trade-unionism is face to face with the Mexican-American and must deal with him in and out of the union hall.

The Professions

The dismal averages of educational attainment already cited and the slow economic and professional advance reflected by percentage formulas tend to obscure the qualitative importance of such advance. The effect on the Mexican-American community of the professional man or woman in its midst is a pervasive, though subtle one. Ethnic pride is invigorated whenever an individual of a minority becomes an attorney, a doctor, a professor, or a civil servant. There is more confidence in the approach to the bureaucracy and the due process of the general society through an intermediary speaking one's own language and having a familiar cast. Often the confidence is misplaced but its

human roots persist. Moreover, the first generation of the successful ones is very likely carrying vivid personal memories of deprivation, of rebuffs, personal confrontations with ignorance or prejudice, as well as of sympathy received or understanding offered in time of need.

These elements are present in the new generation of Mexican-American professionals. In proportion to the ethnic group as a whole, the professionals are few indeed. Their distribution by professions can be surmised from the figures compiled from the 1960 census for California. There were 21,405 Spanish-surname persons engaged in professional, technical and related work, of whom 3,599 were teachers, and 2,645 were state civil servants. This represents a very small percentage of both the total professional population and the Mexican-American minority—ratios profoundly affecting the character of the continuing relationships between this select group and those who remain far behind in economic and cultural opportunity.

From all that can be observed, most of those who are upward bound carry few burdens of ethnic commitment. A smaller number do carry such commitments, sometimes at personal risk and often at personal cost, not having yet found the way to make their influence more effective through combined action. It is from their thin ranks, moreover, that public agencies recruit for appointments to more attractive staff positions. Within the Mexican-American community there are no comparable opportunities. The decisions that are made by individuals tell a great deal about the process of assimilation by the general society, with its distribution of values between personal advancement and collective progress.

A process of self-selection is at work among Mexican-Americans who have risen high enough to catch the ear and the eye of those who are in a position to distribute the

resources, appointments, honors, and opportunities of acceptance by the general society. Some, in their professional careers, must define the terms of these transactions and determine whether they are to render genuine or merely nominal representation of millions of Mexican-Americans on important issues. A few have already chosen the way of service to their people. The task is to identify them and bring them together.

The Intellectuals

The question of leadership of the Mexican-American minority is being raised seriously, and for the first time from an intellectual point of view, by a still smaller kernel of teachers and college professors who have maintained an active interest in and connection with their communities. Most of these individuals are not themselves contenders for leadership. Bound by emotional ties to their ethnic origins, they are equipped with the intellectual discipline to examine leadership roles more critically, whether these roles are assumed by friendly outsiders or by ambitious insiders.

This scrutiny of community leadership is integral to the consideration and ultimate resolution of other issues: the creative uses of bilingualism; effective political participation; Negro and Mexican-American relations; the role of research in ethnic progress; the rewards and hazards of cultural accommodation; current theories of community organization as applied to the Mexican-American *colonias;* Mexican policy, American diplomacy, and the effects of both on life in the Southwest; the significance of labor organization to ethnic minorities; the adaptation of educational systems to youth and adults.

Dialogues on subjects such as these, while not entirely

novel, are involving more minds. Fittingly enough, it is the colleges and the universities that have stimulated this advance; but as yet they have made no effort to relate it to a wider field of intellectual exchange and perhaps give it a more effective platform.

To make such an effort is important. Young men and women are now tentatively exploring the separate facets of the central issue of progress within the American society —acculturation, assimilation, integration. Using rational tools they have begun to master—research, publication, criticism—they are engaged in self-examination and social appraisal. Though they may not be entirely aware of it, their conversations shuttle between subjective anxieties and the social problems of the minority they are rapidly leaving behind. Should the frail dimension of ethnic awareness be suffocated or wither from neglect, it would unquestionably be a loss to the general society as well as to the minority.

The Students

In 1964 nearly 750 Spanish-surnamed students were enrolled at Los Angeles State College. They are to be found today in every major university and in many smaller institutions of higher learning. The number graduated from California colleges in 1964, according to one estimate, was over 2,500.

Although the absolute numbers may be encouraging, taken by themselves they are misleading. Accepting the 2,500 figure as true, it would still be less than one percent of all the graduates of that year. The Spanish-surnamed residents of California comprise more than ten percent of the total population.

In a 1965 survey involving 10,000 students in five southern California universities, only 75 were students with Spanish surnames. The Berkeley branch of the University of California recently listed 77 Mexican-Americans among its 25,000 students. The University of California at Los Angeles had 70 Mexican-American students in a campus enrollment of 26,000.

This imbalance marks one course of action for the future —a very large increase in educational opportunities for more young people to complete college careers. The other is the stimulation and guidance of those who are already on campus and are, in their own way, pondering the problems of the ethnic minority from which they have sprung. One of these problems is the stimulation of high school students to set their ambitions on a college education. Another is the ways and means of serving the *barrios* in their concerns. There is incipient organization among the students of various campuses to these ends.

The Young

Significant as they may be in numbers, the Mexican-American university and college students are only a tiny elite as compared with the young people of high school and elementary school age. There are approximately 1,750,000 primary, intermediate, and secondary school students of Mexican descent in the five southwestern states. In the largest Mexican community, that of East Los Angeles, a 1965 survey established that 37 percent of its population were children fourteen years of age or younger. This example is typical of other communities. Young people account for a large part of the Mexican-American minority.

Among the very young, different, though equally pressing, cultural gaps appear. On one side stand the impoverished households, the alien family style, the ancestral language, the insecure community. On the other there is the school with its inadequate budgets, its administrative molds, its distance from the families of its pupils. Between them is the preschooler who speaks only Spanish, who falters in his first and crucial encounter with Anglo-American because his native speech is still regarded as a barrier and not a road and because in addition he brings with him all the handicaps of poverty.

Unfortunately, it is apparently not yet fully understood at all levels of government that very large investments of money and effort are needed to compensate for the years of neglect. The cutting of federal aid to education, and particularly the failure to appropriate more than a fraction of the funds authorized by Congress for the federal bilingual education program* has resulted in the cancellation or rejection of many experimental projects aimed at helping the Spanish-speaking child who is just beginning school.

Self-Help

Some of the most obvious and satisfying efforts at self-help in the *barrios* have been in the establishment and maintenance of cooperative child care centers, where Mexican-American teachers and mothers serve on a voluntary basis. There are other manifestations of this spirit.

It is probably a sociological truth that the greater the distance between the Mexican-American culture of the

*Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Congress authorized $30 million for this program for fiscal 1969 but funds were not appropriated until late 1968, and then the appropriation was only $7.5 million.

colonia and the help-yourself incentives of individual advancement, the more numerous the acts of mutual aid and support. Before they became familiar with institutionalized social work, the Mexican migrants were imbued with the simple idea of neighborliness as a relief of urgent family need. The constant exchange of small quantities of food—a cup of lard, two ears of corn, a few coffee grains—that took place in a Mexican village did not totally disappear after emigration. When emigrant families found it possible to buy onions or beans or rice in one-hundred-pound bags, thereby saving measurably in their food outlays, they began the practice of cooperative buying, partly to share the savings, partly to avoid spoilage because of lack of refrigeration.

These were some of the precepts of poverty, not necessarily the manifestations of nobility or altruism. They still prompt individuals to respond to needs that reflect new stresses or demands—interpretation in court and other public and private institutions, the never-ending repair of very used automobiles, the sharing of a telephone, the endless counseling of individuals through a daily round of perplexities. Not infrequently several families have, by taking turns, joined in moving condemned bungalows or cottages to a distant *barrio*, thus distributing the heavy labor that no one man could provide.

The important thing to notice in these services of mutual help is their scale. This has always been immediate, concrete, to the root of the matter, not susceptible to administration by third parties, and always creating and reinforcing a sense of obligation for some future time. There are persons living in the *barrios* who still remember these customs, and who still follow them. They are a significant element in the pattern of community life evolved by the Mexican-American over the decades.

Community Organizations

Following the end of World War II most of the Mexican-American organizations focused their interest on neighborhood improvement, protest against police harassment and brutality, election reforms, citizenship and naturalization, and funeral insurance protection. Underlying these interests, two factors have conditioned the present forms of cooperative action, now generically called community organization, among Mexican-Americans. One of these elements is the abiding preference for self-help. The other is the as yet unbridged gap between social service institutions, welfare agencies, and similar bodies and their clients. The latter condition, in its most recent and probably least durable manifestation under the Office of Economic Opportunity, is discussed in chapter 5.

Among the spontaneous forms of mutual aid there have been the funeral societies, the *mutualistas*, and similar organizations. But these have been only one segment, and not the most enterprising or outreaching, in the ferment of organization that has occurred in the last twenty years. One group has claimed that it was in active contact with no less than three hundred Mexican-American organizations in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. The figure is not improbable, though it does not give any clue as to the degree of organizational activity present. The mortality rate is known to be high.

If the effectiveness of organizing activity has been checked by frequent failures and discouraging frustrations, there has nevertheless been laid a foundation of accomplishments and experience. Many groups can now reckon their survival by the years instead of by the months. In the fifteen years between 1950 and 1965 the various organizations achieved a voter registration of over 400,000 Mexican-Americans in

have no will to resist economic mistreatment or social discrimination. Another was that they have no capacity to organize. Still another, that there is a dearth of leadership ability among them.

These are stereotypes, and they persist for a number of reasons. There is no history of these events written and circulated so that it comes to the attention of more than a small circle of specialists. In the waste and futility of *barrio* politics the lessons of organizational failure have been neglected. The leadership cadre has been small and overtaxed. Practical experience in democratic group procedures that expedite results and minimize pointless talk has been limited to the few. Funding has been scarce. Methods of obtaining community cooperation have been too uncritically borrowed from the larger society, with a resulting strain that many groups have not been able to survive. Intensely human endeavors have been pitched on a scale too large for *barrio* citizens to grasp, plan, direct, and administer themselves.

To point to these difficulties is not to minimize the significance of community cooperation sustained by Mexican-Americans during the past three decades. It, too, is a new dimension in the life of this minority, the one which perhaps most pointedly indicates promising change.

National Organizations

After World War II much of the organizing vitality among the Southwest's largest minority was provided by the young war veterans. They formed organizations of their own, notably the American G.I. Forum, or joined with a newfound pride other groups which were seeking more effective and satisfying roles for Mexican-Americans.