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Dominant-Minority Relations in 1964

by Julian Samora

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Abstract

The paper was presented as part of the Provost's Lecture Series at Michigan State University on March 11, 1964.

About the Author: Julian Samora

Dr. Julian Samora was born March 1, 1920 in Pagosa Springs, Colo., where he attended grade and high schools. Receipt of a Frederick G. Bonfiles Foundation grant enabled him to enter Colorado's Adams State College, where he received his Bachelors Degree in 1942. He taught in a Colorado high school before continuing his efforts for an advanced degree by virtue of three scholarships. In 1947, he received his Master's in Sociology from Colorado State University at Fort Collins. He had, by then, begun teaching at Adams State College and continued for more than a decade (1944-1955). He enrolled in Washington University in St. Louis, where he earned his Ph.D. in Sociology and Anthropology in 1953. He was the first Mexican American to receive a doctorate in this field.

After teaching at Michigan State University, Dr. Samora accepted an associate professorship in sociology at the University of Notre Dame in 1959. He was also a visiting professor at a number of outstanding universities, including the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. In the spring of 1985, he retired from teaching.

Throughout his retirement, Dr. Samora provided a wide range of insight and direction for Latino educators, professionals, and students. He had a major impact within the field of Sociology as well as all social sciences in general because of the number of students he personally mentored over the years. He was not only a pioneer in Mexican-American studies, but he was also a National Council of La Raza co-founder. He also created the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), which impacted bilingual education and immigration nationwide. In 1989, Michigan State University established a Latino research organization and named it after him - the Julian Samora Research Institute.

Because of his experience and expertise, Dr. Samora served on many important boards and commissions in both the governmental and private sectors. Among the most salient are the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the President's Commission on Rural Poverty. He also served as an editor for *International Migrant Review*, *Nuestro*, and other notable journals. He likewise directed the Mexico Border Studies Project at Notre Dame. Over the span of four decades, he received multiple prestigious grants and awards, including the White House Heritage Award in 1985 and Mexico's Aguila Azteca Medal in 1991.

Julian Samora was always deeply interested in research. He presented the results of his findings in countless journals and books. Among his most important publications are *La Raza: Forgotten Americans* (1966), *Mexican-Americans in a Midwest Metropolis* (1967), *Los Mojados: The Wetback Story* (1971), and *Gunpowder Justice: A Reassessment of the Texas Rangers* (1979). At the time of his death in February 1996, he was working on a historical account of four families living in the Southwest from the 16th Century to the present.

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Dominant-Minority Relations in 1964

The United States is populated by people from most of the nations of the world who represent a diversity of cultures. Throughout its history, this nation has been able to accommodate these populations — some more easily than others — depending on the time and circumstances of their entry to this country. The usual history of an immigrant group (besides those who have been conquered such as the American Indian and the Spanish-speaking) has been that of settlement in urban areas and occupying the lower strata of society; having made an early resolution in favor of acculturation, they have begun the relatively slow process of vertical social mobility.

The children of the first generation of the immigrants — perhaps marginal to some degree — have usually been committed to acculturation and the third generation has often been considered, and considers itself, fully acculturated,

In this paper I should like to discuss one facet of dominant and minority relationships, in general, and the situation of the Spanish-speaking population of the United States, in particular.

Drawing from Wagley and Harris, a minority can be defined as a subordinate segment of complex state societies, having physical or cultural traits which are held in low esteem by the dominant segments of the society. They are bound together by these special traits, and by special disabilities which these traits bring. Membership in the minority is transmitted by rule of descent, which is capable of affiliating succeeding generations even in the absence of readily apparent physical or cultural traits. Minorities, by choice or necessity, tend to marry within the group.¹ The existence of a minority implies a dominant group.

Mardin and Meyer consider a dominant group to be “...one within a national state whose distinctive culture and/or physiognomy is established as superior in the society and which treats differentially and unequally other groups in the society with other cultures or physiognomy.”²

Some time ago, Louis Wirth suggested a typology of minorities, taking into account their number and size, the degree to which minority status involved friction with the dominant group or exclusion from participation in the life of the total society, the nature of the social arrangements governing the relationships, and the goals toward which both groups were striving in quest of a new and more satisfactory equilibrium.³

Using that criteria, and stressing the goals toward which minorities direct their ideas, sentiments, and actions, Wirth typed minorities into pluralistic, assimilationist, secessionist, and militant groups.⁴ With very few exceptions, only the first two types — pluralistic and assimilationist — appear relevant to our consideration in the United States.

A pluralistic minority is one which seeks toleration for its differences. The range of toleration may vary from freedom to practice a dissenting religion to the existence of sub-societies. The dominant society must, of course, be sufficiently secure to allow certain cultural autonomy. The assimilationist minority works toward complete acceptance by the dominant and merger with the larger society.⁵

Perhaps it is important to look at pluralism at two levels — one level is cultural and the other is social or structural.

By cultural pluralism is meant the maintenance of a distinctive way of life which differs from that of the dominant society. This would suggest, in the extreme, a sub-society within its own culture. In the U.S., the existence of such a sub-society is virtually impossible. It may be possible for a minority to practice a different religion, to emphasize its food or dress patterns, and even — perhaps — to retain certain customs related to marriage, family socialization, or health and disease. A minority may also retain its native language and attempt to perpetuate its historical and cultural heritage. The range of toleration by the dominant society varies, of course, in relation to the social and cultural condition presented by the minority.

In order to participate in American society, however, it would seem that a minority must have internalized sufficiently the major part of American culture. That is to say, to hold a job, rent a house, enroll children in school, seek medical care, take advantage of public and private welfare agencies, buy food and clothes, vote, etc. A minority member must be cognizant of and knowledgeable about much of American culture.

American society assures a degree of cultural conformity in at least three ways: through the public school system, the mass media, and through the personnel of agencies most likely to come into contact with minorities.

- 1) The public school system, which influences the great majority of the population for 6-10 years, appears to do at least two things. When perceived necessary, it tries to do away with cultural pluralism by discouraging and forbidding cultural differences. Thus, children are discouraged to speak their native language, wear unfamiliar dress, and encouraged to behave like the dominant group, then rewarded for doing so. At the same time the school system attempts to instill the standard value orientations of freedom, conformity, equality, efficiency, and many others. In many ways it may become clear to the minority that the value orientations and ideals which they are taught and the treatment which they receive — as well as the opportunities which are open to them — are in contradiction to each other.
- 2) The influence of the mass media — while not so apparent — must be an important factor in presenting to the minority a large segment of American culture in terms of ideals, values, beliefs, and attitudes. One must consider, however, that inaccessibility to the mass media on the part of the minority may be an important obstacle to its influence.
- 3) Besides school teachers, minorities come in contact with a variety of professionals and sub-professionals who attempt to influence them in a number of ways. The influence is actually in the direction of conformity to middle class norms. Norms — such as cleanliness, thriftiness, punctuality, personal achievement, and individual responsibility — can be singled out.

This type of personnel — among them policemen, probation officers, visiting nurses, social workers, counselors, union officials — besides playing their professional and vocational roles, also impart cultural materials with sanctions attached.

From this viewpoint, cultural pluralism — except in a most limited sense — is more myth than reality. Most minorities emerge much more acculturated than generally appears. That is, most speak English, have attended school, and enroll their children in school. Their food patterns, clothing, housing, occupations, and recreation are likely to be more like those of the dominant society than those of a minority culture.

Turning to social pluralism — or perhaps more adequately, social separateness — it appears that the minority has a freer range of autonomy; this separateness is indeed encouraged by the dominant society.

I should like to suggest the more apparent areas in which social pluralism is evident. Certainly most primary group relationships for the minority are likely to be based along minority lines. Many voluntary associations, or subgroups within associations, reflect minority identification. Marriage and kinship relations reflect endogamous rules. Neighborhood and housing patterns closely follow minority membership. As a consequence, school districts are also likely to have this same identification. Even when minority teachers are hired, they are likely to be placed in schools and rooms having a highly dense minority population. Churches often are organized along these same lines, as are associations within churches. Although one cannot say that occupations, professions, and industries reflect social pluralism, many positions within occupational structures (quite often lower status) are reserved for minorities and there is limited access to higher status positions in many instances.

Leadership patterns develop in such a way that it is possible to identify both intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic leaders. The fact that the dominant society seeks spokesmen for the minority on issues involving both groups suggests the limited range of intercourse between them.

Cultural pluralism is discouraged in this society and great effort is exerted for the acculturation of minorities. At the same time, social pluralism is encouraged.

If the observation is correct — that there is considerable acculturation on the part of the minorities and much pressure for this — then perhaps the values, aspirations, and expectations developed are not unlike those of the dominant society. Most would desire educational advantages, employment, justice before the law, material comforts, and equality of opportunity. The limitations imposed through social pluralism, however, do not permit the attainment and achievement of the aspirations developed. It is here, rather than in cultural differences, that we may find the source of much of the conflict and hostility in dominant minority relationships.

There is another dimension to the problem which is most important in preventing the eruption of violence and which stabilizes dominant minority relations. American social structure is open enough to admit minority members who are highly acculturated and socially mobile. There are some exceptions to this, which can be explained in racial rather than socio-cultural terms. Thus, the siphoning off of the middle-class, successful, minority member into the dominant society prevents many protest and nativistic movements, which would be forthcoming if the barriers were rigid. It also thwarts developing leadership.

The Spanish-speaking population in the United States is a case in point. The Spanish-speaking people have been in this country for a great number of years. Yet it is probably safe to say that this large ethnic group is one that has acculturated the least in American society.

This population in the United States today constitutes a very large heterogeneous group numbering about 6 million. Some 3.5 million are concentrated in the five Southwestern states. My remarks will be limited to these. Of those who reside in the Southwest, some 82% are located in the states of California and Texas, each having about 1.4 million. This population in 1940 was predominantly

a rural population. In 1950, 66% were considered to live in urban areas and, in 1960, 86% were classified as urban. It is a population that is growing rapidly due to high fertility rates, which are higher than the rates for the total white population and the non-white population in the respective states. A second factor for the population increase is the large migrations yearly from Mexico. Over 50% of the population is under 20 years of age, indicating high rates of dependency, high proportions of the population in infancy and child-youth status, and a high demand for community resources such as schools, health, recreation, and welfare. The majority can be classified in a category of low socio-economic status.

The housing situation for this group, according to the 1960 census, is inferior both in quantity and quality in relation to the Anglo and the non-white population. Their housing shows extensive deterioration, over-crowding, and lack of bath and toilet facilities. They pay proportionately more rent for their accommodations and get less for what they pay. The majority live among themselves in distinct areas, whether they reside in major cities, rural areas, or small towns, villages, or migratory labor camps. This segregation — whether voluntary or involuntary — is either the result of the accident of birth, the occupation of the individual, low socio-economic status, desire to live by relatives or friends with a common heritage, or discrimination by the community. Morbidity and infant mortality rates are high. The instances of broken families — from either divorce, separation or widowhood — are high, as is the frequency of delinquent and criminal behavior. Their educational achievement is notably lower than for Anglos and the non-whites in all five of the Southwestern states, and — in some states — as high as 52% of the Spanish-speaking have completed four years or less of schooling, placing them in the category of “functionally illiterate.” School and classroom segregation, although diminishing now, have been common in the past. School dropout statistics are also high.

Their unemployment rates are considerably higher and their income is comparatively lower than that of the dominant population. A large portion of this group is represented in the migratory streams, which means a situation which involves an inequality

of opportunity for education and employment as well as including much child labor and its consequences. They also have larger proportions in low status occupations. The lack of opportunity to obtain apprenticeship training is suggested and both direct and indirect evidence of discrimination in employment is also evident. There is some evidence to suggest that, in many areas, they suffer from police brutality, differential arrests and conviction patterns, and exclusion from jury duty. The pattern, however, is quite variable throughout the United States.

Voting patterns and general political participation vary widely, too. In a very few areas, there is complete control of town and country; in other areas, there is hardly any participation. The exercise of the right to vote — whether high or low — does not seem to change appreciably the general socio-cultural situation of the Spanish-speaking nor the opportunities open to them. In some instances, there is evidence of barriers to the right to vote.

Discrimination in public accommodations, swimming pools, theatres, restaurants, and hotels has decreased considerably, but is still a source of complaint. Much of this discrimination is on a social class rather than on an ethnic base.

The effects of the domestic and foreign agricultural labor system, the commuter worker system in border cities, and the illegal entrance from Mexico for purposes of employment are among the most serious problems. The effects of this consist of unfair competition for domestic laborers, depression of wages, exploitation of labor, deprivation of civil rights, categorical retardation in education, and the perpetuation of a vicious social system. Leadership among the group has been slow to develop and — while at the present time two national organizations are recognized — there has yet to develop anything as effective as the NAACP or the Urban League. The problem of developing leadership is closely tied to the social class factor. That is, the emerging leaders are generally middle class professionals, but would-be followers are largely lower class. More often than not, they don't understand each other.

Thus, one of the largest minorities — whose members have become acculturated to a greater or lesser degree — live much of their lives apart from the dominant society. The home, family, recreation, and neighborhood relations — as well as the voluntary associations — are perhaps more separated than the more formal institutional roles.

Returning, then, to the type of minority, I would label it “assimilationist.” Pluralism exists, but from my viewpoint this is to be understood as more social than cultural.

The problems of conflict — and there are many — are to be understood more in terms of the limitations which social pluralism imposes on the realization of the aspirations and goals.

Endnotes

1. Wagley, Charles and Marvin Harris, *Minorities in the New World: Six Case Studies*. N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1958, p. 10.
2. Marden, Charles F. and Gladys Meyer, *Minorities in American Society* (second edition), N.Y.: American Book Co., 1962, p. 25.
3. Wirth, Louis, “The Problem of Minority Groups,” in Linton, Ralph (ed). *The Science of Man in the World Crisis*. N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1945, p.352.
4. Ibid, p. 354
5. Ibid, p, 357