**From Historical and Cultural Identity to the Politics of Identity:**

**Relevance for Community Organizing**

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Juan Gomez-Quiñones clearly points out in his writings that cultural identity for the Mexican American working classes of the 1960s and 1970s was not questioned. In our own ethnographic experience about working class Mexican Americans of that generation we agree with Professor Gomez-Quiñones. That generation and the previous ones had in their intrinsic signifying and symbolic expressive culture the reality of their economic and social everyday life. In their experience, their Mexican American culture had the cultural elements, values and practices to survive, be resilient and resist before the oppressive and exploitative Anglo American society.

Américo Paredes brings the voice of the oppressed Mexican Americans of South Texas to be heard in his counter hegemonic folkloric research. He focuses on the verbal artistry of Mexicanos from jokes, proverbs and songs to corridos or ballads, and in folk practices like curanderismo and traditional religious celebrations. The Mexican Americans that inherited and continued re-creating these cultural folk practices did not have their cultural identity and their historic experience in question. It was that cultural identity that was their strength and their way to continue identifying generationally; a culture of border conflict that contested the hegemonic vicious attacks from different sectors of the American society.

The generations that evolved in the Chicano Movement centered their cultural identity in the symbolic strength of an indigenous past, of collective memories of revised Mexican American folklore and of Mexican revolutionary leaders and artists of industrial modernism that guided a path of liberation from poverty and ignorance to organized syndicalism and social and educational justice organizations. However, that more radical cultural agenda stayed within the “intelligentsia” of the movement and did not make its way through the vertiginous changes of postmodern social and economic realities of the last decades of the 20th century that younger generations were experiencing, nor with the realities of post-colonial realities and paradigms.

Cultural Identity of Mexican Americans becomes the center of debate when assimilative processes in the history of Mexican Americans take place. It is at this juncture of cultural hybridization via the economic, social and educational desired mobility with a parallel political mobilization of integration into the hegemonic society that the “ethnihood” of the Mexican Americans becomes multi-faceted and selective.

It is the national statistical discourse which Simply by asking how we identify ourselves, as Hispanics or Latinos, the U.S. Census questionnaire, a statistical instrument, is telling us how to answer. Further, in some instances, there could exist the choice of identifying ourselves as Mexican Americans or Chicanos/as or as having Mexican ancestry. The language we speak predominantly could be another indicator: English, Spanish or both. Hispanics are the largest ethnic minority in the US, almost 17 per cent, or 52 million; of this 65% is of Mexican origin. The question is what is the cultural identity we are sharing?

For contemporary Mexican American people, cultural identity is an evolving and open ended concept. We are socially, culturally and linguistically a complex population that cannot be defined as a monolithic ethnic group. We have a very marked socio-economic class division, with its related diverse levels of education, political affiliations, socio-cultural ideologies, diverse race ancestries, historical geographical origins and historical genealogies, diverse religions, degree of language command in English, in Spanish and in bilingualism and differentiated gender identities.

In spite of this complex social and cultural making inside the Mexican American community, we still stand as a distinct and identifiable community within the American society. Defining our cultural identity takes us to one of the most critical questions: Do we all share a historical identity related to our dynamic cultural identity? A historical memory is needed to define our individual identity. Then, we can share our historical collective memory.

In mainstream American education, the Mexican American history has been tailored or silenced. When it is mentioned it is the version re-written, re-interpreted and owned by the dominant society. Throughout the generations, Mexican Americans have been increasingly disowning their own history. Attempting to map the next 50 years of our historical future requires revamping the foundations of a historical collective memory which we all should own, especially the newer generations whose historical memory has been diluted.

The historic memory is needed to know, understand and acknowledge the struggles and grief of past generations and their efforts to bring to the newer ones a better social and economic existence, but not at the expense of having historical amnesia. Re-owning our collective historical memory will reinforce our capabilities to live in solidarity with our own Mexican American differentiated communities and with any other communities in need.

Human processes in action are eminently transformative and they keep continuously changing our diverse levels of experience; it is the historical collective memory, the sharing of our historical past that constitutes our “true collective self.” If we all own our true historical collective self, the differences within our community in terms of diverse experiences of place; social interactions at the diverse levels also in our American society; changes in traditions and cultural practices; will be an asset in our collective experience and not a denial of what we were, but an affirmation of what we are, and what we expect to become.

Jose Limón expresses very succinctly but clearly how self-defeating can be the blurring sense of a Mexican American historical and cultural identity in a young person when confronting the rejection of the hegemonic other: a student attending an elite university, and somehow representative of the postmodern generation, is unable to sort out how an insult to his insulted ethnicity could express solidarity with members of the Mexican working class. This experience, which is not isolated, elicits the need to share our Mexican American historical collective memory.

The question is how to transcend from a Mexican American historical and cultural identity to a politics of identity where our “ethnihood” can talk to a collective cultural identity in which the historic intersects with the political to advance the true collective “spirit” of a generation that has in its hands the possibility of understanding liberation and freedom with geo-solidarity and eco-solidarity. The collective experience of Mexican Americans has in its historical and cultural inheritance the results of the wrongs and the rights of their collective actions. Sorting out those faults and successes of our complex and evolving collective identity, and the immensely rich cultural creativity of our complex ancestry can lead us to build a clear and stronger future throughout the next fifty years.

Making use of our collective inherited cultural tools of everyday community life in solidarity can be extended to a politics of cultural organization actively organizing communities for the peaceful and just advancement of Mexican American, and other ethnic or cultural communities that are in solidarity with our experience. Then, we will be able, peacefully and justly, to coexist in the US, on the American continent and in the world without losing our inherited and cherished cultural and historical identity, without pretending to impose on any other collective identified group our economic or political power and our own world view. That has been our collective lesson.

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