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**The Origins and History
of the Chicano Movement**

by Roberto Rodriguez

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April 1996

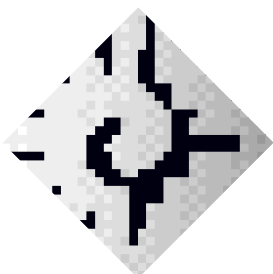
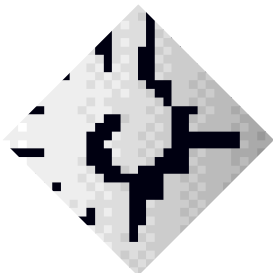
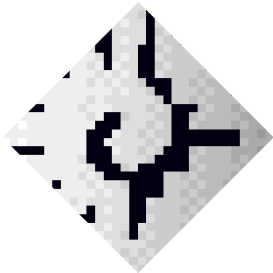
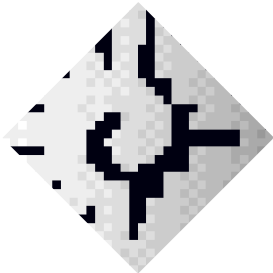
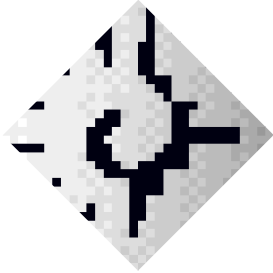
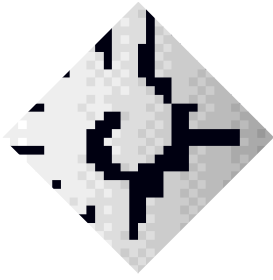


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The Origins and History of the Chicano Movement

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The Julian Samora Research Institute is the Midwest's premier policy research and outreach center to the Hispanic community. The Institute's mission includes:

- *Generation of a program of research and evaluation to examine the social, economic, educational, and political condition of Latino communities.*
- *Transmission of research findings to academic institutions, government officials, community leaders, and private sector executives through publications, public policy seminars, workshops, and consultations.*
- *Provision of technical expertise and support to Latino communities in an effort to develop policy responses to local problems.*
- *Development of Latino faculty, including support for the development of curriculum and scholarship for Chicano/Latino Studies.*

The Origins and History of the Chicano Movement

Some mark the beginning of the Chicano resistant movement when Columbus was met by a fusillade of arrows in his first attempt to land in the Americas. Others set its beginning at the time of the defense of Tenochtitlan in 1521 (now Mexico City) — pitting the Cuauhtemoc-led forces against the Spanish invaders. Others set it at the end of the Mexican American War in 1848, when Mexico lost half of its territory to the United States and its Mexican residents became “strangers in their own lands.”

The modern Chicano political movement, most scholars agree, began during the mid 1960’s — a time coinciding with the Black power movement.

“It was a time of decolonization struggles around the world and global revolution,” says educator, Elizabeth Martinez, author of various books, including “500 Years of Chicano History.”

In the 1960’s, the Chicano movement was both a civil/human rights struggle and a movement for liberation. In this realm, universities became one of the focal points of protest in the movement. Some of the principal demands were to open up of the doors of universities to people of color and the establishment of Chicano studies — which was envisioned — through “El Plan de Santa Barbara” — as a place where the intellectual work of the movement could take place, at the service of the Chicano community.

Ada Sosa-Riddell, director of the Chicana/Latina Center, University of California at Davis, says that Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA) and Chicano studies represent two of the long-lasting legacies of the Chicano movement. However, with the advent of the anti-affirmative action mood of the country — we may well see the death of ethnic studies, she says.

“But you can’t destroy Chicano studies, she says. “You would have to burn the literature.”

Chicano and Chicana Movements

In terms of the Chicano movement, perhaps it’s more appropriate to speak of movements because the struggles in the different parts of the country were many, with separate goals and visions and unique histories. Some of them included: the struggle to improve the lives of farm workers, the effort to end Jim Crow style segregation and police repression, the land grant struggles, the struggle to improve educational opportunities and the struggle for political representation and self-determination.

In time, other movements blossomed, specifically, the struggle for gender equality, access to higher education, immigrant rights and a literary and artistic revolution which spoke to cultural rebirth and a rediscovery of *mestizo*/indigenous roots and self-definition.

This was brown power. And it was also the building of Aztlan.

For some, building Aztlan (the U.S. Southwest — or the lands stolen from Mexico during the Mexican-American War) literally meant fighting for a sovereign nation, while for others, it was the spiritual building of a people.

Each of these movements spawned hundreds of organizations such as the United Farm Worker’s Union, *La Raza Unida Party*, *La Alianza de Pueblos Libres*, the Brown Berets, The National Chicano Moratorium, *CASA - Hermandad General de Trabajadores*, The Crusade For Justice, the Mexican American Youth Organization, MEChA, the August 29th Movement and *Comision Femenil Nacional Mexicana*.

During this time of great social upheaval, political fervor and cultural rebirth, the Chicano movement was hardly unified. The reasons: lack of historical memory, regionalism and sectarianism, but also government efforts to destroy this nascent movement.

The 1960's and '70's were an exciting time, says Lea Ybarra, associate provost for academic affairs at California State University at Fresno. "We felt we could make a difference."

At Fresno State, where she began her studies, there was only a handful of Chicano and Chicana students. Today, there are more than 4,000. And now, students take things for granted: "We are witnessing a new phenomenon: the professors are more radical than the students," she states.

Luis Arroyo, professor and chair of Chicano and Latino studies at California State University of Long Beach, says that the Chicano movement began as a movement for dignity and self respect. During that phase — of struggling to be recognized as a people — there was a sense of unity.

Yet, once an attempt was made to define the movement and give it an ideology "We began to develop competing definitions as to what the movement was," says Arroyo.

To this day, those competing definitions continue to shape how scholars define what the movement was or wasn't, when it started, when and if it ended and what it should be. A spillover of that conflict included what to call people of Mexican-origin and if the word Chicano and Chicana included people with origins than Mexico.

Teresa Cordova, feminist Chicana scholar at the University of New Mexico says that an analysis of the Chicano movement can not be reduced to a European "great men in history" model (or great women), because it was a social movement.

Those who say the Chicano movement is dead, she adds, reveal their own disconnection: "Anyone saying the movement is dead means he's dead!"

Many of the past activists — many of whom were students — are today part of the environmental justice movement, work with youth, in health or legal clinics or teach in schools, she says. Many are also now senior scholars. "When we focus on the big names, we're missing the point. It didn't function that way," says Cordova. "There were lots of soldiers."

To the thesis that the Chicano movement is dead, Ada Sosa-Riddell replies: "No, but there's a lot of people trying to kill it."

Precursors and the Missing Generation

What differentiates the Chicano movement from earlier Mexican civil rights struggles is its national character, its mass nature and its strong student base at colleges and universities.

Indeed, the role of students was unique in the 1960's and 1970's. The university became both a political battleground and a focal point of protest regarding its elitist nature in keeping people of color and working class students outside of its doors.

While there had always been political resistance since the Mexican-American War, and while there had been student activism on a smaller scale during the 1930's and 1940's, it was not until after World War II that Mexican Americans began to be visible on college campuses. However, it was not until the 1960's — as a result of educational opportunity programs — that Chicanos/Chicanas streamed unto campuses in unprecedented numbers.

Their prior absence was generally due to segregation/discrimination in the educational system, says Carlos Muñoz, professor at UC Berkeley and author of "Youth, Identity, and Power," a book that chronicles the Chicano movement.

The exception, particularly in the 19th Century, were the children of landed elites.

As such, there was no intellectual tradition in the Mexican American community in higher education similar to that which has existed in the African American community. The reason, says Muñoz, is that because after the Mexican American War, Whites did not feel a responsibility to educate Mexican Americans. Thus, there was never a push to create Mexican American colleges, similar to the Black colleges.

Absent a large presence in higher education, Mexican American public scholars debated the issues of the day in newspapers, as opposed to lecture halls.

As an example, *El Clamor Público*, published by Francisco P. Ramirez in Los Angeles in the 1850's, provided a forum for the discontented Mexican community in the United States.

Arturo Madrid, the Murchison Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Trinity University, says that contrary to popular belief, there is an untapped wealth of literature in Mexico about the Mexican-origin population in the United States prior to 1960. This was the era of McCarthyism and large-scale deportations of Mexicans that were both indiscriminate, and also selectively targeted against Mexican political, labor and community leaders — “against anyone that was suspect,” he says.

With a few exceptions, the effect, was to leave in place, a less combative Mexican American intellectual leadership, says Madrid.

Arroyo agrees, saying that in his research, he has uncovered a wealth of information regarding writings, books and writers by immigrants prior to the 1960's. One such writer was Ramon Welch, he says, who wrote political commentaries and was a social activist in the 1950's prior to being deported.

Felix Gutierrez, director of the Freedom Forum's Pacific Media Center, whose parents were journalists and student and activists during the 1930's-1950's, says that political activism has always been a part of the Mexican American community. “What people were talking about in the 1960's, we were living in the 1950's,” he says.

Gutierrez himself represents a link between the “Mexican American Movement” of the 1930's-50's — whose motto was “Progress through Education” — and the 1960's movement. He, along with Ralph Guzman, were the faculty advisors for the first United Mexican American Student organization at California State University at Los Angeles.

Incidentally, Gutierrez followed in his parents footsteps, obtaining a Masters degree in journalism from Northwestern University. Yet at a time when whites could obtain a job in newsrooms without degrees, Gutierrez could not obtain a job in mainstream media. After a career in academe, he is now considered one of the nation's top media experts.

While Gutierrez sees the birth of the Chicano movement as a resurgence of the earlier 1930's-50's movement, he distinguishes the 1960's as “a period of turbulence.”

One of the principal parts of the country where that turbulence manifested was in Crystal City, Texas where in 1963, Chicanos took over city council in a part of the country that had long been dominated by agricultural *patrones*.

The program of activists there, which is documented in the book “MAYO: Avant-garde to the Chicano Movement in Texas,” by UC Riverside professor Armando Navarro, “was to eliminate and replace the gringo,” says Jose Angel Gutierrez, director, Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Arlington

Struggling against Jim Crow institutions, Chicano activists also won school board elections in South Texas but found out that Anglos remain embedded in power, as power brokers, as teachers and administrators. This knowledge, says Angel Gutierrez, is what triggered the creation of La Raza Unida Party — the first and only political party for Chicanos: “We became the electoral arm of the Chicano movement.”

Links to the Black Civil Rights Movement

Elizabeth Martinez, a past director of the New York chapter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and affiliated with the organization since 1960, says that the Chicano movement had not simply symbolic links with the civil rights movement but actual ties.

SNCC was one of the principal groups involved in sit-ins at lunch counters and voter education in efforts to desegregate the South.

In 1963, after four little girls were killed by a Klan bomb in Birmingham, Alabama, Martinez was enraged to the point where she joined the organization as a full-time member.

In the Freedom Summer of 1964, shortly after the bodies of three murdered civil rights workers were found, Martinez recalls driving through the Mississippi Delta, thinking that the place was “stained with so much blood of so many black people who just tried to register people to vote.”

Martinez notes that in 1965, as a member of SNCC, she delivered a speech at the historic farm worker march from Delano, Calif., to Sacramento, in solidarity with the United Farm Worker's Union. In 1968, on behalf of SNCC, she traveled to Albuquerque, to connect with the Chicano land struggle associated with New Mexico and to help found "El Grito del Norte" newspaper. "I went for two weeks and I stayed for eight years," she says.

New Mexico had drawn the attention of SNCC because in 1967, members of the Alianza had staged an armed raid on a courthouse, protesting the Anglo theft of New Mexican land grants. Prior to the courthouse raid, the farm worker's movement — begun in 1963 — had drawn the support of Martin Luther King Jr.

In 1966, aware of the uneasy race relations within the civil rights movement, she wrote an article titled "Neither Black or White." Even then, she pointed to a problem that Latinos today often observe: when it comes to race, Latinos don't matter.

Many other Chicanos were involved with the Black civil rights movement. Many of them later became instrumental in forming linkages between the Chicano, Black Power, and the American Indian Movement.

Martinez, who is of Oaxacan indigenous ancestry, grew up riding the back of the bus in the nation's capital. That experience is what created a bond with her to the civil rights movement.

The Development of Chicano Studies

In later years, as the struggle over access to a higher education became increasingly important, high schools, colleges and universities became not simply focal points of protest but also recruitment grounds for the different movements.

Carlos Muñoz, one of the many principals involved in the political development of the 1960's movement, says that the relatively large influx of Chicano students into universities unleashed both a political movement focused on civil and human rights, but also an intellectual movement that both challenged historical knowledge and created the discipline of Chicano studies.

UCLA professor, Juan Gomez Quiñonez, author of various books, including *Roots of Chicano Politics, 1600-1940* and *Chicano Politics: Reality and Promise, 1940-1990*, says that while resistance has always been present in the Chicano community, "Something different did happen in the 1960's that wasn't there before. It was an attitude."

That attitude was reflected in the concepts of Chicanos belonging to a community and that Raza were not foreigners, but indigenous to the Southwest. Quiñonez notes that the placard "This is our Land," first appeared at a rally at UCLA in 1967.

Prior to the Chicano movement, many people of Mexican-origin privately spoke of the Southwest as Mexican/indigenous land, but it was not until the Chicano movement that it was done so in a public/political manner.

Books such as *Occupied America*, by CSU Northridge professor, Rodolfo Acuña — which was widely used in Chicano studies classes — created the intellectual underpinnings that rejected the notions — accepted by previous generations — that Chicanos were immigrants or foreigners, that they wanted to assimilate and that they were docile.

When Chicano studies was created, its purpose was to give intellectual support to the movement and to listen to the voices of both men and women and the community organizations. The community produced the ideas and Chicano studies provided the intellectual support, says Quiñonez.

Prior to the development of Chicano studies as a discipline, very little knowledge existed about the Chicano, says Refugio Rochín, director of the Julian Samora Research Institute at Michigan State University. Neither was there a Chicano studies curriculum and very few Chicano professors.

Samora, who taught at Notre Dame from 1959-1985, along with folklorist Americo Paredes and scholar labor activist, Ernesto Galarza, — was one of the few scholars who studied Mexican Americans and the Mexican American community. Today, the JSRI, founded in 1989, carries on the work that Samora pioneered, the study of Latinos in the Midwest.

In the 1950's and early 1960's, because the scholarship of those three and a few others was not widely known, students, like Rochín, who were interested in studying Mexicans, had to rely on Anglo scholars.

After a stint with the Peace Corps in Colombia in the early '60's, Rochín says his experience in Latin America reaffirmed his interest in his roots. But there was nowhere to study Mexican Americans except in the Latin American departments. "Anglos were teaching us about ourselves," he says.

It was the same mentality that Peter Skerry (*Mexican Americans: The Ambivalent Minority*) writes about today — "the Anglo model of wanting us to assimilate," says Rochín.

With the advent Chicano studies programs, for the first time, Chicano and Chicana scholars began to produce knowledge about their own community.

"Chicano studies changed the way we viewed the land we lived on," and it also allowed Chicanos to see U.S. imperialism, says Rochín. It also connected Chicanos to their indigenous roots and Native American studies, he says.

The movement also created the concept of "*sin fronteras*" — "the concept of no borders," says Rochín.

Rochín notes also that while there are a few Chicano research centers or departments throughout the Midwest, such as at MSU, Wayne State, the University of Minnesota and the University of Wisconsin, most were developed in California where Chicanos were numerous, but in the minority. This contrasts with a general lack of Chicano studies programs along the U.S./Mexico border where Chicanos are in the majority.

The body of knowledge, and the resultant literature, which is vast and growing, produced and recovered by a generation of Chicano and Chicana scholars, has proved that Chicano studies is a discipline, not a sub-discipline, adds Rochín. "Chicano studies has its own merit and its literature is unique."

Chicano and Chicana studies has pioneered the study of the family, bilingual issues, immigrant studies and the study of *mestizaje*, says Rochín. The study of living and dealing with duality can be helpful to societies that are also now having to deal with similar populations and ethnic tensions, he says.

Despite this, Chicano and Chicana studies is not on safe ground and it has little to do with scholarship as opposed to political attacks and back door attacks against their budgets.

Rochín says that multiculturalism has actually "killed interest [on the part of universities] in Chicano studies." Additionally, the notion of grouping all Latinos under the rubric "Hispanic" has also weakened and diluted the intent of Chicano studies, he says. Now, professors with little or no connection to Chicano studies get hired, simply by the fact that they are from Spain or South America. "We're still suffering from that," he says.

Jose Angel Gutierrez, of UT Arlington, whose center was recently created, says that Chicano studies centers/department have stopped being advocates. The exception, he says, are campuses such as CSU Northridge. Unlike other departments around the country, CSUN's department has historically been connected to political action — not simply quaint and disconnected ideological theories that focus on the self, he says.

The center's contribution to the discipline, he says, will be to teach how to win an election and how to take community control. With his long experience in organizing, he says he will also contribute advice on how not to make mistakes. "I'm not a footnote."

Madrid agrees that after the initial phase of Chicano studies, Chicano and Chicana scholars — not by their choosing — generally confined their studies to the university. This is what motivated a number of scholars, including himself, to create the Tomas Rivera Center think tank in 1984.

“It [TRC] was the first place where on a sustained basis, the intellectual research on the Chicano/Latino community was connected with persons who shaped and influence public policy,” says Madrid. As opposed to leaving the research on a university shelf, the idea was “to bring intellectual fire-power [to public policy debates],” he says.

Maria Herrera Sobek, a professor at UC Irvine is the kind of scholar that was both a product and a participant of the Chicano movement. Born of farm worker immigrant parents, Sobek grew up in a shack and attended segregated schools in Texas and also picked cotton. Today, a renowned poet, she says her background helped shaped her academic studies. Her work on folklore and *corridos* — or ballads — comes directly from her upbringing, she says.

She says that Chicano studies has been great for the university and the community, however, she agrees that Chicano scholars have not been successful at presenting their research to the public. This is particularly true on the issue of bilingual education. Despite the fact that all major research shows that bilingual education works, “The opposition has shaped the debate,” she says.

Antonia Castañeda, a history professor at the University of Texas at Austin, says that Chicano Studies challenged the structure of the university. But because it is relatively a new field, it has historically been in a struggle for survival. That’s part of the reason why many scholars did not engage in public policy debates outside of the academy. “Linkages [still] need to be made,” she says.

“The issues of housing, health, education and child welfare have not gone away,” says Castañeda. “Some of us have made it, but “Power will always make room for individuals.”

The Rise of Chicana Feminist Scholars

Ybarra was present when the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Scholars (NACCS) was formed. “By the time NACCS was created in 1974, women had to be taken into account,” she says. For example, as an undergraduate, she had been the chair of the Third World Coalition at UC Berkeley, where women were in many leadership positions.

Despite this, men had to be constantly challenged for their lack of attention to the issues of women. The women of NACCS did not allow themselves to be walked upon, she says: “There were so few of us, we were assertive. We had to be.”

Despite this, NACCS did not have a conference dedicated to women until 1983.

Castañeda says that the Chicano movement, — which was a movement for liberation — was fraught with internal contradictions: “It was male-defined. It was sexist, misogynistic and homophobic. The movement was about economic, educational and political equality, but fundamentally, it was not about gender equality.”

Contrary to the picture of the ideal Mexican family — promoted by Chicano scholars — in which the woman stays at home to raise the children, Mexican women have always worked, at both wage and unwaged labor, says Castañeda.

The challenge for Chicana scholars is to both dispel such myths, but also to continue to examine the intersection between class, race and gender, she adds. “For instance, Chicano scholars have examined police brutality, but not internal [domestic] violence directed at women.”

Just as importantly, the anti-affirmative action mood of the country has Castañeda “terrified,” because it will shut off the pipeline of Chicana and Chicano scholars currently being trained at universities. “That is their [foes] intent.”

Chicana feminist scholars are exploring issues ignored by Chicanos, such as the role of women and gender in colonial society, early labor organizing efforts by Chicanas, and the role of women in community, civil and human rights organizations. Chicanas and Chicana lesbians are also at the forefront of literature and other critical issues that affect all of the Chicano/Chicana community, says Castañeda.

At the end of the 1970’s, Sosa-Ridell, who was part of the early Chicana Caucus within NACCS, helped co-found *Mujeres Activas en Letras en Cambio Social* (Active Women in Letters for Social Change), to deal with specific Chicana feminist issues.

Prior to Chicana feminists stepping forward, dealing with feminist issues “was seen as White women stuff.”

This emphasis on examining women’s issues caused a big conflict. “The biggest conflict was internal — among Chicanas” — says Sosa-Riddell. “We were passionate.” When Chicanas debated Chicanos, Chicanas didn’t take their male counterparts arguments seriously. “What do you expect, they’re men,” was the attitude Chicana scholars had.

Some of the issues that created heavy conflicts were issues of how to deal with issues of lesbians. At issue was what it meant to be woman-centered,” says Sosa Riddell. Yet, to this day, many of the same issues cause intense conflict, she adds.

MALCS has allowed for a full articulation of feminism, says Sosa-Ridell. For instance, Cynthia Orozco, visiting scholar, University of New Mexico has challenged the 1969 “El Plan de Santa Barbara,” the document which laid the foundation for Chicano studies as excluding women.

A Resurgence of the Chicano/Chicana Movement

Many scholars maintain that ever since the death of farm labor leader Cesar Chavez in 1993, there has been a resurgence in the Chicano movement, particularly at colleges and universities nationwide.

This new activism peaked in 1994 when hundreds of thousands of junior and senior high and college students across the country walked out of schools and held marches and rallies in opposition to California’s anti-immigrant Proposition 187. “The mass mobilization against 187 reaffirmed the need to be unified,” says Angela Acosta, a graduate student at the University of New Mexico. “The Chicano movement shaped my life,” says Acosta. Yet as someone who worked against 187, she believes the new movement isn’t limited to Chicanos, but to Latinos and other immigrants as well.

This new activism is also being manifested in the current multiracial movement to defend affirmative action in which men and women and members of all races are struggling jointly to fight off the anti-affirmative movement.

Ybarra says that despite the continuing negative attacks against Latinos and other people of color, “We [the 60’s generation] have to be proud. There’s still a lot to do, but we have to remember that we did accomplish a lot.”

Ybarra concludes: “There will always be a need for Chicano studies. It is a discipline, it’s not taught in high schools and our color’s not going to change.”

Genevieve Aguilar, a senior at Hanks High School in El Paso, who recently saw a preview of the forthcoming PBS special “Chicano,” says that the Chicano movement is definitely not dead — that it lives in students like herself who battle against students who believe that racism no longer exists and who don’t see a need for Chicano or Latino programs.

When students ask Aguilar, who has been a member of the educational National Hispanic Institute since she was in the ninth grade, as to why there isn’t an institute for Whites, she responds: “There is: It’s called government.”

Maria Jimenez, a long-time human rights activist and director of the Immigration and Law Enforcement Monitoring Project with the American Friends Service Committee in Houston says that the proposed (on Oct. 12, 1996) Latino march on Washington may well be the culmination of 25-30 years of struggle of the Chicano movement: “It’s the culmination of a historical experience,” she says.

She views the call as “a maturation of political forces.” While acknowledging that there have been thousands of Raza marches throughout the country, none have ever been staged in Washington. Latinos and Latinas have always had local marches because they’ve responded to the local conditions they live in.

Now, it’s time to show a national presence she says. The message the marchers will deliver, she says is: “We’re here, we’ve always been here and we’re not going away.”

Related Readings

For more on the Chicano/a Movement, the Julian Samora Research Institute recommends:

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