



INTERVENTIONS

A Day Without Immigrants: The Racial and Class Politics of Immigrant Exclusion

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A Day Without Immigrants

1 May 2006 was a milestone in the struggle for worker, human, and immigrant rights, as well as US Chicano/Latino history. Over a million people, mostly Latino immigrants and their supporters, took to the streets of the US challenging anti-immigration forces. The protest was triggered by proposed legislation by James Sensenbrenner (R-Wisconsin), which would further militarize the US/Mexican border (Nevins 2001) and make undocumented persons felons. Anti-immigrant sentiment, while always a backdrop to US politics and culture, has been building since 9/11 and has reached a critical mass with the emergence of vigilante groups and draconian legislation, prompting Latina/o and immigrant communities into action. In this intervention, I summarize the anti-immigrant movement from the perspective of Los Angeles, which some consider “ground zero” of the movement, and pay particular attention to anti-immigrant sentiment among people of color, arguing that class politics are desperately needed to challenge the power of nationalism.

25 March marked the first major event of the current immigrant rights movement, with protests, marches and rallies held across the US. For many, this mobilization seemingly appeared out of nowhere.¹ For weeks, however, Spanish-language DJs took the lead in Los Angeles, urging over half a million to march downtown. Building on this momentum, organizers of the “March 25 Coalition” planned a nationwide boycott for 1 May. Riffing off the mockumentary, “A Day Without a Mexican”, the organizers envisioned immigrants and their supporters boycotting work, school, and other economic activities in order to demonstrate immigrants’ contributions to the US. The leadership, however, soon splintered on the strategy, with some arguing that a boycott could undermine

whatever moral authority immigrants had as workers. Consequently, two actions were planned for Los Angeles: a noontime march in downtown and a late afternoon march along Wilshire Boulevard for those who attended school or work. The noontime event was very grassroots and an overwhelmingly Latino affair. The latter march was more diverse, as it had the backing of many labor unions and the Catholic Church and was more institutional in nature. In addition, there were mobilizations in Santa Ana, Riverside, San Bernardino and other cities across the southland. The geography of the region was transformed by the boycott and marches—morning traffic was eerily nonexistent and commerce in central Los Angeles was largely shut down.

The atmosphere of the protests was festive and hopeful, with entire families marching. As a participant, it was the largest sea of humanity that I had ever experienced. I was moved by the courage and resilience of *mi gente* to come out in massive numbers, to demand their rights as workers, as human beings fully deserving of respect and dignity. Here was a people not only resisting efforts to criminalize them, but were demanding full amnesty and legalization. I was in awe that the “sleeping giant”, as pundits in the 1980s often referred to the Latino population, had awoken.

Yet, it is uncertain where this nascent movement will go. While there have been intense voter-registration efforts since spring, the immigrant-rights movement faces a number of internal obstacles—to say nothing of external opposition. The most significant internal tension within the movement is between more conservative and militant forces. The fact that two separate events were held only a few miles apart speaks volumes. The vast majority of immigrants are very clear on what they need: full amnesty. And while segments of the grassroots leadership have no trouble saying so, the more mainstream and moderate leadership does. Indeed, in a television interview Los Angeles mayor Antonio Villaraigosa explained that the protestors were marching for a “bi-partisan agreement” that would protect US borders as well as the rights of immigrants. Talk about a translation crisis! As often happens, the middle-class leadership, in this case, Chicano and Latino politicians, are repackaging the demands of the working class into a form that they feel will be acceptable to the establishment—and in the process, selling out the people. No elected official is demanding amnesty.

Besides the political cooptation of Latino “leaders”, the movement must also contend with such issues as Mexican nationalism (an ever-present challenge), escalating anti-immigrant activism, and increasingly anti-immigrant sentiment within communities of color. I would like to focus on these latter two, the erasure of workers from the contemporary discourse and how this operates among communities of color. Essentially, there are two bases on which immigrants’ rights can be anchored: human rights (Maher 2002) and worker rights. Neither is sufficiently



Figure 1: Protester on 1 May march. His sign reads, “Jose called today! Make your own taco USA. Photo by Sonia Rodriguez

developed in the US to counter such intense nationalism. The issue of legality, particularly in the absence of a strong worker consciousness, provides a trope that enables potential allies, such as Mexican Americans and African Americans, to join the bandwagon, and thus become part of the nation. The cost? An opportunity to build a movement for social justice.

Workers vs. Immigrants

This was actually a sea-size demonstration of workers, for workers and—most importantly—by workers. (Cooper 2006)

The posters and speeches of May Day reflected the protesters’ identity as workers. US/Mexican immigration has long been known as a labor migration and the worker identity and consciousness of ethnic Mexicans is well known (Flores Niemann, Arredando and Rodriguez 1999). Mexicans come to the US in search of work to support their families; they accept and embrace work as a necessary part of survival; they take pride in their work and accomplishments. As one marcher explained, “I clean houses, very honorably!” (Hernandez 2006).

Son trabajadores in every sense of the word. As Figure 1 indicates, the protestor is well aware of his role in the US economy. “Making tacos” is symbolic of all the diverse and undervalued work that Latino immigrants perform. Images of the tough, honorable, Mexican immigrant worker

abound in *Mexicano* culture, as seen in the music of Los Tigres del Norte, who performed at the Wilshire rally, as well as in this excerpt from a *corrido* composed for May Day.

El Primero de Mayo

No somos malos ni criminales [We are not bad people or criminals]
 Venimos aquí pa' trabajar [We came here to work]
 Este país nos necesita y estamos aquí para aportar [This country needs us/and we are here to contribute]
 En este mundo tan complicado [In this complicated world]
 Que quiere decir ser ilegal? [What does it mean to be illegal?]
 Hay que aceptar que este mundo esta cambiando [We have to accept that this world is changing]
 Y las fronteras se van a eliminar² [And the borders will collapse]

In contrast to this strong working class identity, many anti-immigrant forces emphasize legal status while overlooking immigrants' role as workers. As the popular bumper sticker says, "What part of *illegal* don't you get?" While some oppose those who violate US laws and borders, others oppose the "threat" immigrants pose to the nation, as evoked in the "browning of America" (Martinez 2006). By ignoring immigrants' identities as workers, the door is open to cast them as "law breakers", fiscal parasites, and culturally inferior. There is no recognition that workers produce wealth and literally build this country. There is no recognition of the social costs of reproduction, which, in fact, Mexico bears most of (Burawoy 1976), or the humanity of workers which requires that they be allowed to live with their families. This position presumes that workers themselves have no rights, and undocumented workers even less. As a result, we get legislation like H.R. 4377 which would criminalize people seeking work in a global economy.

There is a direct link between the weak class consciousness of the US, its history of anti-Mexican racism, and the strident nationalism which propels the current anti-immigrant frenzy. The privileging of nationalist politics allows us to avoid a worker consciousness, especially an international worker consciousness, which could conceivably allow us to develop a radically different attitude toward immigrant workers. While the vast majority of anti-immigrant activists and organizations are white, there is a growing number of people of color who embrace these politics. This is of particular concern because Latinos and Blacks are two potential allies of immigrants, but unfortunately, nationalism can trump class and racial politics.

People of Color and Anti-immigration

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that Mexican Americans and African Americans are increasingly involved in anti-immigrant

politics—they too seek to belong to the nation. As a Chicana, I have long been aware of the ambivalent feelings that Mexican Americans have towards Mexicans and Mexican immigrants (Gutiérrez 1995). I grew up hearing references to *mojados* (wetbacks) and understood that we had internalized anti-Mexican racism. While aware of this, I was nonetheless taken aback when this latest round of immigration bashing revealed deep anti-immigrant sentiment among my extended family.

Two reasons one might expect greater support from Mexican Americans towards Mexican immigrants are class and racial/ethnic solidarity. Although native-born Latinos are more prosperous than immigrants, it is still an overwhelmingly working class population. These are folks who are well acquainted with unions and the daily struggle to put bread on the table, and thus, one might hope for some solidarity and compassion for others seeking to feed their families. There is, in addition, the racial/ethnic connection. Although it is a fraught relationship, there is no denying the link between Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants. The fact is, many Latino families are “blended”, meaning that they are composed of people with a range of different legal and national statuses. Moreover, many Mexican Americans know that it is only an accident of birth that they were born in the US. Given such arbitrariness, is it right to deny others who are only trying to survive? Apparently so, according to a growing number of Mexican Americans (Romero 2006). For example, when I asked one of my cousins to reconcile his opposition to current immigration with the fact that our grandparents came here “*sin papales*”, he countered, “just because they did it the wrong way doesn’t mean that should be continued”. This is an excellent example of the internalization of a law and order mentality which characterizes contemporary immigration debates. Such a legalistic discourse readily excludes others while never forcing one to account for one’s own privilege and how it was derived.

Unfortunately, my cousins are not alone. Recent coverage of the Minutemen has featured both Latino and Black members, and a new national Latino coalition was recently formed to oppose legalization efforts (Gaouette 2006). One former Brown Beret explained his transition from Chicano politics to the Minutemen. “The thing that got me was when they started bringing the Mexican flag in . . . [our movement] was for the American Hispanics . . . and our flag is red, white, and blue” (quoted in Romero 2006:66). Once again, US nationalism overcomes any feelings of ethnic solidarity or class consciousness.

African Americans have also begun voicing anti-immigrant sentiment. While some commentators assume that African American opposition is natural, given that immigrants “compete” with native-born Blacks, the reality is more complex. In fact, while just over half of African American voters supported Proposition 187,³ poor Blacks were less likely to (Morris 2000)—despite the fact that this population is

presumably in greater competition. African Americans have not historically embraced anti-immigrant politics for two reasons. First, in a series of interviews we found that many were sympathetic to the plight of poor, struggling people. According to one Black marcher, “I’m here because Blacks and Latinos have both been suppressed in this society. The same thing we were going through 40 or 50 years ago, they are going through now” (in Mack 2006). Second, many African Americans know that attacks on immigrants, or any group for that matter, can readily turn into an attack against them. Nonetheless, this latest round of anti-immigrant activity has featured a growing Black presence. For example, Ted Hayes, a local homeless advocate, established the Crispus Attucks Brigade to fight undocumented immigration, which, he declared, “is the greatest threat to African Americans since slavery” (in Watanabe 2006). Other African Americans reject efforts to compare today’s immigrant rights’ movement with the Black struggle. “The illegal immigration agenda is not a civil rights movement. The civil rights movement called for dignity and opportunity for all Americans . . . African Americans have given their hearts and souls to this country—that is what makes you a citizen” (Smith 2006, B12). Of course, getting African Americans to join the anti-immigrant movement is the Holy Grail for anti-immigration activists. We can see the “work” that race performs insofar as black bodies help deflect any charges of racism directed against the largely white activists. Moreover, anti-immigrant Blacks can be counted on to control the memory of the civil rights movement—ensuring that others are not allowed to draw from its moral authority.

The Future?

The future of the immigrant-rights movement is uncertain. Activists are preparing for more protests on Labor Day, while over the summer Congress convened hearings which have reinforced the partisan nature of the debate. Worker rights have been reduced to a guest worker program. While there are multiple paths on which to build a framework for immigrants’ rights, a focus on a broadly conceived worker rights agenda is essential in order to reach those potential allies currently swayed by nationalism.

Endnotes

¹ Among ethnic Mexicans, the struggle for immigrant rights is quite old (Acuña 1996:ch. 6) and often linked to labor organizing (Garcia 1994; Pulido 2006:ch. 5).

² Written by Joaquin y Neri McWhinny. <http://www.saveourcentro.org/gigantedespierto/index.html>

³ Proposition 187 was the 1994 California initiative that would have banned undocumented persons from receiving a host of social services.

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